

# Hegemonic Disruption

## The Asymmetric Challenge to US Leadership

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IN THE ABSENCE of a “peer competitor,” and before second-tier powers begin any serious “hard balancing,” asymmetric challenges from nonstate actors may be the greatest threat the United States faces in the short and medium term. From a systemic or great-power perspective, the absence of serious rivalries indicates that the “unipolar moment” has stretched into a unipolar era whose foundation rests on US ideas, military superiority, and economic strength.<sup>1</sup> Stable is not synonymous with static, however, as recent events in the Middle East prove. This article presents a “hegemonic disruption model” that supplements traditional realist theories of great-power rivalry and hegemonic competition with an alternative scenario in which the United States faces a transnational network of nonstate actors that derive much of their power and policy from political/religious radical Islamic sources. Though the impact of al-Qaeda and its associated movements (AQAM) is well documented, it is also generally ignored by international relations theory and, in particular, realist theory.<sup>2</sup> The fact that it is not a unified movement or single entity, not backed by a nation-state champion, and only semi-allied with nationalist but radical Islamic movements such as Hamas and Hezbollah does not lessen its potential significance. The hegemonic disruption model places the complex “global war on terror” or “long war” into a larger strategic and theoretical perspective.

This article argues that nonstate actors and ideology are strategically significant elements of the international system in the twenty-first century and that AQAM should be seen as strategic actors. Their strategic significance lies in the potential of transnational forces to create instability on

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a national or regional basis in key areas. Such instability can undermine US hegemonic goals in these areas, essentially pulling them out of the hegemonic orbit. In short, US unipolarity or hegemony can be seriously threatened by nonstate actors, not only peer competitors.

The hegemonic disruption model flows out of existing realist theory—power is still the coin of the realm, but new actors know how to wield it. This does not undermine realism. It adapts theories such as balance of power and power transition to a globalized world in which nonstate actors and ideological conflict have a role to play in the evolution of power relationships in the international system. Traditionally, these theories focus on the way in which great powers vie for leadership, with balance-of-power theories predicting that second-tier powers will balance against a unipolar power and power transition theories describing how challengers to a hegemon will develop. Realist insistence on nation-states as the only unit of analysis and the exclusion of ideology as an element of power hampers the ability of the paradigm to explain current developments in the international system. AQAM wields both hard- and soft-power assets in ways that affect the strategic calculations of powerful nation-states. Understanding the impact of nonstate actors and ideology is crucial for a nation such as the United States that has hegemonic aspirations based on a desire to maintain its power and spread its ideology.<sup>3</sup>

The model has three elements. First, nonstate actors and ideology need to be incorporated into realist thinking on hegemony and rivalry. Theories that reject the relevancy of nonstate actors in the international system suggest that the United States should wait until AQAM has control of a state and then add it to the threat matrix. The ideological challenge of these nonstate actors should not be separated from notions of power competition. Just as in the Cold War, this ideological movement is competing for power against the US hegemonic ideology.

Second, the model of hegemonic disruption examines the ways in which AQAM's strategy and impact has an influence on the international system. AQAM can be seen as a twenty-first-century version of the Cold War-era communist wars of national liberation backed by powers such as the Soviet Union or the People's Republic of China. It has been described as a loosely organized "global insurgency,"<sup>4</sup> a rejectionist bloc of organizations who rebel against the prevailing political dynamics nationally, regionally, and internationally. However, it is unique in that it does not require a state sponsor to maintain a significant attack tempo or to propa-

gate its ideology. The sponsorship of a nation-state champion that supplies weapons, funds, sanctuary, and a message has been replaced by the realities of globalization—the diffusion of technology and the ease of travel, financing, and communication. Fundamentally, the nation-state has lost its monopoly on coercive diplomacy.

Third, the transnational threat is explored through two radical Islamic groups, AQAM's power-projection capability and strategy as well as the rise of radical Islam in Somalia where a failed-state crisis eventually gave birth to the Union of Islamic Courts (UIC) and eventually al-Shabab, an AQAM-affiliated movement. The cumulative impact of nonstate actors who reject US hegemony, both ideologically and in terms of US power, can become a significant strategic challenge as these actors square off with local or regional US allies in destabilizing terrorist campaigns, insurgencies, or civil war. The nature of these asymmetric threats is based on neoclassical realist assumptions—transnational and nationalist movements are power seekers. In this sense, nonstate actors are balancing against or challenging the hegemon through proselytizing and/or violence, a type of asymmetric balancing.<sup>5</sup>

Finally, the conclusion considers the implications of the model—a new strategic landscape in which US hegemony is challenged not just by potential peer competitors and regional powers but also by radical movements that sow instability as they defy US attempts to build national and regional orders based on its hegemonic ideals. To maintain its role in the international system, the United States must respond to a range of threats: instability in a major state, instability in a minor state, hostile governments that emerge peacefully, and seizures of powers by radical movements. Though Iraq and Afghanistan are obvious cases, AQAM and al-Shabab are more representative examples of the asymmetric problems the United States may encounter, especially after the revolutions in the Middle East. Perhaps most critically, recent uprisings in the Middle East, though in the name of democracy, may lead to an era where ideologies and movements compete for power on a regional and national basis. A post-authoritarian era in the Middle East may be similar to the postcolonial era in Asia and Africa when the United States and the Soviet Union (USSR) jockeyed for influence. In this case, however, the United States and its allies may face off against the AQAM network and its desire to penetrate and influence the direction of change in the region. While we hope that political change in the region remains as peaceful as Tahrir Square, the current conflicts in

Iraq, Somalia, and Afghanistan, as well as terrorist campaigns in Somalia and Pakistan, are potentially visions of the future. From a policy perspective, the United States may be realizing the implications of its ambitions to deter all rivals and remake the world. Just as China's rise is fueled by its acceptance of the US hegemonic norms of free-trade capitalism, US-sponsored globalization empowers nonstate actors. In an ironic twist, success in spreading its hegemonic ideology creates threats to US power.

## **Expanding Realist Thought: Nonstate Actors and Ideology**

Traditional neorealist and power transition theories are systemic or structural realist theories, theories that focus on the relationships between the powerful states within the system. The nation-state is the relevant actor. Ideology is either ignored or discounted as a factor in great-power struggles. The question of how unipolar or hegemonic powers might be challenged is a question answered by an assessment of the response of other powerful states, who are acting based upon their need for power or their fear for their own survival. The addition of nonstate actors and ideology into the model is almost a necessity for adapting these models to the current threat environment.

