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Roundabout - How the United States Government Creates Cyclical Terrorism as it Responds to Domestic and Foreign Terrorism

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ROUNDABOUT: HOW THE UNITED STATES GOVERNMENT CREATES CYCLICAL TERRORISM AS IT RESPONDS TO DOMESTIC AND FOREIGN EXTREMISM

by

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A Master's Thesis Presented
to the Halmos College of Arts and Sciences Department of Humanities and Politics of Nova Southeastern University
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Science, National Security Affairs And International Relations

Nova Southeastern University
2021

Nova Southeastern University
Halmos College of Arts and Sciences

This thesis was submitted by <u>Ian Michael (Sarah Selch) Andrews</u> under the direction of the chair of the thesis committee listed below. It was submitted to the Halmos College of Arts and Sciences and approved in partial fulfillment for the degree of **MS. In National Security Affairs and International Relations** at Nova Southeastern University.

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<u>Dedication</u>

This work is dedicated to the following individuals who helped make it possible by keeping me calm, collected and sane throughout the writing process; my mother Marie, and my partners Carla, Sophie, Maddie, Autumn and Eleanor, as well as my dear friend Jules. Thank you.

Acknowledgements

This work acknowledges the helpful feedback and assistance of the committee professors, which was invaluable in getting this paper to its current state. Their patience during a period of illness and their understanding where it concerned the lengthy editing process is also appreciated. Thank you Dr. Zelden, Dr. Edwards and Dr. Kilroy.

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Abstract

Terrorism is frequently studied as a linear transaction between actors, usually a government and one or more extremists of some sort, be they individuals or groups. The focus in this thesis is on the United States government and international jihadist extremists, specifically Al-Qaeda, a conflict which often is covered in one of two ways: extremist action is the provocation and government policy (up to and including military engagement) is the reaction, or alternatively, foreign policy is the initiating action and what we call "terrorism" is merely a response. This paper argues that neither approach is sufficient and proposes a model that focuses less on the proximate provocations leading up to any given extremist action or government intervention, and more on the ways that the actors change and evolve as they participate in a feedback loop of actions and reactions with one another. This model is useful for its ability to highlight the way both the American security apparatus and Al-Qaeda calcified into self-perpetuating enterprises, and its potential for tracking and even predicting the long-term trajectory along which conflicts like the Global War on Terror evolve.

Introduction

Terrorism has furnished multiple lingering questions through the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, questions as to the extreme ideologies that spawn it, the ways it is used in war, the impact it leaves on nations and ethnic groups, and the way it shapes public discourse. Oftentimes, efforts to address these questions consider less the problem of terrorism's formation (and how it shapes public policy), and more what policies *should* be enacted in response to it, almost presupposing a reactive and retrospective approach. This focus on response over cause, policy formation over policy impact, was especially prevalent in the scholarly literature and think-tank output during the War on Terror in the wake of the 9/11 terrorist attacks. With the conclusion of the Iraq War and the aftermath of the Arab Spring and the Syrian Civil War, scholarly attention shifted in variable directions, at least in the West.[1] However, the emphasis on response over cause, policy formation over policy content, continued unchecked. In fact, the push to find solutions to the ongoing conflict, specifically in the Middle Eastern context, overcame the need for a substantive debate on both the nature of the enemy and the sources of the problem in the first place. This thesis will propose an alternate approach to the laser-like focus on single events and the reactive nature of attempts to prevent similar attacks, and advance a model that views extremist and counterextremist actions as an evolutionary feedback loop, and explains how extremist and counterextremist actors changed over time as a result of this competition.

One key consequence of trying to engage with foreign terrorism primarily as a policy problem situated solely within its own specific, geographical contexts, is that a great deal has

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[1] Miller and Fahey, "The Rise and Fall of Terrorism," 2019; Erlensbusch-Anderson, *Genealogies of Terrorism*, 2018.

been published during the last few decades about terrorism *as it occurs in foreign countries*, especially the Middle East. Terrorism as a global phenomenon has received much less attention. And as in the scholarly literature, so too in public conceptions of terrorism. Here too, terrorism was primarily viewed in a specific geographic and foreign policy context, such as in media portrayals of the long wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Thus, were one to ask an academic about terrorism between 1993 and today, and especially between 2000 and today, one might receive several different definitions focusing on several types of terrorism, but most answers would start and end with Islamic fundamentalist terrorism.[2] The high-profile actions of Al-Qaeda and Daesh especially seem to have commanded the most attention around the world relative to other forms of extremism. In other words, due to the response-centric nature of inquiry into terrorism, for many, academic and lay, terrorism has become inseparable as a concept from the Middle East and Islam the religion, despite how distinct the religion is from those groups and ideologies that claim to espouse it to justify their extreme actions.

Domestic terrorism, on the other hand, has been given a much less prominent placement in academic literature and public imagination—at least until comparatively recently. Even with the advent of the Trump years (2017-2021) and the rise of domestic dissent and acts of violence and terror, the debate surrounding this kind of extremism has had to play catch-up in academic discourse relative to the long history and context of domestic terrorist attacks and activities.[3] Some truly groundbreaking research has been done regarding the long history of rightwing terrorism in the United States and its many diverse forms.[4] While more and more of this work is

[2] Shapiro, "Formal Approaches to the Study of Terrorism," 2019; Held, "The Moral Dimensions of Terrorism," 2019; Hegghammer and Nesser, "Assuming the Islamic State's Commitment to Attacking the West," 2015.
[3] Jones, Doxsee and Harrington, "The Escalating Terrorism in the United States," 2020; Bew, Meleagrou-Hitchens and Frampton, "The Long Twentieth Century," 2019.
[4] Williams, "Domestic Terrorism in the United States," 2018.
[4] Jensen, James and Yates, "Contextualizing Disengagement," 2020.

now being carried out,[5] the field would benefit from an evolutionary approach that adequately captures the intimate interplay between domestic extremists and the American state. While this thesis focuses primarily on applying a new framework for studying extremist action to a well-known and well-studied case, a secondary argument of this thesis is that both how we study extremism and which kinds of extremism receive the majority of attention need to be rethought, and a key aim for the theoretical framework developed here is that it should be used in analysis of domestic white nationalist extremism and related phenomena.

Nevertheless, as noted, the emphasis here on the subject of extremism studies is secondary; the main argument to be advanced here is that there are limits in the scholarly literature to how the interaction of extremism and U.S. counter-extremism policy is studied, usually with an emphasis on one side or the other as an independent variable and the other side as reactive, and a dependent variable. This thesis advances an alternate framework that focuses on the evolution of the extremism vs. counter-extremism relationship over time, with less emphasis on who acted first. Terrorism does not act in a vacuum. In other words, accurate and comprehensive study of extremism requires an understanding both of how U.S. policy affects extremist action and how extremist action shapes U.S. policy.

Hence, the superficial consideration given the question of the U.S. government's impact on extremism, combined with a new focus on how extremism influences U.S. policy, forms most of the impetus for the argument in this thesis. The missing element, however, is time. How does each actor influence the other, but more importantly, how does each actor influence the other over an extended period? How do extremism and counter-extremism evolve as a result? As the

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[5] Mudde, *The Far Right in America*, 2018.

global superpower and one of the largest economic, military and cultural forces on Earth, the United States remains a critical element of the story of how and why many extreme ideologies persist. Extremist groups claim legitimacy, oftentimes, via their actions against the United States and its allies. These actions, ostensibly about combatting the American regime's global hegemony, are justified in ways ranging from the lingering legacy of imperialism and colonialism by Western powers to wars waged under the purview of the Cold War and the War on Terror.[6] So too, the longstanding U.S. policy of propping up regimes friendly to its interests regardless of the interests of those living in said countries. By comparison, domestic terrorists since the 1990s tend more towards rejecting the progress of the U.S. towards a more pluralistic, open democracy that respects and represents the diversity within its population. It also hews towards religious extremism in the form of evangelical Christian and political extremism as expressed in things like the militia movement and certain strains of libertarianism and anti-government sentiment.[7] Conventionally, research on these matters has proven rather static in outlook or focused too much on the outcomes of policy rather than its origins, or the impact terrorism has on its formation.

Theoretical approaches to terrorism and extremism in general tend to fall into two camps: policy as *x*, extremism as *y*, so that policy is the independent variable, spurring an extremist reaction; or extremism as *x*, policy as *y*, with terror as the independent variable that provokes a policy reaction. But neither of these approaches has proven adequate when it comes to considering the apparent feedback loop between U.S. policy and extremist ideology. The point of approaching extremism and counterextremism as a feedback loop is to supplement existing study

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[6] Wright, *The Looming Tower*, 2006.
[7] Jones, "The Rise of Far-Right Extremism," 2018; Stern, *Terror in the Name of God*, 2004; Mudde, *The Far Right in America*, 2018.

by moving beyond the focus on a small set of transactions and viewing both extremism and the response to it (or provocation to it depending on your perspective) as an ongoing process. Terrorism does not stay the same over time, nor does the response to it. But the changes in extremism and counterextremism are prompted by the opponent's past moves. As a result, neither side is the first mover in any meaningful way, but rather both sides influence each other in a continuing and simultaneous loop. This drives the evolution of extremist and counterextremist policy.

Both scholarly approaches discussed here rely on the idea of a first mover and a single transaction or set of transactions in response (an act and then a response, a campaign and then a campaign in response, etc.) to answer their own specific questions. In doing so, they fail to engage with the idea of terrorism as an ongoing cycle in which it matters less who moved first than how the iterated responses drive the evolution over time between governments and extremists. These can pressure one or both actors into "doubling down" on existing responses or responses that worked in the past rather than testing new options, leading to missed opportunities or policy dead ends. Neither side is immune to errors.

This thesis is not intended as a commentary on terrorism as a cliched moral quandary or as purely a condemnation of the perpetuation of a cycle of violence for political and financial gain. It is an attempt to address, theoretically, how terror and terror responses/provocations evolve in response to each other, and to show the dynamism of their interactions over time. The available scholarship does not typically approach the issue in this fashion, thus failing to view the entire process as a feedback loop with stakeholders on either side acting in perpetual

response.[8] The contribution of this thesis is to address that gap in the literature by approaching the problem of extremism and counter-extremism with a feedback loop model. Moreover, given that jihadist and general foreign extremism are much more studied in the scholarship, the aim with this thesis is to provide a model that could be used to study not only foreign terrorism, but also the understudied area of white nationalist extremism in the United States and in other Western countries such as in the European Union.

In short, this thesis seeks to understand fundamentally how two actors in an extremist-counterextremist conflict might act to perpetuate their own existences via perpetuating the conflict, a dynamic in which the United States and foreign terrorist groups serve as linchpins in a push-pull relationship. When engaging with this work however, we invite the reader to consider how the proposed feedback-loop model could be used in the context of determining how a given government and a given terrorist group, be it in the U.S. or another country such as Turkey, interact with one another and perpetuate their conflicts. This model could be potentially useful for addressing the evolution of extremism and efforts to mitigate it in a variety of contexts.

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[8] In order of relevance: Farrell, Findley and Young, "Geographical Approaches to the Study of Terrorism," 2019; Haynes, "Religion and Terrorism," 2019; English, "Nationalism and Terrorism," 2019; Lowenthal, "The Policymaker-Intelligence Relationship," 2010; Goodwin, "The Causes of Terrorism," 2019; Warrick, *Black Flags: The Rise of ISIS*, 2016. A notable exception is Crenshaw (ed.), *Terrorism in Context*, 1995, for what Cronin notes is an evolutionary perspective focusing on changes in extremist and counterextremist tactics, presaging the approach used in this thesis of expanding that perspective to also consider changes in the actors themselves. See also Cronin, "How al-Qaida Ends," 2006.

