



Muslim-American Involvement with Violent Extremism, 2001-2018

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Fourteen Muslim-Americans were arrested for alleged involvement with violent extremism in 2018, the lowest total in a decade. The wave of Muslim-Americans associating themselves with the self-proclaimed “Islamic State” appears to have dwindled (see Figure 1).

There were three possible incidents of Islamic terrorism in 2018, all involving teenagers. One set fires on her former college campus in Minnesota, resulting in no injuries; another tried and failed to detonate an explosive in his high school cafeteria in Utah; a third stabbed his friends and a parent at a slumber party in Florida, killing one and injuring two. All three of the suspects exhibited mental health conditions. All had expressed interest in Islamist extremism, although it is not clear whether the Utah and Florida suspects were Muslim. The interim director of the National Counterterrorism Center cited these incidents as evidence that “U.S.-based homegrown violent extremists (HVEs) remain the most persistent Islamist terrorist threat from al-Qa’ida and ISIS-affiliated supporters to the United States.”¹

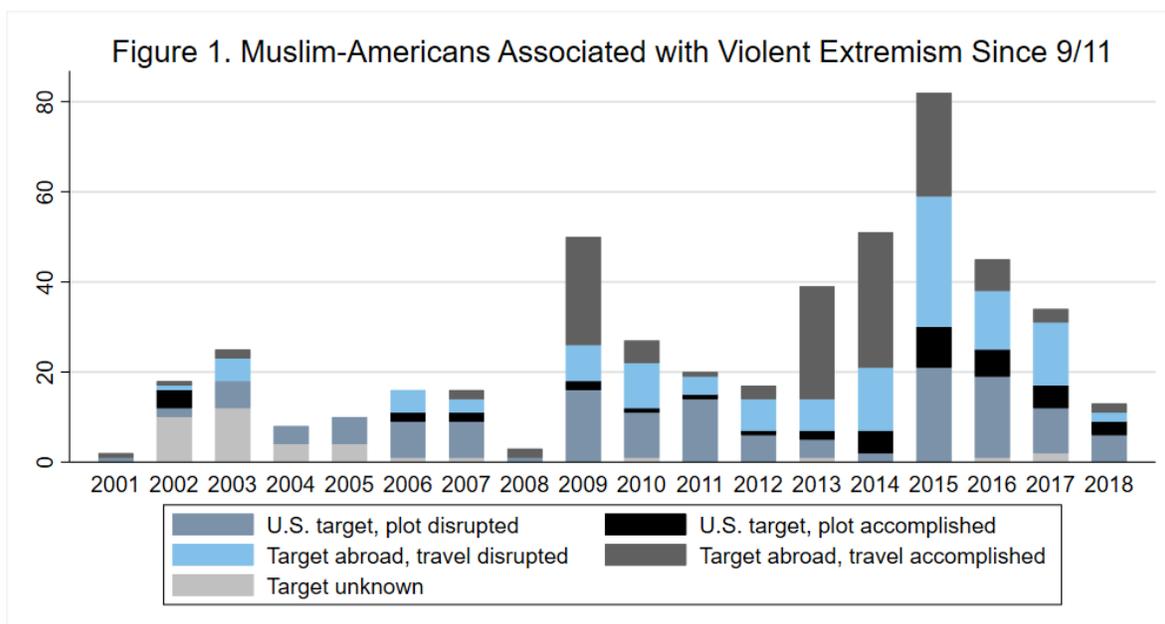
If these incidents are included, the number of fatalities caused by Muslim-American

This is the tenth annual report on Muslim-American terrorism suspects and perpetrators published by the Triangle Center on Terrorism and Homeland Security (<https://sites.duke.edu/tcths>). These reports, and the data on which they are based, are available at <http://kurzman.unc.edu/muslim-american-terrorism/annual-report>.

extremists in the United States since 9/11 rose to 141. Over this same period, there have been approximately 277,000 murders in the United States.² In 2018 alone, 230 Americans were killed in mass shootings,³ including 11 people killed by an alleged right-wing extremist at a synagogue in Pittsburgh.

In addition, four Muslim-Americans were arrested for plotting violence in 2018; three were arrested for promoting terrorism online; three were charged with attempting to join a militant group abroad; and two were charged in 2018 with joining the Islamic State in 2014-2015. Another three were arrested in 2018 for involvement in nonviolent plots.