### **Traditional Analysis: Great-Power Rivalry**

As the Cold War ended, scholars and policymakers alike turned their attention to the meaning of a unipolar world led by the United States. Unipolarity was almost a given, but in most cases it was viewed as a temporary phenomenon.<sup>6</sup> The great mystery centered on what state might become the peer competitor for the United States and when it might be ready to reshape the balance of power or confront US hegemony.<sup>7</sup> Neorealist theory predicts that states will balance against a unipolar power. In an anarchic structure, the unmatched power of the United States will be seen as a threat to second-tier powers, who will act to balance against it to protect themselves and maximize their power in the international system.<sup>8</sup> As states failed to balance against the United States in the predicted manner, proponents and critics of neorealist theories adapted the basic theory to the post-Cold War reality. Offensive realists argued that balancing behavior would eventually begin; in an anarchic world, nations balance against concentrations of power. The end of the Cold War did

not bring a change in the basic structure and processes of international affairs.<sup>9</sup> However, balancing behavior may not be immediate, particularly when the unipolar power has such an advantage in relative power. Several scholars developed a model of “soft balancing,” a sort of neo-neorealism in which states essentially hedge against hegemonic power by increasing their ability to act independently of the hegemon while carefully avoiding the direct challenges—hard balancing—that balance-of-power theory predicts.<sup>10</sup> From the perspective of soft balancing, states are already balancing against US hegemony in a cautious but identifiable way. A further spin on balancing was a valuable case study–driven model suggesting that nations generally “under balance” by failing to recognize and respond to growing threats.<sup>11</sup> Defensive realists argued that balancing against the United States depended on US policies; if nations perceived US unipolar or hegemonic power as a threat to their interests, they would balance against that threat.<sup>12</sup>

In contrast, scholars who favor power transition theories or hegemonic realism consider unipolarity to be both stable and durable in the medium term. Preponderance of power within a hegemon deters second-tier states from engaging in the types of great-power rivalry that might lead to war. A state may also benefit from the policies of the hegemon, concluding that balancing is not in the national interest.<sup>13</sup> Changes within states, such as demographic shifts, rapid industrial growth, or political developments leading to more efficient mobilization of state resources allow second-tier states to catch up to the hegemon, and that may take decades. A rough balance of power between hegemon and challenger or the perception that parity is on the horizon may lead to great-power war.<sup>14</sup> Initial models of the theory consider powerful but dissatisfied challengers as those who begin wars; however, other scholars argue that empirically it is the hegemon who is more likely to initiate preventive war in an effort to crush a challenger before it reaches full strength.<sup>15</sup> The failure of states to balance against the United States in the decade and a half since the fall of the USSR is not a challenge to the theory. States have simply not caught up to the United States yet, and it does not yet see the second-tier powers as true threats.

Analysis from either perspective begins with a similar post–Cold War consensus on unipolarity—the United States is the only power in its class. Neorealist, neoclassical realist, and power transition theories may disagree on when and how unipolarity may come to an end; however, they all agree

that the challenger will be a peer competitor nation-state or coalition of powerful states.

### **The Relevance of Nonstate Actors**

In traditional realist theories, the nation-state is not the only actor that exists, but it is the actor whose power capabilities define the international system and its stability; therefore, it is the only actor that truly matters.<sup>16</sup> That assumption has become a point of contention, particularly after the swift end of the Cold War; confounding neorealist analysis, stable bipolarity had collapsed into unipolarity without a shot being fired.<sup>17</sup> Neoclassical realist ideas emerged in response to this theoretical dilemma. Scholars combined the systems view of Waltz with the state- and individual-level variables of Morgenthau.<sup>18</sup> In contrast to neorealism that focused on the ways in which states responded to similar threats or external constraints in nearly identical ways, neoclassical realism attempts to explain the variations in state foreign policy when faced with similar external constraints or threats.<sup>19</sup> The answers are rooted in the interaction of domestic-level and system-level variables, the ways in which ideas and nonstate actors influence foreign policy decisions of nation-states who face systemic threats or opportunities.

Even in neoclassical realism, however, the importance of nonstate actors is in the ways they influence the foreign policy decisions of nation-states. The hegemonic disruption model takes this one step further by examining how nonstate actors act autonomously of nation-states, in effect pursuing their own foreign policy goals and political strategies in the interests of their movement. The theory is still realist, however. As described below, these nonstate actors do pursue power and make strategic calculations based on an assessment of global and regional power relationships. Relaxing the assumptions that nation-states are the only relevant unit of analysis allows realist models a theoretical flexibility necessary to explain a world in which asymmetric challenges are alarming and great-power challenges muted.

Already nonstate actors and ideology have been given a prominent place in numerous research agendas. They are generally seen as relevant to international affairs in several ways. First, nonstate actors are sometimes seen as the defining variables in the formation and implementation of state foreign policy. The classic studies of bureaucratic politics and organizational processes considered foreign policy to be the result of rivalries between

individuals and organizations rather than rational calculations of national interest.<sup>20</sup> Recent studies add another layer to this by focusing on the growth of “outsourcing” to private contractors in US foreign and defense policy in areas such as aid projects and overseas security, which can divorce implantation from policy intent in unintended ways.<sup>21</sup> Second, collective action by nongovernmental organizations (NGO) composed of private individuals who work collectively across nation-state boundaries is an important area of study. Epistemic communities, networks of “knowledge-based experts,” contribute to state behavior through the ways they conceptualize specific issue areas, such as trade or climate. They may also have an impact on the issue itself as international epistemic communities develop common approaches to key issues, common approaches that seep into the decision-making processes of many states through the advisory process.<sup>22</sup> On an even greater scale, scholars have examined the ability of NGOs to redirect and redefine IGO (intergovernmental organization) agendas. These studies see the rise of NGO power as a phenomenon that ultimately can redefine the characteristics of state sovereignty. Ethnic diasporas have been studied for their influence on their states of origin and the foreign policies of their adoptive states.<sup>23</sup> Third, a large range of nonstate transnational actors play prominent roles in the international system. Classic studies of the 1970s examined the power of multinational corporations, leading to a broad range of research on how financial markets, corporate cartels, and even transnational organized crime have been able to exert significant impact on states’ foreign policies.<sup>24</sup>

Fourth, and most importantly, a growing literature on social movements, civic activists, and networks details how the combined power of citizens can significantly affect state domestic and foreign policies. More recent focus has centered on the power of what are sometimes called “transnational advocacy networks” to alter the way IGOs and states deal with issues such as the environment,<sup>25</sup> human rights,<sup>26</sup> security issues such as missile deployments,<sup>27</sup> and the use of antipersonnel land mines.<sup>28</sup> Scholars argue that the network form may be the next stage of societal organization, as globalization and information technology transform the fundamental ways humans interact.<sup>29</sup> Fifth, and related to all of the above, is the changing nature of communications. From “hacktivism,” to social media that spurred movements in Iran and Egypt, to cyber terrorism, the information and communications revolution empowers nonstate actors.

The extent of this empowerment and how well governments can keep up is the subject of growing debate.<sup>30</sup>

In these models nonstate actors, however influential, are still essentially noteworthy only for their ability to influence the decisions of states. They may be independent actors who change state and IGO policies, but they are still subordinate actors in the larger systemic issues of power competition. The hegemonic disruption model goes one step further by examining the ways in which nonstate actors can independently challenge nation-states.

### **The Relevance of Ideology**

Ideology is typically discounted as a variable in traditional realist theories. The interests of states in neorealism are defined as the pursuit of power (offensive realism) or security (defensive realism). Ideological goals are secondary, if they matter at all.<sup>31</sup> Power transition theorists view national interest as influenced by system- and state-level factors such as state power capabilities, wealth, cultural welfare goals, and the search for peace. These are generally defined by ruling elites and individual leaders, but ideology or ideas are not key factors in defining interests. A nation's level of economic and, consequently, political development is the critical factor in the definition of its interests.<sup>32</sup> For the purposes of this article, ideology is defined as the principles used to order societies in terms of the relationships between government and the governed, and between the nation-state and the international system. This is a broad definition based on the theories surveyed below and includes judgments on the social, political, and economic norms of society and the international system.

