

THE BROOKINGS INSTITUTION

WEBINAR

JIHADISM AT A CROSSROADS

Washington, D.C.

Friday, September 11, 2020

**PARTICIPANTS:**

**Introduction:**

DANIEL BYMAN  
Senior Fellow, Center for Middle East Policy  
The Brookings Institution

**Discussion:**

DANIEL BYMAN, Moderator  
Senior Fellow, Center for Middle East Policy  
The Brookings Institution

TRICIA BACON  
Assistant Professor, School of Public Affairs  
American University

THOMAS HEGGHAMMER  
Senior Research Fellow  
Norwegian Defense Research Establishment

BRUCE RIEDEL  
Senior Fellow and Director, Intelligence Project  
The Brookings Institution

\* \* \* \* \*

## P R O C E E D I N G S

MR. BYMAN: Hello. My name is Daniel Byman and I'm a senior fellow here at Brookings at the Center for Middle East Policy. And I am pleased to welcome you today to our event, "Jihadism at a Crossroads."

I'm speaking, of course, on the 19th anniversary of the September 11th terrorist attacks, the deadliest terrorist attacks in history, and really almost at exactly the time that the second plane was striking the World Trade Center. And this is a good time to both look back and look forward at the modern jihadist movement, groups like al Qaeda, the Islamic State, but also future directions on where it's going. We've seen the thread change tremendously over the years. We've seen counterterrorism change tremendously over the years.

And I am delighted today that we have an excellent group of speakers to guide us through this very difficult and tricky set of questions.

Our first speaker is Thomas Hegghammer. He is an expert at the Norwegian Defense Research Establishment. He is also the author of the recent book, "The Caravan," which is in a way a biography of Abdallah Azzam, the kind of leading, if you will, jihadist ideologue during the anti-Soviet struggle in Afghanistan. But I would say, also, really the story of how jihad went global, how you had a series of individuals and groups that were very locally focused that then became the modern jihadist movement mainly as we know it today. It's an analysis both of a person, but also a very in-depth, I would say phenomenal analysis of the movement as a whole, and it's really a remarkable book.

Our second speaker is Dr. Tricia Bacon. She is a professor at American University, a former analyst with the State Department. She has written also extensively on terrorism and on Afghanistan. And in particular, I would highlight her book and her work on why terrorist groups form alliances.

Our third speaker is Bruce Riedel, who is a colleague of mine at The Brookings Institution. Bruce is also the director of the Intelligence Project at Brookings and has come to us after 30 years in government, mostly in senior positions with the U.S. intelligence community, but also with the White House and the Department of Defense. He is the author of numerous books on the Middle East and on terrorism. His most recent is *Beirut 1958*, which explores America's first major military

intervention in the Middle East.

I'm going to begin with a series of questions for our panelists. And from there, we're going to open it up to the audience for the last 10, 15 minutes or so of our presentation for questions.

So, my first question is for Thomas, which is really to talk in depth about the findings of your book. Our event today is about the future direction of the jihadist movement. And based on your research, can you tell us what in the past have been the main drivers of the movement, but also how you think these key drivers have changed and where the movement might go in the years to come?

Thomas, I think you're muted.

MR. HEGGHAMMER: Thank you very much, Dan, for that kind introduction, for flagging the book, and for inviting me to this discussion on this solemn date.

So, this is obviously not the first seminar about sort of the state and the future of the jihadi movement and a lot of things have already been said. So, I'm going to sort of stay at my macro level and just give you sort of some of the key things that are on my mind when I think about the state and the future of the jihadi movement. And those things come from a long time of studying the movement and, as you say, those are from looking into its sort of birth, which is what I describe in the book.

I think the first thing that I want to underline, everybody sort of knows it, but it's worth still reflecting on, and that is the remarkable resilience of the movement. We're talking about a movement that has roots going back to the early 20th century and that kind of takes the current form that we know today in the 1980s in the war in Afghanistan. So, that's at least 40 years of sort of continuous activity. And this is in spite of a tremendous amount of resistance and repression, even from first the Soviet Union and later on from the military machinery of the United States and all of its allies. It survived lots of different setbacks. And organizations have come and gone and leaders have come and been killed, and yet the movement has sort of continued.

And if you think about it, there haven't really been many successes in this story. Obviously, the Afghanistan jihad in the 1980s is viewed in the movement as a victory. They consider that they basically expelled the Russians from Afghanistan, so that is a high point.

Throughout the '90s, things are not going very well. I mean, they're involving themselves in various conflicts, but things are not really working out and nothing really to show for. Then, of course,

they get a major hit on 9/11, which was a major success and contributes clearly to the sort of self-confidence of the movement. But after that, they revert back to a series of setbacks and so on.

