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JIHADIST TERRORISM 15 YEARS AFTER 9/11

A Threat Assessment

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INTRODUCTION

As we mark the occasion of the 15th anniversary of 9/11, it is useful to reflect on the nature and scope of the global jihadist threat and its likely trajectory in coming years. The death of Osama bin Laden and the Arab Spring five years ago seemed like it would usher in an era when terrorism would not be a central national security concern. Instead, the Arab Spring inaugurated anarchy and civil war in much of the Middle East, out of which sprang ISIS, itself a derivative of bin Laden's al-Qaeda.

To assess the scope of the jihadist terrorism threat this paper is organized into eight sections:

- First, a taxonomy of ISIS terrorism;
- Second, an assessment of who ISIS' American recruits are and why they sign up;
- Third, a consideration of what ISIS wants;
- Fourth, the state of the current jihadist terrorist threat to the United States;
- Fifth, an assessment of how ISIS is doing;
- Sixth, an examination of what the big drivers of jihadist terrorism are;
- Seventh, a discussion of some future trends in terrorism,
- and, finally, what can be done to reduce the threat from jihadist terrorists?ⁱ

ⁱ Thanks to **David Sterman** and **Albert Ford** of New America's International Security program for their valuable input on this paper. Thanks also to the Aspen Homeland Security Group for prompting this paper.

A TAXONOMY OF ISIS TERRORISM

There are five types of terrorist attacks that can in some way be considered an “ISIS” attack outside of Iraq and Syria:

- the first are directed by core ISIS;
- the second are carried out by an affiliate of ISIS with some kind of relatively tight connection to core ISIS;
- the third are attacks by ISIS affiliates with little or no real connection to the core;
- the fourth are attacks by individuals who are enabled by ISIS;
- and the fifth are attacks inspired by ISIS, and are sometimes undertaken by unstable individuals who latch on to ISIS’ ideology to give their violent acts some thin veneer of meaning.

These five categories of attacks are fleshed out in more detail below.

1. Attacks Directed by Core ISIS

On Friday, November 13, 2015 militants trained and directed by ISIS killed 130 people at multiple locations in Paris, including a concert hall, a soccer

stadium, and a popular restaurant, the kinds of venues that ordinary Parisians flock to on a Friday night. At, or near, these venues the attackers deployed a mix of terrorist tactics, including suicide attackers, an assault using more than one gunman willing to fight to the death, hostage-taking, and bombings.

French President Francois Hollande blamed ISIS for the attack and the terror group quickly claimed responsibility. In January 2016, ISIS also released a video showing the attackers in Syria—six of whom were French and Belgian citizens—which definitively established that the terrorists who carried out the attacks in Paris were trained and directed by ISIS.¹

Similarly, ISIS-directed militants carried out the March 2016 attacks at the Brussels airport and metro station that killed more than 30 people.

2. Attacks by an ISIS Affiliate with Some Connection to Core ISIS

When ISIS militants took hostages at an upscale cafe in Dhaka, Bangladesh in June 2016 and killed 20 mostly non-Muslim foreigners, they also sent images of their victims lying in pools of blood to ISIS’ de facto news agency Amaq which posted them almost in real time for the world to see. This

established that the Bangladeshi affiliate of ISIS (known as Jamaatul Mujahideen Bangladesh) had carried out the attacks and was also to some degree coordinating with core ISIS in the Middle East.²

Similarly, on January 27, 2015, ISIS gunmen attacked the Corinthia Hotel in the Libyan capital, Tripoli, killing 10. Five of the victims were foreigners, including one American. ISIS core celebrated the attack in some detail in *Dabiq*, its online magazine, including showing photographs of the two ISIS gunmen.³ A month later ISIS core released a video showing members of Egypt's Coptic Christian minority being beheaded on a Libyan beach by members of ISIS' Libyan affiliate.⁴ The video showed the victims in the orange jumpsuits that ISIS forces its victims to wear. Both the attack on the Corinthia Hotel and the beheading of the Christians suggested some measure of command and control by ISIS core of its Libyan affiliate, according to a U.S. government official familiar with the intelligence on Libya. The official says that Libyan fighters have frequently traveled back and forth between Libya and Syria and Iraq.

3. Attacks by an ISIS Affiliate with Little or no Real Connection to the Core

A number of terrorist groups around the world have proclaimed themselves part of ISIS. In many of these cases, this seems to be more a case of slapping on the ISIS patch than any kind of formal command-and-control by ISIS core. For instance, ISIS-Khorasan, a splinter group of the Taliban, declared in January 2015 that it was an ISIS "wilayat," a regional province of ISIS, though there seems to be little or no real direction of the group from the ISIS core. This Afghan ISIS affiliate has conducted multiple suicide bombings in Afghanistan, including the most deadly terrorist attack hitherto in Kabul that killed at least 80 Shia Hazaras—a group that has been fiercely persecuted by Sunni terrorist groups—attending a demonstration in July 2016.⁵

There is also the more subtle case of Boko Haram, the Nigerian terrorist group that has pledged allegiance to ISIS.⁶ Although it isn't controlled by ISIS core, in pledging to ISIS, Boko Haram adopted key tactics of the group. This can be seen most clearly in the far more sophisticated use of video propaganda and social media that occurred once Boko Haram had pledged allegiance to ISIS in early 2015. Boko Haram's previously unsophisticated media operation started aping ISIS in its sharper video production values and increased use of social media.

4. Attacks Inspired by ISIS

In the past two years, there have been as many as six ISIS-inspired attacks in the United States. The most lethal was in Orlando in June 2016 when Omar Mateen killed 49 people at a nightclub catering to the gay community; it was the deadliest terrorist attack in the country since 9/11. In December 2015, a married couple in San Bernardino, Calif. attacked an office holiday party and killed 14 people.

There have been other ISIS-inspired attacks that were not lethal. In the fall of 2014, 32-year-old Zale Thompson attacked police officers with a hatchet in New York. Described as an unemployed recluse, Thompson is believed to have been inspired by ISIS.⁷ Last May, gunmen inspired by ISIS opened fire at a cartoon contest of the Prophet Mohammed held in Garland, Texas. The gunmen, Elton Simpson and Nadir Soofi, were killed by police before they could kill anyone. In January, Edward Archer shot Philadelphia police officer Jesse Hartnett. Archer told police, "I pledge my allegiance to the Islamic State, and that's why I did what I did."⁸

Finally, in late August 2016, 20-year-old Wasil Farooqui of Roanoke County, Va.—who had reportedly traveled to Turkey in an apparent effort to then cross the border and possibly join ISIS in Syria—allegedly repeatedly stabbed a randomly selected man and woman in Roanoke with a knife, yelling "Allahu Akbar!" as he did so,

severely injuring them.⁹ The case is complicated by the fact that Farooqui told a detective he was hearing voices telling him that he was stupid and to attack someone, which raises the issue of the extent to which some “ISIS” attacks are even really “terrorism” in any meaningful sense.

Unstable Individuals Adopted by ISIS

Unstable individuals will sometimes carry out attacks with only the thinnest veneer of jihadist justification and the attack will be quickly adopted by ISIS, even though ISIS had no connection to the plot at all. This certainly seems to be the case of 31-year-old Tunisian Mohamed Lahouaiej Bouhlel who so frightened his own family with his violent personality that he was prescribed antipsychotic drugs when he was a teenager.¹⁰ Bouhlel never attended his neighborhood mosque, smoked marijuana, drank heavily, ate pork, chased women, and had had a number of run-ins with the law for violence. He also beat his wife who then divorced him. Bouhlel was so incensed by his wife leaving him that he defecated in their apartment. Bouhlel, in short, was a violent loser who may have been on the edge of psychosis.

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During Bastille Day celebrations on July 14, 2016, Bouhlel killed 84 people in Nice, France using a large truck as a weapon. ISIS’ overseer of operations in the West, Abu Mohammad al-Adnani, had called for attacks using vehicles as weapons two years earlier. After Bouhlel’s massacre, French Prime Minister Manuel Valls astutely observed that ISIS “gives unstable individuals an ideological kit

that allows them to make sense of their acts.”¹¹ This echoed the conclusions of leading American forensic psychologist Reid Meloy, who together with his British colleague Jessica Yakeley, published a 2014 study of terrorists with no connections to formal terrorist organizations.¹²

Meloy, who works as a consultant with the FBI’s behavioral analysts, framed the initial stage leading to violence as “grievance,” and his explanation of what that meant is worth quoting at length, as it nicely summarizes Bouhlel’s rancor. According to Meloy, the pathway begins with

“an event or series of events that involve loss and often humiliation of the subject, his or her continual rumination about the loss, and the blaming of others. Most people with grievances *eventually grieve their loss*, but for those unwilling or unable to do so, often the most narcissistically sensitive individuals, it is much easier to convert their shame into rage toward the object which they believe is the cause of all their suffering. Such intense grievances require that individuals take no personal responsibility for their failures in life ... they are ‘injustice collectors.’”¹³

What follows this stage, Meloy explains, is “moral outrage.” “He embeds his personal grievance in an historical, religious, or political cause or event. The suffering of others, which may be misperceived or actual, provides emotional fuel for his personal grievance.”¹⁴ Personal grievance and moral outrage are then “framed by an ideology.” The nature of the ideology is secondary; its function is to allow the perpetrator some justification for the violent act he is planning. Meloy explained, “Upon closer examination, these conscious belief systems are quite superficial; subjects will cherry pick phrases from the relevant authoritative text to justify their desire to kill others ... This framing is absolutist and simplistic, providing a clarity that both rationalizes behavior and masks other, more personal grievances.”¹⁵

A Case Study: The Orlando Terrorist

This is also a good description of how the Orlando terrorist Omar Mateen took his personal grievances and framed them around the ideology of ISIS so that he was no longer the disappointed wannabe cop in a dead end job that he actually was, but a heroic holy warrior who pledged himself to ISIS as he carried out his massacre.

