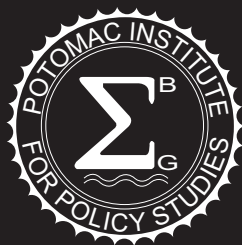


Combating the Islamic State: Is a New Strategic Blueprint Needed?



INTER-UNIVERSITY CENTER
FOR
TERRORISM
STUDIES



January 2016

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THE INTER-UNIVERSITY CENTER FOR TERRORISM STUDIES

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Professor Yonah Alexander

Director, Inter-University Center for Terrorism Studies

Introduction

Since time immemorial war has been a permanent fixture in the struggle of power within and among nations. It is not surprising therefore that Sun Tzu, China's foremost strategist, observed over 2500 years ago that "war is a matter of vital importance to the state, the province of life or death, the road to survival or ruin" (400-320 BC, *The Art of War*, II). Similarly, in modern times, Winston Churchill, Britain's great former Prime Minister, famously noted that "in mortal war, anger must be subordinated in defeating the main immediate enemy" (*The Gathering Storm*, 1948).

Despite this stark reality, a related political concept, "terrorism" (constituting fear and psychological and physical violence as an instrument of tactical and strategic power employed by individuals, groups, and sovereign entities seeking to achieve single-issue or broader policy objectives at home or abroad) has consistently evaded universal agreement on the meaning of the term. Specifically, there is no consensus as to who are the "terrorists," what are the root causes of the phenomenon, and how societies should combat national, regional, and international threats.

Suffice it to mention that in the Twentieth Century even the League of Nations Convention of 1937 was never enacted by member states because of contradictory political and ideological perceptions of the security dangers posed by "terrorism." Likewise, the United Nations, thus far at least, has failed to craft and adopt a comprehensive global legal instrument intended to provide theoretical and practical clarity to various manifestations of violence short of all-out war.

In light of the post-9/11 era, characterized by the dramatic expansion of terrorists' modus operandi by "propaganda by deed" and the "deed by propaganda," the question arises whether contemporary states will continue to reserve to themselves the legal and moral authority to define "terrorism" or perhaps usher in a more inclusive universal framework in the coming years.

To be sure, this question has continuously been on the academic agenda for the past fifteen years. For example, within the context of the mission of the Inter-University Center for Terrorism Studies (administered by both the International Center for Terrorism Studies at the Potomac Institute for Policy Studies and the Inter-University Center for Legal Studies at the International Law Institute), we have undertaken a number of interdisciplinary research projects covering

different security challenges from shutting down international terror networks to combating weapons of mass destruction threats.

Several studies are noteworthy. *Al-Qa'ida Ten Years After 9/11 and Beyond* (2012), as well as *Al-Qa'ida's Mystique Exposed: Usama bin Laden's Private Communications* (2016), were co-authored by Yonah Alexander and Michael S. Swetnam and published by Potomac Institute Press. The purpose of the later volume is to provide a rare window into the covert life of the founding leader of one of the most dangerous terrorist movements in modern times. Fortunately for the U.S. government and subsequently for the international community at large, untangling a substantial part of al-Qa'ida's enigmatic nature became easily possible following the raid on bin Laden's compound in Pakistan on May 2, 2011. Selected declassified correspondence of the infamous leader that is contained in this book is provided courtesy of the U.S. Office of the Director of National Intelligence.

Another recent work is *The Islamic State: Combating the Caliphate Without Borders* (2015), co-authored by Yonah Alexander and Dean Alexander and published by Lexington Books. This study offers insights into the nature of the Islamic State (also known as IS or ISIS) and what the international community can do to combat it. In order to achieve this objective, the origins, intentions, leadership, capabilities, and operations of the IS are explored. The Islamic State's multifaceted efforts and effects in the region and beyond are described. Also, national, regional, and global strategies that are being pursued to address the new threat are examined. To this end, a range of recommendations are offered on specific steps that governmental, intergovernmental, and non-governmental bodies can take to counter the IS menace. Lastly, additional insights are presented relevant to combating the IS and undermining its potential future capabilities.

Selected excerpts of the book addressing the Islamic State's features and highlighting some "best-practices" roadmaps to combating the group are shared below.

Characteristics of the Islamic State

Although the Islamic State is hierarchical in many respects, the entity has features of networked groups as well. Also, by spreading its message globally and recruiting individuals to travel to the Islamic State or to act locally, the entity has a modicum of decentralization. Its expansive and rising use of technology and virtualization affords the IS opportunities for growth in a rapid and relatively inexpensive manner. The IS has exhibited other powers of statehood, including the issuance of passports and declarations that it will establish a national currency.

As gatekeeper, the IS can determine which individuals can join the group. It is open to individuals who self-select, and to cabals. The Islamic State's fighters include Iraqis, Syrians, and a multitude of foreign fighters. In September 2014, a CIA spokesman estimated that it "can muster between 20,000 and 31,500 fighters across Iraq and Syria."¹ That same month, U.S. Government sources projected foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq to include 15,000 persons from 80 nations.² By February 2015, that figure had reached over 20,000 persons from 90 countries.

The adversaries that the Islamic State encounters locally are the fragile states of Iraq and Syria, various rebel groups, dissenters, and other segments of the populace. Also, the Islamic State has made adversaries of Iran, which aids the Syrian and Iraqi governments as well as the West, and some 60 countries in the U.S.-led coalition. As with other Islamist groups, Israel is a natural enemy of the Islamic State.

Through the growth and transformation that the IS has undertaken—from its origins as Jama'at al Tawhid wal Jihad in 1999 to its caliphate status from 2014—the entity has been characterized by fluid and non-linear traits. Presently, the Islamic State and its antecedents are on various terrorist-designation lists, including those of the U.S., European Union, and UN.

Globally, civilized countries and the vast majority of their citizenry view the Islamic State as an abhorrent deviant threat that merits elimination in the swiftest manner possible. Yet, unfortunately, the entity claims significant support from adherents in Syria, Iraq, the Middle East, and worldwide. The international outreach and character of the Islamic State's message is akin, in a way, to the characteristics of al-Qa'ida, particularly at its height.

Ultimately, a determinant as to the future success of the Islamic State rests with the battle of ideas: whether its hate-based messages are more attractive to the citizenry than multi-pronged counter-narratives. The counter-narratives will mostly have to emanate from the Muslim world, as other messaging will not be deemed as credible in the region. Nevertheless, non-Muslim-majority countries also have a role in crafting and disseminating counter-narratives and alternatives to the Islamic State's message. Other initiatives, such as military campaigns, interference with the flow of foreign fighters, and counter-terror financial moves, will also be indispensable in combating the group.

Various countries, such as Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, and Kuwait, have been accused of supporting or allowing their citizenry to aid Sunni jihadist fighters against the Assad regime. Inevitably, some of this assistance is

believed to have reached the Islamic State or its precursors. By 2014, these countries were members of the anti-IS coalition.

State sponsorship or pseudo-state assistance has clearly aided the Islamic State. However, this type of aid has lessened precipitously since summer 2014. The Islamic State is in a weaker financial position because of that. This loss has been offset to a considerable degree by IS's ability to garner substantial funds through oil sales, extortion, kidnapping for ransom, smuggling, and organized crime, among other sources. These funding activities, too, have suffered under coalition airstrikes and anti-IS efforts by Kurdish and Iraqi forces.