Chapter 1: Literature Review

This review will be structured in three parts: the existing models of approach to extremism, a methodological review for the purposes of establishing the feedback loop model, and a general review of the state of scholarly and public discourse on terrorism and policy responses.

Carl Sagan wrote in his seminal 1980 work, *Cosmos*: "If you wish to make an apple pie from scratch, you must first invent the universe." Sagan's point is that in any endeavor, one should start with original principles to the extent needed.[9] But it is also a thought experiment meant to invoke the absurdity of approaching a process with far more background than is necessary for the task at hand. When one thinks of baking from scratch a humble apple pie, no reasonable person starts the recipe at the Big Bang. When someone is baking, the initial conditions of the universe are not immediately relevant to what that individual is doing. There is an indeterminate point from which the act of baking the pie counts as having come 'from scratch' and it becomes ridiculous to ask for more clarity; you can use fresh whole apples direct from a tree, but you do not need to harvest them yourself or plant the tree yourself.

This mindset is useful for understanding terrorism as an ongoing interaction between the ideologies that spawn it, and the governments and groups that are forced to confront and engage with it. It highlights the limits in tracing all the interactions of extremism and counterextremism leading to present-day terrorism far back into the past, save if one is addressing the history of terrorism or a given extremist group.[10] In this sense, what x and y are as variables is largely a

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[9] Sagan, *Cosmos*, 1980.
[10] Lutz, "Historical Approaches to Terrorism," 2019; Hegghammer and Nesser, "Should I Stay or Should I Go?" 2013.

moot point, not relevant to the discussion. What is relevant is the process of change over time; of the feedback loop that exists between policy and action, followed by reaction and revised policymaking.[11] Where we start our examination of this dynamic is almost an arbitrary decision. Not to exculpate anyone, but sufficiently deep into a feedback loop of violence such as this it matters less for the analysis who started it (what was the first mover) than how the interactions evolved over time. What is needed, instead, is a model that maps that evolution. For our purposes, enough background information can be gleaned from brief reflections on the history of terrorism and from focusing on current events as they have been addressed in the scholarship thus far; "from scratch" for us becomes this bushel of apples. The life story of the apple tree is less important than what this thesis is meant to do with the apples to make the pie. Or, put another way, what is important is how the arms race and tit-for-tat between extremism and counter-extremism is evolving right now. From a purely political science perspective, our focus should be on the process by which extremism and counterextremism evolve and less on individual, transactional events. A historical perspective is still important for context, but is useful to this approach only as a means of showing a trajectory of events that can then be extrapolated to anticipate future changes in how either side operates.

Existing scholarly approaches often classify extremism as the *x* or the *y* in the extremism-counterextremism relationship.[12] The majority of academic scholarship, as is the case in many

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[11] While extremist terror is not a monolith, and admits of many different motivations, ranging from nationalism or independence to xenophobia and racism to sectarian conflict, the differences these varying motivations may cause in the nature or targets of extremist action may provoke different responses but do not entail variation in the overall structure of the feedback loop. Actions, reactions and reactions to reactions (and so on) still pile up and form an evolutionary trajectory that can be traced, in order to understand how the ongoing conflict has changed both sides and their approaches.

[12] While the long-dominant Western approach often treated extremism as the x, or unmoved mover, recently more diverse perspectives have entered the scholarship and challenged this view of the relationship, often suggesting that extremism may be the y, the reaction to an earlier stimulus. Such perspectives include Alia Brahimi's *Ideology and Terrorism* and Brahma Chellaney's *Terrorism in Asia: A rapidly spreading scourge tests the region* as well as Boaz Ganor and Eitan Azani's *Terrorism in the Middle East*.

fields, is dominated by Western perspectives and the biases of developed economies and peaceful democracies. Works of this sort tend to look at terrorism and extremism as *x*—the first mover or more specifically as the unmoved mover (i.e. independent variable).[13] Some works discuss the more ethical and moral elements of the terrorism quandary alongside questions of intelligence gathering that is intended to facilitate the prevention of terrorist attacks, such as Ross W. Bellaby's *The Ethics of Intelligence: A New Framework*, while other works discuss the motivations of religiously-minded terrorists who still act within political frameworks and with decidedly down to earth, political goals, such as is seen in Jessica Stern's *Terror in the Name of God: Why Religious Militants Kill.*[14]

The above works tend to see extremism as the unmoved mover. Terrorism is always a threat in need of intelligence gathering or de-radicalization or sorting into typologies. It becomes a fact of life that such things should exist, and addressing them becomes like going through the motions. Of the accumulated works, Erlensbusch-Anderson's work seems to be the most willing to break the mold and view terrorism as a self-perpetuating problem that no one truly addresses in full, only describing and cataloguing over time for mass consumption actions taken in response to terrorism.[15] Power dynamics, for Erlensbusch-Anderson, are more important for understanding terrorism from many different angles.[16] Consequently, she largely eschews extended historical analysis focusing on "who started it" in favor of describing the immediate

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[13] See: Verena Erlensbusch-Anderson's *Genealogies of Terrorism: Revolution, State Violence, Empire* and Cas Mudde's *The Far Right in America (Extremism and Democracy).* Both are deep dives into theory and/or meticulous detail regarding the nature of terrorism and how it should be looked at in a given context. They, however, are the exception. Generally speaking, works of monograph length tend more towards a general readership and produce works like Lawrence Wright's *The Terror Years: From Al-Qaeda to the Islamic State* and Daniel Levitas' *Terrorist Next Door: The Militia Movement and the Radical Right*.

[14] Bellaby, *The Ethics of Intelligence*, 2016; Stern, *Terror in the Name of God*, 2004.

[15] Erlensbusch-Anderson, *Genealogies of Terrorism*, 2018; McClintock, *Instruments of Statecraft*, 1992; Wright, *The Terror Years*, 2016.

[16] Erlensbusch-Anderson, *Genealogies of Terrorism*, 2018.

impact of the actions and responses in a conflict that may involve extremist terror, e.g. asymmetrical warfare. In her approach, each action is taken on its own terms, situating attacks and responses more as brief historical moments than datapoints in a long history, and focusing on the immediacy and short-term thinking inherent to many actions in such a tit-for-tat conflict. But her work is the exception and not the rule. In this sense, x is always unmoved, and the general public comes to view extremism as a permanent, fixed issue. The policy response is equally fixed: throw more defense dollars and lives and books at it.

Examples of analyzing extremism as the y include Walter Enders, Adolfo Sachsida and Todd Sandler's *The Impact of Transnational Terrorism on U.S. Foreign Direct Investment*, which talks about how terrorism impacts US efforts to distribute humanitarian aid, sanction international actors for violations of international law, and assist foreign nations with economic development. Charlinda Santifort, Todd Sandler and Patrick T. Brandt's *Terrorist attack and target diversity: Changepoints and their drivers*, discusses how terrorists (lone wolves and organizations) develop their target diversity over time and expand the complexity of their attacks within the scope of their resources, agents at hand, and goals.[17] Enders et al. consider y to be the choices made in the wake of extremist action; terrorist attacks create circumstances by which policy positions must be shifted, changed or even cancelled in favor of another approach or in lieu of resources that could have been allocated otherwise. Santifort et al. treat y as the actual act, and note how the acts perpetrated by a terrorist, or a group of terrorists, can easily escalate over time depending on the context and goals of the group. The unifying factor present in these works is the presupposition of terrorism as a reaction to some external stimulus.

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[17] Enders, Sachsida and Sandler, "The Impact of Transnational Terrorism," 2006; Santifort, Sandler and Brandt, "Terrorist attack and target diversity," 2012.

The lineage of extremism scholarship, and discussions of terrorism in many fields of scholarship generally, almost exclusively hew towards these two positions; they address *x* or *y* but not the relations between both. Beyond this, with a few exceptions, the broad scope of scholarship regarding terrorism has further tended towards the following frameworks or fields of focus:

- organizational
- institutional
- formal/empirical
- sociological
- criminological
- cultural
- anthropological
- historical
- geographical
- nationalist
- religious
- critical
- psychological[18]

Of the above, critical theories tend to be the most akin to this paper's purpose and premise, in terms of determining the cause of terrorism or more specifically the causal outcome of the feedback loop that exists between a government and an extremist ideology (i.e.. between the US and foreign jihadist terrorists).[19] Where critical theory differs crucially is that, like most other forms of terrorism research, it assumes a first mover or cause, rather than assuming a perpetual swing that goes back far enough not to matter in understanding the current state of terrorism and

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[18] Bosi, della Porta and Malthaner, "Organizational and Institutional Approaches," 2019; Shapiro, "Formal Approaches," 2019; Fisher and Dugan, "Sociological and Criminological Explanations of Terrorism," 2019; Malešević, "Cultural and Anthropological Approaches," 2019; Lutz, "Historical Approaches to Terrorism," 2019; Farrell, Findley and Young, "Geographical Approaches to the Study of Terrorism," 2019; English, "Nationalism and Terrorism," 2019; Haynes, "Religion and Terrorism," 2019; Heath-Kelly, "Critical Approaches," 2019; Horgan, "Psychological Approaches," 2019.
[19] Heath-Kelly, "Critical Approaches," 2019.

its respondents.[20] Psychological examinations are often similar.[21] The most common theoretical approaches all assume a first mover as a given, whichever side it might be. There is always an unmoved mover that just exists, to be responded to. Action and reaction are always presupposed. This notion can of course be challenged not necessarily with a historical infinite regression of causes, but rather with the idea that which mover was first matters less than the overall process and the changes that ensue because of it; to some degree, any starting point will be somewhat arbitrary.

Erica Chenoweth and Andreas Gofas' work, *The Study of Terrorism: achievements and challenges ahead*, identify several areas where current terrorism research has fallen short. In particular, they note the lack of interdisciplinary scholarly research that combines multiple approaches to create new avenues for study. Alex P. Schmid's *Institutionalizing the Field of Terrorism Studies*, Richard Jackson's *Revising the Field of Terrorism* and Jonathan Evans' *Academic Research and the Intelligence Community: some reflections* take a long view of terrorism scholarship, noting the field's movement beyond an initial narrow focus towards a global view rather than predominantly a Western one.[22] Evans in particular questions the reliability of intelligence agencies and agents as narrators.[23]

Counterterrorism studies, including Juliette Bird's *Terrorism and Counterterrorism: A Policy Perspective* and Andrea Bianchi's *Counterterrorism and International Law*, is a field that is focused on investigating counterterrorism policy. The production of such policy tends to be

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[20] Heath-Kelly, "Critical Approaches," 2019.
[21] Horgan, "Psychological Approaches," 2019.
[22] Chenoweth and Gofas., "The Study of Terrorism," 2019; Schmid, "Institutionalizing the Field of Terrorism Studies," 2019; Jackson, "Revising the Field of Terrorism," 2019; Evans, "Academic Research and the Intelligence Community," 2019.
[23] Evans, "Academic Research and the Intelligence Community," 2019.

dominated by counterterrorism research, a separate subfield. Counterterrorism research tends to

be dominated by intelligence researchers and analysts, including scholars who began their

careers as intelligence analysts or who became analysts after an academic career.[24] The resultant

reliance on intelligence agencies for primary sources bears noting, but overall both of these

subfields of terrorism scholarship have a smaller reach in the literature.[25] Much more work can

and should be done in these fields just regarding encapsulating the scale of institutions like the

United States' National Security Agency, or China and Russia's many intelligence agencies and

intelligence operations groups.[26]

Both the strengths and limitations of current scholarship are clear. While this literature

describes the feedback loop cycle piecemeal, what is often missing is the long-view approach

seeking to understand how extremism and counterextremism feed one another, not only

perpetuating a cycle of action and reaction but spurring progressive evolution in both. Like much

of the literature, this feedback loop model does have x and y terms but takes it as moot which one

was the true "first mover" when the starting point for the cycle is arbitrary and often in the eye of

the beholder. What matters is how the cycle affects the development and growth of both the

extremist ideology behind the acts of terrorism, and the government(s) and societies that respond

to terrorist actions and must make gambles with their social contracts. Also important is how this

evolution has caused both extremism and counterextremism to institutionalize and calcify over

time, becoming self-perpetuating unto themselves and in relation to each other. And finally, the

model should be able to account for what happens as an extremist group falls into decline or

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[24] Bird, "Terrorism and Counterterrorism," 2019.
[25] Bird, "Terrorism and Counterterrorism," 2019.
[26] Many of these groups engage in cyberwarfare with one another. Cyberwarfare is a burgeoning field all its own with much overlapping with counterterrorism, particularly state terrorism, but discussions of that remain outside the scope of this work.

even extinction.[27] While this field of scholarship is itself growing and adapting to some long-neglected realities of the face of extremism, and including more perspectives once ignored, there are more changes to make. Beyond including non-Western perspectives, for example, or recognizing white nationalist extremism as a topic badly in need of study, scholars should consider whether an action-then-reaction approach is adequate no matter whom the first actor is established to be.[28] As such, the feedback-loop approach to the evolution of extremism and counterextremism posited here is a helpful addition to existing scholarship.