The attack in Orlando fit a grim pattern: Every lethal jihadist terrorist attack in the United States in the past decade and a half has been carried out by American citizens or legal permanent residents, operating either as lone wolves or in pairs, who have no formal connections or training from terrorist organizations such as al-Qaeda or ISIS. Because 9/11 was carried out by 19 Arab, foreign-born terrorists, many Americans may think that terrorist attacks in the United States are carried out by foreigners, rather than by U.S. citizens, but Omar Mateen was an American citizen who was born in New York to parents who immigrated to the United States from Afghanistan.

Unstable individuals will sometimes carry out attacks with only the thinnest veneer of jihadist justification and the attack will be quickly adopted by ISIS.

Mateen is similar to other jihadist terrorists in the States since 9/11. According to research by New America, there have been more than 350 jihadist terrorism cases in the United States since the 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon. The militants are overwhelmingly American citizens or legal residents; around 80 percent. The

perpetrators are not the young hotheads of popular imagination. The individuals in these cases have an average age of 28, a third are married, and a third have children. In many ways, they are ordinary Americans. Mateen was 29 when he carried out the attack, had been married twice and had a three-year-old son.¹⁶ He was steadily employed as a security guard at a local golf resort.¹⁷ He had no criminal convictions, and there is no evidence he suffered from mental illness.

In his case, as in so many others of the more than 350 Americans charged since 9/11 with some act of jihadist terrorism—ranging from material support of a terrorist group to murder—the easy explanations—that jihadists in the United States are “mad” or “bad”—are not supported by the evidence. According to research by New America, the rate of mental illness for those 364 Americans who have been charged or convicted for some kind of jihadist crime—about 11 percent—is below the rate of the general population, while their incarceration rate is similar to the incarceration rate of the general population of adult males; an American male has about an 11 percent chance of going to prison in his lifetime.¹⁸

Even in the cases of the dozen perpetrators who carried out the ten lethal jihadist terrorist attacks in the United States since 9/11, only three of the terrorists had a documented history of mental illness.ⁱⁱ Naveed Afzal Haq who killed a woman at the Jewish Federation building in Seattle in 2006 had been treated for bipolar disorder.¹⁹ Muhammad Youssef Abdulazeez who killed four Marines and a sailor at two military installations in Chattanooga, Tenn. in 2015 suffered from depression according to his family.²⁰ In August 2016, a judge ruled that Alton Nolen, who beheaded a coworker in Oklahoma in September 2014, was not competent to plead guilty after hearing testimony from mental health experts

ii The ten lethal jihadist terrorist attacks since 9/11 are the 2016 Orlando nightclub shooting; the 2015 San Bernardino shooting; the 2015 Chattanooga shooting; the 2014 Washington State and New Jersey shootings; the 2014 Oklahoma beheading; the 2013 Boston Marathon bombing; the 2009 Little Rock shooting; the 2009 Fort Hood, Texas shooting; the 2006 Seattle Jewish Federation shooting and the 2002 shooting at Los Angeles International Airport.



The Pulse nightclub in Orlando, where Omar Mateen killed 50 people in June 2016. (Photo: Neville Elder / Shutterstock.com)

including one defense witness, who testified that Nolen was schizophrenic.²¹

Of course, killing strangers in the service of jihadist ideology isn't "normal," but the large majority of the twelve jihadist terrorists in the States since 9/11 who have carried out lethal attacks were not suffering from a documented mental illness when they carried out their assaults.

The National Institute of Mental Health says that around one in five Americans has some kind of mental illness in any given year. The sample size of 12 lethal jihadist terrorists in the States since 9/11 is a very small one, but their rate of mental illness—one in four— is only slightly above that of the general population. (By contrast, a 2013 study of 119 individuals who carried out or planned to carry out acts of lone-actor terrorism either in the United States or in Europe since 1990—motivated by a wide range of political beliefs including jihadism, neo-Nazism, anti-government extremism, and those with idiosyncratic ideologies—found that just less than a third had a history of mental illness or personality disorders.)ⁱⁱⁱ

iii Thanks to Jessica Stern for pointing out this study: Paul Gill et al., "Bombing Alone: Tracing the Motivations and Antecedent Behaviors of Lone-Actor Terrorists," *Journal of Forensic Sciences* Vol.59 No..2, March 2014. <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/1556-4029.12312/pdf>

For the book *United States of Jihad: Investigating America's Homegrown Terrorists*, I reviewed court records in hundreds of terrorism cases and spoke to family members and friends of terrorists, as well as to some of the militants themselves. I found that American jihadists are generally motivated by a mix of factors, including dislike of U.S. foreign policy in the Muslim world; a "cognitive opening" to militant Islam, often precipitated by a personal disappointment or loss; and the desire to attach themselves to an ideology or organization that could give them a sense of purpose. For many, embracing the ideology of Osama bin Laden or ISIS allowed them to become the heroes of their own story as well as actors in a cosmic crusade.

For each individual terrorist the proportion of these motivations varied. For instance, Tamerlan Tsarnaev, the older of the two brothers who carried out the Boston Marathon bombing in 2013, was a non-practicing Muslim who became an Islamist militant once his dreams of becoming an Olympic boxer faded. At the time of the attack, he was unemployed. For him, bombing the marathon seemed to allow him to become the heroic figure that he believed himself to be.²²

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On the other hand, his younger brother Dzhokhar never seemed to embrace militant Islam. He smoked marijuana, drank, and chased girls — hardly the actions of a Muslim fundamentalist. Dzhokhar Tsarnaev's motivations for the bombings were instead largely molded by his older brother, whom he admired and feared, and by his own half-baked opposition to American foreign policy.

Nidal Hasan, the Army major who killed 13 people at Fort Hood, Texas, in 2009, seemed to be more of an ideologue. He was a highly observant Muslim who objected to American foreign policy. But according to Nader Hasan, a first cousin who had grown up with him, the massacre at Fort Hood was also motivated by Nidal Hasan's personal problems. He was unmarried, his parents were dead, he had no real friends, and a dreaded deployment to Afghanistan loomed. "He went postal," Nader Hasan explained, "and he called it Islam."

These stories underline how hard it is to satisfactorily answer the question of why terrorists commit heinous crimes. Human motivations are complex. As the philosopher Immanuel Kant observed, "From the crooked timber of humanity not a straight thing was ever made." It's a useful reminder that human beings, including terrorists, often defy neat categorization.

Omar Mateen's motivations, too, seem to have been multilayered, and will probably never be fully explicable. Mateen himself offered one inspiration: ISIS. In a 911 call he made from the nightclub as he was carrying out his massacre, Mateen pledged himself to ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. Yet a more complex stew of personal traits, resentments, and obsessions also propelled him towards violence. As a child Mateen was angry and disruptive in class, and at age 14 he was expelled from high school for fighting.²³ On the morning of the 9/11 attacks, Mateen told classmates that Osama bin Laden was his uncle.²⁴

As an adult, relatives say Mateen expressed homophobic views, while coworkers remember that he claimed to have connections to both al-Qaeda and Hezbollah, groups that are at war with each other. His first wife says he was abusive and couldn't control his temper. There are suggestions that he might have been confused about his sexual identity. Mateen's reported use of gay dating apps and visits to the Pulse nightclub in the months before the attack make this a tempting central narrative—self-loathing for his own homosexuality turned violent—but these behaviors are also consistent with the careful planning of predatory murderers. In the weeks after the massacre FBI investigators

concluded that there was no evidence Mateen had had a gay relationship.²⁵

Mateen was certainly, however, a man whose dreams had faded. He desperately wanted to be a cop and took selfies of himself wearing New York Police Department shirts, but he was dismissed from a Florida police-training academy in 2007 because he threatened to bring a gun to campus and was falling asleep in class.²⁶ Eight years later in 2015, Mateen tried once again to become a police officer, applying to the police academy at Indian River State College in Fort Pierce. He was turned down because he admitted to using marijuana in the past and also because of what the college termed "discrepancies" in his application form.²⁷

Mateen's grievances festered. Three weeks before his attack, one of the leaders of ISIS publicly urged that sympathizers of the group should carry out attacks in the West during the coming holy month of Ramadan.²⁸ By following this directive, carrying out an attack as a self-styled "Islamic fighter" pledging allegiance to ISIS, Mateen was finally the heroic holy warrior that he believed himself to be. A day after the massacre, ISIS's official radio station Al-Bayan claimed him as one of the "soldiers of the caliphate in America."²⁹ But Mateen's connection to ISIS was only aspirational; he wasn't trained, directed or financed by the group. Instead he was, like every other jihadist in the States since 9/11 who has carried out a lethal attack, operating as a self-radicalized "lone wolf."