In contrast to the treatment of nonstate actors, nonrealist theories have often incorporated ideology into theories of power competition. Descriptions of the Cold War as a titanic struggle between the forces of liberal-democracy and communism dominated the public debate on both sides of the East-West divide, even as the scholarly community gravitated toward realist theories that transformed the United States and the USSR into power- or security-seeking mirror images.<sup>33</sup> Variants of the "English School" focus on the role of ideas; rather than anarchy defining the international system, hierarchy based on "common values," a "common set of rules," or the "working of a common set of institutions" defines international society.<sup>34</sup> In this sense, the balance of power is influenced by the differences in the ideologies of powerful states.<sup>35</sup> Constructivists have developed theories that explain the national interests of states as based



on states' national identities,<sup>36</sup> or the way international society socializes states,<sup>37</sup> or the ways in which the preferred social orders of powerful states may clash.<sup>38</sup>

Ideology again emerged as a crucial variable in post–Cold War debates on the shape of the next international system. Variants of democratic peace theory are based on the notion that ideology matters: liberal-democracies are less likely to fight each other, and liberal democratic ideologies are judged to be inherently less threatening than other ideologies, engendering fewer reasons to balance against a liberal hegemon among liberal-democratic and non-liberal-democratic states.<sup>39</sup> Others speculated that future great-power rivalries will be based on ideological conflict. Liberal-democracy faced challenges from religious nationalism,<sup>40</sup> or soft authoritarianism,<sup>41</sup> or a wholesale rejection of Western values, ideologies, and an international system based on those traditions.<sup>42</sup> The two most notorious debates on the international system and future great-power conflict after the Cold War were both based on the notion that ideology matters. The debate over the “end of history” argued that ideological conflict among the great powers had ended.<sup>43</sup> The potential for a “clash of civilizations” reflected the possibility that new divisions in the world would be based on culture and civilization, key components in political ideologies. These civilizations would begin to clash at the micro level over control of nation-states and at the macro level as national champions for each civilization form alliances and square off.<sup>44</sup>

These models describe the ways ideas influence the foreign policies of states or the clashes of states or the clashes within states. The hegemonic disruption model builds on these notions by making nonstate actors more autonomous. When nonstate actors reject the ideas of the hegemon, they have the ability to challenge the hegemon in strategically meaningful ways.

## **The Model of Hegemonic Disruption**

The model of hegemonic disruption is based on three elements: the importance of nonstate actors, the relevance of ideology in the international system, and the strategic nature of the asymmetric threat from nonstate actors today. These ideas flow from a basic observation of hegemony in theory and reality. US unipolarity is the basic strategic reality of the early post–Cold War decades. Whether this represents empire, hegemony, or something else entirely and what the United States could or should do

with such power is a subject of debate. A key distinction in sorting out these terms is to consider power in terms of material resources and power in terms of influence. A preponderance of resources qualifies as unipolarity, but hegemony requires a preponderance of global influence.<sup>45</sup> There is a serious debate between those who argue that global hegemony is a myth and that only regional hegemony is possible,<sup>46</sup> and those who contend that the United States has sought global or “extra-regional” hegemony since at least the end of World War II.<sup>47</sup> This is less of an argument than it first seems. Whether global hegemony is possible and whether states seek it are two different issues. Realism suggests that global hegemony, even if possible, is fleeting; states will balance against the aspiring hegemon, or a single challenger will emerge. Unipolarity, even hegemony, is an interregnum before India, China, or the European Union catch up and defy the United States individually or collectively.

Great powers either seek to change or maintain the structure of the international system. Classical realists,<sup>48</sup> most scholars of neorealism,<sup>49</sup> and power transition theorists<sup>50</sup> contend that great powers are typically status quo oriented, seeking to maintain established power relationships that favor their state. Offensive realists may argue the opposite: great powers are power seekers, rather than security or stability seekers, acting to increase their power over other states.<sup>51</sup> The United States is somewhat exceptional, a revisionist hegemon, often behaving as if it were a revolutionary power bent on changing the status quo. From Wilson’s Fourteen Points through the Bush Doctrine and into the Obama presidency, an implicit and sometimes even explicit element of US policy has been the notion that a rule-based world order, the spread of democracy, and the expansion of free trade are the long-term solutions to US national security threats. The United States is not only protecting its own national security, it is also engaging in the hegemonic task of world-order building.<sup>52</sup> Since the end of World War II, US foreign policy has rested, in part, on the assumption that a lack of US leadership in the interwar period was one of the causes of the depression and the war; only US economic, political, and military leadership could restabilize the world system.<sup>53</sup> In this sense, the Cold War was not just a realist struggle between two great powers, but also an ideological struggle between two domestic systems.<sup>54</sup>

The hegemonic disruption model adapts traditional realism’s observations about hegemony to recognize that nonstate actors who oppose the power and ideology of the hegemon are willing to use violence to back up

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their opposition to US hegemonic goals and that they have the power projection capabilities to use that violence in a coherently coercive manner. As the nation-state loses its monopoly on global influence and coercive diplomacy, transnational movements such as AQAM and its regional allies like al-Shabab become relevant to the evolution of hegemony in the international system.<sup>55</sup>

Table 1 compares power transition, balance of power, and hegemonic disruption. An era of unipolarity or an era during which a nation makes a bid for global hegemony is the starting point. Revisionist global-order-building policies dominate the hegemon's agenda; however, on a regional basis it faces ideological and military challenges from groups that reject its power and its ideology. These asymmetric rivals could successfully prevent the hegemon from achieving its revisionist goals. The result is not great-power war or major rebalancing of relationships between the great powers, as in the other models, but a clear waning of hegemonic influence in at-risk regions as the costs of hegemony increase and the ability of the hegemon to enforce its rules decreases.

**Table 1. Models of power competition**

Model:		Phases:			
<b>Power Transition</b>	hegemonic war →	winner becomes hegemon →	hegemonic decline; challenger rises →	hegemonic war	
<b>Balance of Power</b>	stable balance of power →	aggression or imbalance of power →	balancing by great powers →	rebalancing or war	
<b>Hegemonic Disruption</b>	unipolarity or bid for global hegemony →	revisionist hegemony (order building) →	nonstate actors present ideological challenge to hegemon and its regional allies →	asymmetric disruption of hegemony	

## Transnational Radical Islamist Groups

The threat of transnational radical Islamic groups is illustrated here through two aspects. First, AQAM's ability to spread its ideology, build a network, and use each of these strengths to create the capability for global power projection is one of its unique features. Second, AQAM's ties to local groups, such as al-Shabab in Somalia, may be its greatest power.

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AQAM on its own is not strong enough to impose revolutions from outside a nation. Its failure in Iraq is evidence of this.<sup>56</sup> However, its ability to form alliances with local radical Islamic movements, merging national and regional goals with transnational ambitions, gives it staying power and perhaps the ability to gain a foothold in nations and regions.

### **AQAM's Power Projection**

Radical Islam has been viewed in many ways: as part of a classically defined "social movement" that spreads from nation to nation,<sup>57</sup> as a theocratic response to Western-imposed secularism,<sup>58</sup> or as a general "anti-imperial" response to Westernization and Western power.<sup>59</sup> It has also been viewed as another in a series of "revolutionary waves" through which an idea is ignited by a central revolution and then catches fire in other nations as the revolutionary idea is exported.<sup>60</sup> Radical Islam is at times all of these, depending on what level of analysis guides the research strategy.<sup>61</sup>

Radical Islam can be categorized by its ideological nature (Sunni or Shiite) and its goals (transnational or nationalist). This study focuses on the Sunni transnational variant, though a larger research design could add the Shiite variant as an additional case study. However, it is slightly different in nature because it is still primarily state sponsored (Iran). The difference between transnational and nationalist movements is important and addressed below.

