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Defining and Understanding the Next Generation of Salafi-Jihadis

The United States has been engaged in a robust counterterrorism campaign, formerly known as the Global War on Terror (GWOT), since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. In the almost 18 years since the 9/11 attacks, the U.S. military has significantly improved its ability to efficiently find, fix, and finish terrorist targets. However, there is widespread recognition among policymakers that the United States and its allies cannot simply kill or capture their way out of this difficult problem.¹ More needs to be done to counter the toxic ideologies and narratives, as well as the legitimate grievances, that have fueled this global phenomenon, particularly with the emerging generation—what sociologists call Generation Z.

To assess the future trends and characteristics of Salafi-jihadism in Generation Z, or Gen Z (known as individuals born between 1997 and 2012), we adopted a multidisciplinary approach incorporating security and terrorism studies, child development, and survey data. Additionally, framing the study around generational cohorts as a unit of analysis allowed us to examine how different formative experiences, such as world events and technological, economic, and social dynamics, “interact with the life cycle and aging process to shape people’s views of the world.”² Most notably, Gen Z distinguishes itself from previous generations by

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Because we have defined our cohort of study, we must also define Salafi-jihadism. As Islamic studies scholar Shiraz Maher states, Salafism is a heterogenous Islamist movement that “believes in progress through regression, where the perfect life is [realized] by reviving the Islam of the first three generations” of the *umma*.³ However, harkening back to an idealized early Muslim community as a model for reforming its modern counterpart is hardly exclusive to Salafis. Therefore, we further define *Salafis* as

ultra-conservative Islamists engaging in sociopolitical acts that emphasize the hyper-unity of the early *umma*, absolute monotheism (*tawhid*), and rejection of alternative Islamic views (*bid'a*). Moreover, Salafi-jihadis are those who undertake armed struggle to impose this Salafi idealization on their societies and worldwide.

Life Span Developmental Factors Contributing to Radicalization of Youth

As the first Gen Z members begin to enter adulthood, there are key developmental factors that make youth particularly susceptible to radicalization. Adolescents and emerging young adults are particularly vulnerable to persuasive messaging from violent extremist organizations. Adolescence (11 to 17 years old) and young adulthood (18 to 25 years old) are two developmental periods that are characterized by identity explorations, instability, impulsivity, risk-taking, and the perceived need for independence. Moreover, adolescents and young adults tend to have a higher propensity toward risky behaviors, including gang violence, drug use, and criminal activities.⁴

Decisionmaking is generally a product of two brain networks: socioemotional and cognitive control.⁵ The former is sensitive to social and emotional stimuli and responsible for processing rewards. The socioemotional network is not fully developed until young adulthood, and more importantly, it is activated by hormonal changes triggered during puberty. On the other hand, the cognitive control network is responsible for self-regulation, thinking ahead, and planning, and it is also less developed during adolescence. As a result, the socioemotional network is overreacting during adolescence, and the cognitive control

network is not mature enough to counteract the emotional responses. Therefore, youth are more susceptible to sensational materials that induce emotional arousal and promise short-term rewards and to engaging in risky behaviors, such as acts of rebellion or violence.

The Drivers of Violent Extremism

The question of radicalization in past and current generations is a complex one. There are multiple drivers that vary based on demographics, socioeconomic conditions, youth culture, geopolitical setting, and governance.⁶ Our research concluded that the underlying grievances that drove radicalization in past generations of Sunni Muslims remain salient in Gen Z. Indeed, real and perceived sociopolitical marginalization and Western aggression against the dominance of the Muslim world all drove radicalization decades ago and continue to do so now. Although these drivers remain relevant in Gen Z, such factors as pervasive pessimism after the Arab uprisings in the early 2010s, anti-U.S. and anti-Western sentiment, the “youth bulge”⁷ and high unemployment, and shifting gender dynamics are arguably more salient in the radicalization of Gen Z than in past Salafi-jihadi cohorts.

