

Can the Intelligence Community Tell What's Brewing in Afghanistan?

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Whenever the United States gets traumatized by the unexpected abroad, discussions inevitably start about the inadequacy of American intelligence collection and analysis. There is truth behind this reflex response: US intelligence organizations, particularly the two largest and most consequential, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and the National Security Agency (NSA), the latter of which is responsible for the bulk of America's intercept of foreign communications and other digital treasure troves, often don't perform as envisioned. Criticisms of the NSA usually revolve around timeliness—seeing and analyzing the intercepts soon enough—and the unavoidable mathematical problems that give encryption an advantage over decryption. And Langley has a way of confidently repackaging establishment biases, in both analysis and operations, which makes it comfortable speaking “truth” to power except when conventional wisdom fails. Weapons of mass destruction—seeing them when they're not there, not seeing them when they are—revolutionary movements, and religious terrorism have been challenging subjects for Langley to get ahead of. And the Directorate of Operations, the outfit that makes the CIA special among America's intelligence services, has long-standing problems with agent recruitment—a chronic inability to put the right operatives on difficult targets long enough to develop creative approaches and a promotions system that rewards case officers who recruit by volume not quality—that may well have given us, among other things, nearly useless agents against the Taliban and Al-Qa'ida.

The debacle in Afghanistan has produced continuing recriminations among those in political circles, who are, if in power, always willing to blame foreign messes on poor intelligence and not on policies and the politicians who advance them. It is becoming clear that both the Pentagon and Langley knew enough and warned enough about the fragility of the Afghan army for the Biden administration to know that a pretty quick collapse was possible. The early assumption of many observers—that the US military and the CIA didn't have a decent grasp of the Taliban's capacity—appears now to have been mostly misplaced. Langley saw the shah surviving the tumult in 1978; military and intelligence officers thought the Afghan army and the Kabul government could go down in under six months. We should, perhaps, still hesitate in rendering final judgment since “cover-your-ass” recollections, which is what journalists often hear, are baptismal in public service. When we see the official paper trail—the classified cables and emails—we will know clearly who knew what when about the ugly end.



Predicting accurately what was going to happen, however, shouldn't have taken much analytical prowess; it required a map and pins to mark all that had fallen to the Taliban over the preceding year. And knowing how fast the Afghan army was likely to crack isn't the most interesting question. It helps little with the salient counterterrorist concerns still before us. Another 9/11 might still happen. The age of mass-casualty Islamic terrorism, though likely evanescent, may not be over. And Afghanistan and Pakistan—the two should probably be viewed as a tandem couple—are still the two most likely spots to serve as headquarters for an anti-American, mass-casualty attack.

What we ought to ask ourselves now: Did Langley and, to a lesser extent, the Defense Intelligence Agency and the intelligence services of the armed branches, ever really try to penetrate the Taliban and Al-Qa'ida in Afghanistan from 2001 to 2021? Or the Islamic State after it arrived in 2014? Hunting for Usama bin Ladin, whom SEAL Team 6 killed in Abbottabad in 2011, may not count at all since searching for him didn't necessarily mean the CIA was trying to penetrate Al-Qa'ida and the Taliban to gain information about their recruiting operations. The active-duty agency officers whom I've spoken to over the years who had tours in Afghanistan or Pakistan, or who targeted Islamic terrorist targets, haven't provided an image of a coherent, focused operational approach to gaining "unilateral" penetrations of radical Islamic organizations. Most have described liaison-intelligence efforts—that is, operations by foreign-intelligence and security services that the agency supports—or paramilitary operations where the objective was to neutralize, not penetrate, Islamic militant organizations and terrorist groups.

Congressional intelligence oversight committees really ought to know whether the clandestine service is now blind inside Afghanistan. As important, understanding the nuts and bolts of what the CIA did do in Afghanistan the last twenty years, and what it is now capable of doing in country, will tell us whether Langley is capable of mounting serious covert-action operations elsewhere. The skill set and risk tolerance—the aptitude—required to run intelligence-collection and covert-action programs against the Taliban and Al-Qa'ida are essential against other targets as diverse as the Iranians, Russians, and Chinese. Given how challenging a multipolar world is, we may have little time to learn to overcome weaknesses.