And, of course, then we have the Islamic State project in the mid-2010s, which is probably the biggest exploit of the entire movement in its history. But that, too, ended fairly quickly.

So, you know, this is a movement that has an extraordinary ability to survive setbacks and that means we should not be overly optimistic about its imminent demise. And I think given the scale of what I.S. was able to do with its so-called caliphate, they have a sort of fat reserve of morale to live on for quite some time.

But, obviously, this also begs the question of where this resilience comes from. How is it possible? They've been more resilient and more transnational than many other movements. And this, of course, is a huge discussion, but I think there are really two key ingredients in this recipe. And I'm not sure if they themselves even have been aware of this recipe, but I see two really fundamental things.

The first one is propaganda and more specifically kind of the technology to disseminate propaganda. First in the form of magazines, you know, the printing press, which becomes more -- you know, cheaper, more available, and so on in the late 20th century. And the 1980s, when Azzam and Afghan Arabs come along, it becomes quite cheap to produce magazines and disseminate them. Later, of course, you get the Internet, which is a huge improvement. You get, you know -- it makes it possible for jihadi groups to disseminate their ideas worldwide very cheaply and so on.

And propaganda, I think, is hugely important because it basically allows them to reach potential recruits more efficiently. It also kind of sustains what we might call kind of marginal voices in the Islamic religious sphere. So, it means that people with very extreme views, very unorthodox interpretations of Islam, have a voice. So, you know, 100, 200 years ago, these people, you know, people with such extreme ideas, they would not have been visible. They would not have been able to make themselves heard. But with all these new technologies jihadis can make themselves heard and seen and recruit people.

The other key ingredient is foreign fighting. And this, of course, really takes off in the 1980s. And why is foreign fighting important? Well, first of all, because it allows rebels to escape repression. So, what you have sort of from the -- really from the '40s to the '70s is a series of kind of

domestic political experts where radical Islamist groups challenged their regimes, unsuccessfully for the most part and -- because they suffer repression. But foreign fighting allows militants to escape their respective countries, go away for a while, their R&R, train, meet other people, and sometimes come back.

I think this is also a key source of the strength, relative strength, of jihadi movements in the West. It's their ability historically to escape the machinery of Western intelligence services, which are very strong on home turf, to escape that into sort of the black areas on the map, and then come back.

Now, what's so interesting now is that these two ingredients of foreign fighting and propaganda, you know, they're harder to find for the jihadis. It's become much harder to travel abroad as a foreign fighter, obviously, you know, as a result of all the countermeasures that were put in place during the I.S. phase.

And also, we have for the first time, these past three or four years, we have for the first time seen a concerted effort to try and censor and limit the distribution of jihadi propaganda online. And with that, we've taken away their communications platform. Of course, that battle isn't won yet, but it is a major change. You know, if I were to point to one game-changer in the war on terror it is that, it is the clamp down on the jihadi Internet. And the fight isn't over, of course, and they are still there. And then in the future, there may be new technologies that allow them to rebalance and distribute propaganda again online, but at this point they're pretty constrained compared to what they have been in previous decades.

So, those two things make me relatively optimistic on our part. And I think that at least in the short term the movement will experience a downturn. Now, what happens after that is something that, you know, I'd hesitate to speculate about. But that's kind of my overall view of the current situation.

MR. BYMAN: Thank you. That's a fantastic way to begin. And it's also, frankly, nice to actually begin with a rare note of optimism, which we don't hear on terrorism-related panels too often, but I think is appropriate given the research you've done.

Tricia, may I turn to you now? 2001, of course, was not only the 9/11 attacks, but it was the beginning of a massive U.S.-led counterterrorism operation against al Qaeda and then against the jihadist community in general. And the beginning of that was, in many ways, in Afghanistan. And 19 years later, the United States is still there.

Can you talk about Afghanistan? If we were having this panel in, say, 2003, 2004, at

least I would be talking about the success of the U.S. effort in Afghanistan. Can you talk about like why the Taliban has come back from near defeat, how important Afghanistan is today, whether it really matters or not for the Taliban and al Qaeda, and your thoughts on what the United States and other countries involved there should do in the future?

MS. BROWN: Yeah. No, I think -- and I think Thomas has already sort of raised why this is a critical theater to look at when we talk about the crossroads, especially 19 years later. And I think there's sort of two components to it when we look at Afghanistan. One is, of course, the external threat that the West is concerned about that emanates from Afghanistan. And then there's the role within Afghanistan.

And it's interesting because when you look at the sort of common measure given by the U.S. Government of the threat from Afghanistan, which is the number of foreign terrorist organizations operating there, you see that in the most recent State Department report 13 of almost 70 foreign terrorist organizations operate in Afghanistan. So, there are a number of groups that still operate there.