5. Enabled by ISIS

Militants inspired by ISIS can reach out directly to members of ISIS in Syria over encrypted social media platforms seeking some kind of specific directions for an attack. This creates a "blended" plot that is both inspired and directed by ISIS. In FBI terminology this is an "enabled" ISIS attack. We already saw a harbinger of this in May 2015 when one of the two ISIS-inspired American militants who attacked the Prophet Mohammed cartoon contest in Garland, Texas sent more than 100 encrypted messages to a terrorist overseas, according to the FBI.³⁰

WHO ARE ISIS' AMERICAN RECRUITS?

There are 117 individuals in the United States that New America has identified in public records or news accounts who have tried to join militant groups in Syria, such as ISIS or the al-Qaeda affiliated Nusra Front, have succeeded in joining such groups, or have helped others to join such groups.

They hail from across the United States and from a wide range of ethnic groups, which underscores the difficulty that law enforcement has in tracking them. They are relatively young; some are even teenagers. Given the fact that groups like ISIS have scant roles for women outside the home, women are surprisingly well represented. These militants are also quite active on social media. This is something of a boon for law enforcement, as many of these militants are prolific posters on publicly available social media, which it is perfectly legal for the FBI and police departments to monitor.

The 117 are residents of 23 states: Alabama, Arizona, California, Colorado, Florida, Georgia, Illinois, Maine, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, Mississippi, Missouri, New Jersey, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, Texas, Virginia, Washington, and Wisconsin.

There is no single ethnic profile for these militants: They are white, African-American, Somali-American, Vietnamese-American, Bosnian-

American, and Arab-American, among other ethnicities and nationalities.

An unprecedented number of American women are involved in the Syrian jihad compared to other such jihads in the past. One in nine of the 117 Americans involved in Syria-related militant activity is a woman. Women were rarely present, if at all, among jihadists in previous “holy wars”—in Afghanistan against the Soviets in the 1980s, in Bosnia against the Serbs in the 1990s, and the initial insurgency in Iraq against the U.S.-led occupation more than a decade ago.³¹

They're relatively young. Almost a fifth are teenagers—including six teenage girls, the youngest of whom is 15. New America found that the average age of the militants is 25.

The only profile that ties together American militants drawn to the Syrian conflict is that they are active in online jihadist circles. 88 of the 117 individuals showed a pattern of often downloading and sharing jihadist propaganda online and, in a smaller number of cases, carrying on online conversations with militants abroad. Militants in the United States today become radicalized after reading and interacting with propaganda online and many have little or no physical interaction with other extremists.

Social media has dramatically accelerated this trend. Of the 117 individual cases that New America examined, there were no clear cases of physical recruitment by a militant operative, radical cleric, or returning fighter from Syria. Instead, people self-recruited online or were sometimes in touch via Twitter with members of ISIS they had never met in person.

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A representative case is that of 19-year-old Mohammed Hamzah Khan of suburban Chicago. In the late summer of 2014, he purchased three airline tickets for flights from Chicago to Istanbul for himself and his 17-year-old sister and 16-year-old brother (who have not been named publicly because they were minors).³²

Khan had met someone online who had provided him with the number of a contact to call once he had landed in Istanbul who would help to get him and his siblings to the Turkish-Syrian border, and from there on to a region occupied by ISIS. Khan planned to serve in the group's police force. Before leaving, Khan wrote a three-page letter to his parents explaining why he was leaving Chicago to join ISIS. He told them that ISIS had established the perfect Islamic state and that he felt obligated to "migrate" there.³³

According to prosecutors, the three teenagers planned to meet up in Turkey with a shadowy ISIS recruiter they had met online, known as Abu Qa'qa, and travel with him, most likely to ISIS headquarters in Raqqa, Syria.³⁴ They didn't make it. FBI agents arrested Khan and his two siblings at O'Hare airport in October 2014.³⁵

There is no evidence that Khan planned to commit any act of terrorism in the United States or elsewhere, and he failed in his goal of reaching ISIS, but he faced up to 15 years in prison for attempting to provide "material support" to ISIS in the form of his own potential "services." He has pled guilty and federal prosecutors have argued for a five-year sentence in which he must continue to cooperate with them.³⁶

What is ISIS' Appeal?

Why would the Khan teenagers, from a comfortable, middle-class family in Chicago, be drawn to Syria and to ISIS? In the minds of ISIS recruits, the group is doing something of cosmic importance that in their view is sanctioned by Allah: defending Sunni Muslim civilians from the terrible onslaughts of the Bashar al-Assad regime in Syria, which has not hesitated to use chemical weapons in its war against its own people.

At the same time, ISIS is creating what its recruits believe to be a perfect Islamic state, trying to restore the Caliphate that ceased to exist after the end of World War I and the collapse of the Ottoman Empire.

ISIS is also even presenting itself as the vanguard of Muslim warriors who will usher in the End of Times and the final, inevitable battle between the West and Islam, which presages the arrival of the Mahdi, the savior of Islam, and the triumph of Islam over all its enemies, including the West.

ISIS also presents itself as creating a real state with plentiful social services and a place where pious young Muslim men and women from around the Islamic world can gather and even find perfect marriage partners.

For its Western recruits, there is also something glamorous and even exciting about leaving behind their humdrum lives in the West to join ISIS. One British foreign fighter told BBC radio: "It's actually quite fun, better than, what's that [video] game

called, ‘Call of Duty’? It’s like that, but really, you know, 3D.”³⁷

Above all, at least initially, ISIS was *victorious*. ISIS released a videotape in the summer of 2014 showing a bulldozer breaking down the great sand berm that demarcated the Iraq-Syrian border, a hugely symbolic erasure of the Sykes-Picot agreement that was made between the United Kingdom and France in 1916 and that had secretly agreed to carve up the Ottoman Empire into areas of British and French control following the end of World War I. This was ISIS’ way of saying, ‘we are expunging all vestiges of Western influence in the Arab world.’ In controlling large swaths of the Middle East ISIS was doing what al-Qaeda never did. To quote bin Laden—who was referring to the 9/11 attacks, but might as well have been talking about ISIS’ appeal a decade and half later compared to that of al-Qaeda—“When people see a strong horse and a weak horse, by nature, they will like the strong horse.”³⁸

As with all totalitarian regimes, mythmaking became essential to ISIS rhetorical authority. It celebrated its creation of the supposedly perfect state as a way of keeping its subjects in a narcotized state of acceptance and attracting new recruits. In an ISIS propaganda video released in July 2014, shortly after the group had seized control of key Iraqi cities and declared its official name to be simply the Islamic State, a variety of fighters from around the world made this point clear—British, Finnish, Moroccan, South African, and Trinidadian

fighters all extolled the wonders of living in the caliphate.³⁹ Filmed during the “golden hour” near sunset, the video showed groups of boys with guns and happy ISIS fighters. An ISIS fighter from South Africa said, “I don’t have the words. I don’t have the words to express myself about the happiness to be here.” The video closes with two boys armed with guns in a park waving to the camera. A text on the screen said, “I wish you were here.” In other words: Yes, we have created an Islamist utopia here on earth! And you should be part of it.

How Does ISIS Crowd Source Jihad in the States?

As FBI director James Comey noted when referring to the 2013 arrest of Terry Loewen, who was accused of plotting an attack on the Wichita airport in Kansas, “We have made it so hard for people to get into this country, bad guys, but they can enter as a photon and radicalize somebody in Wichita, Kansas.”⁴⁰ The “photon” Comey was talking about was, of course, the internet. The only profile that tied together American militants drawn to the Syrian conflict is that they were active in online jihadist circles. About three quarters were posters of jihadist material on Twitter or Facebook, or were in direct contact with ISIS recruiters over social media.