There were no incidents or arrests in 2018 involving Muslim extremists who entered the United States illegally.⁴



Trump Administration Failed to Acknowledge Dwindling Numbers

Two years ago, this annual report documented the Trump administration’s exaggeration of the threat posed by citizens of “travel ban” countries; in fact, extremists from those countries had caused zero fatalities in the United States.⁵ (The total remains zero.) Last year, this annual report documented Trump’s exaggeration of the threat posed by “support networks for Radical Islam”; in fact, the administration had uncovered no support networks.⁶ (It still has not.)

Throughout 2018, the Trump administration continued to exaggerate the rate of Muslim-American violent extremism.

In January 2018, the Trump administration suggested that “thousands of terror-connected individuals” had attempted to enter the United States each year, not counting “those who may have entered or attempted to enter the country undetected.”⁷ There is no evidence of terrorist infiltration on this scale, and such figures do not explain the dwindling number of attacks and arrests, most of which involved people born in the United States.

In October 2018, the National Strategy for Counterterrorism declared, “We remain a nation at war.” The document accused previous administrations of “not develop[ing] a prevention architecture to thwart terrorist radicalization and recruitment. Unless we counter terrorist radicalization and recruitment, we will be fighting a never-ending battle against terrorism in the homeland, overseas, and online.”⁸ The strategy document did not acknowledge the dwindling number of Muslims involved in violent extremism in the United States.

In December 2018, President Trump claimed that “people are pouring into our country, including terrorists,”⁹ and that “we have terrorists coming in through the southern border. ... Because you know why? It was always the easiest.”¹⁰ Trump’s comments contradicted the National Strategy for Counterterrorism, which assessed that migrants posed less threat than “homegrown violent extremists,”¹¹ as well as a report by the State Department in September 2018, which concluded that “there have been no cases of terrorist groups exploiting these gaps [in Latin American border controls] to move operations through the region.”¹²

Figure 3. Muslim-Americans Arrested in 2018 for Alleged Involvement in Violent Extremism

Name	Location	Plot or alleged plot	Disrupted	Status of case
Tnuza Jamal Hassan	St. Paul, MN	Attempted travel in 2017, arson in 2018	No	Trial pending
Martin Farnsworth	St. George, UT	Attempted to detonate explosive	No	Trial pending
Corey Johnson	Palm Beach, FL	Stabbed friends at slumber party	No	Trial pending
Matin Azizi-Yarand	Plano, TX	Plan to use firearms	Early	Trial pending
Waheba Issa Dais	Cudahy, WI	Online recruitment for “Islamic State”	No	Trial pending
Demetrius Pitts	Cleveland, OH	Plan to bomb Independence Day parade	Early	Trial pending
Ibraheem Musabli	Dearborn, MI	Joined “Islamic State” in 2015	No	Trial pending
Faress Shraiteh	Chicago, IL	Attempted travel to “Islamic State” in 2015	No	Trial pending
Omar Ameen	Sacramento, CA	Joined “Islamic State” in 2014	No	Trial pending
Ahmad Suhad Ahmad	Tucson, AZ	Plan to bomb Mexican drug dealer	Early	Trial pending
Ashraf Al Safoo	Chicago, IL	Online recruitment for “Islamic State”	No	Trial pending
Naser Almadaoji	Beavercreek, OH	Attempted travel to “Islamic State”	Early	Trial pending
Damon Joseph	Holland, OH	Plan to shoot synagogue	Early	Trial pending
Tayyab Tahir Ismail	Broward County, FL	Online recruitment for “Islamic State”	No	Trial pending

Early disruption is defined here as coming to the attention of authorities prior to obtaining weapons or explosives.

Why the Decline in Violent Extremism?

The number of Muslim-Americans associated with violent extremism peaked in the first half of 2015, with the rise of the self-proclaimed “Islamic State,” and has been dropping since then. The 2018 figures continued this trend.

To better understand why the numbers have declined, I contacted 27 prominent researchers on Muslim-American violent extremism with this request: “As part of my annual report on Muslim-American involvement with violent extremism, I am collecting insights from experts to help understand why there was so little Islamist extremism in the United States in 2018 -- 3 incidents of violence and 11 arrests, by my count, down from 35 incidents/arrests in 2017, 45 in 2016, and 84 in 2015. Would you be willing to share a few sentences explaining your thinking on this subject?”