The manifestation of these grievances differs across unique localities and drives extremism within the context of specific individuals and geographic locations. Additionally, it is not our intent to suggest that all young Muslims who share these grievances are destined to become terrorists. Indeed, only a minority of the 1.8 billion Muslims worldwide turn to terrorism to address perceived grievances. Nevertheless, as sociopolitical and economic grievances persist, a small number of Gen Z Sunnis almost

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certainly will turn to, or at least endorse, terrorism as a means of expressing individual and sociopolitical agency. The security challenge of Salafi-jihadism is likely to persist at least at the same level as with the millennial generation.

Sociopolitical Grievances

The Arab Spring uprisings spawned widespread hope among Arab youth. However, 56 percent of Arab youth now view the Arab Spring uprisings negatively after disastrous civil wars and political and economic inertia.⁸ Various issues, such as terrorism, political upheavals and instability, corruption, and economic stagnation, are driving the malaise among Arab youth—although none of these issues explicitly portend radicalization. Additionally, the 2019 ousters of Algeria’s Abdelaziz Bouteflika and Sudan’s Omar Bashir could indicate a renewed drive to enact social change through peaceful demonstrations, akin to the Arab Spring uprisings. However, should Arab youth continue to perceive social, economic, and political mobility as unobtainable, some almost certainly will see

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terrorism as the only means of asserting agency and engendering change in a stagnating Arab world.

Moreover, although globalization and increased internet penetration have arguably fostered a positive sense of interconnectedness within the global Muslim community, or *umma*, both developments have also facilitated the bonding over shared grievances and the metastasis of in-group versus out-group mentalities. Increased connectivity, via the internet and social media, among Islam's 1.8 billion adherents has revealed the diversity of the faith in practice, which has led to clashes between "authentic" and "hybrid" forms of religious practice and between more traditional and moderate currents of Islamic ideology, often driving radicalization. Gen Z and millennial Muslims have grown accustomed to debates about authentic versus hybrid forms of Islamic life; for youth in conservative Muslim communities, exposure to places where Muslims practice more liberally could spur either a desire to force those communities to return to a more "proper" practice of Islam or to reject their more conservative upbringing.⁹ Additionally, for Muslim youth raised in secular countries, fundamentalist criticism of their political and social structures is only an online connection away.

Gen Z Sunnis can also readily debate the perception of Western aggression toward Muslim communities and opposition to Western military actions, which have long driven extremism and served as a recruiting tool for jihadist groups. The campaign by the United States and its allies against the self-proclaimed Islamic State (ISIS) will likely continue to play a role in Salafi-jihadism, particularly compared with perceived inaction by Western powers to curb Muslim suffering perpetrated by the Bashar Assad regime in Syria. Tellingly, only 41 percent of *Arab Youth Survey 2019* respondents viewed the United States as an ally of the Arab world, whereas 59 percent viewed it as an adversary, a 27-point increase since 2016.¹⁰

Youth Bulge and High Unemployment in Arab World

Large youth populations mean a higher likelihood of unemployment, decreasing the opportunity costs of joining terrorist organizations. In the Middle East specifically, the youth bulge is a serious economic challenge—close to 5 million workers are set to enter the job market each year, but employment opportunities are in short supply.¹¹ Although there is no consensus that high unemployment

directly leads to terrorism, failed expectations can lead to a sense of discontentment, depression, and restlessness that feeds radicalization. For example, one-third of recent college graduates in Tunisia cannot find work, and educated Tunisians are twice as likely to be unemployed as uneducated ones.¹² Regionally, 30 percent of *Arab Youth Survey 2018* respondents stated that “creating new, well-paying jobs” is the most important means of steering the Arab world in the right direction.¹³ Continued economic stagnation and a consistently high youth unemployment rate, exacerbated by the Muslim youth bulge, could lead to failed expectations and spur radicalization among disenchanting Gen Z Muslims.