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[27] Cronin, "How al-Qaida Ends," 2006

[28] Elu and Price, "The Causes and Consequences," 2019; Holmes, "Terrorism in Latin America," 2019; Chellaney, "Terrorism in Asia," 2019; Chenoweth and Gofas, "The Study of Terrorism," 2019.

Chapter 2: Theoretical Framework

The feedback-loop model considers action, reaction, and escalation between the American government and extra-governmental extremism (typically in the form of various terrorist groups). Most other approaches to terrorism thus far assume a first cause or mover and a reaction agent, target, or a government. This is insufficient. The proposed model looks at terrorism over a much longer timespan to see how two sides of a given conflict repeatedly transform one another over various iterations of the feedback cycle. The evolutionary pressures on both can then be used to understand the changes in each that may follow. Thus, understanding how the feedback loop shapes policy and institutions on either side is critical for developing and evaluating more effective reactions to extremism. This remains true even when an action is so spectacular and traumatic (e.g. 9/11) that the instinctive response to it is to overreact with large-scale state violence, which may be less effective than challenging the perpetrators' media dominance, undermining their unity with allied groups, and exploiting the perpetrators' mistakes in an environment in which public opinion in their home regions has been turning against terror targeted at civilians.[29]

The model can be understood best in a theoretical example. Imagine there has been a bombing like the one that occurred in Oklahoma City in 1995.[30] The bomb goes off in a public space; federal, state and local law enforcement along with emergency services respond; media outlets examine and speculate; intelligence agencies analyze the situation; and government leadership reacts. Casualties are reported, mourning occurs; manhunts quickly follow assuming the individual or individuals in question did not die in the attempt and escaped as was the case

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[29] Cronin, "How al-Qaida Ends," 2006.
[30] Hewitt, *Understanding Terrorism in America*, 2003.

with Timothy McVeigh.[31] Beyond the event itself, there is a shift in public attention, an outcry for action, an ensuing public policy response, a shift of resources and intelligence focus, a shift of scholarly attention towards the event and understanding it as a singular historical moment. Adding complexity is the state's constant struggle to juggle many possible plots and attack vectors. If an attack occurs, questions inevitably arise about how it was able to occur and how counterterrorism efforts failed to prevent it. Successful prevention of plots occurs often, but is very much underreported; how do such shifts in policy help or hinder such efforts at prevention on the basis of public panic in any given moment?

The way the feedback loop model would treat this is first to look to possible reactions by law enforcement and intelligence. Natural responses would include restricting and monitoring access to bombmaking materials and the information required to make high-yield weapons like plastic explosives. Purchases of such materials or dissemination of such information could be tracked to flag suspicious individuals, who would be investigated for ties to groups like militias. Should plotting progress to a certain point the relevant members of those groups would be arrested. In turn, those militia groups or other nationalist extremists might splinter to cover their tracks or change allegiances due to visibility or schisms prompted by increased pressure on them. They might change tactics, and indeed, destruction of the kind seen in the 1995 OKC attack perpetrated by domestic extremists has not really been prevalent since then within the United States. Meanwhile, anti-government extremists, racist and white nationalist groups, Christian extremists, etc. focused their efforts on different forms of violence, finding more success with occupation of federal property, shootings and vehicle attacks, and a shift to a stochastic terror model. If their training camps became vulnerable to law enforcement raids, to offer another

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[31] Hewitt, *Understanding Terrorism in America*, 2003.

example, they might travel abroad to train with like-minded white nationalists elsewhere. Law enforcement would need to adapt to this iteration by flagging necessary materials, but this becomes much more difficult when stochastic terrorism is the target and when the preferred weapons, firearms and vehicles, are so readily available.

It is important to remember the bombing may seem to be a first cause, but is in fact almost certainly a reaction to earlier policy changes and actions, not to mention the potential use of force by a government in response to earlier attacks, which were themselves pretexts for similar exchanges of policy actions and reactions. Any given bombing or attack is a reaction (perhaps an overreaction) to a policy, a set of circumstances perpetrated and perpetuated by a government *and* by an ideology in opposition to the actions of that government. While the ideology might be diametrically opposed to those governmental actions, it does not exist in a vacuum. It is espoused by, and acted on by, people, often in groups. To survive, those groups require support, resources and legitimacy. Over time, efforts to ensure the group's survival in order to continue acting on its defining ideology can change the group into a self-perpetuating enterprise, that may thrive in perpetual opposition where it might wither if it ever achieved its goal. Leaders of such groups may recognize this, and to maintain their own positions may become more interested in continuing the dance rather than finishing the project once and for all.

When this cycle is perpetuated indefinitely, it ceases to matter as much whether policy is the first action and a terrorist attack is a reaction, or vice-versa.[32] Consider what any given militia group or terrorist group might be protesting, and one will find a list of grievances relative to the policy that exists, such as US foreign policy towards a given Middle Eastern nation or, going

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[32] Goodwin, "The Causes of Terrorism," 2019; Lowenthal, "The Policymaker-Intelligence Relationship," 2010.

back historically, the legacy of colonialism in the region. The feedback loop model proposed in this thesis does examine both *x* and *y* and all of these factors, but goes further. It situates the bombing or attack in context, but cares less about the proximate cause of its existence and the immediate effects than it does the long run-up to it and the long-lasting legacy it leaves behind. This model requires that we place less consideration on what happened first or who started it, because this model does not focus on cause and effect. Instead, this model focuses on evolution, on change over time.

The events referenced above are all part of a longer history where multiple ideologies and governments clash with each other over action, reaction and response type. There were, for example, reactions to attacks such as the Oklahoma City bombing in US domestic policy and public discourse, but by and large, the emphasis of reaction was not on addressing domestic white nationalist/antigovernment extremism in a timely fashion.[33] There was no concrete plan for dealing with the ideologies and movements that influenced McVeigh's actions.[34] And by six years later, it was too late to do so, when jihadist terrorism sucked up all the air in the room after 9/11 and all focus and money went to dealing with that problem.[35] The ways domestic terrorism reacted to jihadist terrorism taking this attention was by growing and feeding off public resentment and even racism towards the groups in question and their associated religious and cultural contexts, and pervading ignorance surrounding both.[36]

And so, the failure to focus on white nationalist terrorism itself became a response; it contributed to path dependency and allowed for events such as mass shootings to go on being

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[33] Hewitt, *Understanding Terrorism in America*, 2003.
[34] Hewitt, *Understanding Terrorism in America*, 2003.
[35] Wright, *The Terror Years*, 2016.
[36] Levitas, *Terrorist Next Door*, 2004.

addressed as individual tragedies with no underlying connection rather than being treated as a

systemic problem with underpinnings that, as often as not, were ideological in nature. Mass

shootings for antigovernment reasons, as a prominent example of domestic terrorism in the US,

came to be seen as singular events and motivated by mental illness, not as a pattern motivated by

extremist ideology, resulting in a response that was more permissive.[37] Periodic actions and

reactions peppered this permissive response to give the impression of actual tackling of the

problem, but nothing systemic was ever enacted to challenge the underlying ideologies which

continued to grow and fester.[38] The violent and deadly federal raids following standoffs at David

Koresh's Branch Davidian compound in Waco, Texas, and at Randy Weaver's home in Ruby

Ridge, Idaho, were examples of use of force both reactive and deeply disproportionate, killing

several innocent people in each case.[39] Beyond the unnecessary loss of life, these overreactions

were also strategically inept, as they resulted in predictable blowback, and became part of right-

wing, anti-government mythology.[40] It took a monumental shift over the last decade in public

perception towards these ideologies, after they had managed to find their way into federal seats

of power and cause untold harm to American democracy, in order for them to be taken seriously

as threats to peace and social cohesion.[41]

     Decades of domestic terrorist activity went unaddressed systemically, while federal focus

went towards foreign terrorism which, for America, was generally a less prominent threat.[42]

While it is only a secondary objective of this thesis to show that domestic extremism, especially

of the white nationalist variety, is understudied, this form of extremism is also an excellent

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[37] Williams, "Domestic Terrorism in the United States," 2018.
[38] Levitas, *Terrorist Next Door*, 2004; Mudde, *The Far Right in America*, 2018.
[39] Mudde, *The Far Right in America*, 2018.
[40] Mudde, *The Far Right in America*, 2018.
[41] Mudde, *The Far Right in America*, 2018.
[42] Williams, "Domestic Terrorism in the United States," 2018.

candidate for study using the theoretical approach used in this thesis. It is less useful to recapitulate the debates over who started what, only with a different subject, than it is to move directly to studying the evolution of terrorism in tandem with government provocations and responses. The main goal is to rethink how we study extremism and counter-extremism, and then it will become possible to change focus to a more pertinent form of extremism.

Chapter 3: Case Study

This brings us to the crux of how this model will be used: we will discuss this by

applying the model to a case study involving the jihadist, Salafist terrorist group Al-Qaeda, in

order to test it. We will discuss a loop of actions and reactions, with reference to the rise and fall

of this group relative to others and the ways in which it influenced, specifically, US foreign and

domestic policy. The events to be discussed, in order, are: the 1993 World Trade Center attack,

the Philippine Airlines Flight 434 bombing of 11th December 1994, the failed Bojinka Plot of

1995, the 2000 USS *Cole* bombing, the infamous September 11th 2001 Word Trade Center

attacks, the 2002 Bali Nightclub and US consulate bombings, the failed 2009 Northwest Airlines

Flight 253 attack by the "underpants bomber," and the failed 2010 cargo plane bomb plot.[43] In

addition, we will consider counterterrorism and US federal responses, as well as the War on

Terror spawned in large part by 9/11, in passing.[44] Intelligence failure, law enforcement failure

and the cases where an attack was successfully prevented will all be relevant. Importantly, we

will consider these events by looking at them as making an interconnected whole. Every action

may create the circumstances for the next attack, and the circumstances for the next policy

change or war or prosecution/martyrdom, depending on the point of view of the observers in

question.

The expectations for the model can be summed up as a constant re-evaluation of cases

both understudied and overstudied in literature and public awareness, forming a chronology of

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[43] In order of relevance: Buncombe, "Libya ready to accept responsibility for Lockerbie," 2013; Multiple Authors, *Congressional Hearings: Intelligence and Security*, 1998; Reeve, *The New Jackals*, 2002; Brzezinski, "Operation Bojinka's Bombshell," 2002; Combs and Slann, *Encyclopedia of Terrorism*, 2002; Wright, *The Looming Tower*, 2006; Multiple AFP Authors, "Al-Qaeda financed Bali," 2003; Goldman, "Muslim Cleric Anwar Awlaki Linked to Fort Hood, Northwest Flight," 2009; CNN Wire staff writers, "Yemen-based Al-Qaeda group claims responsibility," 2010.
[44] Bianchi, "Counterterrorism and International Law," 2019; Wright, *The Terror Years*, 2016.

feedback between action and reaction over a given period. The purpose of this mapping out of events is to demonstrate the ways in which terrorist actions and government actions act as both first movers/causes as well as reactions to one another, and to demonstrate the ways in which government policy, in this case US foreign and domestic policy, changes to match the actions and reactions of jihadist, Islamic fundamentalist extremism and terrorist groups such as Al-Qaeda. The model will show the ways in which the US government has failed to address terrorism systemically, and how scholarship on terrorism thus far has failed to offer a solution to the problems posed by this cycle, by failing to properly address it in literature with existing models.