At its core, it is arguable that the Islamic State is partly a sovereign state and provider of services to its constituents, however brutally. The organization also clearly acts as a terrorist entity as it utilizes violence for a political objective and aims at military and civilian targets alike, with indiscriminate severity. IS fighters have at times acted as insurgents, although they appear to have focused very extensively on targeting civilians, which is not "typical" during insurgencies. To some degree, the Islamic State also acts like an organized criminal entity, since a portion of its funding and activities arises from coordinated illicit activities where monetary gains predominate. It can thereby be characterized as a hybrid entity with terror group, organized criminal enterprise, and pseudo-state attributes.

The activities of the Islamic State have profound political, social, and economic implications in the Middle East and beyond. To weaken and ultimately defeat the IS will require extensive energy, time, funds, and manpower. Still, some elements of the IS may remain after its demise, although of lesser potential. It is possible that one of its affiliates abroad may expand, and, depending on where it is based geographically, may pose a significant threat to its respective region.

The removal of its leadership may severely weaken the IS, although as we have seen after the death of al-Qa'ida's bin Laden, it is easier to kill a man than an idea. At the same time, the death, imprisonment, and other efforts aimed at al-Qa'ida senior leadership have weakened that organization. Reports that IS leader al-Baghdadi may have been killed in U.S. airstrikes during 2014 and spring 2015 were not substantiated. Even al-Baghdadi's death, however, when it occurs, would not decimate the Islamic State, as it has developed a hierarchical governing framework with other seasoned leaders to take his place. Still, the elimination of several levels of IS leadership would be very helpful, particularly if such individuals were not replaced with operatives of at least equal capabilities.

Like other “sovereigns” and terror groups, the Islamic State does not operate in a vacuum. It connects and interacts with non-state and state actors both locally and globally. As with any organization, the Islamic State has vulnerabilities and inefficiencies that affect its capacity to govern, fight, and undertake strategic communications, though it has managed to excel at the latter, despite some recent challenges. As it evolves, the IS likely will additionally experience both cohesion and fragmentation as an entity, which must be confronted and exploited.

While this assessment offers a glimpse of current and likely developments of the Islamic State, there are additional aspects that deserve consideration and clarification.

For instance, how are terror groups defeated, and what are the implications for the Islamic State?

Terror groups lose their effectiveness and crumble under various scenarios:³

- They are defeated militarily.
- Their leadership and operatives are killed or imprisoned.
- Police and intelligence communities infiltrate and eliminate them.
- Circumstances or facts on the ground change so that the terror group, through its activities and messaging, is no longer relevant or attractive.
- They lose support, political and financial, from their domestic or international backers, so much so that they cannot sustain themselves.
- Alternative terror, rebel, or other groups arise so that the terror group loses its appeal or sustainability.
- The group reaches a compromise with the government or other entity with which it has a grievance.
- It determines that its violent tactics no longer work, so it decides to use non-terrorist or even non-violent actions.
- It achieves its goals and withers.
- The terror group reaches its objective and transitions into the political process, including governing.

Appreciating these alternatives can provide an insight as to how to combat the Islamic State. One could suggest that several—rather than one—of these available options might be implemented against the Islamic State, such as: defeating the group militarily, using repressive measures to kill or arrest relevant Islamic State leadership and operatives, infiltrating and undermining it from within, impeding its capacity to garner support and funding, supporting political and social alternatives in the areas IS controls so that its support dwindles, and changing the circumstances on the ground so that IS is not viewed favorably. Given the Islamic State’s current worldview, it is highly unlikely that a political

compromise would be feasible. However, broad and extensive counternarratives to the Islamic State—by government and other entities—could well prove effective.

Selected “Best-Practices” Roadmaps

At this point, for the West, defeating a transnational Sunni jihadist group that has seized large swaths of territory in Syria and Iraq is more important than defeating the bloody dictator of Syria, President Assad, an Alawite. Countries will only contribute to a cause when it is viable politically and considered to be in their national interest. The longer a terror group operates, the more difficult it is to undermine its activities.

Despite commitments from several dozen countries, the defeat of the IS will be very difficult, and will take years even if coalition ground troops are used. The additional training of Iraqi troops and moderate Syrian rebels, while important, is unlikely to achieve the desired results. Further instruction and arming of both, which is supposed to take months—if not years—will be insufficient. Realistically, to effectively reverse the Islamic State threat will necessitate an immediate effort of a higher caliber.

More bluntly, if previous training of Iraqi troops has proven less than ideal, why would a new round of instruction produce a different result? This is not a defeatist perspective, but rather, it highlights an important concern so as not to repeat an attempted remedy that—used alone—is likely to be ineffective. So, ultimately, the use of proven reliable ground troops, including coalition forces, will be needed.

Alternatively, in relation to Iraq, Iranian interests and Shiite militias can be permitted to have free reign in their efforts against the IS (it is arguable that is already the reality). Under such a scenario, a defeat of IS in Iraq would be suspect, if not a highly lengthy ordeal. Also, the regime in conquered IS lands might resemble Iran or be its proxy. So, too, Western and Sunni interests in Iraq would be severely undermined.

The Islamic State did not arise overnight nor without extensive resolve and resources. The solutions to undermining, and ultimately, defeating this quasi-state will be lengthy, arduous, multifaceted, and no doubt entail some risk. But the risk of not acting is clearly greater. Ideally, the introduction of such concepts as inclusion and pluralism would also be beneficial, so that a multitude of interests can be considered. Sadly though, this is most unlikely, at least in the short term, given the Islamic State’s disdain for accommodation and its bloody

record of extremism and brutal governance. So too, compromise is hard to come by in post-conflict areas.

The coalition against the IS should be more comprehensive, in terms of commitment and resources dedicated by a diverse group of countries. The aftermath of a defeat of the Islamic State, should it occur, does not guarantee a particular outcome. References to stability in Germany and Japan post-World War II as examples for Iraq and Syria are somewhat misguided. Such analysis does not fully appreciate the regional dynamics, history, and cultural aspects involved, particularly if coalition forces do not remain in the region for decades.

Also worth factoring in is who will be among the beneficiaries in the region of a defeated Islamic State: the Assad regime; Shiite interests in Iraq, Iran, and Lebanon, including Hezbollah; and whatever rebel groups remain in Syria, including former rival Sunni jihadist groups such as Jabhat al-Nusra. Depending on the shape of the outcome, other nations and parties would benefit from having differing combinations of interests and powers governing Syria and Iraq.

As the Islamic State continues to call for its operatives and new adherents to attack Western and other targets, efforts must be made to undermine plots against the U.S. or other Western countries. While often traditional law enforcement and intelligence efforts have proven helpful in preventing terror attacks, encouraging the public to forewarn law enforcement about alleged suspicious activities, including actions that appear out of line with normal conditions is critical. Among pre-terror incident indicators the public should report to authorities are: terrorists conducting surveillance, gathering information, testing security, acquiring supplies and funds, acting suspiciously, undertaking dry runs, and getting into position to undertake an attack. Also, there is the unforgettable one-liner, "If you see something, say something."

More broadly, recommendations regarding the defeat of the Islamic State will be divided into two categories: the responses of national governments (gaining control over the flow of foreign fighters, establishing reliable ground forces, promoting and hastening political inclusion and non-sectarianism, and anticipating externalities) and non-governmental organizations' (NGOs') efforts.