Imagine, for example, Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps with nuclear weapons—an increasingly likely scenario. The United States might want to have the option of engaging in covert action inside the Islamic Republic that would require the deployment of local agents and case officers under unofficial cover. Lessons learned in Afghanistan—in some ways a more demanding target because Afghanistan is more primitive and tribal—would aid Langley in deploying agents and agent teams inside Iran. It is doubtful that the operations directorate could have activated a unit to steal the clerical regime's nuclear archive as did Mossad in 2016. I asked a senior operative who had worked the Iran target in the last five years whether Langley could have pulled off such an operation. "No f——g way," he answered.

Even an ardent liberal or conservative American utterly tired of “forever wars” in the Muslim world might want to possess the intelligence capacity to lift the nuclear-weapons paperwork of an anti-American foe. In all intelligence work, it takes time to learn to do simple things without making lethal mistakes. More complicated undertakings—for example, sabotaging or snatching functional atomic warheads—are impossible unless the CIA can sustain agent teams in hostile territory.

A good agent network inside Afghanistan wouldn’t have prevented a chaotic American withdrawal, but it might have greatly cut the odds that we would kill innocent civilians, a recurring problem long before the botched retaliation for the Islamic State attack against US soldiers at the Kabul airport. And, far more important, a decent CIA network could significantly aid the United States in the arduous effort of trying to keep track of Al-Qa’ida’s and the Islamic State’s operations globally. To say the least, it is disconcerting that the Haqqani network, which has long appeared to be the Taliban branch most closely affiliated with Al-Qa’ida, has such prominence in the new government in Kabul.

As Washington shifts globally from an offensive to a defensive ground game against jihadists and their allies, we will need more bang for the buck in human-intelligence collection and covert action. The temptation will be to believe that certain measures—greatly improved airline security and much tougher visa requirements for anyone coming from the Greater Middle East—will suffice, along with vigilance by the Federal Bureau of Investigation and the Department of Homeland Security against militant Muslims resident in the US. We will, no doubt, continue to drone-to-death terrorists and other malefactors now and then, but without troops and intelligence officers together in the field, the quality and quantity of intelligence collected will nose-dive. The odds of mistakenly killing the wrong people will increase further since we will be more dependent on foreign intelligence and security services, which always have their own axes to grind. Their enemies may not be ours.

American embassies and consulates, where most US operatives hang out, are becoming fewer in the Middle East. Security precautions, already annoying if not stultifying throughout much of the region, will also increase the distance between case officers and the foreigners who might offer valuable information. Operatives need time-on-target if they intend to develop and recruit agents who don’t just volunteer their services (the best spies against the hardest targets have usually been volunteers, who must, nevertheless, find the means to get close to case officers to offer their services and sometimes relay intelligence collected).

The distressing truth: CIA-run foreign intelligence agents—the spies—aren’t likely to save America from major terrorist strikes. History—the successes and failures that Western intelligence and security officers share among themselves—just doesn’t suggest that spies are often sufficiently plugged in at the right moment to matter. Rigorous surveillance of possible terrorists and their allies and well-executed intercept (see the joint European operation



against an Iranian plot to bomb a dissident rally outside of Paris in June 2018) are much more likely to save us from ghastly events. But the effort to try to develop or plant spies inside Islamic terrorist groups and Islamist movements can't help but significantly enhance our knowledge of these outfits, especially how deadly they really are. And the effort could always be spectacularly rewarded—a mass-casualty event thwarted. An operationally aggressive CIA can only complement the efforts of the FBI, Homeland Security, and the all-important European security services, which do much of the counterterrorist police work that keeps Americans safe. And the arduous effort to design and run these operations will help us elsewhere against hard targets.

We are likely at a pivot point: Langley's counterterrorist operations are bound to shrink substantially as the United States retrenches in the Middle East. With fascist China rapidly becoming a superpower, and Putin's Russia showing its teeth, Washington's focus is shifting back to eastern Europe and the Far East. The CIA's operational and analytical priorities always follow the political class's concerns.

And Islamic radicalism hasn't risen to a great strategic threat. Neither it nor Islamic terrorism has approached what Norman Podhoretz described with historic verve as "World War III." The view, common on the American right, that the entelechy of Muslim fundamentalists is to become agents of violent extremism has been proven wrong since 9/11. Devout Muslims of severe and rigorous disposition can be found everywhere in the West, and yet the incidence of Islamic terrorism in the last twenty years, given the huge pool to draw from, has been very small.