This case history details the progression of Al-Qaeda's evolution from a Middle Eastern and Eurasian/Afghan phenomenon into a global terror network, diffuse and factionalized, but unified behind a few shared goals and revenue streams. It is by no means comprehensive. There is a vast literature detailing the specifics of the growth and evolution of Al-Qaeda.[45] The focus here is on how the evolution of Al-Qaeda into the pre-eminent terrorist network of the late 20th and early 21st centuries affected American foreign and domestic policies and prompted the post-Cold War focus of US national security on terrorism. The case history will also show how the organization known as Al-Qaeda grew as a response to US and Western cultural influences, military interventions, and economic pressures—evolving beyond its regional origins to focus almost exclusively on opposition to the United States over all other stated or ostensible priorities, such as creating a caliphate.[46] This case study demonstrates the feedback loop dynamic

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[45] Ganor and Azani, "Terrorism in the Middle East," 2019.
[46] Ganor and Azani, "Terrorism in the Middle East," 2019; English, "Nationalism and Terrorism," 2019.

discussed in chapter 2. Several cycles of this feedback loop will be evident in this chapter, each prompting successive evolutions in both actors.

Al-Qaeda is one of the most recognizable "brands" of extremism, and they are especially well known and influential in the Middle East and North Africa, the places where they first emerged in the 1980s. Many scholars note how the study of jihadist extremism dominated scholarly attention when it came to terrorism and counter-terrorism. Some go a step further and say that Al-Qaeda dominated the scholarly topic of jihadist terrorism just as it dominated extremist spaces. It gathered all the attention, all the relatively sparse donor money, all the recruits, and all the clout within Wahhabist and Salafist Islamic circles for years.[47] Its profile was only heightened in scholarly and government circles after 9/11. The extremism of Al-Qaeda, in terms of its ideology, funding models, operational models, and innovations in terror tactics over what had been done before was heavily influential; later terrorist groups would pick up these lessons, or in some cases react against them to suit their own goals and organizational needs.[48] But Al-Qaeda's own evolution and eventual effective obsolescence in the face of Daesh/ISIS set the trajectory of the evolution of extremism and counterextremism for years.

In practical terms, because of this influence Al-Qaeda is heavily studied. This makes Al-Qaeda an excellent test case, since it is often helpful to test novel models and theoretical frameworks on well-understood cases with an abundance of scholarly discussion.[49] While Al-Qaeda's most obvious influence on extremism and counterextremism and, indeed, politics and culture, is 9/11, focusing solely on their most prominent act of extremism ignores how they

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[47] Ganor and Azani, "Terrorism in the Middle East," 2019; Reeve, *The New Jackals*, 2002.
[48] Abrahms, "The Strategic Model of Terrorism Revisited," 2019; Carter and Pant, "Terrorism and State Sponsorship," 2019; Reeve, *The New Jackals*, 2002.
[49] Crenshaw, "Constructing the Field of Terrorism," 2019.

contributed to the evolution of extremist actions generally. An examination of Al-Qaeda both before and after 9/11, in particular the US's ongoing response to, or the failure to respond, to Al-Qaeda in effective ways, was a dominant influence on counterextremism and helped it evolve specifically into the myopic military-intelligence complex we see in the US today.[50]

While Al-Qaeda comes from humble roots, as it came to prominence, it began to eclipse Islamic Jihad and started to commit its most noteworthy actions outside the Middle East. Despite rhetoric advocating the establishment of a caliphate and other regional governmental reforms, the group shifted targets and ambitions away from domestic Middle Eastern concerns towards the West and the United States, reflecting bin Laden's changing attitudes to the US in the wake of his experiences in Afghanistan. In turn, he and his associates found success experimenting with and elaborating on contemporary terror tactics commonly favored by jihadist groups. These techniques might seem antiquated now, in part because their brutal and spectacular outcomes repeatedly resulted in defensive responses designed to prevent further attacks of the same nature. At the time, however, they were relatively novel; by the early 1990s, aircraft hijackings and bombings had only been a typical tactic among organized extremists, as opposed to lone wolves or more conventional criminals, for a decade or so.

The organization that we know today as Al-Qaeda was not formally founded until the late 80s, but in terms of scholarship, the organization's roots exist within the context of bin Laden's experience among the Afghan Taliban and mujahadeen efforts against the Soviet Union.[51] During the 1980s, Al-Qaeda started to organize based on access to Osama bin Laden's Saudi

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[50] Clapper, "The Role of Defense in Shaping U.S. Intelligence Reform," 2010; Byman, "Counterterrorism Strategies," 2019; Bird, "Terrorism and Counterterrorism," 2019; Bianchi, "Counterterrorism and International Law," 2019.
[51] Reeve, *The New Jackals*, 2002.

money and connections within the Kingdom. At first, Al-Qaeda were purveyors of what we might today consider to be typical terrorist attacks. They were not, however, typical of the attacks of their time, which had a very narrow range of targets.[52] Al-Qaeda dramatically expanded the field of targets, carrying out plane and truck bombings, attacks on noteworthy or symbolic landmarks, or attacks on large gatherings of civilians, frequently at worship or going about their daily business, sending the message that no one was safe. This focus on high-profile targets and large body counts set them apart relative to other groups of comparable motive and strength, such as Islamic Jihad or Hezbollah. In particular, they targeted the specific weaknesses of the post-Cold War West, especially the United States, when it came to security. In this, they also took cues from their competitors and from others operating using terror tactics (up to and including government actors such as Moammar Gaddafi in Libya during the late 1980s, when he was implicated in the Pan Am Flight 103 "Lockerbie" bombing).[53] To get attention, recruits, and money, a group needed to be causing death and destruction that made headlines as far around the world as possible.

Al-Qaeda first achieved that objective on a notable scale with two separate actions orchestrated by Ramzi Yousef in 1993 and 1994.[54] Yousef is the nephew of high-ranking Al-Qaeda member Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, himself believed to have masterminded the 9/11 attacks. In 1993, Yousef executed a truck bombing in the parking garage of the World Trade Center, which was intended to cause more damage to the building and more casualties than it

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[52] Brown, "The Pre-History of Terrorism," 2019; Bew, Meleagrou-Hitchens and Frampton, "The Long Twentieth Century," 2019; Reeve, *The New Jackals*, 2002.
[53] Buncombe, "Libya ready to accept responsibility for Lockerbie," 2013.
[54] Reeve, *The New Jackals*, 2002.

actually did.[55] In 1994, in a test run for the later Bojinka plot he was planning with his uncle, he

planted a bomb on Philippine Airlines Flight 434 that killed one passenger and injured ten

others.[56] Thus, before 9/11, Al-Qaeda already had ambitions to execute symbolic, mass casualty

attacks on American targets and to engage in airline-focused terrorism. Yousef went on to

envision the Bojinka plot, an even bolder plan to hijack and blow up eight planes simultaneously,

assassinate the Roman Catholic Pope, and attack CIA assets, all of which was specifically

intended to coincide with a presidential visit by Bill Clinton to the Philippines, which Yousef

believed was home to a large Muslim audience that he could attempt to radicalize.[57] This proved

to be too ambitious and was foiled, but did provide the framework for 9/11 which that attack's

plotters followed to achieve success.

Smaller-scale suicide bombings continued alongside this level of planning and often

succeeded. Examples include the 1998 US Embassy attacks in Nairobi, Kenya and Dar es

Salaam, Tanzania, and the USS *Cole* attack in October of 2000.[58] In these attacks, echoing

marine barracks and embassy bombings in Beirut in 1983 (attributed to Hezbollah and/or Islamic

Jihad), suicide bombers drove trucks up to the American embassies, or piloted a boat adjacent to

an American destroyer as it was being refueled in Aden Harbor in Yemen, and detonated

explosives carried aboard. The embassy bombings in particular killed 224 people in total, which

from Al-Qaeda's perspective served to keep the pressure up and keep the organization itself

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[55] Multiple Authors, *Congressional Hearings: Intelligence and Security*, 1998; Wright, *The Looming Tower*, 2006; Reeve, *The New Jackals*, 2002. Though the 1993 World Trade Center bombing occurred first, its perceived status as a failure given the relatively contained damage and loss of life, and the arrest of the perpetrators, means it is more of a footnote in Al-Qaeda's history.

[56] Reeve, *The New Jackals*, 2002.

[57] Brzezinski, "Operation Bojinka's Bombshell," 2002; Reeve, *The New Jackals*, 2002.

[58] Elu and Price, "The Causes and Consequences of Terrorism in Sub-Saharan Africa," 2019; Ganor and Azani, "Terrorism in the Middle East," 2019; Reeve, *The New Jackals*, 2002.

prominent, especially in terms of attracting US public attention.[59] Similarly, even after 9/11, the

group did not want for ambition to follow up what they had done even with the beginning of the

War on Terror, following up with attacks on American targets such as the Bali Nightclub

bombings in 2002 that, among other things, targeted a US consulate and killed 202 people in

total.[60] That death tolls of 224 and 202 can be considered relatively small compared to the rest of

their record of attacks is a testament to Al-Qaeda's unrelenting focus on large-scale killing and

brutality.

The main tactical shift post-9/11 occurred in terms of rapid abandonment of airplane

attacks[61] in favor of other means, including falling back to car bombings of US diplomatic

buildings. 9/11 itself, as an attack, was shocking in part because it represented an emotionally

disturbing evolution of terror tactics with a high casualty count, but also because it represented

an incremental improvement in the attack styles Al-Qaeda had attempted before to take

advantage of still-extant sets of security vulnerabilities. Bombs were hard to get on planes, for

example, and so in response, they chose to hijack the plane itself and use it as a bomb and a

hostage device all in one.[62] Another vulnerability exploited was racial profiling, whereby clean-

cut Arab males, well financed and covered in false documents, were selected to carry out the

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[59] Elu and Price, "The Causes and Consequences of Terrorism in Sub-Saharan Africa," 2019; Ganor and Azani, "Terrorism in the Middle East," 2019; Reeve, *The New Jackals*, 2002.

[60] Reeve, *The New Jackals*, 2002; Multiple AFP Authors, "Al-Qaeda financed Bali," 2003; Chellaney, "Terrorism in Asia," 2019.

[61] Airplane attacks had previously represented an appealing target because of a combination of as-yet-untested security vulnerabilities and the prospect of proving the group's determination and capability by making civilian air travel spectacularly unsafe and unequivocally marking civilians as prime targets. This expansion of methods and targets made sense while Al-Qaeda was in a growth phase, just as the use of civilian vehicles themselves (with civilians aboard) as suicide weapons represented a further extension of this approach, only underscoring their commitment to spectacular and horrifying mass-casualty attacks. The affinity for airplane attacks thus was not a direct reaction to efforts aimed at preventing future ground vehicle bombings, but a preemptive attempt to attack in an unexpected manner and raise the stakes all at once through both sheer brutality and novelty. Worth considering is Cronin's (2006) suspicion that some extremist groups may act and escalate simply to perpetuate their own existence.