Thirteen researchers offered their thoughts. Their full responses are listed at the end of this report.¹³ I also attempted to request comment from officials at the Department of Homeland Security, the Department of Justice, the Federal Bureau of Investigation, and the National Counterterrorism Center, but their public affairs officers are furloughed in the partial government shutdown and did not respond to e-mail and voicemail.

The most common theme in the researchers’ responses involved the Islamic State’s loss of territory. Peter Bergen, a journalist and director of the national security studies program at the New America Foundation in Washington, D.C., suggested: “While correlation is not causation, it’s striking how these figures correlate with the rise and fall of the physical ISIS caliphate. That supposedly perfect Islamist society was a powerful pull factor in attracting idealistic young Muslim men and women from around the globe,

including to a relatively small degree in the United States, to either join ISIS or attempt to join ISIS or to try and carry out attacks in ISIS’s name.”

David Schanzer, director of the Triangle Center on Terrorism and Homeland Security at Duke University, noted that “the incidence of violence by extremist Muslim-Americans rises when foreign insurgent movements are successful – that is, they are gaining territory, they are making claims to be an authentic alternative Islamist society, and they are pushing this message aggressively through social media. When they are ascendant in this way, their call for like-minded diaspora Muslims to ‘do something’ can be compelling to at least a small cohort of Muslim-Americans. When these movements don’t seem to be doing much themselves, their use of guilt or shame to compel violence by diaspora Muslims loses its bite, as has been the case as ISIS has gradually lost its so-called caliphate over the past 4 years.”

Brian Jenkins, special assistant to the president of RAND, suggested that in addition to losing its “luster,” the Islamic State’s battlefield losses may have killed off some of its most dedicated supporters, since “the exodus to Syria may have drawn off some of the hotheads who otherwise might have engaged in attacks or plots here” in the United States.

Along with the Islamic State’s loss of territory, several researchers commented on its loss of online recruitment capabilities. Seamus Hughes, deputy director of the Program on Extremism at George Washington University, commented: “The death of key online recruiters such as Junaid Hussain and Abu Saad al-Sudani, who were killed by airstrikes, played a role in numbers going down. It is hard to facilitate travel if there are no easily accessible online facilitators.” Aaron Zelin of

the Washington Institute for Near East Policy highlighted the loss of charismatic mobilizing figures: "I think the destruction of IS territory, its recruiting network online and offline, and general prestige has been a key factor. Moreover, there has not been anyone to fill this vacuum with some charismatic leader or cause celebre that has animated American and in general Western jihadis." J.M. Berger, a research fellow with VOX-Pol, a European academic research network, suggested that online recruitment was particularly important for militants in the United States: "We've seen a major crackdown on jihadist social media and Internet presence. While I don't want to be too aggressive in attributing causality there, it is pretty likely that this has helped depress both recruitment and the virtual/remote direction of attacks, especially relative to Europe, where there are more robust offline extremist social networks. In the U.S., the transmission of the ideology and specific guidance on attacks is much more Internet-centric than in Europe."

Marc Sageman, a forensic psychiatrist and government counterterrorism consultant, proposed that the Islamic State now has fewer casualties, and especially fewer "innocent victims" such as women and children, with which to inspire militancy against the United States: "When images of US attacks in the Middle East subside (because the fighting is now less intense [highest intensity was in 2015 and decreased steadily after that, and tracks pretty well with the domestic decrease of attacks]), they are less available to people identifying with the victims abroad and cause less moral outrage in them, decreasing the impulse to carry out retaliation at home."

Several researchers emphasized that the rate of Muslim-American violent extremism was already quite low. "ISIS has been more or less a flop in its attempts to recruit American Muslims," commented Professor Jessica

Stern of Boston University: "As ISIS loses territory, its 'Caliphate' looks increasingly hollow and unattractive, so it's no surprise they are even less successful recruiting here now than they were a few years ago."

Professors Steven Chermak and Joshua Freilich, directors of the Extremist Crime Research Project, suggested that year-to-year fluctuations are "hard to understand due to the small numbers at issue (and we see some of this as well with the far-right, school shootings, and other such phenomena)." Professor James Forest at the University of Massachusetts Lowell, former director of terrorism studies at the U.S. Military Academy, noted that "Muslim-Americans have generally rejected various ideas of Islamist extremism throughout our history. ... I believe we are seeing an even further decline in the (already extremely small) number of Muslim-Americans who have found any reason or resonance in that ideology because it offers no hope for a better future."