Even when we look at the hundreds of European Muslims who ventured to Syria and Iraq to join the Islamic State, what is most striking is that very few of these individuals engaged earlier in any terrorism-related offenses, broadly defined, and how few seemed interested in returning to their European homelands with violent intent. We don't know, nor are we likely ever to learn, how many would have taken up the cause of holy war against Western targets if it had not been for the all-consuming demands of the Islamic State's many conflicts in the Middle East and its eventual defeat in Iraq. But commentary we have from European Muslims who went east suggests that the primary drive was to participate in the birth of a new *ummah*, a Muslim community where all lived under the holy law, which would spread its revolution throughout the Middle East. All of these volunteers could have tried to join Al-Qa'ida, which would have been thrilled to have them, if their ambition had been to kill Americans and Europeans. That jihad didn't attract them, at least not enough to override the historic allure among some faithful to recreate a caliphate in the Arab heartland.

The French scholar of radical Islam Olivier Roy has stressed the differences between the "local" and "global" jihads, where the former strives to erect an Islamic state, often pretty tightly tied to an underlying ethnic or nationalist identity or grievance (the Taliban,

the Lebanese Hizballah, and the Palestinian Islamist movement, Hamas, come to mind), while the latter aims to kill Americans and other Westerners, caring little or nothing about erecting an Islamic caliphate, imamate, or something a bit less pretentious, a *dawlat*, a fundamentalist government ruling a piece of land. The Islamic State has been the only Islamist movement that has successfully, if not lastingly, combined these local and global ambitions. It has, however, so far been unable to organize terrorist cells in Western lands capable of mass-casualty attacks. That achievement still belongs only to Al-Qa'ida.

Al-Qa'ida's Expansion

Though Al-Qa'ida is certainly trying, it hasn't really been able to pull off the Islamic State's ideological marriage of jihads. Ayman al-Zawahiri, the current head of the group, has tried to mimic the Islamic State's game plan after first castigating the spin-off for its pretentiousness (declaring a new caliphate wasn't at all what bin Ladin and Zawahiri initially envisioned when they linked up with the Taliban's first emir, Mollah Omar, in 1996). Al-Qa'ida has now become a franchise, lending its name to "local" jihads in an effort to burnish its credentials among Muslims and see whether it can find local talent that has sufficient worldliness to wage war against America. This is exactly what bin Ladin and Zawahiri did in Afghanistan after they arrived, creating two camps in country, one for "Arab Afghans" who fought alongside the Taliban against the Tajik-dominated Northern Alliance, and the other for Westernized, more worldly Muslims who had the skill set to operate against the primary enemy.

It is too soon to know whether Al-Qa'ida's current farming operations beyond Afghanistan will bear any fruit. Through the centuries, Islamic insurgencies have usually failed. A few succeeded spectacularly: the Abbasid revolt, which led to the Abbasid caliphate in AD 750; the Fatamid Berber uprising, which led to the Fatamid caliphate in Egypt in AD 973; the radical Safavid Sufi pirs, who became godheads to their followers, established the Safavid dynasty, and converted Iran to Shi'ism in the sixteenth century; and in 1979 Khomeini and the Islamic revolution. They were all charismatic movements with a heavy dose of Alid, or Shi'ite, content. On the other side of Islam's biggest confessional split, Sunni insurgencies have had a much harder time. Sunni Islam is what Westerners would call the faith of the establishment—it doesn't lend itself well to rebels aiming to bring down the status quo. Sunnis have never been as comfortable with the proposition that only the righteous, through deed or blood, have the right to lead the community.

Al-Qa'ida today may get itself dragged into local conflicts that diminish its brand and dissipate its defining mission against America. Militant Islamic movements often peter out or evolve when they are too at odds with the faithful mainstream for too long. And Sunni Muslim rulers in the Middle East have generally been dogged, grinding insurgents down unless the rebels lock onto sufficient public sympathy to sustain them. Zawahiri, a tactician with a sense of history, has a good understanding of why jihadists need to be attentive



to the views of the common faithful. In his famous 2005 letter to Musab al-Zarqawi, who established Al-Qa'ida in Iraq and exuberantly embraced savagery in his war against Americans and the Iraqi Shi'a, the Egyptian warned: "In the absence of . . . popular support, the Islamic mujahid movement would be crushed in the shadows, far from the masses who are distracted or fearful, and the struggle between the jihadist elite and the arrogant authorities would be confined to prison dungeons far from the public and the light of day."