[62] Byman, "Counterterrorism Strategies," 2019; Bird, "Terrorism and Counterterrorism," 2019; CNN Wire, "Yemen-based Al-Qaeda group claims responsibility," 2010; Goldman, "Muslim Cleric Anwar Awlaki Linked to Fort Hood, Northwest Flight 253," 2009.

attacks because they would "fly under the radar" of what security agencies previously had been looking for in terror suspects.[63]

The response to all of the above, especially after 9/11, by the United States was effective, if an overreaction in hindsight. Airline terrorism has been so hard to pull off in more recent years that it largely is no longer worth it from a terrorist perspective, at least within Western nations, and almost every major airline-based foreign terror plot against the United States since 9/11 has failed as a result of changes that followed that event.[64] The response was not perfect, however, and overcompensation can be seen in the rampant racial profiling, use of sky marshals against what rapidly became an obsolete tactic, and the rise of security theater in the form of removing shoes, disallowing toothpaste and shampoo, and full-body scanners violating privacy in the name of questionable results.[65] The security regime of today was irrevocably altered by 9/11, perhaps permanently, not just because of how 9/11 was different than the terror attacks before it, but also because of the ways in which it was the same. As a result, some security responses were not innovative, but merely doubled down on past practices, presenting the outward appearance of response. This appears to be consistent with American perceptions of Al-Qaeda's escalation with 9/11 as largely incremental itself rather than particularly innovative.[66] Failure of imagination did not apply only to security agencies' behavior before the attacks but extended long afterwards, and arguably continues to this day, including the insistence on military action to destroy assets

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[63] Wright, *The Terror Years*, 2016; Wright, *The Looming Tower*, 2006; Byman, "Counterterrorism Strategies," 2019; Bird, "Terrorism and Counterterrorism," 2019; Best, "The Dilemma of Defense Intelligence," 2010.
[64] CNN Wire, "Yemen-based Al-Qaeda group claims responsibility," 2010; Byman, "Counterterrorism Strategies," 2019; Bird, "Terrorism and Counterterrorism," 2019; Wright, *The Terror Years*, 2016.
[65] Dearlove, "National Security and Public Anxiety," 2010; Bird, "Terrorism and Counterterrorism," 2019; Best, "The Dilemma of Defense Intelligence," 2010.
[66] Wright, *The Terror Years*, 2016; Byman, "Counterterrorism Strategies," 2019; Bird, "Terrorism and Counterterrorism," 2019; Best, "The Dilemma of Defense Intelligence," 2010.

and decapitate leadership, which is historically less effective than other means of cutting extremists off from their supports.[67]

Direct security tactics after 9/11 represented doubling down on security tactics that had worked before, just closing gaps.[68] Meanwhile, and perhaps with more worrying long-term implications for the balance between security and personal freedoms within the United States itself, these many attacks became a series of turning points for the developing military-intelligence complex. The top-level, strategic response to repeated intelligence and executive failure following 9/11 was to create a new executive department, Homeland Security, presiding over all of the existing intelligence agencies.[69] This bureaucratic response to extremism was less a direct response to actual terror tactics and the security vulnerabilities they had exposed, and were more reflective of an entity unto itself growing with terrorism as a singular raison d'être, as if it were an ideological opponent in a new Cold War, a re-enactment of the conflict that influenced the worldviews of the major actors in counterextremism at that time and set the policy paradigm for the conflicts to come. Policy inertia and influential figures from the late Cold War were still very much in place by the time serious counterextremism became necessary, and as such, this may be less a case of leaders fighting the previous war and more a perceived extension or iteration of the same conflict. 9/11 was a watershed point where the security response could have become more innovative, but largely failed to be.[70] The years to follow rewarded the

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[67] Cronin, "How al-Qaida Ends," 2006.
[68] Wright, *The Terror Years*, 2016; Byman, "Counterterrorism Strategies," 2019; Bird, "Terrorism and Counterterrorism," 2019; Best, "The Dilemma of Defense Intelligence," 2010.
[69] Bird, "Terrorism and Counterterrorism," 2019; Best, "The Dilemma of Defense Intelligence," 2010; Andregg, "Ethics and Professional Intelligence," 2010; Bellaby, *The Ethics of Intelligence*, 2016.
[70] Wright, *The Terror Years*, 2016; Byman, "Counterterrorism Strategies," 2019; Bird, "Terrorism and Counterterrorism," 2019; Best, "The Dilemma of Defense Intelligence," 2010; Bianchi, "Counterterrorism and International Law," 2019; Evans, "Academic Research and the Intelligence Community," 2019; Hastedt, "The Politics of Intelligence Accountability," 2010.

overreaction, in that no further attacks like 9/11 occurred, which post hoc reasoning chalked up

to the success of the new security measures, of the new Department of Homeland Security, and

to the necessity of the overseas wars prosecuted as part of the overarching War on Terror.[71] In

the meantime, alternate and potentially more successful and efficient methods of shutting down

or seriously hindering Al-Qaeda, such as a sustained effort at challenging their media-savvy use

of visual propaganda, exploiting their potential supporters' increasing discomfort with terror

tactics, and promoting conflict within the Al-Qaeda umbrella by playing up the contradictions in

the goals and views of its allies and affiliates, were not seriously pursued.[72]

After 9/11 the window closed very quickly on airline-based terror as well as attacks

against major American and international landmarks; further airline attacks by al-Qaeda were

generally unsuccessful, or were much lower in profile.[73] Nonetheless, al-Qaeda had enemies

other than the United States they could target and at the same time were perfectly comfortable

attacking non-American locations to make a point to the United States and the international

community that they could largely do what they liked, War on Terror or not. The Bali nightclub

attack represented a mass-casualty attack on something not a landmark, but with a lot of civilians

in one place; it possessed less symbolism, and was more about seeking shock value via a high

body count, though they did attack a US consulate as part of this plot.[74]

Because their success with 9/11 had literally (by shining a light on their funding, which

was curtailed) and figuratively (by altering opportunities for large-scale terror attacks on certain

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[71] Anyone familiar with *The Simpsons* may remember this as a "Bear Patrol" argument, where the absence of an action becomes proof of the reaction's effectiveness and preventative purpose.
[72] Cronin, "How al-Qaida Ends," 2006.
[73] Byman, "Counterterrorism Strategies," 2019; Bird, "Terrorism and Counterterrorism," 2019; CNN Wire, "Yemen-based Al-Qaeda group claims responsibility," 2010; Goldman, "Muslim Cleric Anwar Awlaki Linked to Fort Hood, Northwest Flight 253," 2009; Wright, *The Terror Years*, 2016.
[74] Wright, *The Terror Years*, 2016; Multiple AFP Authors, "Al-Qaeda financed Bali," 2003.

targets) changed the economy of terrorism, Al-Qaeda was forced to adapt, and for a while at least they were able to do so and ride the coattails of their successes to what remaining funding, recruits and sustainability existed. Do note Cronin's caution that it is easy to overstate the role of counterextremist action in forcing the evolution of extremist behavior; while military action caused temporary disruption through decapitation of cells and forcing the relocation of operations or essentially outsourcing to affiliated groups, some even still using the Al-Qaeda "brand," the decision to act as a centralized group itself may have been an error that military responses simply corrected, pushing Al-Qaeda back to a more sensible (for their purposes) decentralized structure. By 2006, Cronin notes, the iteration of Al-Qaeda that committed the 9/11 attacks had effectively ceased to exist.[75] Nevertheless, pinning the group to a broad worldview and ideology rather than a central leadership would help to keep operations going. Scaling down also helped limit the damage done by efforts to freeze assets known to be linked to Al-Qaeda's funders and cut off cash flows through laundering and international money transfer methods (e.g., *hawala* networks) as well as fraudulent charities, since operations like the attack in Bali could be executed comparatively cheaply.

Despite their own evolution into a self-perpetuating entity interested in keeping the lucrative dance of conflict with the United States and its allies going, Al-Qaeda would need to decentralize in other ways to keep going. This is consistent with the compartmentalization needed in the executing of large-scale extremist group actions, in order to survive longer. (Cronin notes the similarity to a leaderless social movement.)[76] They also focused on cheaper, more decentralized versions of terror attacks than they had previously achieved, in order to

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[75] Cronin, "How al-Qaida Ends," 2006.
[76] Cronin, "How al-Qaida Ends," 2006.

remain relevant as the War on Terror threatened their revenue streams and cost them talent and access to safe havens.[77] Even these changes in strategy, however, were not sufficient to prevent a decline in attention and infamy, as Al-Qaeda could not shock people with attacks on this scale as they once had with their more ambitious plots. The decentralized approach conflicted with their prior modus operandi of highly centralized planning and organization of discrete terror cells. They had difficulty adapting to this new landscape and operating effectively on the scale they had before, and their funding, recruitment and resources declined correspondingly. Again, while it is easy to credit this to counterextremist operations (military, financial and otherwise), it may also represent the limits to the space in which Al-Qaeda could adapt and innovate. Their attempt to run a highly-centralized operation had been a victim of its own success, and they were forced back into a more conventional distributed model, which necessitated cheaper and easier actions that were a natural fit for a do-it-yourself model in the internet era.[78] Forcing this change may in context be a comparatively easy win for American policymakers and security agencies, but the last mile, cutting off the last of Al-Qaeda's monetary and social support, proved very difficult, as counterextremist interventions approached their usual and expected limits against a decentralized and compartmentalized enemy united mainly by social bonds and ideology.

It was to be their successors that cemented their decline by both decentralizing and lowering the cost of attacks better than they could, and mastering the media more readily. Daesh/ISIS began life as an Al-Qaeda affiliate within the Levant, committing terrorist acts in the Holy Land, and eventually became an independent group, taking some of Al-Qaeda's leadership

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[77] Hunter, "Terrorism and War," 2012; Jackson, Ashley, Jordan, Natasha, Katherine and Sina, "Practical Terrorism Prevention," 2019; Jeffreys-Jones, "The Rise and Fall of the CIA," 2010; Wright, *The Terror Years,* 2016; Miller and Fahey, "The Rise and Fall of Terrorism," 2019.

[78] Cronin, "How al-Qaida Ends," 2006. Note that by the time of writing Cronin already observed the shift to cheap attacks relying on individual initiative and a commitment to the Al-Qaeda brand rather than formal membership in the organization. Thus, the distinction between a lone-wolf attack and a DIY terror operation becomes blurred.

with them as they left.[79] Their relevance, access to resources and resulting level of hard power

exploded following the chaos of the early Syrian Civil War when they managed to not only carry

out attacks but actually, for several years, hold territory in eastern Syria and carve out the, as

they called it, Islamic State, fulfilling what had become only a distant objective for Al-Qaeda

proper. Daesh ran with the idea of perpetuating the extremism/counterextremism conflict as a

way to secure themselves perpetual legitimacy as a quasi-state, getting funding, support and

political power from sources both within their zone of control and from friendly elements in

countries such as Saudi Arabia and Egypt.[80] They cemented their success via a campaign of

internationally sponsored, decentralized, almost "do it yourself" terror tactics, acting as though

they were influencers in a new online terror economy. They even published high quality, edited

videos and magazines in many languages, and collected taxes in their territory to fund their

operation.[81] They achieved success on a level Al-Qaeda neither seriously aspired to nor ever

matched, focusing much more closely than did Al-Qaeda on seizing territory for the caliphate

they intended to create more or less immediately and exploiting, among other things, the Syrian

civil war to expedite this. Less evident was the calcification of the group into a self-perpetuating

entity as Al-Qaeda had experienced, and to the extent Daesh did evolve in this way, it was

congruent with their aims of transitioning into a regional governing body, aims Al-Qaeda had

always seen as a long-term goal. Where Cronin argued in 2006 that Al-Qaeda was past the point

of failing by ineffectively transitioning to a new generation, believing they had already done so,

their true failure to do so would come about a decade later as Daesh became, to its supporters,

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[79] Wright, *The Terror Years,* 2016; Worth, *A Rage for Order*, 2016; Warrick, *Black Flags*, 2016.