The Current Report

The current report, “Combating the Islamic State: Is a New Strategic Blueprint Needed?” offers views of former U.S. government officials and a retired general as well as an academic. It is based on slightly edited presentations given at several seminars organized by the Inter-University Center for Terrorism Studies held at the Potomac Institute for Policy Studies during August 2014 and November 2015. Contributors to these events included Hon. Robert C. McFarlane (former National Security Advisor to President Ronald Reagan, serving from 1983 through 1985. Co-Founder United States Energy Security Council); Dr. Dov Zakheim (former Undersecretary of Defense (Comptroller) from 2001 to 2004 and DoD Civilian Coordinator for Afghanistan from 2002 to 2004. Currently Vice Chairman of the Foreign Policy Research Institute); Lieutenant General (Ret.) Keith J. Stalder (former Commanding General of U.S. Marine Corps Forces Pacific, Camp H.M. Smith, Hawaii, and former Commanding General of II Marine Expeditionary Force, Camp Lejeune, North Carolina; currently, a Senior Fellow and Member, Board of Regents, Potomac Institute for Policy Studies); Ambassador (Ret.) Edward Marks (Director, Arthur D. Simons Center for Interagency Cooperation; former U.S. Department of State Deputy Coordinator for Counter-Terrorism); and Professor Dean Alexander (Director, Homeland Security Research Program and Professor, Homeland Security at the School of Law Enforcement and Justice Administration at Western Illinois University).

As always, Michael S. Swetnam (CEO and Chairman, Potomac Institute for Policy Studies) and General (Ret.) Alfred Gray (Twenty-Ninth Commandant of the United States Marine Corps; Senior Fellow and Chairman of the Board of Regents, Potomac Institute for Policy Studies) also participated in these seminars. Special gratitude is due to them for their inspiration and support, as well as to Professor Don Wallace, Jr. (Chairman, International Law Institute) for his encouragement. Also, Sharon Layani, a Research Associate and Coordinator at IUCTS has ably facilitated the timely publication of this report.

It is hoped that this report will encourage further scholarship in the significant field of national and global security concerns.

December 2015

Notes

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- ¹ Sciutto, Jim, Jamie Crawford, and Chealsea J. Carter. "ISIS can 'muster' between 20,000 and 31,500 fighters, CIA says." CNN, September 12, 2014. Accessed November 13, 2014. <http://www.cnn.com/2014/09/11/world/meast/isis-syria-iraq/>.
- ² "U.N. Security Council passes resolution on foreign jihadists." Yahoo News, September 24, 2014. Accessed November 13, 2014. <http://news.yahoo.com/un-security-council-passes-binding-resolution-jihadists-191829842.html>.
- ³ Kurth Cronin, Audrey. *How Terrorism Ends: Understanding the Decline and Demise of Terrorist Campaigns*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009.
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Hon. Robert C. McFarlane

Former National Security Advisor to President Ronald Reagan, serving from 1983 through 1985. Co-Founder United States Energy Security Council*

Bringing Down ISIS

For more than 75 years it has been the responsibility of the United States to lead, nurture and maintain a global climate of stability in which American and allied political and economic interests can be advanced – secure against attack from any combination of adversaries. During that period we have faced many challenges by nation states driven by imperial ambition or ideological passion.

Today we must face and overcome five challenges in the Middle East – all largely of our own making. The first challenge, which we are gathered to consider today, is posed by a subnational radical Sunni force that calls itself the Islamic State (or ISIS). ISIS claims that it is carrying out a mandate from God to rid the world of all infidels – anyone not committed to their radical-Wahabbist doctrine – and establish a global Caliphate to prepare for the apocalypse. It is well-armed, well-financed and well-trained and controls substantial terrain primarily in Syria and Iraq. Further, by its barbarous brutality, its skillful propaganda, its sophisticated use of modern media, and the absorption of its breath-taking strategic vision by young Muslims who see no real alternative future, it has succeeded in recruiting and deploying trained followers throughout Europe. Ten days ago it traumatized the European continent in a well-planned simultaneous attack at six locations in Paris killing 129 innocent people. Concurrently, it has inspired fledgling surrogate ISIS chapters across North Africa from the Sinai to Morocco.

The second challenge is posed by Iran, a Shia-Muslim, nation-state that for more than 35 years has waged a theocratic crusade, first to rid the Middle East of western presence and values, and ultimately to dominate the world.

The third challenge – derived from Iran's recent victory in securing a path toward creation of a nuclear weapon(s) in its agreement with the five permanent members of the UN Security Council plus Germany (the P-5 plus 1), – is centered on the inevitable (and understandable) move toward an equivalent nuclear energy program by the Sunni Arab states that is well underway.

The fourth challenge involves how to handle the military intervention of Russia into the region. Russia's intervention has been swift, well-armed and focused on checking reverses suffered by Syrian President Bashar ASSAD's forces. Russia's

* Contribution at event on November 23, 2015.

propaganda espouses goals that are ostensibly tied to restoring order in Syria yet absent an equally swift western response, could foreshadow an historic shift in the strategic balance of power in the Middle East at American (and local) expense as Russia uses its substantial military capability and arms sales potential to build an ever more dominant presence throughout the region.

The fifth challenge lies in the socio-economic burden and threats posed by the tide of refugees that continues to flood neighboring countries in the Middle East and much of Europe; more than 4 million Syrian and Iraqi nationals have been displaced.

Strangely, the United States brought each of these challenges on itself going back five years ago through its failure to define clearly its interests in the region, to put in place a politico-military strategy to defend those interests, and to lead its NATO and regional allies forthrightly in preempting these challenges. The fecklessness of our country's behavior has been astonishing. It is especially so when one considers that by 2008 coalition forces had succeeded in restoring a modicum of order (before ISIS emerged) and a path toward stability in Iraq with the assistance of a residual presence of American and allied forces. Instead, our premature withdrawal created a vacuum that has enabled the rise of the Islamic State and resulted in the forfeiture of most of the gains made – and losses suffered – during our nine-year commitment. What must be done to reverse this turn of events, meet the five challenges cited above, and restore stability to the region?

First, the leadership and core military and economic viability of ISIS must be destroyed. The means for doing this was enunciated with remarkable clarity by retired Army General Jack Keane in joint hearing before the House committees on Homeland Security and Foreign Affairs last Wednesday. In his testimony, General Keane called for a serious escalation of U.S. Military activities in Iraq and Syria. In his words, "'Once and for all, (we must) send the required number of advisors, trainers and air controllers that are truly needed to dramatically increase combat effectiveness.'" Specifically, the General recommended that we "Dramatically increase UAVs, mine-clearing vehicles, Apache helicopters and a host of other much-needed equipment." General Keane, a former Vice Chief of Staff of the US Army's plan calls for using special-operations forces to conduct "large-scale" in-and-out raids to target ISIS critical nodes and functions. The new force would rise to at least 10,000 with another three or four combat brigades available out-of-theater in reserve. In the General's judgment, with which I strongly concur, a serious, sustained commitment at this level can prevail. It should commence with a devastating and sustained air campaign under much less restrictive rules of engagement. This renewed war will require a five-year commitment with no *a priori* terminal date in mind or

announced until the pre-conditions for enduring stability in Iraq and Syria are established.

As this battle is waged safe zones should be established on the Turkish and Jordanian borders to shelter and protect Iraqis and Syrians displaced by violence. These zones would be protected on the ground and in the air by regional forces augmented as necessary by US air power. Once they are effective, they will provide a relief valve to the mass migration that is contributing to instability in Europe. The United Nations and European governments should support and provide resources for what must be a sustained effort.