Of course, their capability varies significantly, but when you look at their external ambitions they're almost entirely regional with, of course, the exception of al Qaeda. There's a few organizations that have had one-off plots outside of the region, but overall it's Afghanistan's neighbors who are the most threatened by the organizations that operate there.

And when you look even sort of more closely, interestingly, of those 13, 8 of them existed before 2001. So, there is a significant subset of them that are organizations that have been able to persist during the last 19-year campaign.

Of the five new organizations, one is a splinter. They, too, are predominantly regional threats. They're organizations that threaten Iran, Pakistan, Central Asia. They're much more contained to the region rather than having broader global aspirations.

There has been two successes, if you will, two organizations that were delisted that were operating in Afghanistan before 2001. Those were two North African groups that basically became defunct in the subsequent campaign.

So, there is sort of a mixed picture, but there is still a pretty robust foreign terrorist presence in Afghanistan. And when you look at the relationship with the Taliban, 10 of those 13

organizations are closely allied with the Taliban and basically working in conjunction with the Taliban and the insurgency in Afghanistan. So, internally, these are sort of the Taliban's strategy for the insurgency in Afghanistan.

But looking over time there's an interesting evolution for the role of foreign fighters in Afghanistan, and that is in that pre-insurgency period that you're talking about and the early years of the insurgency. Foreign fighters actually had more of a role and more influence. They were one of the things that helped the Taliban to transition into an effective insurgency. They were certainly not the only one, but they were a source of tactics, they were a source of resources when the Taliban was really at its nadir after the defeat in 2001.

But as the Taliban became a more sophisticated insurgent organization, it was able to capitalize on local grievances, it started to bring foreign fighters under its umbrella and manage them, make sure that they sort of stayed colored within the lines in the insurgency in Afghanistan. And foreign fighters really declined in influence over the course of the insurgency as the Taliban became much more of a local phenomenon.

They certainly still have a role as sort of specialized advisors in some instances, but the Taliban is, you know, for all intents and purposes, for its resources and its capabilities, a pretty independent organization. So, we see sort of an actual decline in terms of foreign fighters' influence over time there. But in that early period, that sort of formative opening period where the Taliban was trying to consolidate into an insurgency, there was a role for some of the foreign fighters and the FTO organizations.

So, it's very much a situation now in Afghanistan where the Taliban has a strategic advantage. It's going into the talks with the Afghans in a position of strength. Whether you look at its territory, its operations, its influence, it's definitely in a position of strength. But the caveat to that is that it has these foreign terrorist organizations and their foreign fighters operating under its rubric, but it's not dependent on them. It doesn't need these organizations in order to maintain its position. If those organizations disappeared tomorrow or if those fighters were kicked out tomorrow in some world, the Taliban really wouldn't lose any significant strength. So, there is a dynamic there that is pretty sobering, I think, from an overall sort of what is the state of jihadism in Afghanistan?

MR. BYMAN: Thank you. And that jibes perfectly with the work that Thomas has done and brings us to Bruce, where I want to ask you a slightly different question, but related, which is if you look at Thomas' book, obviously Afghanistan plays a tremendous role in the jihadist movement, but another country in some ways as or more important is Saudi Arabia. And Thomas' book goes into great detail on not only Azzam's time there, but he's also written about some of the rivalries and disputes within the religious community, and how these seemingly arcane and organizational differences in the 1970s in places like the Hejaz in Saudi Arabia really lead to the growth of Pan-Islamism. And that in turn provides very fertile soil for the evolution of the global jihadist movement in the years that follow.

You've worked on Saudi Arabia extensively. You've written on Saudi Arabia extensively. Can you talk about how the Saudi role with regard to both terrorism and counterterrorism has evolved since the 9/11 period? And if so, how much of that is what the Saudis want to do on their own, how much of this is due to U.S. policy? And are there changes that you would recommend for another administration going forward?

MR. RIEDEL: Thank you, Dan. Can you hear me? Yes, it is a remarkable book and I congratulate Thomas on it.

And as you rightly point out, Dan, Saudi Arabia plays a central, if not the pivotal, role in the development of the modern Islamic jihadist movement. It's pointed out in the book that it was the Saudis through their educational institutions that actually paid Abdallah Azzam while he was living in Pakistan in the 1980s and writing his most important works. It is the country that he visited most frequently.

But one of the remarkable things about Abdallah Azzam is that he seemed to be able to travel around the world, including across the United States, almost at will even as he was propagating the ideas of a violent jihadist movement. The place he visited the most was Saudi Arabia and particularly the Hejaz. It was, of course, also the financier of the jihadist movement, not just the money that the Saudi intelligence service provided to the Pakistanis and the Afghan mujahedeen, but also, more importantly in many ways, private Saudi money that was raised from Saudi royals, Saudi businessmen in order to support the jihad.