This raises the question of how we should conceptualize lone wolves in the age of social media. A militant radicalizing in front of his or

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her computer by himself at home is now not really alone. He/she is swimming in a virtual sea of jihadist recruiters, cheerleaders, and fellow travelers who are available for interaction with him or her 24/7. Contrast this with a classic lone-wolf American terrorist of the past such as the Unabomber Ted Kaczynski who mailed his targets more than a dozen bombs between the late 1970s and the mid-1990s that killed three people and injured some two dozen others, all in service of his obscure, Luddite beliefs. Kaczynski did this entirely by himself while living like a hermit in a remote cabin in Montana with—forget the internet—no electricity.

Today's lone wolf is instead plugged into a vast self-referential and interactive ecosystem where he or she can virtually, instantly find thousands of other people around the world who share his or her beliefs. Take the case of Alex, a twenty-three-year-old sometime Sunday school teacher living in a remote part of Washington state, who converted to Islam. In 2015, multiple members and fans of ISIS spent thousands of hours online with her, promising that they would find her a suitable husband and even sending her gifts of chocolate and books about Islam. The three teenage Khan

The Continuing Influence of Anwar al-Awlaki

Lost in the intense coverage of the ISIS-inspired threat in the States is the continuing influence of the American-born cleric Anwar al-Awlaki whose sermons and writings about the importance of jihad have appeared in 97 jihadist terrorism cases since 9/11, according to New America's research. Awlaki was killed in a drone strike in Yemen in 2011, but killing the man turned out to be easier than killing his ideas; since his death al-Awlaki's writings and videos have turned up in 57 terrorism cases in the United States.

siblings from Chicago were in regular contact with virtual recruiters in Turkey and Syria and militants in the United Kingdom before attempting their emigration to the caliphate in 2014. In the useful formulation of the Israeli counterterrorism expert Gabriel Weimann, the lone wolf is now part of a virtual pack.⁴¹

WHAT DOES ISIS WANT?

Whenever ISIS carries out a new atrocity, whether it's beheading a group of Egyptian Christians or enslaving Yazidi women in Iraq or burning its victims alive, the big question most people

have is: Why on Earth is ISIS doing this? What could possibly be the point? Adding to your list of enemies is never a sound strategy, yet ISIS' ferocious campaign against the Shia, Kurds, Yazidis,

Christians, and Muslims who don't precisely share its views has united every ethnic and religious group in Syria and Iraq against them. ISIS has even fought with its most natural ally, al-Qaeda in Syria. So what is going on here?⁴²

A key window into understanding ISIS is its English language magazine *Dabiq*. In February 2015, the seventh issue of *Dabiq* was released and a close reading of it helps explain ISIS' worldview. The mistake some make when viewing ISIS is to see it as a rational actor. Instead, as the magazine documents, its ideology is that of an apocalyptic cult that believes that we are living in the end times and that ISIS' actions are hastening the moment when this, the apocalypse, will happen.

The name of the *Dabiq* magazine itself helps us understand ISIS' worldview. The Syrian town of Dabiq is where the Prophet Mohammed is supposed to have predicted that the armies of Islam and "Rome" would meet for the final battle that will precede the end of time and the triumph of true Islam.⁴³ In *Dabiq*, an ISIS propagandist stated: "As the world progresses towards al-Malhamah al-Kubrā, ('the Great Battle' to be held at Dabiq) the option to stand on the sidelines as a mere observer is being lost." In other words, in its logic, you are either on the side of ISIS or you are on the side of the Crusaders and infidels.

When American aid worker Peter Kassig was murdered by ISIS in November 2014, "Jihadi John"—Mohammed Emwazi, the masked British murderer who appeared in many ISIS videos—said of Kassig: "We bury the first crusader in Dabiq, eagerly waiting for the rest of your armies to arrive." In other words, ISIS wants a Western ground force to invade Syria, as that will confirm the prophecy about Dabiq.

We live in an increasingly secularized world, so it's sometimes difficult to take seriously the deeply held religious beliefs of others. For many of us the idea that the end of times will come with a battle between "Rome" and Islam at the obscure Syrian town of Dabiq is as absurd as the belief that the Mayans had that their human sacrifices could

influence future events. But for ISIS, the Dabiq prophecy is deadly serious. Members of ISIS believe that they are the vanguard fighting a religious war, which Allah has determined will be won by the forces of true Islam. This was the conclusion by terrorism experts J.M. Berger and Jessica Stern who wrote that ISIS, like many other "violent apocalyptic groups, tend to see themselves as participating in a cosmic war between good and evil, in which moral rules do not apply."

This is also similar to the conclusion of Graeme Wood in *The Atlantic* who wrote in 2015, "Virtually every major decision and law promulgated by the Islamic State (another name for ISIS) adheres to what it calls, in its press and pronouncements, and on its billboards, license plates, stationery, and coins, 'the Prophetic methodology,' which means following the prophecy and example of Muhammad, in punctilious detail. Muslims can reject the Islamic State; nearly all do. But pretending that it isn't actually a religious, millenarian group, with theology that must be understood to be combated, has already led the United States to underestimate it."⁴⁴

ISIS members devoutly believe that they are fighting in a cosmic war in which they are on the side of good, which allows them to kill anyone they perceive to be standing in their way with no compunction. This is, of course, a serious delusion, but serious it is.

When ISIS first gained significant ground in Iraq and Syria in 2014, it focused almost entirely on its actions there and encouraged its overseas followers to join the jihad. Writing in the third issue of *Dabiq*, an ISIS writer asserted, "This life of jihad is not possible until you pack and move to the Khilafah," meaning to leave your home and travel to ISIS's areas of control in Iraq and Syria.⁴⁵

In 2015, ISIS shifted its strategy, attacking on a large scale outside of Iraq and Syria. The group claimed responsibility for the downing of the Russian Metrojet carrying 224 passengers and crew on October 31 in the Sinai in Egypt.⁴⁶ Two weeks after

the Metrojet bombing, the team of ISIS militants attacked at multiple locations in Paris.

This marked a pronounced shift to directing or inciting operations against the West, but it also underlined ISIS' incoherent strategy. ISIS' main goal is to present itself as the *Islamic State* that it has named itself; the guardian of an expansive caliphate that is both a theological and a geographic entity. But by attacking Western targets ISIS united a global coalition against it, which is in the process of thoroughly dismantling the ISIS caliphate.

After ISIS attacked France in November 2015, the French immediately increased their airstrikes on ISIS targets. After ISIS attacked at Istanbul airport in June 2016, the Turkish army attacked ISIS targets inside Syria, quickly taking the city of Jarablus. ISIS attacks inside Turkey also resulted in a Turkish

clampdown on the flow of ISIS "foreign fighters," almost all of whom transit Turkey on the way to join the group in Syria.

ISIS should have understood that provocative attacks against Western targets would only amplify the war against it. As early as the summer of 2014, following the murder by ISIS of the American journalist James Foley, the United States substantially increased the number of airstrikes against the group and mobilized a coalition of like-minded nations to join the anti-ISIS coalition. According to CENTCOM, nations that have conducted strikes against ISIS—in addition to the United States—are: Australia, Belgium, Canada, Denmark, France, Jordan, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and the United Arab Emirates.

WHAT IS THE THREAT TO THE UNITED STATES?

The ISIS attacks in Brussels and Paris have raised concerns about the threat posed by returning Western "foreign fighters" from the conflicts in Syria and Iraq who have been trained by ISIS or other jihadist groups there. Six of the attackers in Paris were European nationals who had trained with ISIS in Syria.⁴⁷

Yet in the United States, the threat from returning foreign fighters is quite limited. According to FBI

Director James Comey, 250 Americans have gone or attempted to go to Syria.⁴⁸ This figure is far fewer than the estimated 6,900 who have traveled to Syria from Western nations as a whole—mostly from Europe.⁴⁹ As many as 1,900 of those militants have returned, according to an estimate by the U.S. House Committee on Homeland Security.⁵⁰

From court records and news reports, New America identified 117 American militants who have traveled

to Syria to join militant groups, attempted to travel to Syria to do so, or provided support for those who did. Of those, 74 were arrested before reaching Syria. For example, Shannon Conley, a 19-year-old woman from Colorado, pleaded guilty in September 2014 to conspiring to provide material support to ISIS.⁵¹ She never set foot in Syria, as she was arrested at the Denver International Airport. More recently, Sajmir Alimehmeti, a 22-year-old resident of the Bronx, was arrested on May 24, 2016 after allegedly attempting to reach Syria to fight with ISIS—he had previously been denied entry to the United Kingdom.⁵² Like Conley, Alimehmeti never reached Syria.