Turning to the second and third challenges concerning the new life given Iran's nuclear program by the JCPOA, and the justified Sunni quest for how best to counter it, we can take some confidence in the knowledge that experienced, highly qualified professionals have been focused on this challenge for almost two years. They have developed a sound public-private strategy for dealing with the key elements of each challenge. Their plan is supported by the moderate Arab states, Israel and Russia and the resources are at hand.

What remains missing – and critical – however, for such a coherent strategy to be executed is leadership. It appears that we are at least a year away from overcoming that challenge.

Dr. Dov S. Zakheim

Former Undersecretary of Defense (Comptroller) from 2001 to 2004 and DoD Civilian Coordinator for Afghanistan from 2002 to 2004. Currently Vice Chairman of the Foreign Policy Research Institute*

I would like to talk about first, what we should not be doing and then perhaps what we should. I am focusing entirely on ISIS. I agree we are at war. The problem is that this country does not want to go to war. It is not just the President, it is the country, because to go to war would require a lot more than we are currently committing to the fight against ISIS. General Jack Keane, whom I also respect and who was dead right about the surge, says we need more forces. The surge involved 160,000 troops at its maximum. I do not think this country wants to replicate that. It is as simple as that.

If we are not going to send that many troops and not going to spend the money that goes with them, then maybe we should not talk about going to war. Maybe we should talk about containment. Now I know the administration talks about containment but they are clearly not containing very much. They say they have rolled back ISIS and they have gotten "x" amount of square miles back, most of which is desert. ISIS has not really lost a major city in many months. Yes there are now body counts again as there were in Vietnam; we measure how many ISIS people we have killed. But ISIS keeps replenishing; even more than the North Vietnamese, who drew upon the Viet Cong, ISIS replenishes its forces from all over the world. Clearly, the measures we are using are phony measures.

If we are not going to defeat ISIS and we are talking about containment, we ought to recognize that we should not talk about defeating them because if we are not defeating them then they are winning, by definition. We have created their argument for them. We have said to ISIS, "I am going to defeat you" and every day they are still around they say "hey, we are not defeated." Recall that in 1991 Saddam Hussein said "I won the war." Nobody else thought he had won the war but he felt he won the war because he was still there. Just being there, when somebody says they are going to defeat you, means you have not lost.

But then we have to be serious about containing ISIS; we are not serious about doing so. We are currently conducting about one-seventh the number of airstrikes we carried out in Libya, which was not exactly a major alpha strike campaign. The Russian strikes have been far more intense and intensive and the Russians do not have the same constraints on the rules of engagement that we do. So we are striking less and we are tying one hand behind our backs as we do it.

* Contribution at event on November 23, 2015.

Our training is a disaster. There is something fundamentally wrong with the way we train Middle Eastern forces; that problem goes beyond ISIS, as our record in Afghanistan makes abundantly clear. Something is wrong in the way we train others at least in this part of the world and we are going to need to look at that. Particularly, in the case of our efforts against ISIS, we had better stop exaggerating how well we are doing. Of course the Inspector General is digging up emails to expose some failures in Central Command, but it is a larger question beyond one or several individuals exaggerating the degree of success that we have achieved.

The real issue is the product of our training: the forces we have trained run away. Who has armed ISIS? We armed ISIS with all the materiel that the people that we trained left behind. ISIS does not even give us credit for it! As long as we do not have troops on the ground—and I do not know whether it is ten-thousand, fifteen-thousand, or five-thousand, I will leave that to military experts—we will not defeat ISIS. Whatever the number is it had better be a larger number than fifty and it needs to be more than just special operations forces. We have Rangers who can kick down doors too, we have Marines who can kick down doors, but until we have got them we should forget about any regional support from the Arabs.

It has been hard enough when we are there on the ground. The last time we got major support from the Arab states was in 1991. I was responsible for running around the world trying to get help from the Arabs and others during the operations in both Afghanistan and Iraq the previous decade. It was not easy and what we got was very limited in terms of their boots on the ground. And that was when we had over 100,000 troops in Iraq and Afghanistan. So we need to be very cautious about assumptions about what the locals are going to do. But they certainly will not do very much at all if we are not in there showing that we are serious.

The same considerations apply to the Europeans. The only Europeans who are actually serious about knocking the heck out of ISIS are the French because of what happened in Paris. Interestingly, this is the second time this has happened in Paris. The first time there was a terrorist outrage in Paris the French did not do very much; it took two attacks to wake them up. The other Europeans who are doing a lot are the Russians, and there really is nobody else. The Canadians have just announced they are pulling out their half a dozen aircraft, this “major” force that they have there. Pulling them out is one of the first things Mr. Trudeau announced upon becoming Prime Minister. That does not exactly discourage ISIS.

Finally, we need to get our heads straight about who we are going after first and whom we are not going after because unless we do that nothing good will come out of whatever we try. What do I mean by that? The Turks' number one priority is—actually it is a tie for first—the Kurds and Assad. In fact, they are only nominally tied for first; the war against ISIS actually is less important to Turkey than fighting the Kurdish PKK and their Syrian Kurdish allies.

As for the Russians, their number one priority is to keep Assad in power. They are now going after ISIS because of what happened over Sinai. Israel's number one priority is Iran because that is how Mr. Netanyahu got himself elected. He wants to stay in power; he has a majority of one which is not exactly huge.

Many of the people whom we have worked with on the ground to fight ISIS actually want to fight Assad. Until we figure out what we want to do first we are never going to get anywhere. In my opinion, we need to focus on ISIS. We should swallow hard and admit that while we have been telling the world for four years that we are going to get rid of Assad, he is still there, and he is going to outlast our president who wanted to get rid of him. So why don't we come to terms with that reality because that is the only way we are going to be able to work alongside the Russians. Since the Russians do not have the same restrictive rules of engagement that we do, in this case they are not a bad ally. By the way, we have worked with some pretty mean Russians in World War II. In truth, if we want all our bedfellows to be perfect then we are not going to have too many. Who is worse Mr. Putin or ISIS? If you think Mr. Putin is worse, fine. Do not work with the Russians.

So what should we be doing? As I already indicated, we need to launch far more airstrikes than we have had until now. We did launch more intensive air attacks in the battle for Kobani, for example, but then we ratcheted them down again. We have to maintain a more intensive pace. It would not be bad to take a look at what the Russians are doing and try to emulate them as much as we can. That we even should contemplate looking to emulate the Russians shows you how far back we have fallen. We have to look at them instead of them looking at us.

Secondly, let us stop kidding ourselves about how we help the Kurds. We cannot help the Kurds as long as everything we send them in Iraq goes through Baghdad and as long as we are minds about the Kurds in Syria because of Mr. Erdogan. There is not very much Mr. Erdogan can do to us, there is a lot more we can do to him. For instance, given his tottering economy, we can raise tariffs on everything he sells to us. There are many things we can do to squeeze Mr. Erdogan; we have done it before by the way. He initially did not want to work with us at all but we squeezed him, and now we operate out of Incirlik. We can do more.

At the same time, as long as we have a mantra of “one Iraq” and only help the Kurds by going through Baghdad, we are going to be creating a problem for ourselves. We cannot expect these people to work alongside us—and they are the toughest fighters—if we don’t give them what they need. We have not bothered to train them, they are pretty darn good on their own. They will not go beyond the territory they believe is theirs but they will stop ISIS from moving into their territory. So that is part of containment. We should arm them directly.