Since 2005 the destruction in the Middle East has gotten much worse. This dark reality overlaps and is in tension with what Princeton's Michael Cook noted about recurring turbulence in Muslim societies: "In no other civilization was rebellion for conscience sake so widespread as it was in the early centuries of Islamic history; no other major religious tradition has lent itself to revival as a political ideology—and not just a political identity—in the modern world." Given the gross political and economic dysfunction throughout the Middle East, it seems unlikely we've seen the last wave of Islamic revivalism. The brutal military regime in Egypt and the one-man modernizing dictatorship of Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman in Saudi Arabia are tailor-made to create vigorous religious opposition even if both initially enjoyed considerable popular support for their hostility to overreaching Islamists. The Muslim identity is the most fundamental in the Middle East. In the ruins and the police states could the faith again recharge against Westerners—the historical enemy? Will that revivalism metastasize again into terrorism aimed at the United States? The answer should dictate the budgets and manpower that Western intelligence services devote to the radical Islamic target.

Modern Islamic militants, from whom Islamic terrorists spring, are in an endless loop where the injustices of the distant past and the present become one. They see themselves as the faith's last, best hope, sometimes as avatars of revenge against those who have laid Islam low. They take the most important guiding principle of Islamic jurisprudence—*amr bi'l-maruf, nahy an al-munkar*, "command the right and forbid the wrong"—and turn it into a personal mission where individuals act as God's deputies. This view of the world as essentially sinful gets supercharged when Westernized Muslims, who have a greater sense of themselves as historic actors in a great war where one man might make a difference, join the jihad. Individualism, the West's irrepressible juju, has been jet fuel for jihadism.

This Molotov cocktail of religion, grievance, and ambition is certainly still out there in militant Islamic circles; we just don't know how much traction it has after two decades of incredible turmoil in the Middle East. Islamic radicals, certainly Arab Sunni Islamic militants, probably think they have lost a lot more than they have gained (defeated in Iraq, mauled in Syria, crushed in a popular fascist coup in Egypt, lost face in democratic—now authoritarian—Tunisia, and cut off, it appears, from Saudi and Emirati funding).

Can Afghanistan serve as a hopeful catalyst, inspiring proof that the most powerful Western nation can be downed? Can't the region's problems and hatred of the infidel

be sufficiently blamed upon the West's continuing machinations to offset all the horrors that Islamic militants have undeniably had a hand in?

We just don't know. To be safe, the CIA should assume, even if evidence inclines us to go the other way, that history will repeat itself.

Counterterrorism certainly won't become an afterthought at Langley, as it pretty much was from the 1970s through the late 1990s. Nonetheless, the CIA's attention on Afghanistan—and on the many insurgencies where Al-Qa'ida is trying to piggy-back on local grievances—will surely diminish, too. When the president says that we are going to use “over-the-horizon capability to suppress future threats to the homeland” and Secretary of State Tony Blinken adds that “we achieved the objectives that we set out to achieve,” that “Afghanistan would not again become a haven for terrorism directed at the United States or any of our allies and partners,” that means, among other things, that Langley is going to invest a lot less time and money in much of what it has been doing since 9/11. Political pressures emanating from the White House in favor of seeing Al-Qa'ida as essentially defeated will affect all of America's intelligence services. Trickle-down in the executive branch is irresistible. Langley will be less affected than will military intelligence, given the Pentagon's acute sensitivity to the commander-in-chief's preferences, but the tilt will be the same.

It is a near certainty that America's messy withdrawal from Kabul has discombobulated, probably hopelessly fractured, the CIA's agent network in the country. Langley has gotten a lot of its own Afghans out and helped get a lot of other Afghans in danger to safety—much more rapidly it seems than any other US government agency. Such commendable efforts, however, suggest that its stay-behind network is probably small and without the required communication equipment to be of any use for spying.