One of the most interesting episodes in the book is this recounting of a meeting between



Abdallah Azzam and the then governor of the province of Riyadh, Prince Salman, now, of course King Salman today. It's extraordinary that a Palestinian itinerant professor would get a meeting with one of the most important people in the kingdom. It's also important because Prince Salman, now King Salman, again, has been the leading figure in the private raising of funds for jihadism since back in the 1960s, but particularly in the 1980s, where at least in the initial years of the Afghan war, he raised more money for the mujahedeen than the CIA and the Saudi intelligence service provided together in order to keep the mujahedeen going. He would go on to do the same thing in Bosnia.

That has changed now. Why has it changed? Well, the first reason is not because of 9/11. The Saudis, including the royal family, generally reacted to 9/11 with an air of mystery. How could this small group of Arabs possibly have carried out such an extensive and extraordinary plan?

It wasn't until 2003, when Osama bin Laden declared war on Saudi Arabia and gunfights broke out in Saudi cities virtually on a day-to-day basis, that the Saudi attitude towards Islamic jihadism began to change. And it changed for a very simple reason: survival. It was in their self-interest to take on al Qaeda, particularly Osama bin Laden, because he was taking the war to him. He wanted to see if he could overthrow the kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

The principal figure in the battle against Osama bin Laden and al Qaeda in 2000 was, of course, Prince Muhammad bin Nayef, first deputy minister of interior and then later minister of interior, who built brilliantly an effective counterinsurgency program, and more or less by 2006, had wrapped up the al Qaeda infrastructure in the country. At the same time, he also instituted procedures to curb private funding for jihadist groups. Many of these procedures were worked out very closely with the United States of America, particularly the Department of Treasury. In fact, you could say that the United States played a considerable role, not the lead role, the Saudis played the lead role, but the United States played the secondary role as most important second player in curbing al Qaeda and jihadism in Saudi Arabia in the first part of this century.

All that said, if we go to 2020, private Saudi money going to jihadist groups continues to be a serious problem to worry about. I would highlight in particular the Taliban. The Taliban gets a lot of their funding from Saudis, from private people in Saudi Arabia.

What do I mean when I say "private people?" Private people often includes very senior

members of the royal family. It includes very prominent businessmen. The bin Laden family, for example, is a classic example. They are no longer in the business, they're largely out of business today, but it's people like that. So, when you say "private," the theme between private and public can be very, very thin.

Also, a lot of their funding comes out of the UAE and out of Bahrain, both of which have an interest in supporting Sunni groups. It is much less than it used to be, but it's still cause for concern.

And, of course, there's another cause for concern and that was the attack on December 6, 2019, in Pensacola, when a Royal Saudi Air Force lieutenant, who was engaged in course of training in Pensacola, fired on his fellow American classmates and killed three. What is disturbing about that is that it indicates that jihadism still manages to infiltrate into the most important institutions of the Saudi state. The Royal Saudi Air Force has to be up there in the top two or three most important institutions of the state.

We also know that other members of his class of Saudis training in Pensacola were at least somewhat aware of his jihadist tendencies. He used to hold parties and show movies of mass casualty terrorist attacks. Not the kind of parties that I've ever been invited to or even know about. So, there should have been a lot of questions going up, but apparently there were not.

So, while we've seen considerable success, and like Thomas, I have reasons for optimism today, I also have reasons for concern. Saudi Arabia is not yet fully out of the business of tacitly allowing fund-raising and it's also not successfully geared in getting rid of jihadists within its own institutions of state.

MR. BYMAN: Thank you, Bruce. That was sobering, as well as extremely informative.

I want to ask all three of you a question because I think somewhat unusually not only are all three of you experts on the jihadist movement in general, all of you have thought, written, or worked -- or and worked, I should say, extensively on counterterrorism, as well. And in addition to 19 years of watching the jihadist movement evolve, we've had 19 years of watching counterterrorism respond. And I wonder if all of you could pick one thing, either a strength or a weakness, to talk about in terms of something that you feel is important with regard to counterterrorism that either deserves to be highlighted in terms of improvement or that it's something that really has worked well and deserves to be recognized.

I'm going to go in slightly different order this time. Tricia, if I could start with you and then go to Thomas and then we'll end with Bruce.

MS. BROWN: I don't know if it's an occupational hazard, but I quickly think of mistakes rather than successes, so I'm glad Thomas is here to inject us with a little bit more positivity.

I think, especially speaking on Afghanistan, it's easy to forget that it took several years for the insurgency to emerge in Afghanistan. As you pointed out, Dan, in the question you initially asked me, 2003/2004, is considered really a success story. And I think that there are some lessons there that need to be examined more closely about the insurgency onset in Afghanistan.