We definitely have to revamp our training. The only way we can do that in the short term is to have more people on the ground. More people who not only are acting as spotters but also people accompanying the fighting units because then the fighters might be a little bit too embarrassed to run away as they have in the past. The presence of American forces in their midst will buck them up. Again, I do not know if it is five-thousand, ten-thousand, or fifteen-thousand troops that are required to do the job in Iraq and Syria. It cannot be a huge number because the American public will not support it. I do not think it needs to be a huge number.

Let me turn to Safe Zones. Right now, the Administration continues to oppose safe zones because it fears that the Russians will confront American forces and penetrate the safe zones. The air space in particular would be susceptible to Russia penetration but not just the air space. The Russians could pull artillery up to the boundary of a safe zone and fire into it. Why would the Russians do that? The Russians would do so because we have also said that we are going to train the opposition in the safe zones.

The Administration must choose. If the United States wants to have safe zones and does not want people running away from Syria then it had better decide not to train the opposition in those safe zones. Washington could then tell Moscow, “fine you can inspect those safe zones.” Otherwise, there will be no safe zones, and the refugee problem will continue to worsen, with dire consequences for Europe and for NATO.

There has been some talk of having the Arabs patrol the outer boundaries of the safe zones. They are not going to do so in the absence of a serious American land force presence. In any event, the leading Gulf States are too tied up in the war in Yemen; and that war is not going very well for them.

Washington should cut a deal with the Russians, by making it clear that the safe zones are purely humanitarian zones. Those zones will have to be in Syria. They are not going to be in Turkey. The Syrian people do not want to go to Turkey unless they absolutely have to. They are not going to be in Jordan. That small, poor country has already absorbed about a million refugees and cannot

take in any more. The refugees have to be accommodated in zones inside Syria, which also would render it more likely to keep them from running to Europe.

What can we do for Jordan? One thing we can do is put some troops there. We should help the Jordanians ensure there are no incursions by ISIS. If ISIS is to be contained, they must be constantly encircled and slowly penetrated to make them shrink.

Then there is one other thing we need to do. Many of the young Arabs flocking to ISIS are not necessarily poor; a lot of them are pretty well-educated. The ones who perpetrated 9/11 were not uneducated and poor. So we have to reach out to young Arab men and women. It is not going to work if we create another al-Hurra. That station failed in Iraq in the past, and will not succeed against ISIS today. What we should instead do is work with Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiya. Those are the media that can actually reach these people. We should also work with Arabs who know how to handle social networks, not because they understand these media more than we do, after all, we created social networks such as Facebook, LinkedIn and the like, but because only they know how to talk to their own people. There are enough people in Iraq and Syria that are terrified of ISIS and that would work with us. That, again, needs a concentrated effort that we just have not undertaken.

A few words are in order regarding homeland security. We have had two major incidents in 14 years, Boston and San Bernardino. Whether one considers the European Union as a whole or just Western Europe, they have had four major incidents in the same time. Two in Paris, one in London, and one in Madrid. And of course lots and lots of smaller incidents--stabblings, the hacking of a head of a London policeman, or stabblings of Jews in Paris. Why? Because we are more serious about homeland security than they are. If the Europeans do not want to have any more trouble they need to keep doing what they are doing right now. They should not find the last of the Paris terrorists and then convince themselves that they have done the job and can go back to normal. The situation is not normal. We can work with them--indeed, we already do--and we can do more with them but it is up to them. There is only so much the United States can do for other people.

At the end of the day, it is not going to be the United States that brings down ISIS. ISIS is just the latest manifestation of an upsurge in Islamic extremism that bursts onto the international scene every few hundred years. The Madi in Sudan, the Almohads in Spain and Morocco, demonstrate that the rise of ISIS is nothing new. How did those other extremists disappear? Partly by external force but partly by what went on internally. In the same vein, there is no way that ordinary human beings who are not completely mad are going to support ISIS

indefinitely. It is just not going to happen. What we need to do is be serious about containing them.

We cannot put a time limit on our efforts; however, we cannot announce when we are getting out. The people of the Middle East have long memories. They waited out the Crusaders, whom they now consider us to be. The crusaders had a kingdom, they had families, they were in the Middle East for over one hundred years and then they were kicked out. I am not saying we need to fight a hundred years war but let us not have deadlines or and have our president say that by the end of his term America is going to be out of the Middle East. We are not going to be out of the Middle East, because a president cannot give a speech and expect the world to jump just because he gives the speech. If he wants to change facts on the ground, he will need to do more than speak from a podium.

Lieutenant General (Ret.) Keith J. Stalder

Former Commanding General of U.S. Marine Corps Forces Pacific, Camp H.M. Smith, Hawaii, and former Commanding General of II Marine Expeditionary Force, Camp Lejeune, North Carolina; currently, a Senior Fellow and Member, Board of Regents, Potomac Institute for Policy Studies*

I will go beyond some of the thoughts we have heard so far but which are independently very similar to what other speakers have said.

I wanted to really look at the questions for the panel and the conference, which are:

"The U.S. Combating the Islamic State: Is a New Strategic Blueprint Needed?"

Emphatically my answer to that is: "Yes".

And **"Is the Islamic State a threat equal or greater than al-Qa'ida for the U.S. and the international community?"** And again, emphatically in my mind, "Yes, absolutely".

Then, to the matter of best practices of "best practices," what do we do?

Clearly, a very timely panel in light of the Paris tragedy.

These are some of the key developments that frame these questions:

The first one is that when the U.S. backed away from its own red line on Syria after Assad used chemical weapons on his own people a very negative (for the West) signal was sent to the Islamic State and other dictators.

Then, the Iranian nuclear accord took center stage as a U.S. strategic objective over the objections of Gulf Arab states, Israel, and others. Very significantly, the U.S. decoupled Iranian support for Hezbollah and Assad and others, in seeking this nuclear power arrangement.

The U.S. was very slow to confront the Islamic State until the Yazidis were attacked in Sinjar about 14 months ago. There was absolutely no mystery about the Islamic State prior to that. The evil embodied within ISIL was well understood before the U.S. finally joined the effort on behalf of the Yazidis. We were very slow to the mark and came aboard for reasons that drew suspicions across the entire region.

* Contribution at event on November 23, 2015.

Since then the U.S. has approached the fight incrementally, using small numbers of marginally effective airstrikes with an almost zero collateral damage tolerance risk. There are about 3,500 U.S. advisors in Iraq. Recently, 40 or 50 Special Operations troops were approved – very small numbers.

We speak of “containing the Islamic State,” but the minor U.S. efforts to date do not support that in any convincing way.

It is unclear to almost everybody what the U.S. strategy actually is, to go the question at the start of the panel.

For me, a viable strategy is comprised of: ends, ways, and means, with implementation plans and actions to achieve them. I see no meaningful levels of that in U.S. policy, intent, and/or military deployments with regard to the Islamic State. Present incremental U.S. tactical actions appear to be a modified and indecisive adaptation of counter insurgency operations.

Europe is experiencing a refugee crisis the likes of which it has not seen since World War II. It challenges European unity and maybe even the existence of the EU itself.

Alarmingly to me, after the Paris attacks, France did not invoke Article 5 of the NATO Treaty. It invoked article 42.7 of the Lisbon Treaty, an EU solidarity clause.

President Hollande will visit Washington tomorrow. I anticipate that his message to President Obama will be that foreign fighters and the migrant crisis are destabilizing Europe while America watches. On Wednesday, he travels to Moscow to see President Putin.

In the aftermath of the Paris tragedy, Russia and France have a common objective to destroy the Islamic State.