The linkages between radical Sunni movements are based in an often shaky consensus on a shared ideology that seeks to end the separation of church and state in Muslim societies, to return to "true" or "original" Islam, to impose a near-medieval version of Islamic law, to overthrow ruling elites who do not share their ideology, and to remove Western influence from society and Western power from their regions. The Sunni variant, based in Salafi or Wahhabi thought, traces its roots along several interlinked paths and includes followers of the beliefs of Ahmed ibn Taymiyya (1263–1328, Damascus), Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab (1703–92, Arabia), Muhammad Rashid Rida (1865–1935, Ottoman-controlled Syria), Sayyid Abul A'la Mawdudi (1903–79, founder of the Jama'at-i-Islami party in Pakistan), Hasan al-Banna (1906–49) and Sayyid Qutb (1906–66), founder and onetime leader of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt.<sup>62</sup>

The transnational and nationalist division is equally important and relates to two issues. First, AQAM's goal is to rebuild the old Islamic caliphate, an empire under al-Qaeda's control that would stretch across Africa

and Asia. In this sense, its goal of eliminating the nation-state system in the Islamic world runs headlong into the goals of groups such as Hezbollah and Hamas, who seek to gain control in a nation-state. It is unlikely that after having fought to achieve power in Lebanon and the Palestinian areas, respectively, these movements would happily turn control over to the Saudis and Egyptians who lead al-Qaeda. Second, al-Qaeda sees democracy as un-Islamic, giving leadership, power, and secular decision authority to man that belongs rightly to God. Hezbollah and Hamas have both participated in elections, and that fact has created some tension between AQAM and Hamas.<sup>63</sup> Analysts should not assume that different radical Islamic movements have the same strategic goals (power in a nation-state vs. power in a region) because they use the same style of tactical operations (terrorist attacks). Viewing radical Islam as monolithic or entirely linked to al-Qaeda is a mistake similar to the one made in the early years of the Cold War when Western analysts perceived a monolithic communist threat in which Russia, China, Vietnam, and Cuba, among others, were inseparable allies, working in coordination to achieve a single goal. As in that case, radical Islam contains a diverse set of movements that already have experienced tensions over goals and the strategies to achieve those goals. Importantly, this suggests that the level of threat from each of these movements is different and the way to combat each will also be different.

AQAM is unique because it has achieved something no other terrorist organization has: global power projection. Its ability to exert that power even in the face of the US-led “war on terrorism” and the threat from its affiliates to seize power in at-risk nations makes AQAM a geopolitical factor rather than simply a critical global law enforcement problem. How AQAM can help regional allies make a bid at seizing power is illustrated by the rise of the Union of Islamic Courts (UIC) and al-Shabab in Somalia.

In the context of neorealist theory, the form of terrorist asymmetric warfare used by al-Qaeda is a strategy based on its weak position in the international system. It cannot directly challenge the United States because it does not have the resources; it uses what methods it has—terrorist forms of coercion—to balance against US power. In the context of power transition models, AQAM is a rising asymmetric power that has taken advantage of technological change and rising capability to present a challenge to the hegemon. For movements that use terrorism, power is both a means and an end. As seen below, they all seek a share of power, either nationally or regionally. Analysis of their strategies suggests that they have concluded

that their political goals are unachievable unless they can demonstrate a clear capability to exert power in a significant and sustainable way—through the ability to conduct terrorist strikes. Having once proven that power capability, coercion becomes a tool to force their targets into concession or surrender.<sup>64</sup>

AQAM is also a part of a trend of the information age and globalization. It is a network-style organization rather than a hierarchical organization. Its structure is not based on command and control from a central headquarters. It is a virtual organization in many ways—decentralized, with autonomous and entrepreneurial units, who may or may not have even loose connections to the central hub of the organization. Linkages to AQAM are temporary; ideology may even be the only commonality; finance and training may be the only functional relationships. AQAM has been seen as an international credit union for terrorism, while its regional affiliates have been seen as franchises (carrying the international brand, but locally owned and operated); its leaders may “lead” only in terms of inspiration and example. It has built an organization with global power projection by taking advantage of the information revolution in communications (for organizational structure and publicity), the ease of travel in a globalized age, and the availability of technologies for weaponry. In both senses ideology is a force multiplier: it recruits, unifies, and sustains disparate organizations and individuals into a decentralized hydra. Al-Qaeda’s ideology serves as an alternative ideology to the one that underpins US hegemony. It combines a medieval Islam with anticolonialism, Pan-Islamism and Americanism, and antisecularism.<sup>65</sup> Even if the actions of its many heads are uncoordinated, they have the same cumulative effect: weakening the United States and its allies.

The hegemonic disruption model considers scenarios short of radical Islam taking root in a peer competitor or AQAM creating a successor to the Islamic caliphate. A great power or large empire steeped in radical Islamic thought would likely behave in ways explained by traditional models of great-power rivalry. Hegemonic disruption examines the damage that can be done to US hegemony by an asymmetric threat.

AQAM’s asymmetric challenge to US hegemony is defined here as a threat of disruption. Disruption has several potential elements: propagation of an ideology that rejects the hegemonic ideology spread by the United States; terrorist campaigns against governments, organizations, and individuals that are US political or ideological allies; inspiration of

more traditional insurgencies on a national or regional basis; and the attempted seizure of power in nation-states.

Al-Qaeda's ultimate goal is to rebuild the old Islamic caliphate across Africa and Asia.<sup>66</sup> At its core the strategy seeks the removal of the regimes in the heart of the Middle East, particularly Saudi Arabia and Egypt. Three elements of the strategy are important to the hegemonic disruption model: AQAM's global power projection, including its decision to attack the United States; terrorism as insurgency; and soft power.

AQAM's global power projection is based on strategic calculation. The one key obstacle to al-Qaeda's success in the Middle East and Asia is US support for the targeted regimes. The innovative nature of the strategy rests in hitting the global enemy first and then moving on the local targets. In al-Qaeda's terms this means war with the "far enemy" before the "near enemy." The decision to do so has been and still remains controversial within AQAM.<sup>67</sup>

A brief look at AQAM's activities illustrates its global power projection. According to US officials, AQAM has cells in over 70 nations. It has dedicated affiliates in several regions, including Abu Sayyaf and Jemaah Islamiyah in Southeast Asia, al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb in North Africa, al-Shabab in East Africa, al-Qaeda in Iraq, and al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) in the Middle East, and even the Islamic Emirate of the Caucasus operating out of Chechnya. Its allies in South Asia, the Afghan and Pakistani Taliban, are perhaps the most lethal organizations in the radical Islamic community.<sup>68</sup> Since 2004, well into the global efforts to defeat AQAM, to mid-2010, it has been able to launch 17,030 attacks spanning four continents with a total of 94,674 killed or wounded. Table 2 illustrates AQAM's sustainability. From 2005 through 2010, it has shown the ability to launch at least five attacks in two or more years in 11 nations, with several nations seeing attacks increase from under 10 to the hundreds (Pakistan, Russia, and Somalia). This data excludes attacks in the West Bank, Gaza Strip, and Israel perpetrated by nationalist-oriented groups such as Hamas. Even subtracting obviously escalating attacks in Afghanistan and Iraq, the number of attacks by AQAM affiliates has increased by a factor of 13 during that time span.<sup>69</sup> AQAM and its allies have been able to sustain a stream of attempted attacks on US targets, some that have succeeded in killing Americans (Abdulahakim Mujahid Muhammad's June 2009 attack in Little Rock and Nidal Hassan's November 2009 attack at Fort Hood, both linked to AQAP), while other potentially

more lethal attacks were foiled (Najibullah Zazi's September 2009 plan for attacking the New York subway system, Umar Farouq Abdulmutallab's bombing attempt on 25 December 2009, AQAP's attempt to ship package bombs to the United States in October 2010, and Mohamed Osman Mohamud's attempt to bomb a Christmas-tree lighting ceremony in Portland, OR, in November of 2010).<sup>70</sup>