[80] Worth, *A Rage for Order*, 2016; Warrick, *Black Flags*, 2016; Multiple Authors, "Teen charged with planning knife or bomb attack for ISIS in New York City," 2019.

[81] Worth, *A Rage for Order*, 2016; Warrick, *Black Flags*, 2016; Malešević, "Cultural and Anthropological Approaches," 2019.

superior to Al-Qaeda at its own game.[82] Thus, despite its having been a flash in the pan in terms of longevity compared to Al-Qaeda, Daesh is relevant to this case study simply because of how it represents, for all intents and purposes, the end of Al-Qaeda as the major player it had been previously.

Daesh also perfected the dichotomy between outsourcing violence and terrorism elsewhere and simultaneously centralizing power and security at home, as highlighted by their bifurcated propaganda. The propaganda aimed at the people living in the regions they sought to control was utopian and emphasized security and the rule of Islamic sharia law (as they interpreted it), while what was aimed at their enemies in the West was designed to enrage those enemies and provoke them into continuing the conflict explicitly at the cost of any sort of reconciliation or negotiation, all the while encouraging those unable to come to Syria to support them or plan and carry out attacks in their home nations.[83]

The evolutionary chain that led to Daesh originated in the United States' response to Al-Qaeda and, more directly, to the "institutionalization" of Al-Qaeda as a self-perpetuating entity. For Daesh's leaders, perpetuation was not enough, leading to their dissatisfaction with Al-Qaeda's track record; they wanted to create a truly world-shattering enterprise and forward their vision for Islam beyond the need for terrorism alone, but as something that could truly compete with the West and with local regimes friendly to outside influences.[84] Al-Qaeda appeared to them incapable of achieving, perhaps even unwilling to pursue, these regional political goals,

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[82] Cronin, "How al-Qaida Ends," 2006.

[83] Wright, *The Terror Years,* 2016; Worth, *A Rage for Order*, 2016; Warrick, *Black Flags*, 2016; Phillips, "Terrorist Organizational Dynamics," 2019; Hegghammer and Nesser, "Assessing the Islamic State's Commitment to Attacking the West," 2015; Hegghammer, "Should I Stay or Should I Go?" 2013.

[84] Wright, *The Terror Years,* 2016; Worth, *A Rage for Order*, 2016; Warrick, *Black Flags*, 2016; Hegghammer and Nesser, "Assessing the Islamic State's Commitment to Attacking the West," 2015; Felbab-Brown, "The Crime-Terror Nexus," 2019; Carter and Pant, "Terrorism and State Sponsorship," 2019.

centered on the creation of a caliphate. The success of Al-Qaeda in its offensive pursuits almost ensured its decline in this regard, and created its replacement by an eventual successor that was more innovative and could outcompete it in terms of funding, efficiency, brutality and attention. Where once Al-Qaeda took ideals and grudges against the West and the United States and acted upon them for their own sake, eventually coming to eclipse its early jihadist forebears, Daesh upped the ante further by attempting to create a national identity on that approach, and on terrorism and extreme interpretations of Islam as nation-building. This is not to say their goals were at loggerheads. Indeed, Al-Qaeda had various objectives beyond mere violence, including political reform and nation-building, just as Daesh did. The disagreement appears to be rooted at least partially in which goals appeared to be the priority for Al-Qaeda's leaders, who had much more success enacting spectacular and telegenic violence than they did in forming a theocratic government. Those leaders who would break away to operate as Daesh appear to have believed that the creation of a caliphate should be a much more immediate goal. Cronin notes that the overarching political goals of Al-Qaeda, including the overthrow of the Saudi regime (which they believed to be illegitimate), would have required upending most of the global political and economic order, a difficulty Daesh encountered immediately when they tried to tackle the objective in the short term rather than kicking the can down the road as they believed Al-Qaeda had been doing.[85]

Meanwhile, Al-Qaeda executed prominent and violent operations that forced the American government to react, which in turn forced its own hand. In trying to survive the response it had provoked, Al-Qaeda gave rise to more dynamic successors like Daesh that

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[85] Cronin, "How al-Qaida Ends," 2006. While Cronin could not have been expected to predict the rise of Daesh, her point that the overall goals of comprehensive political and economic reform required for the creation of a caliphate are very, very difficult to achieve still stands, and it is natural that Daesh would face similar difficulty when it attempted years later to tackle the same task.

eclipsed it. By the 2010s, Al-Qaeda was on the decline and already failing to execute plots

involving planes and other conventional targets in which it had once specialized.[86] Northwest

Airlines Flight 253 in 2009, infamous for its "underpants bomber" element, was the last high-

profile plot involving an American target by the group, and was an attack that failed with no

fatalities.[87] Unsurprisingly, the United States response to foiling plots like this was to continue to

do what they had been doing to prevent attacks.

In summary, during the 1990s, Al-Qaeda became very active, and had ambitions to

execute a plethora of airline bombings. They successfully did several, as test runs for the Bojinka

plot, but that plot, which would have seen them bomb eight planes simultaneously, failed.[88] At

around the same time they executed the 1993 World Trade Center bombing, so the focus was

clearly on bombs and either mass casualty targets or landmarks. They wanted attention and

visibility. During the 2000s, Al-Qaeda continued their late-1990s pattern of suicide bombings

with the USS *Cole* incident. Then 9/11 merged mass casualty, landmark attacks, airline

operations and suicide bombings on a grand scale that hit multiple targets. They remained active

in mass casualty bombings afterwards but moved away from major landmarks, such as was the

case during the Bali bombings, and back to more conventional targets like consulates.[89] They

still attempted to focus on planes as a vector of attack for some time, despite the increasing

difficulty of executing such plots.[90] During the 2010s, Al-Qaeda became decentralized, having

been forced by the War on Terror to adapt. Osama Bin Laden was dead and other leadership was

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[86] Wright, *The Terror Years,* 2016; Worth, *A Rage for Order*, 2016; Warrick, *Black Flags*, 2016; Phillips, "Terrorist Organizational Dynamics," 2019.
[87] Wright, *The Terror Years*, 2016; Goldman, "Muslim Cleric Anwar Awlaki Linked to Fort Hood, Northwest Flight 253," 2009.
[88] Wright, *The Terror Years*, 2016; Brzezinski, "Operation Bojinka's Bombshell," 2002.
[89] Wright, *The Terror Years*, 2016; Multiple AFP Authors, "Al-Qaeda financed Bali," 2003.
[90] Wright, *The Terror Years,* 2016; Phillips, "Terrorist Organizational Dynamics," 2019; Byman, "Counterterrorism Strategies," 2019.

being forced by circumstances, including disappearing funding and the deaths of leaders killed in US military actions, to think smaller-scale. It would be difficult for even a determined American national security apparatus to dry up their funding sufficiently to make a truck bombing impossible.

In addition to the long-known advantages of operating via small independent cells, terrorist violence itself was changing too; the Boston Marathon bombing in 2013 has a link to Al-Qaeda but only in the sense of stochastic terrorism, decentralizing even further from the cell-based structure. They did not claim responsibility, nor did the bombers claim affiliation, but the bombers did read materials Al-Qaeda produced and released as part of their shift to both an ongoing institution supporting terror and a decentralized organization that outsources terror. Terrorism itself was decentralizing beyond the need for a traditional group in ways it had not been before thanks to the internet, becoming not just a social activity but almost parasocial, with operations carried out by adherents with no formal membership.[91]

Daesh subsequently capitalized on the decline of Al-Qaeda and the increasing prevalence of stochastic terrorism to hit the United States and other Western nations in new ways, often without having to do much in the way of traditional planning and executing, just encouragement. Al-Qaeda still exists today, but after its experiment with high visibility combined with central command and control met with sharp military and financial countermeasures, it has become highly decentralized relative to several decades prior (with many regional groups claiming the name and carrying out terror attacks in localized areas) and does not represent the same threat it once did. But its impact on the US remains indelible. Daesh currently is in much the same

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[91] Cronin, "How al-Qaida Ends," 2006.

situation, no longer holding territory or a coherent, singular identity as a group. Both groups learned how difficult it is to sponsor, promote and execute extremist violence from a centralized structure, and why longer-lasting extremist groups likely owed their longevity to their distributed, compartmentalized structures.[92] While it is harder to defeat them outright in this distributed form, it is harder for them to execute coordinated, spectacular acts of violence and destruction.

The United States, by contrast, responded to all of the above with the expansion of security on a scale heretofore never seen before in its history, and post-9/11 with two wars and an arguably disproportionate military response in Afghanistan and Iraq (with the latter nation having no direct involvement in Al-Qaeda's activities and whose destabilization following the Bush era Iraq War opened the door in part to Daesh's expansion beyond Syria).[93] US federal authorities paralleled in their own ways the evolving tactics of jihadist terrorism and Al-Qaeda's actions specifically with increasingly complex counterextremism and security policies, going after addressing proximate vulnerabilities like airport screening gaps. They learned to go granular in some respects with their loophole plugging, tracking purchases of explosive or other questionable materials, and even learning how to efficiently track questionable people going to flight school, but not wanting to learn how to take off or land.[94]

Counterextremism stayed a gradual course and made incremental improvements over the 80s and 90s, but ramped up in scope and solidified as an entity unto itself after 9/11 with the creation of the Department of Homeland Security. Anti-terrorism efforts expanded into all

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[92] Cronin, "How al-Qaida Ends," 2006.
[93] Wright, *The Terror Years,* 2016; Worth, *A Rage for Order*, 2016; Warrick, *Black Flags*, 2016; Phillips, "Terrorist Organizational Dynamics," 2019.
[94] Jackson, Ashley, Jordan, Natasha, Katherine and Sina, "Practical Terrorism Prevention," 2019; Wright, *The Terror Years,* 2016; Miller and Fahey, "The Rise and Fall of Terrorism," 2019.

spheres of potential attack, going even further than before to target the financiers of terrorist activities in any nation. Ultimately, the United States cannot escape geopolitics; some countries will simply be off limits for military action (such as U.S. ally and oil supplier Saudi Arabia), so instead they attacked others. The War on Terror represented the resulting shift of focus away from some centers of terrorism activity and funding towards those the U.S. could hit.[95] The overall counterextremist response focused on proximate security, expansion of supporting bureaucracy, and the use of military force over the use of law enforcement and minimal military involvement. Financial crimes and drug/human trafficking economies also became targets of counterterrorism as revenue streams to deny to groups like Al-Qaeda.[96]

By the 2010s, the United States intelligence and military apparatus surrounding terrorism had become something unlike it had been previously when it was directed towards the Cold War threats of the Soviet Union and its allies, or even relative to the earlier 80s and 90s period of terrorism response. While still turned towards state level threats generally, terrorism for a long period of time dominated the dialogue and funding priorities of the many agencies involved such as the NSA and CIA, especially post 9/11, focused as they were on inward and outward facing counterintelligence, counterterrorism and general intelligence gathering.[97] These organizations, among others, once faced post-Cold War irrelevance, but now account for large segments of Congressional security and military funding, acting as "Bear Patrols" calcified in place to combat

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[95] Coker, "The Collision of Modern and Post-Modern War," 2012; Carter and Pant, "Terrorism and State Sponsorship," 2019; Lowenthal, "The Policymaker-Intelligence Relationship," 2010.

[96] Jackson, Ashley, Jordan, Natasha, Katherine and Sina, "Practical Terrorism Prevention," 2019; Wright, *The Terror Years,* 2016; Miller and Fahey, "The Rise and Fall of Terrorism," 2019; Murray and Tama, "U.S. Foreign Policymaking and National Security," 2017; Enders, Sachsida and Sandler, "The Impact of Transnational Terrorism on U.S. Foreign Direct Investment," 2006.