The vacuum of U.S. strategic leadership created a strategic opening for Russia for the first time since the Cold War. Russia is using this opening to ostensibly demonstrate resolve in fighting ISIS while actually supporting Assad; thereby legitimizing Putin and Russia in ways that will embolden Russia further in the future.

Russia is also altering world perceptions of its ability to project power. A wide array of weapons and capabilities are now being used to support Assad and Russia is “back” after the collapse of the USSR.

Russian intervention strengthens their influence with Israel, France, Turkey, Jordan, Iran, and the Saudis. They are operating from a base in Syria and are changing the balance of power in the Middle East.

Russia is displacing the U.S. in the calculations of European and Middle Eastern governments. Russia is now seen as a legitimate player in ways that reward bad international behavior, not only in the Middle East, but in other places we are very familiar with.

Assad is still in power.

Iran wields growing influence as a genuine opponent of the Islamic State in the Shia world.

Decades of U.S. regional influence in Europe and the Middle East are eroding.

No effective coalition effort is emerging this point, and will not, absent U.S. leadership and commitment.

This is how I see the Islamic State:

They are much more of a threat than al-Qa'ida.

They control substantial territory; the so-called Caliphate as it exists now is very real.

They have real money and their revenue is increasing.

They dominate the social media conversation worldwide compared to the West.

Their recruitment efforts are strong and appear to be getting stronger.

The migrant crisis enables greater access to western targets.

They are becoming a truly global effort by self-affiliating with other terror organizations, using the so-called "distant provinces" to appear more powerful than they actually are.

They operate networks of sustaining functions including criminal and financial activities that tie global operations together in very practical ways.

They are truly an international organization with real capability in ways that al-Qa'ida is not.

They have suffered some tactical setbacks on the grounds at the hands of the Kurds and others in their territory but those set backs have been underestimated because of attacks like Paris and the self-affiliations that I spoke of.

I see this as strategic agility on the part of the Islamic State and likely well thought out.

They are correctly seen as an existential threat by the Shias.

This governs everything the Shias do including and especially what they will tolerate from the U.S. or a U.S. led coalition in Iraq.

Other observations:

The Saudis are leading a Gulf Arab coalition of sorts against the Houthis in Yemen with very limited effect.

The Gulf States are waiting to see what, if anything, the U.S. will do with respect to the Islamic State.

In Tehran, Saudi Arabia is seen as unable to fight, unable to defeat a fairly ragtag group in Yemen despite its advanced western made arms.

So, the Islamic State is creating global strategic effects. To thrive it needs to be seen as a global strategic force in order to recruit and raise money and they are succeeding.

On the need for a genuine strategy that supports U.S. vital interests:

We absolutely must have a genuine strategy that contains and defeats the current Islamic State threat.

It must consist of clear ends, ways, and means. It must have the next layers of operational and tactical planning to support it.

The strategy requires detailed integrated campaign planning followed by execution, assessment, and corrective adjustments to move the strategy forward.

The actions identified from the strategy must actually be implemented and seen to be so.

The present employment of air fires and limited partner capacity with advise-and-assist efforts is far, far too little.

Decisive operations will require coalition and ground forces at some level of capacity and capability.

This should all be done by and within a global coalition effort under U.S. leadership.

The U.S. should be prepared to commit U.S. combat forces on the ground to achieve its aims if needed.

All of this needs to be clearly and consistently articulated to the Congress and the public by U.S. civilian and military leaders.

It should look at each country in the region individually with appropriate responses for each.

Current enablers are woefully inadequate to the task.

Much better use of fixed wing air fires and the addition of rotary wing fire support are needed urgently.

Special Operations Forces down to the company level on the ground are required.

Campaign objectives such as retaking Ramadi, cutting road networks and Islamic State supply line should be immediate priorities.

Better equipment for integration with Iraqi and Syrian Kurd forces is urgently needed.

Special Operations direct actions to target Islamic State leaders are essential.

Local governance must be created and sustained. Shia police capacity building, etc.

There must be a viable concept of stabilization after combat operations.

Refugee relief and assimilation should be a major part of the strategy.

There must be a global coalition that counters the international flow of foreign fighters.

There must be a global coalition that counters international and local Islamic State financial support.

There must be a global coalition that counters international and local Islamic State messaging and information operations.

It might be phased thusly:

Provide enhanced enablers immediately from a U.S. led coalition.

Go after the Islamic State on the ground.

Integrate the Iraqi military.

Over time rollback the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria.

Move the coalition back as local forces have the capability to deal with that.

Keep the advisors in place.

Stabilize and withdraw over time as conditions allow, with no deadlines.

In summary, we must:

Create and sustain constant multi-directional pressure under U.S. leadership that can defeat the Islamic State.

We need to think and act globally while applying kinetic pressure on the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria.

Execute a global counter-terror campaign against the outlying and affiliated terror organizations, the so-called "distant provinces."

Operate as a global coalition against the networks that tie ISIS functions together, namely information, recruiting, fighter movement, and financial capabilities. Essentially breaking their global linkages while decisively engaging them in Iraq and Syria.

And Finally:

Current efforts are minimal to the threat. They are mostly unilateral, tactical, and reactively driven attack by attacks on the West.

We must get serious eventually; we should get serious now.

Regarding the question, "Are we at war now?" Yes.

Ideologies create behaviors.

These behaviors are clearly hostile to U.S. vital interests and our allies.

These behaviors and those who execute them have to be defeated to protect us and render the ideology ineffective.

If the Islamic State is not being rolled back, they are winning.

They are expanding with attacks and the addition of the so-called "distant provinces."

They have to be stopped.

If not, things will get worse and worse and worse and worse.

We need to face that now.

Ambassador (Ret.) Edward Marks

Formerly, U.S. Department of State Deputy Coordinator for Counter-Terrorism*

The precedent of the international system was begun by the Peace of Westphalia, and is so ingrained in our worldview that we tend not to think about it very much – although references to the Treaty of Westphalia and the nation-state system are usually de rigueur for diplomats, academics, and up-scale op-ed writers. But the system which began in the 17th century was so accepted that it became the basic anti-colonial argument of the 20th century. The disappearing colonial regimes – particularly in the Middle East, largely European – were quite consciously replaced by replica nation-states, although of varying colors – nationalist, leftist, authoritarian, collectivist, theocratic and once in a while even democratic. The growth in the membership of the United Nations from the original 50 to the over 190 today is a record of that growth and change in the international political structure. Everybody wants to be a nation.

Now this essentially consensual international system does not operate with anything close to perfection. It has been challenged several times in the past: by Napoleon and his revolutionary mode and most recently by the Soviet Union, which attempted to replace the nation-state system with a governance system founded upon a version of a theory of economic class. Today however, while it is still the universal system in the world, it has been challenged on several fronts. First of all – at least in some regions, particularly in the Middle East – by sheer incompetence and by social-political pressures. This is particularly marked in the Middle East – the Arab Middle East, which is apparently in a state of disintegration – as ancient conflicts reoccur between Arab-Persian, Turk-Persian, Turk-Arab, Sunni-Shia, secular-religious, modern-traditional, democratic-authoritarian, national-tribal, rich-poor. As a gazetted outsider, because I am not a Middle East expert by any means, I am struck by the obvious observation that the three most obviously competent nation-states in the region – Iran, Turkey and Israel – are not Arab.