**Table 2. Sunni radical attacks, 2005–June 2010**  
(excluding Israel, Gaza Strip, and West Bank)

Nations with 5 or more attacks in 2 or more years	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010
<b>Afghanistan</b>	264	525	657	1220	2107	3292
<b>Algeria</b>	30	49	43	50	75	34
<b>Bangladesh</b>	15	1	5	0	2	1
<b>India</b>	86	126	50	64	63	61
<b>Iraq</b>	284	334	513	466	528	891
<b>Nigeria</b>	0	0	1	0	8	31
<b>Pakistan</b>	9	22	117	1214	1319	818
<b>Philippines</b>	15	27	8	32	37	26
<b>Russia</b>	5	6	19	406	406	373
<b>Somalia</b>	1	4	75	425	438	562
<b>Yemen</b>	0	0	3	12	6	49
<b>Other nations with fewer than 5 attacks</b>	9 nations <sup>1</sup> 20 attacks	7 nations <sup>2</sup> 11 attacks	4 nations <sup>3</sup> 18 attacks	7 nations <sup>4</sup> 18 attacks	13 nations <sup>5</sup> 35 attacks	17 nations <sup>6</sup> 30 attacks
<b>TOTAL</b>	729 19 nations	1,105 17 nations	1,508 14 nations	3,907 17 nations	5,016 23 nations	6,155 41 nations
<b>TOTAL excluding Afghanistan and Iraq</b>	181	246	338	2,221	2,381	19,872

Data compiled from National Counterterrorism Center's Worldwide Incident Tracking System (WITS), Office of the Director of National Intelligence, [www.nctc.gov/wits/witsnextgen.html](http://www.nctc.gov/wits/witsnextgen.html).

<sup>1</sup> Bangladesh, Egypt, Indonesia, Jordan, Lebanon, Malaysia, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Thailand, United Kingdom

<sup>2</sup> Bangladesh, Ethiopia, Lebanon, Mali, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Tajikistan, Turkey

<sup>3</sup> Bangladesh, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Ethiopia, Lebanon, Mauritania

<sup>4</sup> China, Jordan, Lebanon, Niger, Syria, Tajikistan, Tunisia, Turkey

<sup>5</sup> Bangladesh, Egypt, Ethiopia, Indonesia, Italy, Kenya, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria, Saudi Arabia, Tajikistan, United States, Uzbekistan

<sup>6</sup> Bangladesh, Denmark, Ethiopia, Indonesia, Kenya, Niger, Tanzania, Turkey

The importance of sustainability relates to a second key issue. While it is difficult to clearly identify a single strategy that belongs to a decentralized network such as AQAM, there is an identifiable theme that runs through much of AQAM's debates on strategy: AQAM's terrorism strategy seems to be based in the logic of insurgency. Even if only as a metaphor, considering AQAM's strategy in that context brings coherence to an under-



standing of its methods. At a geopolitical level, this strategy is a modified and updated version of classic Maoist guerrilla warfare.<sup>71</sup> Classic insurgent warfare occurs in three phases. The first phase consists of political mobilization and organizational development. In phase two the insurgent cells attack enemy targets, while avoiding direct head-to-head military confrontation with the forces of the enemy. It is the guerrilla's ability to prove that the government cannot defeat it that ultimately leads the targeted government to fall, negotiate, or withdraw if it is intervening in another nation. The classic aphorism "a guerrilla wins by not losing" has proven itself in cases such as China, Algeria, and Vietnam. If support of the population is the ultimate prize, the people can be seen as a floating constituency that insurgents hope to detach from government alignment and swing toward the insurgent side.<sup>72</sup> Conventional military operations mark phase three. Once the government has been politically weakened and its military effort has suffered commensurately, the insurgents can reorganize to capture the key cities, win the war, and establish the new order.

Captured AQAM documents and important writings of key strategists, when combined with the record of AQAM attacks, reveal a similar insurgent-style asymmetric concept of political-military victory. The parallels are striking and not coincidental. Radical Islamic literature contains discussions of Mao's guerrilla strategy, Western analyses of guerrilla warfare, and case studies of previous guerrilla insurgencies, such as in Algeria and Vietnam in the 1950s and 1960s. Al-Qaeda's Internet magazines discuss the uses of "fourth generation" and "asymmetric" warfare.<sup>73</sup> Bin Laden's own 1996 fatwa emphasizes the success of small attacks in forcing the United States to withdraw from Beirut in 1983, Somalia in 1993, and Yemen in 2000.<sup>74</sup> Many writers discuss the weakness of the United States and the importance of revealing that weakness to the world.<sup>75</sup>

Abu Bakr Naji's *Management of Savagery*, written in 2006, often reads like a primer on guerrilla warfare aimed at describing how terrorist attacks against the United States will eventually lead it to withdraw from activity in Islamic regions. Naji develops a theory on tactical and strategic operations that mirrors the events of Afghanistan and Somalia. The strategy consists of three stages.<sup>76</sup> Stage one uses the "power of vexation and exhaustion." This phase consists of political recruitment, cell building, and "vexation operations"—terrorist attacks. The goals of this phase include "exhausting the forces of the enemy," "draining" its capabilities, forcing it to "pay the price," and "making the enemy withdraw its forces," either by trapping it

in a “limited war” when it intervenes (as in Afghanistan) or by punishing it enough that it abandons its support for the targeted local regimes. The ultimate goal of this phase is to plunge a nation into chaos, undermining the government’s ability to maintain stability and the population’s faith in the government. Having achieved this goal, stage two, the “administration” or “management of savagery,” begins. During this stage, the radical Islamic organization essentially tries to bring order to the chaos it has created, an order based on its ideology. Along with social welfare, food and medicine, internal security, and continued vexation operations against remaining enemy forces, the radical organization will establish sharia law as the foundation of a new regime and religious indoctrination as a primary method for maintaining that order. Eventually stage three, “establishing the state,” begins when the new radical Islamic order is stable.