Forty three did manage to reach Syria and join a militant group. Of those, 17 are dead. Douglas McAuthur McCain, for instance, a Muslim convert from California, was killed in 2014 fighting for ISIS in a battle against the Free Syrian Army.⁵³ Recently unsealed court documents suggest that Adnan Fazeli, a 38-year-old man who settled in Maine after coming to the United States as a refugee from Iran, died fighting for ISIS in 2015 in a battle against the Lebanese army on the Lebanese side of the Syrian-Lebanese border.⁵⁴

Eight American militants returning from Syria have been arrested. Among them was Mohamad Saeed Kodaimati of California, who pleaded guilty in October 2015 to claiming falsely that he had not joined al Nusra Front, the Syrian al-Qaeda affiliate, after he traveled to Syria in 2012.⁵⁵ Of the eight known American returnees from Syria who are in U.S. custody, only one is alleged to have plotted an attack inside the United States. Court documents allege that Abdirahman Sheik Mohamud, a 23-year-old from Ohio, left to fight in Syria in April 2014 before returning to the United States two months later. After his return to the United States, he was monitored by an informant, leading to his arrest. Mohamud has pleaded not guilty to plotting an attack on a U.S. military base.⁵⁶

Floridian Moner Abusalha managed to travel to Syria and train with al Nusra before returning undetected to the United States in 2013.⁵⁷ Rather than preparing an attack in the States, Abusalha returned to Syria after unsuccessfully trying to recruit a few friends to join him, and died

conducting a suicide bombing in 2014 against the forces of Syrian leader Bashar al-Assad.⁵⁸

At home, the United States does not face a significant threat from ISIS-trained militants, but does face a far more likely threat from extremists inspired by ISIS, or that are in some cases in direct communication with ISIS through encrypted communications. The homegrown terror threat poses a knotty, multi-layered problem for U.S. law enforcement. It's hard for the U.S. intelligence community to track lone wolves who are not communicating with foreign terrorist organizations via email or phone. Nor do lone wolves have meetings with co-conspirators of the type that can be monitored by the FBI, while domestic extremists who are in touch with ISIS using encrypted communications are using the type of encryption that cannot be easily decrypted.

The FBI said in 2016 that it was conducting some one thousand investigations of suspected Islamist militants;⁵⁹ many of these will be dismissed, rightly, as not causes for true alarm, but the attack in Orlando reminds us that despite all these FBI investigations, sometimes America's homegrown terrorists will still slip through the net.

This will be ISIS' legacy in the United States: the crowdsourcing of jihad, so that men like Omar Mateen can quickly convert their personal grievances to what they believe is a righteous holy war.

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A Hard Target

The United States today is a quite-hard target for foreign terrorist organizations that have not carried out a successful attack in the States since 9/11.⁶⁰

That is in part because of the defensive measures the States has taken. On 9/11, there were 16 people on the U.S. “no fly” list.⁶¹ By 2016 there were as many as 48,000.⁶² In 2001, there were 35 Joint Terrorism Task Force “fusion centers,” where multiple law enforcement agencies worked together to chase down leads and build terrorism cases.⁶³ A decade and a half later there are more than one hundred.⁶⁴ Before 9/11, the Department of Homeland Security, National Counterterrorism Center, and Transportation Security Administration (TSA) all did not exist. Annoying as it is for many Americans to go through a TSA checkpoint at an airport, it is a strong deterrent for terrorists inclined to smuggle any kind of weapon on board a plane. While it’s impossible to decisively measure the impact of programs designed to make attacks *not* happen, the relatively few successful jihadist terrorist attacks in the States in the years since 9/11 do seem indicative that, broadly speaking, American defensive measures are working.

Another important change: At the dawn of the 21st century, the American public didn’t comprehend the threat posed by jihadist terrorists. That changed dramatically after 9/11. In December 2001, the passengers on an American Airlines jet disabled the “shoe bomber,” Richard Reid, as the plane flew between Paris and Miami.⁶⁵ Similarly, eight years later it was his fellow passengers who tackled the “underwear bomber” Umar Abdulmutallab on Northwest Flight 253 as it flew over Detroit. And the following year it was a street vendor who spotted a suspicious SUV parked in Times Square that contained the bomb planted there by Pakistani Taliban recruit, Faisal Shahzad.⁶⁶ The public’s awareness of terrorism as a domestic threat is a significant force multiplier to the other measures put in place to defend the “homeland” after 9/11.

Aiding those defensive measures was the United States’ offense overseas. In 2013, the United States allocated \$72 billion to intelligence collection and other covert activities.⁶⁷ Before 9/11, the budget was around a third of that figure: \$26 billion.⁶⁸ CIA drones may be controversial, but they also did significant damage to al-Qaeda in Pakistan and

Weapons of Mass Destruction and Jihadist Terrorists in the States

Despite all the hysterical commentary about the issue, in the decade and a half since 9/11, jihadist terrorists in the States have not developed, acquired, or deployed chemical, biological, radiological, or nuclear (CBRN) weapons. This is a striking finding that is worth underlining: Of the more than 350 cases of jihadist terrorism in the States examined by New America, not one involved CBRN. Chemical, radiological, and biological weapons, however, were either developed or deployed over the past decade and half in the States by 13 far-right militants, one leftist militant and two with idiosyncratic motives, such as Bruce Ivins who launched the anthrax attacks in Washington and New York in the months after 9/11.

in Yemen killing dozens of the group’s leaders.⁶⁹ Neither branch of al-Qaeda was able to launch a successful attack on the States after 9/11 in part because of the pressure that the drone program put them under.

From a purely American perspective, by the time that President Barack Obama was nearing the end of his second term, the threat from al-Qaeda, ISIS and similar groups had receded significantly from its high point on 9/11. The threat inside the States had become largely lone-wolf attacks such as the attack in Orlando in June 2016, while the threat overseas took the shape of attacks on U.S. facilities, such as the one mounted by an al-Qaeda aligned group on the American consulate in Benghazi, Libya that killed four Americans on September 11, 2012.⁷⁰ In the past decade and a half since 9/11 94 Americans have been killed in the United States by jihadist terrorists. Shocking and tragic as these attacks have been, they still pale in comparison to al-Qaeda’s murder of almost three thousand people on the morning of 9/11.

ISIS IN RETREAT

In June 2016, Gen. David Petraeus, formerly the commander of all U.S. forces in Iraq, predicted the largest city that ISIS now holds, the Iraqi city of Mosul, could fall to U.S.-supported Iraqi forces before President Obama leaves office in January. Petraeus characterized this as “a very big deal” and went on to say, “no question ISIS is a loser in Iraq and, increasingly, Syria.”⁷¹ The facts on the ground bear this out. ISIS has lost just under half the territory it once controlled in Iraq and around a fifth of what it had controlled in Syria.⁷² In the past year ISIS has lost the key Iraqi cities of Baiji, Fallujah, Ramadi and Tikrit, as well as Palmyra in Syria.⁷³

In August 2016, ISIS lost the city of Manbij, in northern Syria, a significant victory because it controls key routes to ISIS’ de facto Syrian capital, Raqqa.⁷⁴ ISIS fighters disobeyed orders to fight to the death to hold Manbij and fled.⁷⁵ The same month the Turkish army crossed the border and seized the Syrian city of Jarablus.

In August Lt. Gen. Sean MacFarland, who led the anti-ISIS campaign, said 45,000 ISIS fighters have been killed so far by the US-led coalition. “We estimate that over the past 11 months, we’ve killed about 25,000 enemy fighters. When you add that to the 20,000 estimated killed (previously), that’s 45,000 enemy (fighters) taken off the battlefield.” That’s an astonishing amount of attrition for a force

MacFarland estimated has a remaining strength of 15,000 to 30,000 fighters now.

U.S. intelligence estimates the U.S.-led coalition has also killed at least 135 ISIS leaders and significant officials,⁷⁶ including in late August Mohammad al-Adnani, who oversaw the group’s terrorist operations in the West.

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The U.S. military has also stepped up the air campaign against ISIS’ wealth, for instance, bombing a bank in Iraq in January in which ISIS had stored millions in cash. U.S. bombers have also repeatedly struck trucks carrying oil that ISIS has extracted from oil fields in the shrinking area it now controls. These attacks on ISIS’ cash supply and revenue streams have had real effects on ISIS’ bottom line. ISIS has had to halve the salaries of its foot soldiers, according to documents that leaked from the terrorist army earlier this year.⁷⁷

These massive losses of territory and income have had a very damaging effect on ISIS’ central claims;

that it has created a real caliphate that controls large amounts of territory and that it functions like a normal state.

As the caliphate withers so too does its appeal to “foreign fighters” from around the Muslim world. This is a key to undermining ISIS, as the foreign fighters are often the most ideological of the organization’s cadre and, as the coalition continues to kill on average 2,000 ISIS fighters a month, the terrorist army is finding it harder and harder to replenish its ranks, an indicator of which is its increased usage of children as suicide attackers. In April 2016 the Pentagon said that the flow of foreign fighters has dropped from roughly 1,500 a month to 200 within the past year.⁷⁸

Meanwhile, the flow of Americans going to join ISIS or attempting to do so has slowed to a trickle from an average of six to one a month, according to U.S. intelligence estimates.