Shifting Gender Dynamics

The #MeToo movement has led to increasing recognition of a longstanding culture of harassment and sexual violence and has spurred sister movements, including #MosqueMeToo. Originally intended to share stories of being assaulted on the annual pilgrimage to Mecca, #MosqueMeToo evolved to include stories of sexual harassment and violence in Islamic religious spaces and practices, bringing more attention to Muslim voices that advocate for women and criticize certain Islamic practices believed to disempower women.¹⁴

As voices calling for gender equality are amplified, some individuals may perceive significant threats to their ways of life and values, potentially driving people to embrace more fundamentalist views. Indeed, disapproval of greater social and economic roles for women seems to be common among Tunisian supporters of fundamentalist Islam. In recent interviews with more than 80 Tunisians

imprisoned on terrorism charges, the overwhelming majority said that the place for women was in the home rearing children and that women should wear the *niqab*.¹⁵

Moreover, Salafi-jihadi ideologies provide a means for men who are feeling emasculated for losing jobs or social status to women to reclaim their masculinity. An integral feature that attracted many young Muslim men to ISIS was the hyper-fundamental, strictly enforced gender norms in which men dominated all aspects of the so-called caliphate.¹⁶ The group lauds the accomplishments of men. It allowed them to marry multiple women and take *sabaya* (sex slaves). In the Islamic State, the public sphere was strictly the domain of men, and the group’s violence

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provided a vehicle for men to reclaim their masculinity by taking up arms.

Salafi Ideology

Young Muslims turn to Salafi-jihadism for various socio-political and economic reasons. However, Islamic fundamentalism is part and parcel of Salafi ideology, and, regardless of primary drivers, which vary from individual to individual, ideology is often the common denominator.¹⁷ Therefore, it is no accident that Salafi-jihadi groups consistently present their narratives in religious and historical frameworks, infusing Salafi-jihadi ideology with motifs of injustice, absolute unity within the *umma*, tales of Muslim resilience, and religious justifications of violence as a means of defending Islam and achieving their sociopolitical objectives. Furthermore, the Salafi-jihadi ambition of reverting Islam to their vision of the religion's early, "pure" form represents the panacea for many drivers of

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extremism—corrupt, ineffective rulers; perceived subservience to the West; absence of the caliphate; deterioration of Islamic heritage and morals; and the increasing emergence of women in the public sphere. Extremist actors present this ideology as the solution to all perceived ills, which thereby serves as a magnet for disgruntled Sunni youth in a wide variety of circumstances.

Collapse of the Caliphate and Implications for Future Radicalization

Fallout from the demise of ISIS' self-declared caliphate and the implications for Salafi-jihadism among Gen Z remain unclear. Because it was a major draw for young jihadists, the collapse of the physical caliphate may portend diminished radicalization in Gen Z. However, the immersion of adolescents and young adults in ISIS' culture of violence forebodes a possible expansion of extremist networks, particularly if ISIS youth are not adequately deradicalized and reintegrated into mainstream society. Moreover, that ISIS established a caliphate at all will likely reverberate with Gen Z Sunnis, who now have a living memory of a purportedly utopian Sunni caliphate, rather than harkening back to the 7th century Rashidun caliphate. Furthermore, a resurgent al Qa'ida, resilient ISIS, and an unpredictable flow of foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs) to and from conflict zones might also manifest in a multipolar, decentralized global jihadist movement connected via the internet and made increasingly dangerous through emerging technologies.¹⁸

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Returning Foreign Fighters

Of the estimated 41,490 individuals who traveled to the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq, at least 7,366 have returned to their countries of origin.¹⁹ Historically, returning waves of jihadists have facilitated the spread of extremist ideologies in their home countries, especially among impressionable youth. For instance, Libyans returning from Afghanistan in the 1980s established the jihadist Libyan Islamic Fighting Group, whose members, even after the group disbanded, would go on to cultivate and lead radical extremist groups operating in the country today.²⁰ Reducing the twin threats of future terrorist attacks by returning FTFs and radicalization of future jihadist cadres will be a major challenge for host countries. These fighters have been consumed by the ethos and mission of ISIS and will have difficulty returning to “normal life.”²¹