The negotiations that U.S. and the Afghan government are undertaking with the Taliban now are happening in a much weaker position. And the deals that will be struck, if there are indeed deals struck, are going to be significantly worse than what could have been achieved earlier.

But we talk a lot about de-Baathification and the implications that had in Iraq. But there was also a de-Talibanization policy undertaken in Afghanistan and had a lot of implications and really set the stage for a number of the conditions that helped contribute to the insurgency, whether that was the alienation of a subset of the Pashtun population, empowering strongmen who abused their position and undertook actions that made the population more receptive to the return of the Taliban, or basically put the Taliban in a situation where their options were to be killed, captured, or move into Pakistan, which, of course, is the state that was the most unhappy with the status quo in Afghanistan. So, there was, I think, a greater ability to find elements of a Taliban that could have been peeled off and elements of the -- kept elements of the population from returning their support to the Taliban if there had been a last heavy-handed approach to some of these policies.

While some of them are very much understandable in the aftermath of 9/11, I think that there also needs to be some lessons learned from that about sort of how to capitalize on military victories. We've very good at achieving military victories, but it's the political successes afterwards that are equally important. And if those aren't consolidated, we see the kinds of insurgencies that we've seen in Afghanistan and in Iraq and elsewhere.

MR. BYMAN: Tricia, can I question you on that slightly before we go to Thomas?

MS. BROWN: Of course.

MR. BYMAN: Drawing on the kind of knowledge of what we've learned over the last 19 years, what would you advise current negotiators given that the U.S. is in a weaker position? You know, are there achievable things that can minimize the risk of terrorism and yet, at the same time, kind of keep the United States out of what seems to be a relatively endless war?

MS. BROWN: Unfortunately, we're in one of those situations where there's a host of bad options. There's not a lot of good options at this juncture. And I think the U.S. has pretty clearly signaled no matter who wins the next election that the U.S. commitment is going to be significantly reduced. And I think that puts the Afghan government in a relatively weak negotiating position going forward.

But I think one of the things to sort of keep in mind with the Taliban, which is what I raised earlier, is that they don't need these organizations. This isn't the 1990s where the foreign organizations were sort of a backbone of part of what it -- its strength. And so a lot of what we're dealing with is sort of reputational. And so trying to find ways that the Taliban can relinquish these organizations, these foreign fighters, without losing too much face, which seems to be one of their main concerns -- because I think that there are wedges that can be exploited there, but I think there's been some additional mistakes in giving away some important negotiating leverage too early.

So, I think the Afghan government is in a very difficult negotiating position. And unless the U.S. takes a significantly different approach going forward, there aren't that many opportunities to sort of change the strategic direction of how things are heading in Afghanistan.

MR. BYMAN: Okay, thank you. Thomas, can I ask you your thoughts on a counterterrorism either success or failure you'd like to highlight?

Again, I think you're muted, Thomas.

MR. HEGGHAMMER: I never learn. I'm like the Western government fighting terrorism.

So, I think, as I mentioned earlier, I think one of the most important things that have happened in recent years is the collective effort to limit the spread of propaganda and ideological material online. And if I were to guess, if I were to speculate, you know, when we look back on this period 20, 30 years from now, I think that may well be a turning point, kind of single one thing that we did that helped weaken the movement. Because strictly speaking, before that, nothing worked or seemed to work. And, you know, we did some very bad things and a bunch of things that were less bad, but we never really

found something that really dented the movement until this Internet thing. So, I would highlight that.

But I also wanted to say that, you know, I'm kind of being a little bit sarcastic here, but that's not fair because a lot of the effort against these al Qaeda and I.S. and these transnational jihadi groups has actually been quite well done in the sense that there have been some very sharp minds at work in intelligence houses around the world who have developed a very detailed nuanced understanding of these groups. And I say this because I think outside of sort of specialist circles, there still is this kind of perception of the U.S. or Western counterterrorism apparatus as just terribly stupid and kind of excessively forceful. And I think this has very much to do with the Iraq debacle.

And I think it's true to say that in the early 2000s, you know, the leaders of kind of the war on terror did have a simplistic and poor understanding of the phenomena that they were facing, but that changed. You know, we learned and the amount of knowledge that governments have now and the amount of nuance that people have -- you know, when approaching this movement is, I think, a lot higher than people realize.

So, I think that aspect of the war on terror, this sort of intelligence track, this focus on kind of mapping the bad guys, separating the cadres of these really dangerous organizations from the populations or from other groups that don't have international ambitions, all these sorts of things, that sort of slow and steady build-up of expertise has been effective, as well.

So, you know, patience and attention to nuance has been a feature of the war on terror. And I think that's a success that's not often -- that's not heralded enough.