Balanced against all this, of course, is the fact that the terrorist group has launched attacks or inspired them in places as disparate as Baghdad, Brussels, Istanbul, Kabul, Nice, Orlando, and Paris in the past year. The terrorism research group IntelCenter also counts 43 ISIS affiliates of various kinds around the world. Some have declared their “support” for ISIS, while others have declared their “allegiance.”⁷⁹ As



An AV-8B Harrier takes off from the USS Wasp in August 2016 to conduct air strikes in Sirte, Libya for the U.S. Navy. (Photo: U.S. Navy)

discussed above, some of these affiliates may have simply slapped on the ISIS patch, but others clearly have some real connection with the ISIS core, such as the ISIS affiliate in Libya, which is the affiliate that is most tightly bound to the ISIS core.

That said, ISIS core continues to suffer reverse after reverse on the battlefield, while ISIS in Libya has suffered similar battlefield reverses to that of ISIS’ core, losing control of the key coastal city of Sirte in Libya in August 2016, which had served as the group’s key hub in Libya.⁸⁰

The Continued Resilience of al-Qaeda

A decade and half after 9/11, al-Qaeda has shown surprising resiliency despite the heavy losses it has sustained, including of its founder Osama bin Laden as well as dozens of other al-Qaeda leaders killed in CIA drones strikes in Pakistan and Yemen. While al-Qaeda has shown scant ability to attack in the West—the last successful terrorist attack it directed in the West was the suicide bombings on London’s transportation system in 2005 that killed more than 50 commuters—its regional affiliates remain quite capable of sustained attacks in their respective regions. Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent, Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, and Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb all retain capacity for sustained local attacks. Meanwhile the Nusra Front, Al-Qaeda’s capable Syrian affiliate, claimed in July 2016 that it was separating from al-Qaeda. Director of National Intelligence James Clapper said he believes that Nusra likely announced its divorce from al-Qaeda’s core for tactical reasons and the split is only cosmetic in nature.⁸¹

Al-Qaeda appears to be grooming one of bin Laden’s sons, Hamza, to be a next generation leader of the group. Hamza, in his mid-20s, has long been an al-Qaeda true believer. He has appeared in a number of videos and audio messages that were released by al-Qaeda in the past year or so.⁸²

THE DRIVERS OF GLOBAL JIHADISM

At the macro level, ISIS is not itself the problem—though it certainly amplifies existing problems—but rather is the symptom of five major problems that are driving jihadist terrorism around the globe and will continue to do so even when ISIS is contained or even largely defeated.⁸³

1. The regional civil war in the Middle East between the Sunni and the Shia that engulfed first Iraq, then Syria, and now Yemen. That regional civil war is being driven by a variety of factors including the failure of the largely Shia Iraqi government to give Sunnis a real place at the table and the brutal civil war that the Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad is waging on his largely Sunni population. Also in the mix is the role that Iran and the Gulf states have played in fighting each other in Syria through proxy forces such as the Sunni militant groups that are supported by the Gulf States and the Shia militias that are supported by Iran.

This regional sectarian war was amplified by Saudi Arabia's invasion of Yemen in the spring of 2015 to fight what they believe to be Iranian-backed Houthis who had recently seized control of the Yemeni capital.

The civil war across the Middle East between the Shia and the Sunni empowers groups like ISIS and al-Qaeda who claim to be the defenders of Sunni rights against Shia attack. Until there is real political

accommodation between the Sunnis and the Shia in countries such as Iraq, Syria, and Yemen and some kind of rapprochement between the mortal enemies of Iran and Saudi Arabia, these sectarian wars will grind on. Don't, however, expect such an accommodation in the short- or medium-term. The Syrian civil war is already in its fifth year and the principal players in the conflict both inside Syria and outside of the country show absolutely no sign of making even the first tiny steps toward setting up a real peace process.

2. The collapse of Arab governance around the region. Think of ISIS as a pathogen that preys on weak hosts in the Muslim world. In fact, there is something of a political law: The weaker a Muslim state, the stronger will be the presence of ISIS or like-minded groups. So, in Iraq, Libya, Syria, and Yemen—countries that are completely failed states or are largely failing states—the presence of these groups is strong. In Muslim countries with somewhat competent governments such as Indonesia, the presence of these groups is relatively small.

3. Unprecedented waves of immigration to Europe from the Muslim world. Germany alone has taken more than a million refugees and asylum seekers.⁸⁴ European countries simply do not have the ideological framework the United States has in the shape of the “American Dream,” which has

helped to successfully absorb wave after wave of immigration, including Muslim-Americans who are well-integrated into American society. There is no analogous “French Dream” or “German Dream.”

4. The rise of European ultranationalist and protofascist parties, a problem amplified by the massive immigration from Muslim countries into Europe. These parties define themselves as deeply opposed to immigrants and are ultranationalist in flavor. They once played a very marginal role in European politics but now these parties are now doing well in Austria, France, Hungary, Poland, and Switzerland. The rise of these parties is reflective of the rising anti-immigrant sentiment in many European societies that in turn amplifies the feelings of alienation that many Muslims feel in Europe.

5. The marginalization of Muslims in Europe who often live separate and unequal lives. An indication of how marginalized European Muslims are is provided by the following bleak statistics: The proportion of the French prison population that is Muslim is estimated to be around 60 percent, yet Muslims only account for about 8 percent of France’s total population.⁸⁵ In Belgian prisons there is a similar story: 30 percent of the prison population is Muslim, yet Muslims only make up 6 percent of the overall population.⁸⁶

It’s therefore not surprising that French and Belgian prisons have proven to be universities of jihad. The members of the ISIS cell responsible for the

attacks in Paris that killed 130 and the attacks in Brussels that killed 32, bonded through criminal activities or in prison. Abdelhamid Abaaoud and Salah Abdeslam, the cell’s masterminds, were childhood friends who grew up in the Brussels neighborhood of Molenbeek. In 2010, the men were arrested and spent time in the same prison. Ibrahim Abdeslam, Salah’s brother, also spent time in prison with Abaaoud.⁸⁷ He would go on to be one of the terrorists in the November Paris attacks. Khalid and Ibrahim El Bakraoui, both suicide bombers in the Brussels attacks, had served lengthy prison sentences for armed robbery and assault on police.⁸⁸

Muslim citizens in France are 2½ times less likely to be called for a job interview than a similar Christian candidate, according to researchers at Stanford University.⁸⁹ Many French Muslims live in grim banlieues, the suburbs of large French cities (similar to housing projects in the United States), where they find themselves largely divorced from mainstream French society. According to the Renseignements Généraux, a police agency that monitors militants in France, half the neighborhoods with a high Muslim population are isolated from French social and political life. The French term for these neighborhoods is equivalent to “sensitive urban zones,” where youth unemployment can be as high as 45 percent.⁹¹

None of these five problems is easily solvable and they feed into ISIS’ narrative that Muslims are under attack by the West, and the Shia, as well as any Muslim who doesn’t share their extremist ideology.

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EMERGING TRENDS IN TERRORISM

Terrorists Merging with Media

In 1985, British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher spoke about terrorism at the annual convention of the American Bar Association.⁹² Following a recent high-profile hijacking of a TWA passenger plane forced to land in Beirut that had received lavish media coverage, Thatcher urged that news organizations “must try to find ways to starve the terrorist and the hijacker of the oxygen of publicity on which they depend.”⁹³

It’s a dilemma that news organizations have grappled with for many decades since. Terrorist attacks are, of course, news, but terrorists also depend on “the oxygen of publicity” provided by the media to spread accounts of their violence. But what happens when today’s terrorists are the media? In the past, terrorists had to rely on the media to get their messages out, but now they can completely control their own message, from making their own content to ensuring its widespread distribution.

In a new twist of the past three years, ISIS and other jihadist militants are also now reporting on their own bloody work in real time. Consider that ISIS produces lavish TV productions, filmed professionally in high definition—of everything from its murder of civilians, to profiles of its heroic fighters, to the supposedly idyllic life that can be

lived under its purportedly utopian rule. The group also has its own de facto news agency Amaq that credibly reports on ISIS’ own atrocities. ISIS also publishes multiple webzines in English, French, Russian, and Turkish. Most strikingly, terrorist organizations and their supporters maintain many tens of thousands of accounts on social media platforms, including Twitter and Facebook, which they use to further propagate the ISIS message.⁹⁴ More and more, those accounts are documenting and broadcasting terrorist violence as it plays out live.

During the Westgate mall attack in Kenya in 2013 in which at least 67 were killed, someone close to the al-Qaeda affiliated Al-Shabaab terror group was live tweeting details of the attack, which were often far more accurate than any other source.⁹⁵ The Westgate mall attack was the first major terrorist attack that was live tweeted by someone close to the perpetrators. As the assault at the Westgate mall was underway, a Twitter account used by Al-Shabaab tweeted: “The Mujahideen (‘holy warriors’) entered Westgate mall today at around noon and they are still inside the mall, fighting the Kenyan kuffar (‘infidels’) inside their own turf.” It was the first confirmation that the attack was the work of Al-Shabaab, and journalists around the world quickly reported this. Crucially, Al-Shabaab then explained in a tweet that the mall attack was going to be a fight to the death in which there would be

no negotiations for the lives of the hostages the gunmen had taken: “We’ll not negotiate with the Kenyan govt as long as its forces are invading our country, so reap the bitter fruits of your harvest #Westgate.” This key aspect of the assault on the mall was also reported globally.