A comparison: The agency's human-intelligence and covert-action networks in Vietnam utterly fell apart after the North Vietnamese army rolled its tanks into Saigon. It would be an interesting exercise to examine a post-fall review of CIA networks in South Vietnam to see if the Directorate of Operations (DO) ever assessed why these networks couldn't survive once personal contact—regular case officer-agent meetings—got cut and whether the DO ever seriously contemplated developing a stay-behind agent plan before 1975. The CIA likely never did. America turned the page on Vietnam; Langley, according to officers who had served in the East Asia division in the 1970s, did too. The vast majority of the agency's assets, even within the Viet Cong, likely would have had no great value within a new Communist regime, beyond giving atmospherics on what was happening in the cities, towns, and countryside. What really mattered then, after the fall of Saigon, was whether the CIA had much in North Vietnam; and from conversations with officers who worked the North Vietnam account, that answer was “no”—not a single asset of note.



Taliban Afghanistan is obviously operationally different from Communist South Vietnam: An asset base among the common folk might help with big questions. Pashtun Afghans, who are the ethnic group that powers the Taliban, could provide valuable information on whether Al-Qa'ida was reconstituting anti-American training bases under Taliban protection. Any information from Afghan sources concerning training bases for Westernized Muslims, especially if stationary and incorporated into the Taliban military structure, would be of paramount importance. The type of intelligence assets that might be valuable for this task wouldn't necessarily be inner-circle Taliban or Al-Qa'ida since camps of any size and the movement of non-Afghans into and out of the country would likely be noticed by many.

Such an asset base could also possibly provide useful intelligence on the Islamic State, which appears to have established itself among religiously militant Sunni Afghans, both Pashtun and non-Pashtun, who don't care for the Taliban and its Pashtun *über alles* ethos. Without troops and case officers on the ground, the United States is probably flying blind. An intercept is a deeply frustrating tool that usually only becomes valuable after you have pinpointed the bad guy, who, you pray, is voluble and indiscreet in his conversations. Washington no longer has NSA listening sites inside Afghanistan. Small pieces of human intelligence—even rumors, “RUMINT”—could help the CIA focus what resources it has. Working counterterrorism henceforth in Afghanistan will likely be a puzzle: It will take time, effort, and “feel” to put the pieces together.

The past shouldn't be the future: Langley had next to nothing in Afghanistan in the 1990s—neither inside the Taliban nor among the Northern Alliance in the Panjshir Valley. The CIA did come to see Ahmad Shah Massoud, ever so briefly once bin Ladin had started bombing US embassies in Africa (1998) and a warship in Aden (2000). The great Tajik warlord and leader of the Northern Alliance told me when I visited him before 9/11 about the agency's objectives and operational sensitivities. The senior case officer who came to see him was sympathetic and understood well the agency's “equities”—the liaison-service and political concerns—that the CIA had in Afghanistan. He was one of the few operatives who didn't have a pro-Pakistani bias, which always affected, if not crippled, Langley's and Foggy Bottom's assessment of the Taliban before 9/11. He didn't, however, have a working grasp of Dari, Tajik, Pashto, or proper Persian.

According to Massoud, Langley's objectives weren't bold or far-reaching. He thought them a small first step but utterly inconsequential to his fight. He needed weaponry and, as he wryly put it, the Iranians would send him arms now and then, but the Americans, who were Al-Qa'ida's primary targets, wouldn't.

Washington may well decide, again, that its best path forward with the Taliban is to seek a *modus vivendi* with the group. President Biden, who has been as ardent as Donald Trump in denouncing America's “forever wars” and has experienced a painful, politically

embarrassing troop withdrawal, seems unlikely to support an insurgency against the Taliban—at least not before the CIA provides overwhelming evidence of the group’s complicity in resurrecting Al-Qa’ida training camps.

And the Taliban victory has once again made Pakistan the “indispensable” middleman. The movement could not have risen in the 1990s and re-risen after 2001 without the Pakistani army’s support. The generals’ geopolitical fear of India outflanking them, religious zeal in the military, and internal Pakistani politics designed to incorporate and placate Pakistan’s own powerful Pashtun community all come together in Islamabad’s pro-Taliban foreign policy. I recently had drinks with a former CIA station chief in Islamabad who had the opportunity to witness up close Pakistani support of the Taliban. Despite 9/11, he remains sympathetic to Islamabad and averse to Washington supporting any anti-Taliban opposition. This “realist” disposition likely remains widespread among senior ranks inside the operations directorate.