Youth returning from ISIS-held territories are of particular concern to security and intelligence services. Of the 7,366 known FTFs who have returned to their countries of origin, as many as 1,180 are children.²² Many of them have been aggressively targeted by ISIS’ indoctrination and radicalization initiatives, from the streets to schools to Cubs of the Caliphate training camps.²³ Furthermore, the radicalization of children and young adults is particularly dangerous because they are too young to have formed a cognitive defense to radicalization founded on critical thinking and

an expanded worldview.²⁴ Therefore, deradicalization of returning adolescents could be especially challenging; indeed, German authorities have already raised concerns over radicalized youth returning from former ISIS territories, warning that the adolescents might pose a “challenge for years ahead.”²⁵

A Decline in Radicalization?

The destruction of the caliphate could, in fact, contribute to a reduction in radicalization, especially among Gen Z Muslims. In the *Arab Youth Survey 2018*, Hassan Hassan asserts that the reality of the caliphate, of joining something new, was a major driving factor for young Muslims traveling to Iraq and Syria.²⁶ Indeed, the appeal of resurrecting the caliphate greatly facilitated the attractiveness of ISIS’ ideology, and, absent a similar state-building project, a future generation of would-be jihadists might not be so determined to heed the call.

However, ISIS has modified its caliphate-oriented narrative, propagating themes of nostalgia and juxtaposing scenes of idyllic existence in the ISIS *umma* with the destruction wrought by the global coalition against ISIS.²⁷ Blaming the United States and its allies, ISIS is aiming to ignite Sunni resentment and violence toward the group’s enemies, while simultaneously reminding supporters of what ISIS attempted to create—a utopian Sunni society

modeled in their vision of the Prophet Mohammed and the early Muslim *umma*. Despite its destruction, the caliphate therefore could continue to inspire young Sunni extremists, many of whom could seek to join ISIS or other Salafi-jihadi organizations with the intent of resurrecting the caliphate.

The Effects of Violence on Children

In general, children exposed to widespread violence are more susceptible to radicalization and recruitment. A 2003 study on trauma and the effects of violent experiences on child development asserts that “exposure to increased levels of violence leads to decreased sensitivity to violence and a greater willingness to tolerate increasing levels of aggression and violence in society.”²⁸ The study’s authors also argue that traumatic exposure to violence can result in heightened aggression, depression, and stunted cognitive development in children, whose “age and psychological immaturity render them vulnerable to the effects of overwhelming and inescapable stressors.”²⁹ Furthermore, exposure to intractable conflicts heighten group identity and hostility toward out-groups. Collectively, in-group members develop a narrative to justify engagement in conflict, which often involves delegitimizing and dehumanizing out-group members and presents in-group members as victims.³⁰ In addition, in-group members develop collective emotional responses to out-group members and the responses are often hostile. For example, exposure to political violence was associated with stronger beliefs approving of aggression toward out-groups among Palestinian and Israeli adolescents; beliefs approving of aggression were then found to be associated with actual aggressive behaviors.³¹

The problem of children’s exposure to traumatic violence is particularly acute in Iraq and Syria, given the protracted military conflict. The Cubs and Pearls of the Caliphate, in particular, present a major deradicalization challenge and long-term risk. ISIS intentionally saturated communities under its control with traumatic displays of violence, in which children often participated or observed. Subsequent desensitization to violence, manifestation of aggression, and potential difficulties in finding educational and professional opportunities because of violence-related cognitive deficiencies might provide future openings for extremist actors to radicalize and recruit frustrated, violent youth scarred from wartime experiences.

Technology and the Next Generation of Terrorists

Having lived their entire lives with the internet, Gen Z’s immersion in technology markedly differentiates its members from those of past generations and highlights the potential threat of Gen Z Salafi-jihadis. The internet and social media are powerful recruiting tools and future terrorists are likely to leverage developing social media and

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communications platforms and emerging disruptive technologies to network, plan, and conduct attacks in unprecedented ways.