MR. BYMAN: Thank you. And thank you for highlighting that. I, too, sometimes get frustrated by comments that treat governments around the world as if they've learned nothing about this and as if the depth of expertise is lacking when, when you talk to the people involved, it's actually quite remarkable.

Bruce, let me ask you, as someone who himself was involved deeply in terrorism, what you feel, if there's something you want to highlight either that could be much better or that has gone quite well.

MR. RIEDEL: I'm going to highlight one area where I think we need to do much better. It's a bit nebulous. It's the question of sectarianism, Sunni versus Shia. And particularly, it involves the

leading Sunni state, Saudi Arabia, and the leading Shia state, Iran.

The rivalry between these two countries is part of the environment in which terrorist groups, like the Islamic State and al Qaeda, have been able to thrive. Al Qaeda and the Islamic State, particularly al Qaeda in Iraq, made pursuing Shias violently the essence of its whole life story. Almost more important than fighting the Americans was fighting Iran and fighting the Iraqis. For the Islamic State that was in many ways true, as well.

This is a difficult issue for the United States to address. After all, we're not an Islamic country. We don't have particularly ideological weight in this. But we do have influence with the Saudis and with other Gulf states. We used it in the past. I would say in the Bush administration and particularly in the Obama administration we pressed the Saudis to cut down on their support for violent sectarianism. Clearly, not with complete success, but with some measure of success. In the era of King Abdullah, in many ways we were pushing on an open door. He looked for rapprochement with Iran on several occasions during his career.

But now we face a completely different situation. King Salman and his son, Crown Prince Mohammad Bin Salman are the most sectarian Saudi leaders we have seen in modern history by far. And they pursue a very sectarian foreign policy, one highlight of which is, of course, the war in Yemen, which is a war against a Shia group, the Houthis. This pursuit of this extreme sectarian agenda makes it much harder to stabilize places like Iraq, to try to stabilize Bahrain, and almost impossible to end the war in Yemen.

I think a new administration needs to take a very hard look at this and spend a considerable amount of attention jaw-boning the Saudis and others while trying to reopen the levels of communications with Iran that have been shut down as we've cut off the JCPOA and other things like that. This won't be easy. This is very, very hard to do. It requires a very sophisticated approach. It's a combination of good intelligence, good diplomacy, and a lot of work on information skills. But that's an area where I think we could do a lot better than we've been doing in the last three or four years.

MR. BYMAN: Thomas, if I can ask you a follow-up or extension of Bruce's and Tricia's remarks. One thing they both talk about is the role of the United States, whether in cajoling allies, as Bruce is suggesting, military intervention in Afghanistan. But one of the significant possible changes in

years to come is a diminished U.S. role in the greater Middle East, especially a military role.

And although Vice President Biden and President Trump disagree on many issues, neither is particularly eager to expand the U.S. military role in the Middle East. President Trump recently announced the withdrawal of some U.S. military forces from Iraq.

Your book talks extensively about one of Azzam's changes was going from internal fights within the Muslim world about regime legitimacy to fighting against outside invaders. How much does this change in U.S. policy, if it indeed happens, matter? How much does it affect the groups, both from their ideological and inspirational points of view, but also from a counterterrorism perspective?

Once again, you're muted, Thomas.

MR. HEGGHAMMER: That's three times. So, this is a key question, obviously, but it's one that's really hard to answer.

I mean, I'm working on a paper now. I'm not sure exactly where it's going to end up, but I'm basically looking at data on Western troop deployments to the Muslim world and lifting it from the Military Balance publication series from IISS, which has detailed numbers on like how many troops different countries have at different parts of the world. And what these data show is that measured in troops, you know, not the perfect measure, but a pretty good one, there really was a huge kind of intrusion, Western military intrusion, in the Muslim world in the mid-2000s. You know, the graph really skyrockets and it peaks around 2006, but then it starts to go down. And actually, the troops numbers have gone slowly but surely down since sort of 2007.

And also, by the way, these numbers show that Obama, for all the criticism against him about the drone program and all that, he really did bring the troops home in a sense that, you know, the number of American troops stationed in the Muslim world declined throughout his presidency. But they're still at a higher level than in, say, the '90s or, of course, previous decades.

And what's so interesting about this is that, obviously, you know, so we have this peak in the 2000s and then a decline, and yet the graph for jihad activity doesn't look quite the same. It goes up a little bit in the early 2000s, you've got some stuff going on there, but then it really takes off in the 2010s after the Arab Spring and the Syria war and ISIS and all that. That's really when you have -- on all metrics that's when the high point is. So, the high point comes long after and the high point coincides

with the decline in the number of troops in the region.