But the most dramatic challenge to the Westphalian system is resurgence of another ancient experiment in governance: the Islamic Caliphate. The original Islamic Caliphate preceded the Westphalian system by many centuries. Although in some respects it resembled its imperial peers, the Persian and Byzantine Empires, it was fundamentally different as it claimed global universality on the basis of a revealed religion. Essentially, the Islamic Caliphate denied the legitimacy of governance to every other system of governance. Pursuing that vision, the Islamic Caliphate spread over all of what we now call the Middle East, and over much of what we now call Europe, until it was rolled back from the Iberian peninsula, and then finally, as has been noted, by Vienna in 1683.

* Contribution at event on August 28, 2014.

But by the time of the last siege of Vienna, the Caliphate had lost a good deal of its purely Islamic religious character. Under the Mongols, who were not Muslims when they arrived on the scene, the Caliphate had morphed into a more traditional empire – a more political-military, power organized empire.

In any case, the Ottoman Empire, as its Caliphate identity died, disappeared itself in 1922, to be replaced – surprise – by a consciously national nation-state in its heartland and French and English created colonial protectorate regimes elsewhere in the region. As the 20th Century moved on, these European-colonial protectorate regimes, were replaced by a collection of extensively Westphalian nation-states. However to many in the area this was an alien framework, which to this day still competes with religious and tribal identities. But at the same time this decolonization was happening, the counter-revolution of Islamic governance was being reborn. Intrinsic in the teachings of the Salafists or jihadists or whatever you want to call them, was a call for the return of Islamic governance and the Islamic Caliphate. While this claim was recognized by many, this aspect of the challenge was submerged, and ignored in the focus of immediate threats of violence on a local level. Sub-state violence exercised by various groups – some of them jihadist – arising from various local backgrounds: Sunni, Shia, Turkish, Syrian, Iraqi, Lebanese, Palestinian, and so on.

But the caliphate problem is obviously more fundamental than local fights for power. ISIS is clear about its long-term expansionist and exclusionary caliphate project. This ambition has become clear to the governments of the area as well as concerned outliers, like the United States – and we are an outlier. Obviously, something is missing or wrong in the existing social political orders in the region. Wrong so that the revolutionary – or maybe it is reactionary – Islamic governance model by ISIS is somehow able to growing numbers of adherents. The trite phrase 'root causes' comes to the tongue easily, but is nevertheless pertinent. National leaders in the area must somehow identify and deal with these root causes as matters of urgent necessity.

Certainly among them is Sunni discontent. And the appeal of the ISIS promise is to return them to a dominant position in the area. In the history of Islam and the Middle East, the caliphate marked a period of Sunni dominance, and is being touted by ISIS as the proper form of government for all *real* Muslims: and implicitly, therefore, a return to Sunni dominance. However this challenge also has a very immediate tactical aspect that grabs the attention of the media and all of us. The violence of this threat is approaching anarchy and chaos, attracting the four horsemen of the apocalypse, and that aspect of it must be dealt with today, somehow and someway. So defeating ISIS requires Muslim nations to see ISIS as the threat it really is to them. This has been a problem up till now, as most, including Iraq, have been mired in religious and national competitions and divisions of their own nature and their own optic. Many have

had their own relations with extremists of one sort or another. ISIS has received financing from a number of people, donors in Kuwait and Qatar. Saudi Arabia has furnished weapons, not worrying about where they are going. Turkey allowed ISIS weapons and fighters to flow across porous borders.

I recently received across my email chain, an email, which rather sarcastically but accurately described the situation. A title line on the email was "Are you confused by what is going on in the Middle East?" and the text says, quote:

"Let me explain. We support the Iraqi government and the fight against ISIS. We do not like ISIS. But ISIS is supported by Saudi Arabia, who we do like. We do not like Assad in Syria, we support this fight against him, but ISIS is also fighting against him. We do not like Iran, but Iran supports the Iraqi government in its fight against ISIS. So some of our friends support our enemies, some enemies are now our friends, and some of our enemies are fighting against our other enemies, who we want to lose. But we do not want our enemies who are fighting our enemies to win. If the people we want to defeat are defeated, they could be replaced by someone we like even less. It is quite simple, really. Do you understand now?"

All that has to stop, and there are signs of that happening in recent days as the challenge is now being recognized around the circuit of chanceries. The media is full of verbal and practical adjustments under way, from Tehran to Ankara to Jeddah and beyond. The Sunni-Shia, Persian-Arab, and other spots are being reevaluated, and alliances are being reconsidered. The Saudis made a significant financial contribution to UN Anti-Terrorism programs, there have been recent public statements by Iranians, Saudi leaders, Iranian and Saudi leaders together, Turkish policy towards the Kurds has been evolving; and there has been a lot of highly public agonizing going on in Washington. You may have noticed that in the Washington Post in the last week or so.

So the threat, the challenge of ISIS must be met at several levels immediately as well as over time. Defeating or even substantially frustrating ISIS will require a broad coalition of nations, and addressing not only military threats but political and religious issues.

This will require some sort of grand strategy. First step in creating this grand strategy is identifying its authors and its participants. A coalition of the willing is required. Actually, a coalition of the threatened, but that phrase lacks a certain élan, a certain enthusiasm. And it must be based on the Muslim countries of the region. Such a grand strategy must be multilateral, and as much political as military, in fact even more so. If ever military activity is supposed to be the

extension of politics – and not indulged in for its own sake – this is the situation, and this is the time. We must not let tactics eclipse strategy. A long-term strategy marshaling allies and addressing the region's political dysfunction is required, and the operative word is long-term.

The need to organize such a grand alliance is currently a matter of high priority in presidential palaces and chanceries all around the world. This task is very difficult, if only because it requires a serious reconsideration of many previous and existing policies and practices. Including, for the United States, eventually we must consider questions not only of what, how much and how soon, but with whom? We can only imagine the amount of scrabbling there must be going on in offices, of staffs being driven crazy by principles, screaming for information and answers. We may be in a moment of historic change, or shift, of relationships and pressures. We shall see.

Meanwhile, as this is going on, the response to the immediate challenge is being termed by the key policy question that lies just below the surface of everything we are talking about and everyone concerned: "When does the enemy of my enemy become my ally?

And at what cost?"

Professor Dean Alexander

Director, Homeland Security Research Program and Professor, Homeland Security at the School of Law Enforcement and Justice Administration at Western Illinois University*

Islamic State Threats to the Homeland

The multi-pronged terrorist attack in Paris in November 2015, organized by the Islamic State (also referred to as ISIL and ISIS), coupled with other large-scale incidents in Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Lebanon, Turkey, Yemen, and Tunisia, demonstrate that this quasi-state has taken an increasingly outward posture in terms of attack strategies. In causing the second largest terror attack on European soil since 9/11, the Islamic State might replicate such significant terror incidents globally, including in the United States. The December 2015 ISIS-inspired terrorist attack in San Bernardino marks a troubling trend.

The threat to the U.S. homeland is manifold. About 250 Americans are believed to have traveled to Syria and Iraq, fighting on behalf of a myriad of warring factions, particularly the Islamic State. Some of these individuals were killed fighting on behalf of the group (Amir Farouk Ibrahim, Douglas McCain, and Abdirahmaan Muhumed). Others play varied functions for the group; Ahmad Abousamra is believed to be running ISIL's social media operations. A number have returned stateside, while the fate of the others is unknown. In light of the participation of several Syrian-trained fighters in the November Paris attacks, the specter of foreign fighters returning here and participating in attacks is troublesome. Also, there is the revelation that there are some 50 high-risk IS-linked individuals who are being monitored 24/7 by the FBI.