Technology to Facilitate Online Radicalization

ISIS' considerable coverage on and use of social media abetted the group's meteoric rise to international notoriety, and leveraging social media and messaging apps, such as Telegram, has been and continues to be a hallmark of the group's strategic communications and operations planning.³² Moreover, ISIS has adeptly used online resources to recruit followers virtually. Adolescents are especially susceptible to indoctrination because of immature cognitive control networks, which make them more receptive to emotionally stimulating materials, such as those used to radicalize and recruit young people online. Furthermore, some research suggests that using the internet exacerbates deficits in one's cognitive control network and increases adolescents' propensity for instant gratification and risky behaviors.³³ Therefore, Gen Z's unprecedented level of internet saturation, coupled with the reported stunting of cognitive control network development by internet usage, makes online recruitment targeting Gen Z particularly concerning.

Indeed, ISIS has tapped into populations ripe for exploitation online. According to the *Arab Youth Survey 2019*, social media is now the overwhelming go-to source of news for young Arabs; as of 2019, 80 percent of Arab youth consume their news primarily from social media, which is also becoming one of the most trusted sources of information.³⁴ The rising consumption of and trust in social media are not limited to Arab youth—for example, ISIS

used social media as a conduit to effectively radicalize and recruit fighters from at least 110 countries.³⁵ For example, of the 60 documented cases in 2015 in which individuals attempted to travel to the Islamic State from the United States, social media played a recruitment or coordination role in almost every case, demonstrating the unprecedented global reach that Sunni jihadists now enjoy.³⁶

ISIS also adopted cutting-edge communications technologies to attract an increasingly tech-savvy, internet-saturated demographic of Muslim youth. For example, in early 2016, two ISIS media outlets, *Al-Bayan* and *Amaq*, released Android apps through which supporters could easily access ISIS news on their smartphones. ISIS has also released multiple media productions that mimic the artistic animation styles of violent video games to promote jihad.³⁷ Video game-esque media productions could be particularly effective at attracting future recruits, considering that scientific studies have tied internet addiction disorder and

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a propensity for playing violent video games to patterns of heightened aggressive behavior.³⁸

However, the jury is still out as to whether online or in-person radicalization is more effective; the answer might be that they are both equally important. Online platforms facilitate expanded reach, saturation of propaganda, and creation of opportunities for indoctrination. However, in-person radicalization is more intimate, with more-direct leveraging of peer pressure, and some studies on FTF motivations found that online radicalization did not play a major role in individuals' decisions to undertake jihad.³⁹

Future Implications and Prospects to Counter Violent Extremism

Although technology is already facilitating online radicalization of the next generation of Salafi-jihadis, technology can also be used to counter violent extremist propaganda and create opportunities for online, targeted engagement with vulnerable Sunni youth populations. Artificial intelligence (AI) is playing a role in limiting and removing terrorist content online. Facebook uses image-matching technology and machine-learning algorithms to block photos and videos from known terrorists and to identify patterns in terrorist propaganda.⁴⁰ According to Facebook, once moderators are aware of terrorist content, they are able to remove 83 percent of it within an hour of it being uploaded, in part thanks to AI advances.⁴¹ Although this is an encouraging statistic, it only refers to the content of which Facebook and its moderators become aware; as experts have pointed out, this does not refer to the entire “universe of content” and is likely a misleading figure in

terms of understanding how much extremist content is being circulated and removed.⁴²

Given the importance and popularity of social media among Gen Z, online propaganda is likely to become an increasingly prominent, if not primary, medium of radicalization and recruitment. Recent research has developed and evaluated the effectiveness of online counter narrative programs that target and prevent online recruitment by violent extremists. Broadly defined, counternarrative programs aim to challenge the propaganda disseminated by extremist groups and to present a positive alternative to extremist propaganda.⁴³