Several factors could come together to discourage Langley from even trying to develop serious intelligence networks inside Afghanistan. The past could resurface: In the 1980s and 1990s, the rigorous surveillance of American operatives in Pakistan shut down most operations that Pakistan didn’t endorse and made Peshawar in the North-West Frontier Province, now known as Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, where Afghan Pashtuns live and work in large numbers, out of bounds. And Headquarters’ calculations that the liaison relationship with Pakistan’s Inter-Services Intelligence agency was much more important than any possible long-odds operation aimed at the Taliban and Al-Qa’ida essentially prevented Langley from thinking about penetrating these two groups from Pakistan. Penetrating the Taliban or Al-Qa’ida today from Pakistan likely verges on the impossible.

And operations from the Central Asian republics into Afghanistan would also be challenging because of topography and the ethnic mix in these countries. The Taliban do appear to have expanded their appeal beyond their Pashtun base, which is perhaps a reason why they so quickly overran Tajik and Uzbek forces. The Islamic State also has made progress among the Sunni ethnic minorities that straddle the northern border. That might give a bit more maneuvering room for the clandestine service to recruit or seed spies into Afghanistan. But the reality in all of these republics is probably still one of case officers hemmed in by the local Russian-trained security services. And CIA director Bill Burns, a bureaucrat’s bureaucrat, probably won’t allow case officers to cross the Afghan border (never, ever, underestimate Langley’s risk aversion). And the case-officer cadre, according to operatives still serving, still sorely lacks the needed languages for Afghanistan and its neighbors. Local CIA station limitations and Langley’s disinterest in long-shot operations that the local security services might take offense at are, by themselves, probably enough to paralyze any American effort to use Central Asia as an agent recruiting ground or operational headquarters against the Taliban, Al-Qa’ida, and the Islamic State.



Given the predicament we may be in, it really shouldn't be too much to ask the CIA director—this isn't the job of the Pentagon's intelligence services, which are pretty tightly tied to large-scale military tasks—to anticipate the possible. Odds are high that Langley hasn't yet tried seeding agents into the Taliban. This may also be true of operations against Al-Qa'ida—despite the nearly thirty-year confrontation with the group. I spoke to case officers serving in Afghanistan in 2004, 2008, and 2015–2016. The first described his mission as essentially liaison work, helping the Afghans set up their own service. The hunt for bin Ladin wasn't consuming; efforts to penetrate what was then seen as a broken organization in country wasn't a priority. Officers in later years described their work as either standard case-officer hunting—whatever local target was in reach—or overwhelmingly tactical, that is, intelligence collection tied pretty closely to US military operations. When one is on defense, as US and Afghan Army forces were since at least the end of the Afghan surge in 2012, case officers, like soldiers, tend to focus on what is close and needed. Or as a dark-humored colleague of mine, who served in Mogadishu when bin Ladin claimed to have begun operations there in 1992, put it, after I had queried whether he had ever caught wind of Al-Qa'ida in country: “No, never. I was focused on whether I would be shot or bombed.”

If the Senate and House intelligence oversight committees want to do something preemptive for US counterterrorism, they could try to discover whether Langley has a stay-behind network in Afghanistan and against whom are they targeted. Does the operations directorate have any agents inside the Taliban? If so, how were these recruitments picked up? Were these agents volunteers or did case officers recruit them through some developmental process, taking days, weeks, or months, or were they “cold pitches” rendered in a day? Did they produce any intelligence of note? Was the information tactical (Ahmad is bad; Abdallah is good) or did it ever rise toward the higher reaches of the Taliban? Congressional oversight staffers often don't like asking such detailed questions—they are invidious and will certainly sour friendships built up with the CIA's congressional liaison staff and senior DO officers. And the National Security Council has proven over the decades that it is just incapable of monitoring, let alone arm-twisting, Langley. Such questions, however, will tell Congress, and the White House, everything they need to know.