As of late December 2015, over seventy U.S.-based individuals have been charged in relation to ISIL materials support or other activities. For instance, dozens of Americans attempted to travel to the region but were arrested before reaching the Islamic State, among them:

- Washington State-based Nicholas Michael Teausant was arrested while trying to cross into Canada with Syria as his final destination.
- Texas-based Michael Todd Wolfe—who was traveling with his family—pleaded guilty to trying to join ISIL.
- Avin Marsalis Brown and Akba Jihad Jordan, based in North Carolina, pleaded guilty to conspiracy to provide material support to ISIL.
- Illinois-based Mohammed Hamzah Khan pleaded guilty for attempting to join ISIL, after being detained with his brother and sister at Chicago O'Hare Airport en route to Syria.

* Contribution at event on November 23, 2015, slightly edited in December 2015.

- Three girls of Somali descent based in Colorado were stopped in Germany and sent back to the United States, following the revelation of their plans to ultimately travel to Turkey (and then Syria) with the goal of joining the Islamic State.
- Shannon Conley pleaded guilty to conspiracy to provide material support to ISIL, after she was caught boarding a flight from Denver to Turkey, with ultimate plans to join the group in Syria.
- Tairod Nathan Webster Pugh, a former U.S. airman, was charged with attempting to provide material support to ISIL. He was extradited from Turkey, preventing his reaching his goal of Syria.
- Keonna Thomas was charged with attempting to provide material support to ISIL as she tried to board a plane from Philadelphia to Barcelona, with subsequent plans to reach Syria by bus.

Within the set of individuals that are ISIL-linked, over a dozen U.S.-based individuals have undertaken a terror attack here or were prevented from doing so, including:

- Illinois-based cousins, Hasan and Jonas Edmonds were arrested for conspiracy to provide material support to ISIL. Hasan intended to travel to Syria to join the group, while Jonas planned to acquire weapons, and, using his cousin's Army National Guard uniform, attack the Joliet Armory, hoping to kill over 100 people.
- John Booker, Jr., intended to commit a suicide-vehicle bombing in Fort Riley Kansas.
- Two New York-based roommates, Noelle Velentzas and Asia Siddiqui, were arrested for conspiracy to use explosive in an ISIL-inspired terror attack. Siddiqui purchased propane gas tanks for use in the attacks, and had a step-by-step guide to utilize them in an attack.
- Two IS-inspired men, Elton Simpson and Nadir Soofi, armed with body armor and assault rifles, opened fire on a security vehicle in Garland, Texas, at the site of an exhibition features cartoons of the Prophet Mohammed. Simpson is believed to have been in contact with IS-cyber operative Junaid Hussain. Arizona-based Abdul Malik Abdul Kareem assisted Simpson and Soofi, and was charged with conspiracy, providing false statements, and weapons charges.

Indeed, for some Americans the lure to join the Islamic State is strong, while, of late, some eschew foreign lands in order to pursue terror attacks in the United States. As the U.S. law enforcement community is investigating Islamic State-linked operatives in all fifty states, major caliphate-associated attacks in the homeland—inspired by outsiders or otherwise—are unfortunately likely to occur.

The Islamic State's Lure to Foreign Women

The revelation that the terrorists in the San Bernardino terrorist attack included a woman – let alone a wife and mother – Tashfeen Malik raises again the issue of female contributions to terrorist activity. Since 2014, various U.S.-based women have faced criminal charges arising from Islamic State (IS)-aligned or inspired activities, ranging from plans to travel abroad to join the group to undertake attacks in the United States.

In 2014, female, U.S.-based IS adherents included:

- Two Colorado teenage sisters and their female schoolmate were intercepted at Frankfurt Airport en route to Turkey while intending to reach the Islamic State.
- Shannon Conley pleaded guilty to conspiracy to provide material support to IS, after she was caught boarding a flight from Denver to Turkey, with ultimate plans to join the group in Syria.

In 2015, U.S.-linked women aligned with the Islamic State comprised:

- Pennsylvania-based Keonna Thomas was charged with attempting to provide material support to IS as she tried to board a plane from Philadelphia to Barcelona, with subsequent plans to reach Syria by bus.
- Two New York-based roommates, Noelle Velentzas and Asia Siddiqui, were arrested for conspiracy to use explosive in an IS-inspired terror attack. Siddiqui purchased propane gas tanks for use in the attacks, and had a step-by-step guide to use them.
- Mississippi-based Jaelyn Delshaun Young and her husband, Muhammad Oda Dakhlalla, were charged with conspiracy and attempting to provide material support to ISIL.
- Three women based in Midwest—Sedina Unkic Hodzic, Mediha Medy Salkicevic, and Jasminka Ramic—were arrested as part of larger cabal that conspired and provided material support to IS-aligned terrorists.
- Heather Coffman pleaded guilty to lying to authorities in relation to her assisting a foreign national in joining the Islamic State.

Other U.S. women were successful in reaching the so-called Caliphate, such as Hoda Muthana, formerly from Alabama. More broadly, by early 2015, over 550 women from Western countries were believed to have traveled to the Islamic State.

Internationally, the Islamic State actively radicalizes and recruits women and girls online or otherwise by disseminating the following narrative: leave the decadence and apostasy of their home country, where they are unwelcome;

join the jihad and be empowered by living in a true Muslim land (the Caliphate); you will contribute to the cause by marrying an IS fighter, and parent the next generation of warriors. Interspersed in the IS pitch is the notion that a Caliphate-based life will be exciting, meaningful, and better than what their life abroad provides or can attain.

Like men, women terrorists pursue such violence for various reasons: perceived political and economic marginalization, ideological commitment, vengeance for victimization of family or friends, financial benefits, a desire to improve their social status, hopelessness, and heavenly benefits arising from martyrdom. Some women have been coerced into terrorism after they have been accused of bringing dishonor to their families through some moral transgression.

Women terrorists have been involved in a breadth of violent acts on behalf of groups embracing all ideological perspectives. Female terrorists have inflicted damage on soft and hard targets, often benefiting by less circumspection by government, private security, and the public, since women are typically not perceived as being involved in terrorism. This misconception is a factor in the success of women terrorists in carrying out all types of attacks, including suicide bombings.

The inclusion of females as terrorists essentially doubles the number of prospective recruits and contributors to a terrorist cause. Also, women are viewed with less suspicion than men. Thereby, they provide tactical advantages, including capacity to undergo less frequent and rigorous searches by government authorities.

Law enforcement, security personnel, and the intelligence community at home and abroad have largely assumed that women will hold back from terrorist activities. Given the increased visibility, lethality, and contributions of female terrorists worldwide, this underestimation of women terrorists merits a recalibration at great urgency. Sadly, Tashfeen Malik is the latest – but not the last – of this reality.

Academic Centers

Inter-University Center for Terrorism Studies (IUCTS)

Established in 1994, the activities of IUCTS are guided by an International Research Council that offers recommendations for study on different aspects of terrorism, both conventional and unconventional. IUCTS is cooperating academically with universities and think tanks in over 40 countries, as well as with governmental, intergovernmental, and nongovernmental bodies.

International Center for Terrorism Studies (ICTS)

Established in 1998 by the Potomac Institute for Policy Studies, in Arlington, VA, ICTS administers IUCTS activities and sponsors an internship program in terrorism studies.

Inter-University Center for Legal Studies (IUCLS)

Established in 1999 and located at the International Law Institute in Washington, D.C., IUCLS conducts seminars and research on legal aspects of terrorism and administers training for law students.

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