These writings also connect the notion of repeatedly striking the United States and its enemies to the notion of weakening US hegemony. Abu Musab al-Suri’s *Call to Global Islamic Resistance*, which has been compared to Hitler’s *Mein Kampf* or Lenin’s *What Is to Be Done?*, specifically describes the conflict as one between America’s desire for hegemony and jihadi organizations’ opposition to the international order and US domination of the third world.<sup>77</sup> Zawahiri also describes how the United States “monopolized its military superiority” following the fall of the USSR to impose its will on the rest of the world. However, he argues that the defeat of the USSR in Afghanistan was a “training course” for taking on the United States and its “sole dominance over the globe.”<sup>78</sup> Naji also analyzes US and Soviet goals of world domination but quotes Paul Kennedy’s *Rise and Fall of Great Powers* to warn that if the United States believes it can achieve world domination, it will overextend itself and collapse.<sup>79</sup> In short, as both Zawahiri and al-Suri emphasize, the battle is global and the United States is the main target.<sup>80</sup>

Soft power is a key element of AQAM’s strategy. The importance of the Internet for popularizing the AQAM message, the care which AQAM takes to issue videos and media statements, and the fact al-Qaeda’s core structure consists of a media committee<sup>81</sup> that reports to the Shura decision-making body make it clear that AQAM does understand that it is in a “war of ideas.” As in the case of insurgency, AQAM is acutely aware that ultimately the ability to gain support of the population will determine whether AQAM succeeds or fails. AQAM worries about alienating supporters if it becomes too brutal; Zawahiri himself explains it plainly: “more

than half this battle is taking place in the battlefield of the media,” and “we are in a media battle in a race for the hearts and minds of our Umma.”<sup>82</sup> Naji’s “stage of administration” is essentially an effort to use soft power to reestablish order and security for the population, an effort aimed directly at achieving legitimacy and popularity within society. In this sense, both AQAM and those who intend to fight it believe that terrorism in the twenty-first century is perhaps first and foremost information warfare.<sup>83</sup>

### **Al-Shabab: A Model for AQAM?**

The rise of radical Islam in Somalia is an example of the nature of the ideological threat to regional stability and of how AQAM found an opportunity to expand its influence. It is the tale of how radical Islamic organizations evolved out of the chaos into the Union of Islamic Courts and finally into al-Shabab, an organization that is seen as an integral part of the AQAM network.<sup>84</sup> Cases of direct US intervention, as in Afghanistan and Iraq, are unusual and less likely to be repeated. The Somalia case is featured here because it is the more likely scenario: the AQAM ally seems incapable of consolidating power, the US-backed government and regional alliances cannot seem to defeat the radical movement, and the United States chooses not to intervene. Instead the conflict seems an intractable threat to regional stability, a continuing humanitarian crisis, a source of spreading radicalism, and an obstacle to US regional and global goals.

Radical Islam became a factor in Somalia in the 1970s as its entry into the Arab League expanded ties with more conservative Arab states. Pres. Mohammed Siad Barre’s response to political Islam was to arrest and execute Islamic leaders.<sup>85</sup> The key development in the growth of radical Islam was the formation of the al-Itahaad al-Islaami (AIAI) during 1982–84 through the merger of two smaller groups. The anarchy that followed the overthrow of Siad Barre in 1991—a multisided, clan-based civil war causing famine and political chaos—allowed radical Islam to flourish.<sup>86</sup> The AIAI transformed itself from a proselytizing organization into a militia-backed political force with the help of some returning Somali veterans of the Afghan war against the Soviets and the key defection of Somalia army colonel Hassan Dahir Aweys.<sup>87</sup> As lawlessness, clan violence, and famine took a toll, Islamic courts based in local mosques or subclan leadership began to spring up to restore order by mediating local disputes. The courts based their rulings on either local customary law (*xeer*) or Islamic law (sharia), both radical and moderate.

The civil war in Somalia was seen by Iran, Sudan, and AQAM as an opportunity for expanding the reach of their ideas and activities. The military regime in Sudan led by Gen Omar al-Bashir—steeped in Hassan al-Turabi's radical Islam by the early 1990s and already playing host to al-Qaeda—became the locus for these activities. A joint Sudanese-Iranian committee channeled funds to the Somali Islamic Union Party, while Iran created a radical militia, the Somali Revolutionary Guard. The ill-fated 1992 US/UN humanitarian intervention was a shot of adrenalin to AQAM. Islamists of all stripes saw the intervention as a Western attempt at re-colonization; its failure—and AQAM's alleged involvement in the Battle of Mogadishu—led to expanded AQAM ties to the AIAI and Gen Mohammed Farah Aidid's militia.<sup>88</sup>

The AIAI had hopes to use Islam as the unifying force that would unify clans and end the Somali civil war, but this effort failed.<sup>89</sup> Ethiopian retaliation for AIAI terrorist attacks across the border led to its defeat as a fighting force in 1996. In 1998 Aweys created a southern Mogadishu court, Ifka Halane, based in radical Islam and described by some as less a court than a military base. However, further defeats by Ethiopia and Aidid's forces in 1998 and 1999 forced the AIAI to shift strategy toward local proselytizing and cooperation with the government, particularly the judiciary, through the Islamic courts movement.<sup>90</sup> When an internationally backed coalition government, the Transitional National Government (TNG), was formed in 2000, Aweys accepted a governmental role as head of a sharia implementation council. When the TNG collapsed in 2003, its successor, the Transitional Federal Government (TFG), tried to crush the courts' movement and stabilize the nation, but failed.<sup>91</sup>

In response to the TFG's hostility toward Awey's courts, the Union of Islamic Courts was formed as a coalition between radical Islamic courts. A US-led attempt to build an anti-UIC movement based in secular militias and funded by local businesses pushed the conflict to a head. The US-backed Alliance for Restoration of Peace and Counterterrorism formed in February 2006 and almost immediately went into battle with UIC forces. The UIC defeated these militias, captured most of Mogadishu, and declared itself the new government of Somalia in June 2006.<sup>92</sup>

The victory for radical Islamists was temporary; Ethiopian troops, backed by the United States, overthrew the UIC in December 2006, returning the TFG to power. After a period of disorganization, the UIC splintered into two key armed factions: Al-Shabab, the new AQAM-

linked terrorist organization, based in the youth wing of the UIC; and Hizbul Islam, Aweys' newest vehicle for his ambitions.<sup>93</sup> Following Ethiopia's withdrawal in January 2009, the TFG was led by moderate Islamist sheikh Sharif Sheikh Ahmed, a former member of the UIC. Radical Islamists control most of southern Somalia, save the capital Mogadishu, where peacekeepers of the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) keep the TFG afloat.

Not surprisingly, the number of terrorist attacks in Somalia attributed to radical Sunni Islamists has increased from one in 2005 to 438 in 2009, with resulting casualties increasing from nine to 4,385; in just the first six months of 2010, 248 attacks resulted in 1,941 casualties.<sup>94</sup> More threatening in the long run is the message sent by twin al-Shabab–linked bombings in Kampala, Uganda, on 11 July 2010 that killed 70 and wounded 74. Studies of al-Shabab have highlighted AQAM's role in training members of the group, AQAM's use of al-Shabab–controlled territory as a sanctuary for travel to and from Africa and the growing convergence of their messages.<sup>95</sup> In a unique twist, indictments in 2009 and 2010 were issued against Somalis for recruiting American Somalis in Minnesota to fight for al-Shabab and for raising money for the group. Reportedly, at least two dozen Americans have traveled or attempted to travel to Somalia to fight for al-Shabab; several of them are now in custody.<sup>96</sup>

In the context of the hegemonic disruption model, Somalia is in play. Transnational radical Islamists have been able to spread their ideology and organization to gain a foothold in East Africa. Al-Shabab and Hizbul Islam remain critical threats, even as their escalating violence alienates the population and divisions in their ranks increase.<sup>97</sup> Though the 1998 embassy bombings in Tanzania and Kenya revealed AQAM capability in the region, al-Shabab's strength establishes a sanctuary and training ground for AQAM through which it can expand its activities in the region. It is unlikely that the United States, Ethiopia, or Uganda will allow Somalia to fall permanently into the hands of al-Shabab. Ugandan president Yoweri Museveni would like to expand the AMISOM force and give it a more aggressive mandate for fighting al-Shabab, a move backed by the United States diplomatically and financially.<sup>98</sup> However, denying it a victory will take years. AQAM has taken advantage of the local chaos of Somalia's civil war to create a larger regional threat that disrupts the stabilizing efforts of the United States and its African allies.