Some researchers cautioned that the recent decline in Muslim-American involvement with violent extremism may be temporary. Professor Bruce Hoffman of Georgetown University called the current moment a "lull" due to the Islamic State's territorial and online defeats: "Why should we expect this to be a permanent condition? ISIS, it is true, has been knocked off balance by the coalition operations. At the same time, according to the National Strategy for Counterterrorism released by the White House in September, it still retains 8 official branches and some two dozen local networks. Hence, it retains a foundation from which to again engage in radicalization and recruitment and once more become threatening." Similarly, Seth Jones, director of the Transnational Threats Project at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington, argued that "terrorism is an inherently non-linear threat. Surprise and shock are the terrorists' age-old stock and

trade. If it were predictable, terrorism would lose the power that makes it the preferred tactic of America's most intractable enemies. So one should not assume that the levels of Islamist extremism violence will continue to decline."

A Decade of Overly Dire Warnings

This is the tenth annual report on Muslim-American involvement with violent extremism. Each edition of this report has tracked the cases of Muslim-Americans who have engaged or attempted to engage in extremist violence, or supported or attempted to support foreign terrorist organizations. The goal has been to specify the scope of a problem that has preoccupied much of United States foreign and domestic policy-making since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001.

Over the past decade, the report has found far fewer cases of Muslim-American violent extremism than government officials repeatedly warned us to expect.

The first annual report, co-authored with David Schanzer and Ebrahim Moosa, quoted Eric Holder, who was then the attorney general, as saying, "The American people would be surprised at the depth of the [homegrown] threat. ... And that's the shifting nature of threats that keeps you up at night." Robert Mueller, then-director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, said the FBI was investigating "hundreds" of Muslim-Americans on suspicion of violent extremism. The actual number of arrests, by contrast, averaged 17 per year.¹⁴

The third annual report quoted Janet Napolitano, then-secretary of the Department of Homeland Security, saying that "in some ways, the threat facing us is at its most heightened state since" 9/11.¹⁵

The fifth annual report quoted Matthew Olsen,

director of the National Counterterrorism Center, expressing concern about "capable individuals with extremist contacts and battlefield experience" who would return to the United States and engage in violence."¹⁶ Since that time, only 10 individuals have returned to the United States after joining militant groups overseas, only three of whom engaged in violence.¹⁷

The seventh annual report quoted James Comey, then the director of the FBI: "We've got investigations in all 50 states, over 900 of them, all of which we're trying to assess where are these people on the journey from consuming [militant propaganda] to acting [on that propaganda]."¹⁸ Less than 5 percent of these investigations yielded terrorism-related arrests the following year.¹⁹

The ninth annual report quoted Donald Trump predicting that terrorists are "coming into our country, they're coming in by the thousands. And just watch what happens. I'm a pretty good prognosticator. Just watch what happens over the years, it won't be pretty."²⁰ Instead, as this year's report documents, Muslim involvement with violent extremism in the United States has decreased in recent years, not increased.

For a decade and more, Americans have been warned about widespread plots of Muslim extremism, and these warnings have proven hollow.

The first of these annual reports, "Anti-Terror Lessons of Muslim-Americans," found that levels of violent extremism were low because Muslim-American communities engaged in extensive self-policing, consistently denounced violence, sought policy change through political engagement, and were building community institutions to support healthy civic engagement. A decade later, the evidence continues to confirm these findings.

Appendix. Survey of Terrorism Researchers

Prompt to researchers: As part of my annual report on Muslim-American involvement with violent extremism, I am collecting insights from experts to help understand why there was so little Islamist extremism in the United States in 2018 -- 3 incidents of violence and 11 arrests, by my count, down from 35 incidents/arrests in 2017, 45 in 2016, and 84 in 2015. Would you be willing to share a few sentences explaining your thinking on this subject?

Responses:

Peter Bergen, director of the national security studies program at the New America Foundation:

While correlation is not causation, it's striking how these figures correlate with the rise and fall of the physical ISIS caliphate. That supposedly perfect Islamist society was a powerful pull factor in attracting idealistic young Muslim men and women from around the globe, including to a relatively small degree in the United States, to either join ISIS or attempt to join ISIS or to try and carry out attacks in ISIS's name. The decline in cases is largely attributable to the destruction of the physical caliphate.