Political scientist Omar Ashour has proposed three pillars of effective counternarrative programs:

1. comprehensively cover all dimensions of violent extremism (i.e., psychological, political, historical, theological, and instrumental)
2. promote credible messengers, such as former members of extremist groups and independent religious figures
3. promote and propagate counter messages widely via various media outlets.⁴⁴

Although researchers and practitioners have increased their attention to developing counter violent extremism (CVE) programs designed for adolescents and young adults, the effectiveness of CVE programs remains largely unknown because of a paucity of rigorous evaluations. Furthermore, the multiple drivers of extremism require CVE strategies to adapt a more-comprehensive approach; instead of focusing on risk factors only, CVE strategies need to incorporate protective factors from multiple

sources that would build resilience in individuals and communities against violent extremism.

A public health approach to CVE suggests that CVE programs are most likely to succeed when they include a team of professionals from multiple disciplines and address both risk and protective factors across multiple social, economic, cultural, and political contexts.⁴⁵ A public health approach to CVE that includes a multidisciplinary team and addresses multiple risk and protective factors may be best suited for this nexus of challenges. For example, a public health approach to CVE for the Sunni Gen Z cohort should focus on early prevention to address the root causes of extreme violence and to promote integration, trust, and prosocial political participation. Successful early prevention would include (1) both risk and protective factors, (2) educating and empowering communities, (3) building community partnerships, (4) employing multidisciplinary teams, (5) linking individuals in need to care (e.g., social services), and (6) training public health and social service workers in the areas of radicalization and CVE.⁴⁶

The next generation of CVE research should also focus on conducting rigorous evaluation to determine how and when CVE programs change young people's attitudes toward violent extremism and, more importantly, prevent young people from engaging in extreme violent behaviors. Finally, CVE programs can build on an extensive body of existing research on youth violence prevention in other demographics, such as immigrant and refugee youth gangs, which exhibit a similar set of psychological, social, and economic factors to those that propel adolescents and young adults to become Salafi-jihadis. Research addressing these factors in gang violence provide an excellent starting point for CVE that aims to prevent violent extremism in Gen Z.⁴⁷

Endnotes

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- ¹⁷ Alexander Thurston, *Salafism in Nigeria: Islam, Preaching, and Politics*, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2016. It is vital to emphasize that Salafis, both jihadi and non-jihadi, promulgate a unique brand of Islamic fundamentalism, involving an arguably ahistorical projection of absolute unity (*tawhid*) within the early *umma*, a rejection of alternative views (*bid'a*) within Islam, and a fixation on overt acts of religiosity. Indeed, the majority of Sunni Muslims, either conservative or moderate in their sociopolitical outlooks, uphold the Prophet and his companions as exemplars of Muslim morality and unity. Moreover, although multiple religious currents, such as the highly diverse Sufi traditions, might venerate the early *umma* as the Islamic paradigm, Sufi practices and beliefs are anathema to Salafis. Therefore, it is imperative to disaggregate the Salafi brand of fundamentalism from other groups who also uphold the early *umma* as a model of reforming the contemporary Muslim community.
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About This Perspective

In this Perspective, the authors explore the unique characteristics and expected drivers of Salafi-jihadism in Generation Z (Gen Z), elucidate potential threats and challenges posed by the next generation of Salafi-jihadis, and put forward recommendations for counter violent extremism programming to address the future threat. The RAND team's research suggests that many of the overarching factors that drove past generations of Salafi-jihadis will remain salient in the coming generational cohort, although the manifestations of these factors will vary across localities. However, Gen Z's unprecedented familiarity with and connection to the internet and modern technology differentiate these members from previous Salafi-jihadis and portend an adaptive, tech-savvy future terrorist threat.

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For more information on the RAND Cyber and Intelligence Policy Center, see www.rand.org/nsrd/ndri/centers/intel or contact the director (contact information is provided on the webpage).

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