To assess the value of any recruitment that isn't involved in covert action, it is imperative to see what intelligence that agent has actually produced. The Directorate of Operations always stubbornly resists allowing anyone in the oversight committees to have that level of operational and intelligence access, but without it, the committees are reduced to a level of trust that isn't wise. Congress needs to know now how seriously Langley undertook espionage. Does the CIA today have any standing capacity in country to develop a reliable reporting network focused on foreign jihadists? Although the Congressional committees have usually focused on the ethics and morality of agency operations, they can, if they choose, question DO personnel about operational details—even if the White House objects. They can demand to see agent intelligence production. The clandestine service can scrub

the necessary identifiers to ensure that Congress members and their staff don't learn an asset's name or other damning details. But the committees need to know exactly what Langley has been doing against the Taliban, Al-Qa'ida, and the Islamic State. They need to know whether America is starting from scratch, or whether the directorate has some assets that can be repurposed in helpful ways—assuming that the clandestine service left communication equipment behind that the assets know how to use.

We may learn that the DO essentially has what it had in Vietnam after 1975: nothing. If so, and given the difficulties of recruiting useful agents from neighboring countries, the only operational path forward would be to try to seed spies into the country. This would mean that Langley would either recruit Westernized Muslims, perhaps in conjunction with European intelligence and security services, or send young male case-officers who are Muslims or can faithfully pretend to be converts, into Afghanistan to see if Al-Qa'ida, or secondarily the Islamic State, will pick them up. These operations would be dangerous. Dangling American Muslims in front of Al-Qa'ida and the Islamic State would be especially appealing, but also, perhaps, too challenging. European-passport-carrying Muslims volunteered by the hundreds to fight for the Islamic State; far fewer American Muslims did. American Muslim recruits must surely come with severe counterintelligence scrutiny.

Since Al-Qa'ida has become a franchise, it has opened the door to more aggressive CIA actions to try to get assets inside Zawahiri's command structure. The distance between his command and these insurgencies is, of course, much greater than before 9/11, when bin Ladin kept his distance from most radical Islamic movements and focused on America. Zawahiri may have discovered already that these insurgencies don't offer recruits of sufficient skill and worldliness to be of use in the war against the United States. That could, of course, limit their utility to the CIA as avenues into Al-Qa'ida.

Muslim Fatigue

The United States may luck out. Hardcore Sunni militancy just may have had its day. Its ability to attract young men and women, especially among Arabs, appears to have diminished. There is a certain shell shock that has taken place since Zarqawi gave birth to Al-Qa'ida in Iraq and its larger scion, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, known in the Muslim world by the Arabic acronym, *Daesh*. The level of violence that ensued, always a tricky proposition since violence can attract and, if of sufficient horror, repel young men, has been unprecedented. The destruction wrought by this savage militancy, internal rebellion, sectarian strife, outside powers (Iran, Russia and, to a lesser extent, the United States and Turkey), and just a crippling inability of ever-more-corrupt local and national governments to do the most basic things, has left the entire Middle East in deep depression. Even the Lebanese, who saw so much destruction and bloodshed over the last fifty years and remained plucky and determined to find the good life, now view themselves as a failed people. The Muslim Brotherhood's enrapturing simple creed,



Al-Islam huwa al-hall, “Islam is the answer,” worked well when the primary problems were Western imperialism and Westernizing dictatorial elites; it is far less clear whether the Brotherhood and its many offshoots can prosper in a shattered world where fundamentalists and other Islamic militants are as much perpetrators as they are victims.

A possible Shi’ite parallel: The evanescence of Iranian religious radicalism of a ferociously anti-American bent began in earnest as the theocracy lost popularity. Bright, decently educated, Westernized, radical anti-American Shi’ites were easy to find in the 1970s and 1980s. When the Iran–Iraq War started in 1980, there were legions of young Iranian men who lived to martyr themselves. It is educational to go back and read the language of the Iranian street, brilliantly relayed by Paul Vieille and Farhad Khosrokhavar in *Le discours populaire de la révolution iranienne*, or the formative works behind the Islamic revolution—the writings and speeches of former militant rock stars, the Islamic Marxist Ali Shariati or his clerical counterpart, Mahmud Taleqani.

They all seem today distant and disconnected. The young, even the middle-aged, no longer read what was once gospel. The eighty-two-year-old supreme leader, Ali Khamenei, who nurtured his anti-Western hatred on Shariati and the Egyptian founding father of modern jihadism, Sayyid Qutb, and his mini-me president, Ebrahim Raisi, who gives the impression that he’s only read executive summaries of Islamist literature, talk like they’re in an anti-colonial time warp. The vast majority of the Iranian people have moved on. The revolutionary clergy and its praetorians in the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, all ideologically pruned by Khamenei, remain in power. They both endeavor to expand the revolution abroad because they can no longer do so at home. Among their own people, they have lost their charisma, and they know it.