## **A New Strategic Landscape**

The hegemonic disruption model suggests that the US hegemonic task is complicated by the rise of nonstate actors. It is a strategic landscape in which the United States must worry about a peer competitor (such as China), a regional challenger (such as Iran), and the impact of nonstate actors with hostile ideologies and ambitions. The first threat conjures up visions of world war, while the second suggests isolation or containment or Iraq-style intervention. The third, however, places the United States in a position of expending a broad range of assistance and intervention over an extended period of time. The United States is likely to be gun-shy about direct intervention, given its experience in Afghanistan and Iraq. Over the next 10 to 15 years, however, it may face rising threats. Through several paths radical Islam can move states out of the US hegemonic order and into the category of hostile state, failed state, or at least at-risk state. Each scenario increases the potential for both regional challenges to the United States and the existence of sanctuaries from which AQAM could expand its attacks on the United States and its allies. In addition, a government might be “Finlandized” into withdrawing from a relationship with the United States by terrorist attacks and the emergence of ideological brethren to al-Qaeda within its state or within a neighboring state.

In the wake of the revolutions in the Middle East of 2011, the big question is this: Are we witnessing another 1989, similar to the overthrow of communist leadership and the growth of democracy in Eastern Europe, or the collapse of the old order and the first shots in the battle for the new order? Political change is likely to give AQAM new opportunities. While authoritarian leaders inhibit freedoms, they also may have effective counterterrorist measures, however unjust, that quash radicalism in the short term even as they breed them in the long term. For example, it is not a stretch to argue that a politically free Egypt may face an increase in the number of terrorist attacks in the short term as political organization, peaceful or potentially violent, becomes easier. This has been the Indonesia experience. At least four scenarios are plausible.

**Instability in a major state.** A radical Islamic challenge (whether sustained terrorist campaign, terrorist-led insurgency, or civil war) in a major state such as Egypt, Nigeria, or Pakistan is perhaps the greatest threat. As key regional stabilizers and potential economic hubs in US regional strategy, the ability for a radical Islamic movement to pose a significant threat to the viability of these states shakes the regional foundation of US

strategy, which has always been based, in part, on finding key regional stabilizers—states whose success breeds success to the rest of the region.<sup>99</sup> Similarly, instability can breed instability. Pakistan, already significantly unstable, may be the nightmare scenario. Its possession of nuclear weapons makes it a special case that might require direct intervention.

**Instability in a minor state.** Somalia-like scenarios in several nations—Yemen, Algeria, or following a failure of the current government in Afghanistan—are likely to lead the United States to reliance on a regional ally to contain the threat, similar to the US-Ethiopian alliance vis-à-vis Somalia. Though these scenarios may not significantly alter the stability of a region, these small state crises can lead to the spread of sanctuaries through which transnational actors such as AQAM may find a freedom of action they have not had since the overthrow of the Taliban in 2001.

**Hostile governments emerging peacefully.** The United States may also face an increase in radical Islamist but nationalist movements that use the emergence of more open political orders as a path to power. Though Hamas and Hezbollah should be considered allied with AQAM only as a matter of convenience and are likely to oppose AQAM if it tries to dominate Palestinian areas or Lebanon respectively, both these movements could become role models for AQAM regional affiliates. Hamas and Hezbollah participated in elections and won their power, even while maintaining their violent strategies. In a “new” Middle East, more nationalist elements on the periphery of AQAM may shift their strategy. The United States often assumes that the act of voting transforms a nation into a US ally. Elections in the Palestinian territories, Lebanon, and Iraq should put that notion to rest. Scholars also argue that democratizing states may be more war prone than any other type of state.<sup>100</sup> The United States, a nation that had supported the old regime, could easily become the new bogeyman for radical Islamic movements who seek to gain power peacefully. Alliances with the United States could become an Achilles’ heel for a political party. The result could be war or sponsorship of terrorism as a method of domestic political mobilization.<sup>101</sup>

**Seizure of power.** Iran, Sudan, and Afghanistan under the Taliban are examples of how radical Islamic movements took advantage of instability and seized power. Each came to power through a different path: Iranian radicals captured a broad-based revolution, Sudanese radicals seized power through a military coup, and the Taliban fought its way to power during a civil war. These should remain exceptions; the difficulties these three

nations have caused regionally would suggest that the United States and its regional allies would likely take significant action long before another nation reaches such a critical stage. However, the Iranian revolution was a strategic surprise, and the situation in Afghanistan was not considered to be critical or strategic when the Taliban captured Kabul in 1996. Regional champions for radical Islamic movements do expand the potential for opposition to US hegemony, even as they present the United States with a more traditional target.

Three analogies from the Cold War help bring the new threat into clearer focus using the model of hegemonic disruption. First, radical Islam can be seen as a twenty-first-century analog to communism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.<sup>102</sup> It is a power-hungry ideological force waiting to take root around the globe. Though the World Islamic Front for Jihad against Jews and Crusaders has not become a virtual Comintern, disruption of US hegemony does not require much unity or formal institutional capability. Most scholars would have been skeptical of a prediction in 1848 that the world would be faced with a set of Marxist and left-leaning nations, sometimes aligned, sometimes feuding, that controlled states and fueled insurgencies on every continent except North America. Ideologically, the danger rests in radical Islam's ability to gain a foothold in states or regions.

Second, given its global power projection, radical Islam is similar to a virtual version of the communist wars of national liberation during the Cold War. If the Cold War era of wars of national liberation were a struggle against a tiger that supported a legion of hornets, then the United States today faces a legion of hornets which have varying goals but all believing the US has ruined their nest. Globalization empowers the movements, making radical Islam a global threat to US hegemony without a nation-state champion, without central unification, and even while divisions within radical Islam exist. The nature of network organizations, particularly their ability to disrupt, should be a reminder that organization is a key aspect of power and an important weapon of war. Scholars of networks argue that in a head-to-head conquest, networks will beat hierarchical structures.<sup>103</sup> This may be particularly true if the goal of the network is simply to disrupt the nascent order and ideology (AQAM), and the goal of the hierarchy is to build a new order and ideology (the United States). This is the basic challenge of the United States in Afghanistan. The Obama administration's policy is to "clear, hold, build, and transfer" (clear the



insurgents, hold territory, build a stable order, and transfer authority to the Afghans).<sup>104</sup> In a contest between the United States and AQAM in Yemen, for example, who will have the easier task: an AQAM bent on extending the instability or a United States determined to bring order? Both examples are microcosms for what the United States is trying to do globally.