[97] Jeffreys-Jones, "The Rise and Fall of the CIA," 2010; Gill, "Theories of Intelligence," 2010; Best, "The Dilemma of Defense Intelligence," 2010; Andregg, "Ethics and Professional Intelligence," 2010; Bellaby, *The Ethics of Intelligence*, 2016.

terrorism. Critically, counterextremism lagged behind as a means of not only preventing new terrorists from being recruited, but deradicalizing existing ones and offering terrorists a way out of remaining committed to their causes. This latter element is only very recently being attended to, after a further lapse of attention under the Trump presidency, moreso as a response to rising domestic terrorism concerns over diminishing jihadist ones.[98] Jihadist deradicalization has proven in scholarly literature to be more of a feature of the European experience with combatting terrorism.[99] As Cronin notes, Al-Qaeda's membership and recruitment strategies and internal structure are more based on social bonds than any sort of political or military hierarchy, and approaching counterextremism with this in mind would prompt responses aimed at breaking the connection between Al-Qaeda and its supporters, and exploit social distaste for terror attacks against civilians.[100]

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[98] Jensen, James and Yates, "Contextualizing Disengagement," 2020; Jones, "The Rise of Far-Right Extremism in the United States," 2018; Jones, Doxsee and Harrington, The Escalating Terrorism in the United States," 2020; Mudde, *The Far Right in America*, 2018.

[99] De la Calle and Sánchez-Cuenca, "Terrorism in Western Europe," 2019.

[100] Cronin, "How al-Qaida Ends," 2006. While Cronin does not consider deradicalization, it is nonetheless at least somewhat congruent with her suggestions of weakening the social bonds of terror networks, to individual radicals and to populations. She repeatedly notes that in comparison, military strategies, especially those aimed at decapitating extremist leadership, will be less effective and amount to little more than setbacks and symbolic victories.

Chapter 4: Case Study Analysis

With the case history of Al-Qaeda outlined, the feedback-loop model can now be applied as an analytical framework. Al-Qaeda evolved in strategy, tactics and even internal organization over decades. The United States' responses also evolved over time but emphasized performative security theater while expanding real counterterrorism efforts with only mixed results. Nonetheless, the appearance of success persists, since they have prevented any repeat attacks on the scale of 9/11 and thwarted many large-scale terror attack plots emerging from major jihadist organizations such as Al-Qaeda in recent decades, leaving smaller, decentralized DIY attacks as among the only viable options for continuing attacks on civilians.[101] The War on Terror, the military and geopolitical component of the counterterror response, ended up a disastrous overreach which destabilized the Middle East and gave terrorist groups and ideologies more ammunition, literally and figuratively, to use against the United States. It opened up the potential for future retaliations by Al-Qaeda and Daesh successors while leaving a power vacuum that allowed a new generation of even more effective extremists to take hold, who presented a challenge the United States has not fully responded to.[102]

The feedback loop model focuses on these events as a timeline, not as singular events and responses. How did the feedback loop play out? The evolution of jihadist terrorism prompted in

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[101] Success could easily be defined as zero terrorist attacks from a certain point onwards, though a more realistic definition of success would be a noticeable reduction in the incidence and impact of extremist violence. However, the absence of such violence remains subject to post hoc reasoning, so it is necessary to be cautious in attributing success to certain interventions. In this case, interventions like security theater have been shown not to stop people from bringing dangerous weapons or devices aboard planes, the efficacy (and morality) of racial profiling is hotly disputed, and killing or capturing extremist leaders has not consistently stopped comparable groups, especially those like Al-Qaeda that specifically avoided creating cults of personality around their leaders; see Cronin, "How al-Qaida Ends," 2006, and Dearlove, "National Security and Public Anxiety," 2010.
[102] Miller and Fahey, "The Rise and Fall of Terrorism," 2019; Levitas, *Terrorist Next Door*, 2004; Kalyvas, "The Landscape of Political Violence," 2019; Jones, Doxsee and Harrington, "The Escalating Terrorism in the United States," 2020.

this case a progressive but predictable escalation of response from the United States to prevent repeat terrorist actions, but these efforts have caused the terrorist elements in the form of Al-Qaeda to evolve, finding new vulnerabilities to replace those patched by security changes and new support streams and leaders to replace those lost in the War on Terror. Instead of operating with high visibility and seeking overwhelming brutality and spectacle, it has returned to safer tactics that are harder to counter, with less spectacular results, almost operating on the margins compared to its more visible period from the mid-1990s to shortly after 9/11.[103] United States policy did change in response to these adaptations, seeking once again to cut off funding and eliminate leaders as they had before. This included an expansive and new drone warfare policy, relying on remotely piloted flying vehicles to carry out what were effectively assassinations of high-ranking Al-Qaeda operatives, replacing earlier special forces attacks on said individuals. This in turn was a tactic prone to overreach and resulted in entirely predictable blowback after multiple avoidable civilian casualties inflicted with seemingly no care for the consequences.[104] Meanwhile, the increased vulnerability of Al-Qaeda's leadership prompted further decentralization of planning and operations in general, while efforts at cutting off the group's funding through freezing assets, monitoring charities whose funds could be skimmed, and cracking down as much as possible on alternative and informal banking networks necessitated a shift to cheaper attacks and even DIY forms of attack that were not centrally planned or funded.[105] These attacks have so far proven more difficult to deter.

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[103] There is room for debate on whether they have become less effective due to their scaled-down focus on smaller targets and cheaper, simpler attacks, or more effective given how much more difficult it is to stop all such attacks or stamp out the organization as a whole.

[104] Stanton, "Terrorism, Civil War and Insurgency," 2019; Soutou, "How History Shapes War," 2012; Murray and Tama, "U.S. Foreign Policymaking and National Security," 2018; Jackson, "Revising the Field of Terrorism," 2019; Hunter, "Terrorism and War," 2012; Coker, "The Collision of Modern and Post-Modern War," 2012.

[105] Cronin, "How al-Qaida Ends," 2006.

Several examples exist of vectors of terrorist action that were once promising but no longer are; of these, planes are a pre-eminent example. Planes first became popular targets in the 80s because, prior to this, they were largely unscreened and less protected compared to now.[106] They did not previously get targeted by anyone, even state actors, generally speaking. Getting bombs onto them was easier initially, resulting in mid-air explosions being the norm for a time. Hijackings and turning planes into mobile bombs became the norm later for a brief but deadly period, when bombs became harder to smuggle aboard as a result of the initial wave of airline bombing acts of terror.[107] After 9/11, this all changed and plane attacks slowed once it became clear how hard it now was to strike these targets, even when they were not airborne. Access to flying lessons was much more stringently regulated. Chemicals could not be smuggled nearly as easily onto planes to craft a bomb while in flight. Bombs couldn't be easily hidden in clothing or luggage. Hijacking became harder for lack of easily concealable weapons to hold hostages and threaten pilots.[108] Successive restrictions in airline security continually forced Al-Qaeda to innovate until there was almost no more room left to do so. An attack like 9/11, which combined the mass casualty, suicide bombing, airline destruction, symbolic landmark attack, and multiple simultaneous attack aspects of all of Al-Qaeda's previous terror projects into one operation, has become much more difficult to repeat. As such, Al-Qaeda became a victim of its own success, in a way. The evolution in Al-Qaeda's operations could only keep up with security responses for so long before it ensured Al-Qaeda's own demise through declining success, declining relevance, and ultimately their replacement by other groups.

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[106] Brown, "The Pre-History of Terrorism," 2019; Wright, *The Looming Tower*, 2006.
[107] Reeve, *The New Jackals*, 2002; Wright, *The Looming Tower*, 2006.
[108] Bird, "Terrorism and Counterterrorism," 2019; Byman, "Counterterrorism Strategies," 2019; Dearlove, "National Security and Public Anxiety," 2010.

Bombings remained a ground-based constant of terrorist activity and became a renewed

interest area for organizations such as Al-Qaeda when planning large scale actions after planes

stopped being accessible. But bombing actors became more diffuse as the decades wore on and,

critically, as access to bomb making techniques and know how became, in essence, democratized

via the advent of the Internet Age.[109] "Do It Yourself" terrorism became a staple of many

ideological extremists, including jihadist-inspired lone wolves in Western nations, whenever and

wherever access to firearms was sparse but bomb making materials was comparatively easier to

come by.[110] Since bomb making materials are diverse chemical agents themselves, not all of

them were effectively tracked within the U.S. until comparatively recently, even though

domestic terrorist groups were known to use them as well to make things like pipe bombs or

even truck bombs.[111] A decentralized extremist group does not need a professional to make

bombs anymore. All that is needed is some obscure website or a USB stick with instructions on

how to make a simple bomb, and then access to a hardware store. Al-Qaeda historically needed

professional bombmakers to make their bombs, and generally speaking, higher end explosives

(in terms of the kind of ordnance material used and relative TNT scaling radius of detonation)

remained the domain of jihadist terrorists with access to warzones where materials were

unfiltered and not tracked. But Al-Qaeda caught on too late that the future of extremist violence

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[109] Warrick, *Black Flags*, 2016; Hegghammer and Nesser, "Assessing the Islamic State's Commitment to Attacking the West," 2015; Jackson, "Revising the Field of Terrorism," 2019; Jones, Doxsee and Harrington, "The Escalating Terrorism in the United States," 2019; Moore, "International Terrorism," 2017.

[110] Hegghammer and Nesser, "Assessing the Islamic State's Commitment to Attacking the West," 2015; Jackson, "Revising the Field of Terrorism," 2019; Jones, Doxsee and Harrington, "The Escalating Terrorism in the United States," 2019; Moore, "International Terrorism," 2017; Phillips, "Terrorist Organizational Dynamics," 2019; Santifort, Sandler and Brandt, "Terrorist attack and target diversity," 2013. Note that it is also possible that extremists found radiological attacks such as the dreaded "dirty bomb" simply too impractical to pursue, though it is possible this may have been a normative limit even for them, as there is some indication that early versions of the 9/11 plot included attacks on nuclear power plants which were later reconsidered. See Tremlett, "Al-Qaeda Leaders Say Nuclear Power Stations Were Original Targets," 2002.

[111] Mudde, *The Far Right in America*, 2018; Levitas, *Terrorist Next Door*, 2004, Jones, Doxsee and Harrington, "The Escalating Terrorism in the United States," 2020.

globally was decentralized, with the purpose of the central organization increasingly being to inspire and instruct, but not as much to plan and execute actions itself anymore.

Daesh/ISIS learned this lesson quickly and capitalized on it even as they fought in the Syrian Civil War. White nationalists watched their activities from afar and replicated their own actions in turn where they could.[112] Counterextremism by contrast has yet to really figure out how to stop diffuse bombmaking relative to preventing plane hijackings beyond traditional detective work, which is slow and full of hits and misses. The US response remains in an evolutionary state once again, playing catch-up, responding now to jihadist shifts to diffuse, decentralized terrorism which was a response to earlier US activities and the War on Terror. Beyond this, it is also important to note that decentralized terror attacks that Daesh inspired among its followers globally were likely in part copied from American mass shootings for spectacle value (consider, for example, the shooting in San Bernardino in 2015).[113] One of the most prominent such mass shooting incidents, the Columbine High School shooting of 1999, could even be considered an act of domestic terror given that the shooters were suspected to be white supremacists and unequivocally had the goal of mass casualties and fear.[114] Even when not focusing on domestic terrorism, a feedback loop exists not only where it concerns the United States and jihadist terrorism, but also where it concerns the study of domestic US terrorist groups and activities. Those scholars who emphasize the study of jihadist radicalism as the main factor of terrorism in the world have failed to sufficiently study the domestic extremism in their own backyard where it concerns the effect seemingly disparate ideologies, that normally hate one

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[112] Wright, *The Terror Years,* 2016; Worth, *A Rage for Order*, 2016; Warrick, *Black Flags*, 2016; Phillips, "Terrorist Organizational Dynamics," 2019.
[113] Warrick, *Black Flags*, 2016.
[114] Mudde, *The Far Right in America*, 2018.

another, have on one another's tactics in turn.[115] While tangential, it must be kept in mind that as domestic terrorism becomes more of a problem, the evolution of counterterrorism in response to jihadist activities will come into play against a different opponent, with potentially disastrous results.