And so the question is, what does this mean? Does it mean that there is no relationship whatsoever that the trajectory of the jihadi movement is entirely independent of the troop presence or does it simply mean that there is a time lag? That the damage done by the Iraq war and the troop deployments in the 2000s just have very long aftereffects? That could also well be.

So, I really can't give a clear answer to this other than to say that clearly the movement is kind of triggered by perceived foreign intrusion into Muslim lands. At the same time, it's about a perception. So, you know, perception is made up of a combination of objective facts and your subjective interpretation of it. And I think that's something that, you know, kind of the pure materialists sometimes forget. They look at it and they say, well, we have these wars and we have these troops, and so that must be way they're fighting. But, in fact, very often the jihad -- ideological extremists might -- they will twist realities on the ground according to some ideological scheme. And they might claim that there is more kind of, you know, Western repression or military presence than there really is and things like that. So, things don't quite fit.

So, but I think overall, you know, if Western -- the bottom line I think is, you know, it's probably a good thing to minimize the military footprint in the region, but it's no guarantee that the movement might not sort of continue to thrive.

MR. BYMAN: Thank you. I'm going to transition now from my questions to those that were submitted from audience members, often in advance of the event.

So, the first I have is from Freddy Lunkie (phonetic), who's a student at Georgetown University. And I'd like to direct this one towards Tricia. Freddy is asking about the question of cooperation and, in particular, how likely is cooperation? He is asking about cooperation between jihadi groups and those other terrorist groups, so far right nationalist groups, for example.

But if I could add to that, the broader question of cooperation within the jihadist community. One thing we've seen in Syria and elsewhere is tremendous divisions within the movement. And if you could talk about that question of different groups working together and when do you think that's likely and when do you think it's not, that'd be great.

MS. BROWN: Sure. When I looked closely at relationships between terrorist



organizations what I found was the cross-ideological relationships were pretty difficult to actually sustain. There could be one-off instances of cooperation, very tactical, very transactional, those things weren't impossible. But any kind of sustained relationship or cooperation that crossed -- that sort of defied ideological tenets was a very tough sell in multiple ways. And one is that it tends to be incredibly divisive amongst the organizations that would participate in it.

So, even if it seems sort of economically advantageous in some way or strategically advantageous, it rubs against some deeply held beliefs. And so I think some of the worst-case scenario kinds of cooperation crossing ideology are less of a concern than one might think.

In terms of other forms of cooperation, I think the distinction that I would sort of highlight is when you see within Syria, for example, when groups are competing with each other. When you add the element of sort of competition for resources or personnel, that tends to really have a limiting effect on cooperation. They can cooperate, but they're doing so in a pretty limited way, pretty fluid way, and usually something that doesn't persist over time.

I think the relationships that have shown more resilience are when you are not sort of cooperating in the same sphere. And if you even sort of look at al Qaeda as an example, the persistence of its relationships despite the challenge from the Islamic State speaks to how resilient these relationships can be.

For all the sort of calculations that one could think of -- al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, Al-Shabaab, AQAP, and Yemen -- should have all defected to ISIS when it was at its peak. It had a lot to offer in terms of what it could bring to its allies. None of those organizations did. And so I think there is also a persistence to these alliances, especially when you can remove some of those elements of competition that we see within conflicts, like in places like Syria.

MR. BYMAN: Thank you. Bruce, if I could turn to you, and this is really an extension of your remarks on sectarianism and the Saudi-Iran competition more broadly.

One thing that comes across very clearly in Thomas' book is how the anti-Soviet struggle, the struggle against the outsider, the invader, transitions very neatly to a struggle against the United States. Can I ask you that question on sectarianism, that given that this has become such a defining feature of the jihadist movement in general, whether in Syria or more broadly in competition across the

Arab and Muslim world, where do you see this going? Is this something that's actually going to lead to less focus on I'm going to say the West probably and more focused and returning the movement to internal battles within Islam? Are there new theaters where you see sectarianism emerging as a conflict where jihadist groups might arise?

MR. RIEDEL: A crucial part of the sectarianism is the policies of the kingdom of Saudi Arabia, which in adhering to its so-called Wahhabi ideology has always been anti-Shia. If you go back and study Mohammad Abd-al-Wahhab, the man for whom the Saudi religious sect is named, he really began as an anti-Shia polemist. He visited Basra early on in his career, which is a mixed Sunni-Shia city, and was apparently completely outraged at the world he saw there.

This conflict, unfortunately for us, always seems to put us right in the middle. It's almost a competition between Sunni extremists and Shia extremists for how many Americans you can kill. Since 9/11, we tend to have forgotten Imad Mughniyeh. Before 9/11, Imad Mughniyeh, a Lebanese Shia, was the most effective terrorist in killing Americans. The CIA did not forget Imad Mughniyeh after 9/11 and successfully went after him and finally brought a measure of justice.