When ISIS militants took hostages at the upscale cafe in Dhaka, Bangladesh in June 2016 and killed 20 mostly non-Muslim foreigners, at the same time they also sent images of their victims lying in pools of blood to the ISIS new agency Amaq, which posted them for the world to see.⁹⁶ Similarly, the same month Larossi Abballa, an ISIS-inspired militant, killed a police official and his partner outside of Paris. Immediately after the murders, Abballa videotaped himself live on Facebook declaring his allegiance to ISIS.⁹⁷ While Abballa was taping this statement, near him was the couple’s terrified 3-year-old son.

Meanwhile, pledging allegiance to ISIS on Facebook after a murderous attack has now become almost routine for terrorists in the West. Omar Mateen, the terrorist in Orlando who killed 49 at a gay nightclub, pledged his allegiance to ISIS on Facebook as he carried out his attack.⁹⁸ So, too, did the terrorists in San Bernardino in December who killed 14 attending an office holiday party.⁹⁹

One of the big ideas of modern terrorism, from the Munich Olympics of 1972 during which Palestinian terrorists kidnapped Israeli athletes to 9/11, has been to use widespread TV coverage of violent acts to propagate and advance the political ideas of the militants. Today, terrorists bypass traditional media entirely and they now act simultaneously as the protagonists, producers and propagators of their acts of nihilistic violence.

Terrorist Groups with Armed Drones

Hezbollah, the militant Shiite group headquartered in Lebanon, reportedly used drones in late September 2014 to bomb a building used by the al-Qaeda affiliated Nusra Front, along Lebanon’s

border with Syria.¹⁰⁰ The armed drones, combined with fire from Hezbollah ground troops, killed 23 Nusra militants and wounded some 10 others, according to a report by an Iranian news agency.

Hezbollah’s use of drones to target another militant group shows how warfare is changing: The monopoly of states on the use of military force is eroding, and new technology is leveling the playing field between states and militant groups.

Iran is the key sponsor for Hezbollah and has plausibly claimed for the past several years to manufacture armed drones. Hezbollah’s use of drones marks a milestone for terrorist groups worldwide: It would be the first time a group other than a nation state used armed drones successfully to carry out an attack, marking an important step towards closing the gap between the drone capabilities of countries such as the United States and militant groups such as Hezbollah. After all, it was only in the months immediately after 9/11 that the United States mastered the technology of arming drones and began to use them in combat.

In August 2016 Hezbollah also released video online showing what appears to be a commercial drone dropping small bombs on rebel positions in Aleppo, Syria.¹⁰¹

Previously, drones were used by militant groups only for surveillance purposes. In August 2014 ISIS uploaded a video to YouTube that showed aerial views of Syrian Army Military Base 93 in Raqqa province in northern Syria that had been shot by a drone.¹⁰²

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field between states and militant groups. So what can the United States and other nations do to protect themselves from this dawning threat? Most armed drones are relatively easy to shoot down if you have sophisticated air defenses or a fleet of jet fighter aircraft. Western countries generally have these, but one can imagine a dystopian future where terrorist groups are able to deploy armed drones against less well-defended targets.

This may be particularly a problem for U.S. embassies, which are well defended against vehicle-borne bombs, but not against armed drones.

The Insider Threat at Airports

The bomb smuggled aboard the Metrojet flight by an insider at Sharm el-Sheikh airport in Sinai in October 2015 raises the question: Could such an insider attack happen in the West? Short answer: It isn't out of the question.¹⁰³

Five American citizens involved in serious terrorist crimes since 9/11 have worked at major U.S. airports in a variety of capacities. They were recruited by ISIS, Al-Shabaab, a virulent "homegrown" jihadist cell based in California, and another such group in New York City.

In the years after 9/11, Kevin Lamar James was jailed in California's Folsom prison where he formed a group that he conceived of as "al-Qaeda in America." James recruited others to help him with his plans. One of them was 21-year-old Gregory Vernon Patterson who had recently worked at a duty-free shop at Los Angeles International Airport (LAX).¹⁰⁴ James thought that Patterson's inside knowledge of LAX would be helpful for his plans and when he made a list of potential targets in California, James listed LAX.¹⁰⁵ James' crew planned to attack around the fourth anniversary of 9/11. They financed their activities by sticking up gas stations and their plans only came to light during the course of a routine investigation of a gas station robbery by police in Torrance, Calif., who found documents that laid out the group's plans for jihadist mayhem.

Members of the California cell are now serving long prison terms.

On October 29, 2008, Shirwa Ahmed became one of the first Americans ever to conduct a suicide attack anywhere in the world when he was recruited by Al-Shabaab to drive a truck loaded with explosives into a government building in Somalia, blowing himself up and killing 20 other people.¹⁰⁶ Ahmed graduated from high school in Minneapolis in 2003 and then worked at the Minneapolis airport pushing passengers in wheelchairs; it was during this period that he became increasingly religious and was recruited by Al-Shabaab.¹⁰⁷ Abdisalan Hussein Ali became a suicide bomber for Al-Shabaab in Somalia in 2011 and had also worked at the Minneapolis airport, in a Caribou coffee shop.¹⁰⁸ Similarly, Abdirahmaan Muhumed, who was killed in 2014 while fighting for ISIS in Syria, had worked at the Minneapolis airport, where he had a security clearance that gave him access to the tarmac and to planes.¹⁰⁹

Five American citizens involved in serious terrorist crimes since 9/11 have worked at major U.S. airports in a variety of capacities.

The problem of militants working at airports and airlines is not peculiar only to the States. In the past decade, British citizens working at Heathrow and at British Airways have conspired with members of al-Qaeda. In the United Kingdom, British Airways IT expert Rajib Karim, 31, conspired with al-Qaeda's affiliate in Yemen to place a bomb on a U.S.-bound plane.¹¹⁰ In 2010, one of the leaders of al-Qaeda's Yemeni affiliate, Anwar al-Awlaki, wrote an email to Karim asking "Is it possible to get a package or a person with a package on board a flight heading to the US?"¹¹¹ Karim replied: "I do not know much about US I can work with the bros to find out the possibilities of shipping a package to a US-bound plane."¹¹² Karim had applied for cabin-crew training before he was arrested and was sentenced to 30 years in 2011. In 2006, an employee at a shop in

Heathrow working on the “airside” post-security section of the airport provided advice about the security conditions to self-proclaimed al-Qaeda terrorist Sohail Qureshi, who was convicted of multiple terrorism charges.¹¹³

Department of Homeland Security Secretary Jeh Johnson announced in June 2015 that he was implementing new measures to “address the potential insider threat” by mandating biannual background checks for workers at U.S. airports, while also requiring airports to reduce the number of access points to secured areas and to increase randomized screening of airport employees.

These are welcome developments but the real vulnerability exists in some of the 103 countries

that, as of 2016, sent direct flights to the United States.¹¹⁴

Bleedout of ISIS “Foreign Fighters” from Syria

The likely defeat of ISIS on the battlefield raises the question: What to do about ISIS foreign fighters who survive? Thousands of foreign fighters may melt from the battlefield. Since we know from other jihads that these foreign fighters are the likely terrorists of tomorrow, Western governments as well as Arab and North African governments must think through what they plan to do to track these fighters and arrest them.

WHAT CAN BE DONE?

There seems to be some conceptual confusion in the U. S. government about what “Countering Violent Extremism” programs are attempting to do: Is it counter-radicalization? Or is it counter-recruitment? Counter-radicalization—turning many millions of Muslims away from radical ideas—seems both a nebulous mission and one that may not be achievable. A far more specific task is trying to stop the relatively small number of Muslims who are trying to join ISIS or sign up for its ideology from doing so. From an American national security perspective that is, after all, what we all want to prevent.

Here are 15 things that can be done:

1. Enlist rather than alienate the Muslim community

The terrorist attacks in San Bernardino and Orlando touched off a furious political debate about how best to safeguard Americans, featuring such solutions as shutting off Muslim immigration, but that would not do much to deal with the threat because lethal attacks by jihadist terrorists in the States since 9/11 have been conducted largely by American citizens.