The above points represent trends. Not one response, but a series of responses piled up over time. One can imagine a sort of Cold War on Terror, with spheres of influence on both sides. The evolution on the extremist side was from discrete actions to make a point, holding ransoms, tying attacks directly to the things that provoked them, etc. towards cheaper, more distributed terrorism, but also, towards keeping the game going; lofty promises at home to the people they need to support them, and proof to their funders that they should keep the money flowing.[116] In this sense, organizations like Al-Qaeda eventually entrenched enough in their own narratives and revenue streams to became criminal enterprises first rather than terrorists motivated towards revolutionary social changes or reactive agents against change. A major reaction to Al-Qaeda's decreasing success rate in its own home regions was Daesh, and Daesh aimed to keep the game going as well; the difference was, for them, a caliphate or Islamic State was the true end goal, not just a lip service promise like it came to be for Al-Qaeda.[117] They promised a utopia at home and promised to give the warhawks in the US exactly what they expected to see: barbarism in need of military response. They aimed to keep both sides riled up forever and eliminate any middle ground so they could achieve their long-term goals.[118]

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[115] Mudde, *The Far Right in America*, 2018; Miller and Fahey, "The Rise and Fall of Terrorism," 2019; Levitas, *Terrorist Next Door*, 2004; Kalyvas, "The Landscape of Political Violence," 2019; Jones, Doxsee and Harrington, "The Escalating Terrorism in the United States," 2020; Jackson, "Revising the Field of Terrorism," 2019.
[116] Felbab, "The Crime-Terror Nexus," 2019; Carter and Pant, "Terrorism and State Sponsorship," 2019; Moore, "International Terrorism," 2017; Wilson, "State Terrorism," 2019.
[117] Wright, *The Terror Years,* 2016; Worth, *A Rage for Order*, 2016; Warrick, *Black Flags*, 2016.
[118] Wright, *The Terror Years,* 2016; Worth, *A Rage for Order*, 2016; Warrick, *Black Flags*, 2016.

The evolution on the counterextremist side was predictable at first over time. Ponderous investments in policing and the military and surveillance, and of course bureaucracy, a big example of which was the creation of the Bush-era Department of Homeland Security, created at a time when they could have just streamlined intelligence sharing instead. This is not indicative of an adaptive response, so much as the development of a military-intelligence complex, which (like the military-industrial complex Eisenhower identified) seeks to justify and protect its own existence as an institution regardless of its actual necessity. Both sides have settled in and depend on the continuation of the conflict in order to secure their own funding and legitimacy and this has certainly become an important ancillary objective relative to the original geopolitical objectives of extremism and counterextremism.[119] In short, terrorists talk a big game and so do those who oppose them, but in the end, were one side ever to "win" (if winning can even be fully conceptualized relative to terrorism), the other side would cease to be necessary. Given the close call agencies like the CIA had with such a prospect of irrelevance following the fall of the Soviet Union, what interest would they have then in ending the conflict they are presently engaged in?[120] Too many institutions and politicians and interest groups revolve around terrorism as a concept and a threat index to exploit for there ever to be a concerted effort to win, and winning in the traditional sense of winning a war, as these agencies approach it, would be vastly destructive; the terrorists, for their part, are happy to keep creating conflicts that create more terrorists, generate more revenue from their supporters, and shore up their legitimacy, such as it is.

[119] Bird, "Terrorism and Counterterrorism," 2019; Best, "The Dilemma of Defense Intelligence," 2010; Andregg, "Ethics and Professional Intelligence," 2010; Jackson, "On Uncertainty and the Limits of Intelligence," 2010; Murray, "Political Violence," 2018.
[120] Bew, Meleagrou-Hitchens and Frampton, " The Long Twentieth Century," 2019; Jeffreys-Jones, "The Rise and Fall of the CIA," 2010.

Nevertheless, while the opposing actors may treat their organizations as "too big to fail," the loop would end were one side to simply run out of endurance.[121]

That is the feedback loop, in essence; an evolution in infrastructure, in response, in the push and pull of events, and the motives for these actions and reactions. The participants react to each other and recognize together (even unspoken) that they could make a long game of this. There is no active conspiracy there, just institutions coming together and acting like institutions do through bureaucratic inertia and institutional learning; blindly focused on their single part of a wider whole, trying to solve it endlessly, never making real headway. Both sides have moved with the times technologically in terms of their kinetic operations and their propaganda and communications. But it is hard to argue that either side has come any closer to its ostensible goal. In the meantime, it appears a good deal of both public and scholarly discourse remains stuck in the same frame of analysis used in the early 2000s or even in the 1990s.[122] Attentions have shifted from wars that end (or never really meaningfully end, in the case of the War on Terror), and as terrorist attacks from foreign agents diminishes, public discourse goes elsewhere. Domestic terrorism is beginning to take the spotlight and will likely bring evolution and change too.[123]

Questions, however, remain. These include whether counterextremism will ever gain a sufficiently decisive advantage to end the loop, which itself depends on whether

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[121] While the Cold War, the origin of the notion of a "military-industrial complex" here adapted to describe a "military-intelligence complex" and a "terror-industrial complex" opposing one another, did eventually end precisely because one side no longer had the endurance to continue, on both sides there was continuity in military and security institutions as well as continuity of expertise, as the same personnel involved in the Cold War continued to fill similar roles. This ending scenario was not precisely repeated with Al-Qaeda (and Daesh) despite the efforts to keep those groups going, which may simply reflect that it is easier for a government and its well-funded institutions, such as the Department of Homeland Security, to survive such a contest of endurance.

[122] Jackson, "Revising the Field of Terrorism," 2019; Crenshaw, Constructing the Field of Terrorism," 2019.

[123] Mudde, *The Far Right in America*, 2018; Levitas, *Terrorist Next Door*, 2004; Jones, Doxsee and Harrington, "The Escalating Terrorism in the United States," 2020; Jackson, "Revising the Field of Terrorism," 2019.

counterextremism learns the necessary lessons and adapts. It is also open to question what strategies might be successful, with limited evidence for the success of deradicalization for extremists both foreign and domestic.[124] It may take nothing short of a complete change in foreign policy to defang overseas extremism by removing all cause for action. But even then, it is difficult to imagine what analogous action would similarly undercut domestic white nationalist terrorism. The answers, as argued in this thesis, lie in an extended analysis of the actions of both extremist and counterextremist actors. And thus, these are the questions terrorism experts should be asking, rather than focusing solely on in-depth analysis of singular events and reactions and debating the definition of terrorism over and over.[125]

As an extension of the above, it should be noted that on both sides of this particular dichotomy, an almost neoliberal logic of decentralizing, privatizing, contracting out becomes apparent. Organizations grow bigger and wider but are not fully centralized. Cost-cutting measures come into play. Homegrown terrorists are groomed, radicalized, and claimed later after their actions occur. Counterterrorism takes on the contours of a business venture, because to defeat a decentralized foe, which is harder to stop, a decentralized organization that can also cut costs should be considered as a response.[126] DIY extremists, military contractors and devolving enforcement to police, the list goes on of evolutionary responses to security and terrorist activity. Just as terrorism might seem to be in some ways a hybrid of crime and warfare, the counterextremist response has come to be pulled between policing and militarism; between the

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[124] Jackson, "Revising the Field of Terrorism," 2019; Crenshaw, Constructing the Field of Terrorism," 2019; De la Calle and Sánchez-Cuenca, "Terrorism in Western Europe," 2019; Williams, "Domestic Terrorism in the United States," 2018; Reid and Bevensee, Multiple Authors, "Transnational White Terror," 2019.
[125] Jackson, "Revising the Field of Terrorism," 2019; Crenshaw, Constructing the Field of Terrorism," 2019.
[126] Jackson, "Revising the Field of Terrorism," 2019; Crenshaw, Constructing the Field of Terrorism," 2019; Chenoweth and Gofas, "The Study of Terrorism," 2019; Phillips, "Terrorist Organizational Dynamics," 2019.

need to sustain security and the cost of doing so.[127] And because those institutions are self-perpetuating, they settled into a pattern of perpetual conflict. This ensures stability of relations, funding, legitimacy etc. Rather than taking a fatalistic approach to this evolution in both actors, we can instead use it to understand that each actor will drive reactions and incremental evolutions in the other rather than expecting either to seek out a decisive advantage to end the conflict once and for all. As a result, an analysis of extremism that recognizes this progression into perpetual, unwinnable conflict, may paradoxically prove more useful to ending the conflict than any strategies developed by the actors whose continued funding, legitimacy and indeed reason for being at all depend upon extending the conflict essentially forever.

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[127] Stanton, "Terrorism, Civil War and Insurgency," 2019; Hunter, "Terrorism and War," 2012; Coker, "The Collision of Modern and Post-Modern War," 2012; Phillips, "Terrorist Organizational Dynamics," 2019; Bird, "Terrorism and Counterterrorism," 2019.

Conclusion

Overall, when using a feedback loop model, one should be focused on finding long-term trends that encapsulate how a conflict has evolved between a government and an extremist ideology and showing how it was through a repeated series of reactions, iterated over time, able to self-perpetuate on both sides. When viewed in this manner, terrorism almost becomes like a strange machine learning experiment, with the result being a stasis that would be silly if it were not so deadly. Both sides became institutionalized, but at the same time decentralized in other ways to survive, in the case of terrorism, and to cut costs in the case of government counterterrorism. Both sides altered techniques to meet shifting goals. Where other scholarly approaches focus only on the give and take of given actions and reactions or vice-versa, the feedback loop model encourages case studies that view the broad panorama of contexts needed to see terrorism as a continuous cycle perpetuated by both sides of the conflict. Viewed in such a manner, new means of understanding and possibly addressing terrorism can be conceived of, and new potential solutions considered for breaking the cycle of violence that follows this constant evolution of escalation and response.

This approach does not necessarily replace other conventional means of understanding terrorism, nor should it be considered as diminishing them, only augmenting them and offering another perspective of a broader nature. Feedback loops offer a longer-term view on how opposing forces in a conflict of this nature can evolve over time, and possibly clues as to where the conflict might go next. Discussing some of the implications for the study of other forms of extremism, including understudied domestic and international white nationalist extremism, also seems a logical use for this model. Though it was considered for use in this paper and was in some sense still used, domestic terrorism as it exists in the United States remains an understudied

field that is slowly catching up to terrorism and counterterrorism literature for breadth of work done.[128] In the context of it catching up, it is imperative to consider the implications of domestic white nationalist terrorism as a similar but ultimately discrete beast from jihadist terrorism abroad as discussed in the scope of this paper. As such, it is a conceivably different feedback loop of its own; influenced by jihadist terrorists and other foreign terrorist/extremist ideologies and practices such as those that exist in Europe, but ultimately unique to its circumstances in North America. Understanding it relative to its long and complex dance with the United States government and its own growing counterterrorism responses is key to understanding the potential future of things like the militia movement and neo-Nazi groups within the U.S., and how they will progress in the future to try and capitalize on the post-Trump moment of political polarization. The applicability of a feedback loop model, however, to domestic, white nationalist extremism may depend on the growing trend of paying increasing attention to such extremists and taking decisive action against them. Should the attention paid them and the efforts made against their actions remain as lackluster as they have been in the past, there may not be much of a feedback loop to analyze. As such, the future of extremism studies must involve refocusing attention to where it is needed as well as applying a more appropriate model and will be predicated upon counterextremism's continued focus on domestic extremism. Forgetting about them will leave us where we started.

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