J.M. Berger, research fellow with VOX-Pol:

I would suggest a few interrelated factors for consideration. First, terrorism is generally an outlier phenomenon with very small numbers even in a busy year, and as such tends to have wide variation from year to year. So the dramatic drop-off may be just a statistical anomaly, at least in part.

Second, on the international jihadist scene, we've seen two major developments since 2015. First, Islamic State has obviously suffered major setbacks in terms of its territorial holdings and, relatedly, its image as a very successful organization, which was a key part on its recruitment messaging. So its efforts to inspire and recruit are less effective, although not completely over. On the AQ

front, we've seen a steady transition of al Qaeda and its affiliates from a focus on global jihad (i.e. international terrorism) and toward a focus on local insurgencies. So on both fronts, there's just much less impetus overall for terrorist attacks in the West.

Third, we've seen a major crackdown on jihadist social media and Internet presence. While I don't want to be too aggressive in attributing causality there, it is pretty likely that this has helped depress both recruitment and the virtual/remote direction of attacks, especially relative to Europe, where there are more robust offline extremist social networks. In the U.S., the transmission of the ideology and specific guidance on attacks is much more Internet-centric than in Europe.

Steven Chermak, professor at Michigan State University, and Joshua Freilich, professor at the John Jay College of Criminal Justice at the City University of New York, directors of the Extremist Crime Research Project:

We think part of the issue is due to having a small N, it is going to fluctuate so year to year changes may not mean much as opposed to comparing say 5 year increments. In other words, it is hard to understand due to the small numbers at issue (and we see some of this as well with the far-right, school shootings, and other such phenomena). For example our Extremist Crime Database (ECDB) includes 5 jihadi homicides in 2014 (3

by Ali Brown), 2 jihadi homicides in 2015; 1 in 2016; 5 in 2017 & 1 in 2018.

James Forest, professor at the University of Massachusetts Lowell and former director of terrorism studies at the U.S. Military Academy:

The political rhetoric about this threat is not (and has truly never been) supported by factual evidence. There never has been a flood of terrorists coming into the U.S., and in truth the U.S. is not (and has never been) the most frequent target of Salafi-Jihadist terrorists anyhow. So, the main threat for years has been the potential for radicalization among Muslim-Americans, i.e. the threat of homegrown violent extremism. But Muslim-Americans have generally rejected various ideas of Islamist extremism throughout our history, from Shia militant agendas in years past to the contemporary Salafi-Jihadist movement propelled by the likes of al-Qaeda and the Islamic State. The things that an overwhelming majority of Muslim-Americans like most about America directly undermine any resonance for the puritanical interpretation of their religion put forward by Salafi-Jihadist ideologues who try to motivate violent acts. I believe we are seeing an even further decline in the (already extremely small) number of Muslim-Americans who have found any reason or resonance in that ideology because it offers no hope for a better future. The inherent failings of that ideology have been further amplified by the complete failure of the Islamic State over the past few years, combined with the fading relevance of al-Qaeda and what it stood for.

Sadly, even though the ideology finds little to no resonances among Muslims in America, there are still Muslims in other countries who will choose (based on personal and contextual influences) to act violently in support of the ideology. But I also believe Salafi-Jihadism is

an ideology that will eventually lose its motivational power and crumble beneath the weight of its own contradictions and hypocrisies. This is not dissimilar to the story of other terrorist ideologies throughout history, of course. And yet, the optimistic assessment about the eventual decline in the resonance of jihadist ideologies must be tempered with the recognition that some new, other kinds of ideologies will eventually likely rise to the forefront of terrorist threats in the future. Thus, our society would certainly benefit from less fear-mongering about a wrongly-perceived type of terrorist threat, and more focus on building an educated and resilient society that actually understands the core strategy of terrorism - a strategy that attempts to compel our behavior through fear, in order to achieve some type of political and ideological goals. An educated and resilient society is one that recognizes and universally rejects those attempts. But education and resilience are made impossible by rampant fear, blame and bigotry.

Bruce Hoffman, professor at the School of Foreign Service at Georgetown University:

The lull is likely a product of the defeat and dismantling of ISIS's caliphate, the attendant damage done to its brand and undermining of its message, as well as the disruption dealt to its hitherto highly effective social media recruitment and radicalization efforts.