In fact, the real lessons learned should come from the law enforcement agencies that have studied jihadist terrorists in depth. A very telling indicator of future violence by a terrorist, FBI behavioral analysts have found, is what they term “leakage.” Leakage was first identified by the FBI in 1999 in the context of school shootings, emerging from the observation that a student who was going to do something violent had often intentionally or unintentionally revealed something significant about the impending act, anything from confiding in a friend to making ominous “they’ll be sorry” remarks. Leakage is, in short, when a violent perpetrator signals to people in his circle that he is planning an act of violence.¹¹⁵

What was true of school shootings turned out to be true for terrorist crimes as well. In an ongoing study of some 80 terrorism cases in the States since 2009, the FBI found that “leakage” happened more than 80 percent of the time. Those to whom information was leaked, termed “bystanders,” were broken down by the FBI into peers, family members, authority figures, and strangers. FBI analysts found an average of three bystanders per case, and in one case as many as 14. Some “bystanders” saw radicalization behavior. Others saw actual plotting and planning, such as the accumulation of weapons, self-educating about how to make explosives, or preparations to travel overseas for terrorist training.

FBI analysts were dismayed by how common it was for bystanders to know that a radicalized individual was up to something yet failed to tip off the authorities. Analysts graphed out the bystanders who were most likely to come forward with information versus those least likely to do so. Peers were aware of the most concerning information, but they were the least likely to volunteer it. Family members were often aware of both radicalization and planning, but they came forward less often than authority figures such as college professors, supervisors, military commanders or clerics. These figures were reasonably likely to offer information but were more aware of a suspect’s radical sympathies than of any actual plotting.

Strangers were the most likely to come forward, which could be helpful. A tip from a clerk at a New Jersey Circuit City—who in 2006 was asked to make copies of a videotape on which he saw men shooting off weapons and shouting “Allahu Akbar!”—developed into the case in which a group of six men were convicted for plotting an attack to kill soldiers at the Fort Dix, N.J. Army base.¹¹⁶ However, strangers made up only 5 percent of the bystanders with useful information about a suspect.

Community outreach to Muslim communities to enlist their help in detecting those who may be becoming militant is the most fruitful approach to dealing with the scourge of terrorism. This is the opposite approach from painting all Muslim immigrants as potential terrorists.

The importance of the information that a peer can have was underlined by the terrorist attack in San Bernardino, in which 14 people were killed by married couple Syed Rizwan Farook and Tashfeen Malik. Farook’s friend Enrique Marquez allegedly provided the two semiautomatic rifles that Farook and his wife used in the massacre.¹¹⁷ Authorities have said Marquez allegedly also knew that Farook was planning to carry out some kind of terrorist attack as early as 2011.¹¹⁸ Marquez has been charged with a variety of federal crimes for his alleged role and has pleaded not guilty.¹¹⁹

The lesson of the FBI study of terrorism cases is that the most useful information comes from peers and family members. That’s why community outreach to Muslim communities to enlist their help in detecting those who may be becoming militant is the most fruitful approach to dealing with the scourge of terrorism. This is the opposite approach from painting all Muslim immigrants as potential terrorists.

2. Either through electronic warfare or other means, take out ISIS' propaganda production facilities in the Middle East.

ISIS announced its involvement in the attack in June at the café in Dhaka, Bangladesh, that killed 20 through Amaq, which is effectively ISIS' news agency. Why does Amaq continue to exist? Also, ISIS continues to pump out online videos, audios, and webzines. These require crude production facilities of some kind. These, too, should be eliminated. (Of course, some will argue that there is some intelligence value derived from having ISIS propaganda facilities continuing to function, but surely that is outweighed by the value of the larger enterprise of eliminating ISIS' appeal.)

3. Intensify the military campaign against ISIS.

The less the ISIS "caliphate" exists as a physical entity, the less the group can claim it is the "Islamic State" that it purports to be. That should involve more U.S. Special Forces on the ground embedded with the Iraqi military as well as other coalition forces in Syria and more U.S. forward air controllers calling in close air support strikes for those forces.

4. Institute a no-fly zone in northern Syria.

This will reduce the battlefield success of Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad, who is the principal driver of the Syrian war and also will reduce the flow of refugees into Europe.

5. Build a database of all the "foreign fighters" who have gone to Syria to fight for ISIS and the al-Qaeda affiliate there.

This is one of the recommendations of the House Homeland Security Committee's 2015 report on

foreign fighters in Syria and it is a very good one.¹²⁰ How can you prevent an attack by returning foreign fighters if you are not cognizant of their names and links to ISIS? Right now, Interpol has a list of some 8,000 foreign fighters, but that is dwarfed by the estimated 40,000 foreign fighters who have gone to fight in Syria.¹²¹

6. Enlist defectors from ISIS to tell their stories publicly.

Nothing is more powerful than hearing from former members of the group that ISIS is not creating an Islamist utopia in the areas it controls, but a hell on earth. Reducing the flow of foreign fighters to ISIS is a key to reducing ISIS' manpower. Muhammad Jamal Khweis, 26, of Alexandria, Va., was held by Kurdish fighters after allegedly deserting from ISIS in early 2015. Khweis gave an interview to a Kurdish TV station in which he said, "My message to the American people is: the life in Mosul [the Iraqi capital of ISIS] it's really, really bad. The people [that] were controlling Mosul don't represent the religion. Daesh, ISIS, ISIL, they don't represent the religion, I don't see them as good Muslims."

U.S. prosecutors could throw the book at Khweis for joining ISIS, and he could get 20 years or more, but, alternatively, they could try something more creative—a deal in which he tells prosecutors what he knows about ISIS in return for a reduced prison sentence. And one more thing: He would also have to appear before the American public, explaining that ISIS is creating hell in the areas it controls.

7. Amplify voices such as that of the ISIS opposition group Raqqa is Being Slaughtered Silently.

The group routinely posts photos online of bread lines in Raqqa, the de facto capital of ISIS in northern Syria, and writes about electricity shortages in the city. This helps to undercut ISIS propaganda that it is a truly functioning state.

8. Support the work of clerics such as Imam Mohamed Magid of northern Virginia.

Magid has personally convinced a number of American Muslims seduced into support for jihad by ISIS that what the group is doing is contrary to the teachings of Islam.

9. Keep up pressure on social media companies such as Twitter to enforce their own terms of use to take down any ISIS material that encourages violence.

Since 2015, Twitter has taken down some 360,000 accounts—including 235,000 accounts in the last six months—used by ISIS supporters, but the group continues to use Twitter and other social media platforms to propagate its message.¹²²

10. Amplify support to Turkey to help it to tamp down the foreign fighter flow through their country to ISIS in neighboring Syria.

Turkey, which had long been criticized by Western countries for allowing foreign fighters to move through its territory on their way to Syria, has clamped down on that traffic into Syria. Those efforts by the Turks are paying off, according to ISIS itself. In 2015, ISIS posted advice in one of its English-language online publications to would-be foreign fighters, saying, “It is important to know that the Turkish intelligence agencies are in no way friends of the Islamic State [ISIS].”

11. Relentlessly hammer home the message that while ISIS positions itself as the defender of Muslims, its victims are overwhelmingly fellow Muslims.

12. Prevent suspected terrorists from buying military-style assault rifles.

Astonishingly, over the past decade or so more than 2,000 people known or suspected to be terrorists have bought guns and assault rifles.¹²³ Even while suspected jihadist terrorists are under some form of FBI investigation, they can easily buy military-style assault weapons. Omar Mateen, Nidal Hasan, and Carlos Bledsoe—three of the most prominent domestic terrorists since 9/11—were all FBI subjects of interest, yet all legally purchased semi-automatic weapons shortly before their attacks. If you have been the subject of an FBI terrorism inquiry it’s obviously completely absurd that you should be able to legally purchase semi-automatic weapons. Congress should pass a law preventing this from happening in the future.

13. Stay in Afghanistan.

The Taliban are coming back in Afghanistan.¹²⁴ The group controls or has a significant presence in around a third of the districts across the country, holding more territory than at any time since U.S. forces toppled the Taliban government in the months following the 9/11 attacks. In addition, both ISIS and al-Qaeda have established significant presences in Afghanistan in the past year or so. U.S. officials estimate there are up to 300 al-Qaeda operatives in Afghanistan and more than 1,000 ISIS fighters.

A key flaw of the Obama administration’s approach to Afghanistan has been constantly announcing proposed withdrawal dates for U.S. forces, which has enabled the Taliban to believe they can simply wait out the clock. It also has contributed to a lack of confidence among the Afghan population, eight out of 10 of whom say that the Afghan army and police need support from countries such as the United States if they are to do their jobs properly, according to polling last year by the Asia Foundation.¹²⁵

The next president should announce a new policy in which a robust U.S. noncombat military force remains in Afghanistan for many years. That force would help the Afghan military with intelligence, training, and logistics.

14. Develop “micro targeting” counter messages for those who are looking at ISIS propaganda.

Advertisers on the internet routinely do this for consumers looking at, say, shoes and there is really no technical reason that this could not be done effectively for those who are looking at ISIS propaganda.

15. Increase funding and research for “photo DNA” technologies of the kind that have largely banished child pornography images from social media platforms.

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