Third, the US response to the “global war on terrorism” is the same as its response to wars of national liberation during the Cold War: direct intervention, assistance to allied governments and their militaries, and covert operations. During the Cold War the United States fought limited wars in Korea and Vietnam, deployed troops in Europe to support NATO, and intervened, deployed forces, or supported governments throughout the developing world. Since 2001, the United States has fought wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, engaged in significant counterterrorism activities in Pakistan, and deployed forces in allied nations with the mission of “enhancing counterterrorism capabilities” in Georgia, Kenya, Ethiopia, Yemen, Eritrea, Djibouti, and the Philippines.<sup>105</sup> Estimated costs of these operations run to \$1.147 trillion (constant FY 2011 \$) or 1.2 percent of GDP in 2008, the year congressional budget estimates benchmark as the peak year of the “global war on terrorism.” At peak years Korea cost 4.2 percent of GDP (1952); Vietnam cost 2.3 percent of GDP (1968), and the first Persian Gulf War cost 0.3 percent of GDP (1991).<sup>106</sup> As the United States draws down forces from Iraq and Afghanistan these costs will decrease, but the need for assistance to other governments, even including the best scenario for change in the Middle East and political development in Pakistan, Iraq, and Afghanistan, may not.

## Conclusions

Great-power rivalry is certainly still relevant. Signs of hegemonic vulnerability could lead to more traditional challenges to US hegemony by second-tier powers. Great powers have always worried about how the failure to act or the act of failure may be perceived by their rivals. Could second-tier powers see US vulnerability as an invitation to engage in soft balancing or even hard balancing? The particular dynamics of the radical Islamic threat challenge the United States in key ways: the loss of access to oil-rich regions, movements opposed to a liberal-democratic nation-state order, and asymmetric warfare that ties the US military down in counterinsurgency and nation building. Nations may challenge US hegemony not because the United States is powerful

(balance of power) or as a result of some threatening policies (balance of threat) or when a challenger has been able to reach parity (power transition) but because the United States has shown weakness. In the short and medium term, however, while nuclear weapons render great-power war an unattractive option, the issue may not be war initiation against the United States by a second-tier power or preventive war by the United States to crush a rising challenger. Instead, hegemonic disruption and the vulnerability that may accompany it could hasten the end of the unipolar era, as the United States is demoted from hyperpower status and a multipolar era begins. While this may be inevitable, as nearly all theories and analysts argue, certainly the United States would rather enter a multipolar era on its own terms, not as a result of a series of failures in regional counterinsurgency and nation-building operations.

Two additional points should be addressed when considering any scenario related to the hegemonic disruption model. First, radical Islam also challenges all the second-tier powers that might balance against the United States. The European Union has faced more numerous attacks than the United States. China faces the separatist East Turkestan Islamic Movement in Xinjiang. India is beset by groups based in Kashmir and Pakistan. Russia faces groups in the Caucasus. Only Japan remains directly unaffected by the global growth of revolutionary Islam, though its alliance with the United States has brought it into the military actions in Iraq and Afghanistan. As the only power with the military might to combat revolutionary Islam, the threat nudges second-tier powers closer to the United States, even as hegemonic weakness may provide those powers with balancing incentives.

Second, nearly every state that faces a serious challenge from radical Islam is an ally of the United States and a partner in US counterterrorism efforts. In addition, AQAM has become increasingly unpopular within states whose populations are majority Muslim. According to the Pew Research Center, AQAM's unfavorable ratings in 2010 stood at 62 percent in Jordan, 56 percent in Indonesia, 72 percent in Egypt, 74 percent in Turkey, and 94 percent in Lebanon. Confidence in bin Laden dropped between 2003 and 2010 by significant margins: 42 percent in Jordan, 34 percent in Indonesia, 28 percent in Pakistan. Of the states surveyed, only in Nigeria do AQAM's favorable ratings rank above its unfavorable (49 vs. 34 percent).<sup>107</sup> Given that terrorists and those opposing them both believe

that popular support will be the ultimate determinant of the current contest, radical Islam would seem to be on the losing side.

However, even if policymakers assume that governments and populations reject AQAM and its ideas, the cost of defeating it is likely to be high. Given US hegemonic goals, the threat of nonstate actors with an ideology hostile to the US ideology nearly guarantees future clashes between the United States and radical Islam. Liberal hegemony is world order building. Though the Bush administration began its tenure explicitly rejecting nation building,<sup>108</sup> its post-9/11 policy, particularly in Iraq and Afghanistan, is exactly that. The impulse for intervention but not involvement is as old as the United States.<sup>109</sup> One of the lessons of Iraq and Afghanistan may be that the United States cannot have one without the other, and both are required for hegemony.

In the long run the United States may want to listen to one of the important principles of counterinsurgency: “The government must give priority to defeating the political subversion, not the guerrillas.”<sup>110</sup> A revolutionary ideology percolating in authoritarian or semidemocratic societies whose economies are based on government control of oil or still mired in nineteenth-century agricultural patterns is a recipe for broad-based instability. The democratic movements in the Middle East suggest that there is an alternative to a choice between authoritarianism and radical Islam (an alternative that US-allied dictators have denied was possible). Reform within authoritarian societies makes radical Islam less attractive and enables governments to separate the committed revolutionaries from those who can be brought back into the community. It asks for no less than a widespread reformation in many nations from Morocco to Central Asia. Again, this is world order building on a global scale, a war of ideas that encompasses globalization, modernization, the role of religion in society, and may be what future historians think of as the “great struggle of the twenty-first century.” From the US perspective this is the task of convincing governments, populations, and nonstate opponents to accept aspects of the US hegemonic ideology. Two guideposts may be helpful. For leaders of authoritarian nations, the United States may suggest that in reality they have two possible futures: each could become the Shah of Iran, the last dictator of a nation whose overthrow led to the inauguration of a revolutionary regime that poses a regional threat a generation later, or each could become Deng Xiaoping, a transformational leader who took a collapsing nation and led it back to prosperity and power. For newly emerging democracies the United States

can stress the benefits of its hegemonic order as enjoyed by Eastern Europe, India, Indonesia, or Brazil, or even nations that accept some but not all the elements of that order (China) while emphasizing the costs of rejecting that order that are faced by Iran, Burma, Sudan, or North Korea.

The model of hegemonic disruption is designed to strengthen realism's ability to explain current geopolitical trends. Traditional balance-of-power and power-transition theories are the best guides to the threat of peer competition with the United States. However, peer competition is not the only threat to hegemony. An unflinching focus on the nation-state as the unit of analysis can be a handicap to understanding current geopolitical trends. The addition of nonstate actors and ideology is explicitly neoclassical realist. The inclusion of nonstate actors and ideology represents an analytical decision to modify the premises of neorealism, but it is not a rejection of the most basic tenet of realism—the struggle for power. The modification here is an addition to the range of actors who may be involved in that struggle. It seems analytically rigid to argue against taking radical ideologies seriously until they gain control of a powerful nation-state. The goal of theory building is parsimony and accuracy. Expanding the range of power seeking actors adds an element of the twenty-first century to ideas framed around nineteenth- and twentieth-century realities. **SSQ**

## Notes

1. Charles Krauthammer, "The Unipolar Moment," *Foreign Affairs* 70, no. 1 (Winter 1990/91): 23–33. The most comprehensive argument on why US hegemony will not be challenged by nation-states is found in Stephen Brooks and William Wohlforth, *World Out of Balance* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008). For an alternate view see Martin Sieff, *Shifting Superpowers* (Washington: Cato Institute, 2009).

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