Why should expect this to be a permanent condition? ISIS, it is true, has been knocked off balance by the coalition operations. At the same time, according to the National Strategy for Counterterrorism released by the White House in September, it still retains 8 official branches and some two dozen local networks. Hence, it retains a foundation from which to again engage in radicalization and recruitment and once more become threatening.

Seamus Hughes, deputy director of the Program on Extremism at George Washington University:

The draw of a physical space to build a self-described Caliphate was a significant motivation for the American Islamic State sympathizers. The announcement of the Caliphate coincided with the huge jump on arrests and charges in 2014 and 2015. As the Islamic State lost significant territory, the numbers reduced dramatically, and the death of key online recruiters such as Junaid Hussain and Abu Saad al-Sudani, who were killed by airstrikes, played a role in numbers going down. It is hard to facilitate travel if there are no easily accessible online facilitators.

Brian Jenkins, senior advisor to the president of the RAND Corporation:

We are dealing with very small numbers and want to be careful not to over-interpret what appear to be trends.

The numbers vary according to criteria and sources. My raw numbers differ from yours but agree that 2018 saw a decline in jihadist terrorist attacks and interrupted plots in the United States. What does it mean?

It does not appear to be a long decline, but rather the downhill side of a peak in jihadist activity in the 2015-2016 period. Jihadist activity in the United States remained at a low level until 2009, when it began to increase. Activity came up somewhat in the 2009 to 2014 period, then jumped significantly in 2015. This coincides with the rise of ISIS. In my numbers, homegrown jihadist activity then declines in 2017, and still further in 2018—your figures show the decline beginning in 2018.

The 2018 totals remain above the 2002-2014 level but somewhat below the 2009-2014 period. In other words, it looks like the decline

takes us back roughly to where we were before the peak.

This trajectory corresponds roughly with the rise of the Islamic State and the loss of almost all of its territory to a U.S.-led bombing campaign and U.S.-supported ground forces. Has ISIS lost its luster?

ISIS effectively used the Internet and social media to directly reach a broad audience, and both al Qaeda and ISIS called for attacks by homegrown terrorists. The volume of ISIS communications has reportedly dropped as ISIS was pounded by air strikes and squeezed by ground offensives. At the same time, social media companies reportedly have moved more quickly to remove exhortations to violence. This leads to a testable hypothesis that there is a correlation between reduced incitement and reduced activity. Detailed research is in order here.

ISIS also attracted tens of thousands of foreign fighters, including about 5,000 from Europe and a couple of hundred from the United States. More than 40 percent of the Americans were arrested before leaving the United State—most of them were put in prison. Of those who connected with a jihadist group abroad, at least half were killed. The fate of others is unknown, but some of them are also likely to be dead. In sum, the exodus to Syria may have drawn off some of the hotheads who otherwise might have engaged in attacks or plots here.

Yet another possible explanation is that effective law enforcement has deterred a growing number of jihadists, although I am a bit skeptical about this.

It could be that America's Muslim community has begun to mobilize against terrorists.

Another hopeful explanation would be that the jihadist enterprise is a spent force, but history shows jihadist groups to be persistent, adaptable, and opportunistic. My guess (“guess” being the operative word) is that the struggle goes on.

Seth Jones, director of the Transnational Threats Project at the Center for Strategic and International Studies:

The current low levels of Islamist extremism may be caused by several factors. First, there appears to be little interest among Muslim-Americans for violent extremism, unlike in other regions like Europe. This means that ISIS and al-Qaeda have failed to leverage – and inspire – individuals in the United States to conduct attacks. Second, the U.S. and its allies have conducted an aggressive targeting campaign against the external operations units of ISIS and al-Qaeda, making it more difficult for them to perpetrate attacks in the West. Third, U.S. law enforcement, intelligence, and homeland security institutions have done a reasonable job over the past several years of arresting those plotting attacks and deterring others. Fourth, the collapse of ISIS’s so-called caliphate may have discouraged would-be attackers, since supporting ISIS no longer meant joining a “winning team.”

Nevertheless, terrorism is inherently non-linear threat. Surprise and shock are the terrorists’ age-old stock and trade. If it were predictable, terrorism would lose the power that makes it the preferred tactic of America’s most intractable enemies. So one should not assume that the levels of Islamist extremism violence will continue to decline.

