



In Brief: Road to the Caliphate: The Salafi-Jihadi Movement's Strengths

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- **Successes on the battlefields against al Qaeda, the Islamic State, and other like-minded groups have not led to their defeat or permanently reduced their threat to the United States.** American strategy misunderstands and misdefines the enemy and therefore persists in a failed approach. The enemy is the Salafi-jihadi movement. The US has focused on retaking terrain, eliminating terrorist cells, and preventing terror attacks while the movement has focused on achieving its overall objectives by penetrating Sunni communities.
- **The Salafi-jihadi movement's leaders see their relationship with Sunni communities as their key to success.** They see themselves as the leaders, the vanguard, of a revolution that will first destroy the governments now ruling in the Muslim world and then bring leaders adhering to their ideology to power across the Muslim world. The terrorism they direct against the West is one of many tactics they use in this effort, but far from the most important from their perspective.
- **The deterioration of conditions in the Muslim world has made communities vulnerable to and created opportunities for the Salafi-jihadi vanguard to develop local ties.** The vanguard offers communities defense from perceived external threats or seeks to fill basic community needs to build relationships with those communities. Communities accept the Salafi-jihadi presence in exchange for this support.
- **The reliance of the Salafi-jihadi movement on its relationship with Sunni communities to strengthen and expand beyond ideological supporters is a key vulnerability.** The movement is inherently dependent on conditions that weaken communities and on the communities' own decisions to accept the vanguard. The US should focus on changing local conditions to prevent the vanguard's ability to enter a community and on working with partners to provide the community with a viable alternative to the Salafi-jihadi vanguard.
- **The US should reorient its efforts to focus not only on disrupting and preventing active terror plots as a national security priority but also on severing the relationships the Salafi-jihadi movement has formed with Sunni communities.** Breaking the bonds with Sunni communities will isolate the Salafi-jihadi vanguard again.