Sunni radicalism, unlike its Shi’ite counterpart, doesn’t today have an oil-rich country willing to arm and energetically abet its propagation. Qatari efforts are small-scale, haphazard, and too tactical. It is in some ways more resilient because it is more diverse and egalitarian—there is no radical Sunni hierarchy that determines orthodoxy and admission. Sunni radicals often have a smorgasbord of religious authorities that they cite to justify actions, usually after they have done something shocking. They really are akin to the first significant schismatics in Islam, the Kharijites, who saw leadership belonging to those who merit it through action. Al-Qa’ida and the Islamic State have had a jostling match in trying to develop a reputation that has more militant street cred. Official Sunni religious hierarchies can’t do much to check such militancy since they just don’t have sufficient standing.

Where we need to look most closely is where Islamic radicalism is potentially the most dangerous to the United States: Europe. The Sunni fundamentalist community there has been under extraordinary surveillance since 9/11, when all could see that Europe had

become safe for Muslim militants inclined toward jihad. It is far too soon to know whether the internal-security pressure has just temporarily capped a volcano. But European security and intelligence officers certainly are now hoping that the worst is over, that the ghastly vicissitudes in the Middle East, combined with greater reflection about radicalism among European Muslims, and the arrival of a new generation, among those born in Europe and the hundreds of thousands who fled the awfulness of their homelands, have changed the intellectual terrain. Peaceful personal salvation—not revenge—might, just possibly, be making a comeback among those searching or in crisis. As one French official put it to me, there just seem to be fewer *bombes à retardement*, ticking time bombs, even though the cyber world of European Islamic radicalism remains frightful. Sunni holy warriors—unlike the Shi’ite ones who don’t ever seem to operate as “lone wolves” and need the canonical blessings of properly trained divines—can come at you, all alone, inspired long distance and over the internet. That doesn’t produce mass-casualty terrorism (Sunni jihadists haven’t yet attracted alienated but clever engineering graduates from the École Polytechnique or RWTH Aachen), but such solitary figures can still temporarily wound societies.

Since 9/11 Europe hasn’t produced its own eidolon of Islamic terrorism—imagine a multilingual version of bin Ladin who has as much pull as once did Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and the Islamic State. That might change everything on the Sunni side (among Shi’ites that seems like an extraordinarily remote possibility; far more likely are captivating clerics who preach the depoliticization of the faith). But unlike the 1980s and 1990s, such a figure certainly isn’t going to arise in Europe without being nipped in the bud by vastly more vigilant internal security. We don’t know how the recent enormous wave of Muslim refugees are going to adjust to Europe’s deeply secular societies. A failure to integrate may produce the kind of alienation that inclines young men toward violence, as we have seen before. Some Syrian and Iraqi male refugees may have become too accustomed to war. They may have a lasting taste for it.

And Muslim militants leaving Europe isn’t hard (getting back in is much more challenging). If they are to become truly dangerous to America, they will need to find an organization that has camps to train them. Mass-casualty terrorism on a 9/11-scale still probably leads back to Al-Qa’ida, the only nonstate actor that has so far pulled it off. Which leads us back to Afghanistan and the CIA.

Common sense ought to tell us that Langley should work *really* hard devising ways to plant spies inside the group in Afghanistan, and wherever else it may be trying to recruit believers for “global” holy war. It is far better that case officers lose their lives trying than American civilians die by the hundreds, or thousands, later. We won’t likely get anywhere, however, unless Congressional oversight committees open with the most basic question of the Directorate of Operations’ senior management: “So, what have you been doing in Afghanistan since 9/11?”





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The Caravan Notebook is a platform for essays and podcasts that offer commentary on a variety of subjects, ranging from current events to cultural trends, and including topics that are too local or too specific from the larger questions addressed quarterly in *The Caravan*.

We draw on the membership of Hoover's Herbert and Jane Dwight Working Group on the Middle East and the Islamic World, and on colleagues elsewhere who work that same political and cultural landscape. Russell Berman chairs the project from which this effort originates.

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