Marc Sageman, forensic psychiatrist and government counterterrorism consultant:

The answer to me is a mixture of my model

and Kahnemann & Tverski's availability heuristics.

Remember that part of my model was that domestic Neo-jihadis identified with victims of fighting abroad, in Syria and Iraq. When they were outraged by the air strikes of US planes, they sought to retaliate at home, carrying out domestic attacks. They did not have to belong to ISIS or Nusrat for that. They simply had to imagine themselves to be part of this attacked community. When images of US attacks in the Middle East subside (because the fighting is now less intense [highest intensity was in 2015 and decreased steadily after that, and tracks pretty well with the domestic decrease of attacks]), they are less available to people identifying with the victims abroad and cause less moral outrage in them, decreasing the impulse to carry out retaliation at home. The nature of the victims also matters. Innocent victims (women and kids) generate more moral outrage (because of the blatant injustice of their deaths) than the deaths of soldiers (because that is what is expected of soldiers and it is a risk they take). As the fighting dies down, there seems to be fewer of these innocent victims and the scope of the fighting narrows. At the same time, there are fewer messages sent from the Middle East on social media, further reducing the availability of such images, causing moral outrage.

If the US and its allies carry out multiple bombings that kill civilians and children, we will see an increase of domestic attacks in retaliation to these attacks. My read on those carrying out such attacks is what they say, namely that it is in retaliation of US aggression overseas. But the nuance is that they need to be aware of this aggression, and the amount of social media messages depicting this aggression has dramatically decreased over the past two years, for many reasons.

David Schanzer, director of the Triangle Center on Terrorism and Homeland Security at Duke University:

It is important to point out how much the arrest data is driven by cases where the perpetrator has traveled, or attempted to travel, to join a foreign insurgent movement. When these movements are ascendant, there are more domestic cases. This occurred in 2007-2008, when about 2 dozen Somali-American youth were inspired by al Shabab, leading to a spike of incidents counted by our data in 2009. Likewise, the rise of ISIS in 2013-2014, leads to a spike in U.S. cases from 2014-2017, peaking in 2015.

I also believe that the incidence of violence by extremist Muslim-Americans rises when foreign insurgent movements are successful – that is, they are gaining territory, they are making claims to be an authentic alternative Islamist society, and they are pushing this message aggressively through social media. When they are ascendant in this way, their call for like-minded diaspora Muslims to “do something” can be compelling to at least a small cohort of Muslim-Americans. When these movements don’t seem to be doing much themselves, their use of guilt or shame to compel violence by diaspora Muslims loses its bite, as has been the case as ISIS has gradually lost its so-called caliphate over the past 4 years.

Jessica Stern, professor at the Pardee School of Global Studies at Boston University:

ISIS has been more or less a flop in its attempts to recruit American Muslims. Unlike Muslims in Belgium, for example, American Muslims tend to be well integrated into American society. Surveys have shown that

on average, they are more patriotic, better educated, and wealthier than non-Muslim Americans, so it’s a difficult pool from which to recruit. As ISIS loses territory, its “Caliphate” looks increasingly hollow and unattractive, so it’s no surprise they are even less successful recruiting here now than they were a few years ago.

Aaron Zelin, Richard Borrow Fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy:

I think the destruction of IS territory, its recruiting network online and offline, and general prestige has been a key factor. Moreover, there has not been anyone to fill this vacuum with some charismatic leader or cause celebre that has animated American and un general Western jihadis. The main official English language propaganda from all groups has been paltry too. The most consistent release is an IS al-Hayat video that just notes their military operations for the prior week. Therefore, there’s no mobilizing message that has grabbed potential recruits. If things in the region change, though, I suspect the trend will change again, but for now I suspect if the status quo remains we’ll see attempts, but at a much smaller scale. I think this all illustrates that while ideas matter, perception of group strength, power, and momentum, as well as access to new exciting theaters and propaganda are important too.

About the author:

Charles Kurzman is a professor of sociology at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, and a specialist on Islamic movements. His book, *The Missing Martyrs: Why Are There So Few Muslim Terrorists?*, was originally published by Oxford University Press in 2011 and just re-issued in early 2019, updated for the age of ISIS. He can be contacted through his website, <http://kurzman.unc.edu>.