This is a very, very difficult issue for the United States to address head on. The best way for us to address it is in a diplomatic dialogue with Riyadh and Tehran in which we try to convince them that it's actually in their self-interest as well as our interest to do that. But we're never going to be completely successful on this count. We can't deal away with sectarianism.

But if you look back at the last couple of hundred years of Islamic history, the kind of sectarianism we have now is really out of control. We didn't see this in the 1950s or the 1960s or certainly a hundred years ago. It has become a much more intense problem. The Islamic revolution in Iran is undoubtedly part of the reason for that, but the counter revolution against it is also a big part of that.

This is a topic that requires a great deal of nuance and a great deal of understanding about how Islam works and how Islamists think about themselves. Like Thomas, I'm struck at how well we actually are prepared. We have people who know the answers to these things or at least can put us in the right direction. What we need is the top leadership listening to the experts on these kinds of issues and trying to send cautionary messages and open doors.

MR. BYMAN: Thank you. Let me turn to Thomas. We have a question from Jeffrey Allen (phonetic) at the University of Maryland, which is about the intellectual leaders of the jihadi community today.

He asks who you see as the key philosophical successor to Azzam. And let me kind of broaden that slightly to simply ask are there dominant figures whose writings and speeches should be focused on for understanding what the movement's about today and where it might go next?

MR. HEGGHAMMER: That's a very good question. And I think the -- to answer I think we need to kind of look at a more broader change in the movement, which is that individual ideologues have become less important, if you will. So, there was a time sort of up until -- well, I guess, up until the Islamic State really, where there was a sort of recognized pantheon of ideological leaders. You know, Azzam was there, bin Laden was obviously there, Khattab from Chechnya was there, there were lots of -- you know, Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, lots of famous names that would be familiar to people listening.

Now, some of those voices are still around and they have a following, but two things. One is that with the rise of Islamic State, many of those old guard figures have lost influence because they had a history with al Qaeda. And the new Islamic State, you know, branch of the movement doesn't seem to elevate individual ideologues in the same way.

And parallel to this, there's a clear shift in the types of propaganda products that people consume. So, basically, people read less books and they watch more 30-second clips on Telegram and so on. And I think the elders in the jihadi movement complain as much about their young people not reading enough as we do.

So, there is this shift away from the old school ideologues and a shift away from long format. And this is changing the ideological landscape and it's made it kind of flatter. There are fewer individuals who really stand out unlike 10 or 15 years ago.

So, that makes it harder, of course, to kind of pinpoint or identify the thought leaders. Obviously, there are individuals with influence. There are named ideologues inside the I.S. universe, but they don't have -- it's more distributed. There are more of them and they don't have quite the same status as some of these former AQ ideologues.

And I think it's just part of -- to me, I see this as part of this longer thread in -- longer trend

in the jihadi movement and perhaps, you know, in kind of contemporary Islam really of erosion of authority; that, you know, the jihadi movement itself is a manifestation of this; that the authority of orthodox -- or mainstream clerics, the ulama, is eroding. You know, it becomes easier for people on the fringes to make themselves heard.

But the same thing has happened inside the jihadi movement. The individual leaders have lost authority. And things are becoming more decentralized and fragmented in a way. Nobody's listening really to anyone in a sense.

So, where this is going to take us down the line, I hesitate to speculate about. But I'm just noting this quite interesting pageant.

MR. BYMAN: Thank you. And I actually like the idea of the kind of intellectual leaders of the jihadist movement joining forces with Brookings and other authors to urge people to read more books. I think that's an appropriate way to think about this.

Our hour is done. I'd like to thank everyone who has joined us live, but also everyone who is watching this, the taped version of this, at a subsequent time. I hope you found it as informative as I did.

Please join me in your own private homes and offices thanking our three panelists. I will again commend to you Thomas' superb book, which is worth reading if any of what we've discussed today you found valuable and interesting. You'll find a lot more detail and very thoughtful analysis in the book.

Thank you, everyone, very much today. And I wish you all the best.

\* \* \* \* \*

CERTIFICATE OF NOTARY PUBLIC

I, Carleton J. Anderson, III do hereby certify that the forgoing electronic file when originally transmitted was reduced to text at my direction; that said transcript is a true record of the proceedings therein referenced; that I am neither counsel for, related to, nor employed by any of the parties to the action in which these proceedings were taken; and, furthermore, that I am neither a relative or employee of any attorney or counsel employed by the parties hereto, nor financially or otherwise interested in the outcome of this action.

Carleton J. Anderson, III

(Signature and Seal on File)

Notary Public in and for the Commonwealth of Virginia

Commission No. 351998

Expires: November 30, 2020