Acknowledgments:

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Notes:

¹ Russell Travers, Acting Director, National Counterterrorism Center, "Combatting the Terrorist Threat Through Agility, Persistence, and Resilience," Statement for the Record, Hearing Before the Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, October 10, 2018.

² Federal Bureau of Investigation, *Crime in the United States, 2017*, Table 1, "Crime in the United States by Volume and Rate per 100,000 Inhabitants, 1998-2017." The estimate for 2018 is extrapolated from preceding years.

³ Mass Shooting Tracker, "U.S. Mass Shootings, 2018," <https://massshootingtracker.org>, January 3, 2019. The figure of 230 fatalities includes only attacks causing four or more deaths. Mass Shooting Tracker counted 426 attacks with four or more deaths or injuries in 2018; Gun Violence Archive (<http://gunviolencearchive.org>) counted 340 such attacks.

⁴ Department of Justice press releases, filtered by topic "National Security – Counterterrorism"; House Homeland Security Committee Majority Staff Report, "Terror Gone Viral: Overview of the 243 ISIS-Linked Incidents Targeting The West," October 2018, p. 9; Deroy Murdock, "Yes, We've Nabbed Terrorists on the Southern Border," *National Review*, January 10, 2019.

⁵ Charles Kurzman, "Muslim-American Involvement with Violent Extremism, 2016," Triangle Center on Terrorism and Homeland Security, January 26, 2017.

⁶ Charles Kurzman, "Muslim-American Involvement with Violent Extremism, 2016," Triangle Center on Terrorism and Homeland Security, January 18, 2018.

⁷ Department of Homeland Security and Department of Justice, "Executive Order 13780: Protecting the Nation From Foreign Terrorist Entry Into the United States: Initial Section 11 Report," January 2018, p. 9.

⁸ White House, "National Strategy for Counterterrorism of the United States of America," October 2018, pp. 1, 21.

⁹ White House, "Remarks by President Trump in Meeting with Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer and House Speaker-Designate Nancy Pelosi," December 11, 2018.

¹⁰ White House, "Remarks by President Trump in Briefing at Al Asad Air Base, Al Anbar Province, Iraq," December 26, 2018.

¹¹ White House, "National Strategy for Counterterrorism of the United States of America," October 2018, pp. 7-8.

¹² Department of State, "Country Reports on Terrorism 2017," September 2018, p. 194.

¹³ I contacted but did not receive responses from the former and current directors of research at the U.S. Military Academy's Combating Terrorism Center, and from terrorism specialists at Fox News, the Hudson Institute, the Investigative Project on Terrorism, the McCain Institute, the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START) at the University of Maryland, the New York Times, the Search International Terrorist Entities (SITE) Intelligence Group, the Terrorism Research & Analysis Consortium (TRAC), and the Terrorism Research Center at the University of Arkansas.

¹⁴ David Schanzer, Charles Kurzman, and Ebrahim Moosa, "Anti-Terror Lessons of Muslim-Americans," Triangle Center on Terrorism and Homeland Security, January 6, 2010, pp. 8, 10.

¹⁵ Charles Kurzman, "Muslim-American Terrorism in the Decade Since 9/11," Triangle Center on Terrorism and Homeland Security, February 8, 2012, p. 3.

¹⁶ Charles Kurzman, "Muslim-American Terrorism in 2013," Triangle Center on Terrorism and Homeland Security, February 5, 2014, p. 3.

¹⁷ Using slightly different criteria, another dataset counts 12 Americans who have returned to the United States after travel to join militant groups in Syria and Iraq: Alexander Meleagrou-Hitchens, Seamus Hughes, Bennett Clifford, "The Travelers: American Jihadists in Syria and Iraq," George Washington University Program on Extremism, February 2018, p. 73.

¹⁸ Charles Kurzman, "Muslim-American Involvement with Violent Extremism, 2015," Triangle Center on Terrorism and Homeland Security, February 2, 2016, pp. 9-10.

¹⁹ Charles Kurzman, "Muslim-American Involvement with Violent Extremism, 2016," Triangle Center on Terrorism and Homeland Security, January 26, 2017, p. 3.

²⁰ Charles Kurzman, "Muslim-American Involvement with Violent Extremism, 2017," Triangle Center on Terrorism and Homeland Security, January 18, 2018, p. 7.