

**THE EVOLVING THREAT OF TERRORISM AND EFFECTIVE  
COUNTERTERRORISM STRATEGIES**

**U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES  
COMMITTEE ON ARMED SERVICES**

**February 14, 2017**

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While ISIS<sup>1</sup> poses the most serious, imminent terrorist threat today, al-Qa`ida has been quietly rebuilding and marshaling its resources to reinvigorate the war against the United States declared 20 years ago by its founder and leader, Osama bin Laden.<sup>2</sup> The result is that both groups have enmeshed the U.S. and the West in a debilitating war of attrition, with all its deleterious consequences. ISIS has built external operations capability that will likely survive its loss of territory in Libya, Iraq, and Syria. Meanwhile, the threat from al-Qa`ida persists and may become more serious as it attempts to capitalize on ISIS's falling star alongside the enhancement of its own terrorist strike capabilities.

In order to better understand the background and dynamics of these developments, this testimony will discuss five key potentialities arising from these current threats:

- First, the resilience of ISIS's external operations arm in a post-caliphate environment;
- Second, the likely enduring threat posed by the tens of thousands of foreign fighters who have answered both ISIS's and al-Qa`ida's respective calls to battle;
- Third, the prospect of al-Qa`ida absorbing—whether amenably or forcibly—ISIS's surviving cadre;

- Fourth, the possibility of terrorist development and use of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) re-appearing as a salient threat consideration; and,
- Fifth, what the new administration should do about it.

**THE RESILIENCE OF ISIS'S EXTERNAL OPERATIONS ARM IN A POST-CALIPHATE ENVIRONMENT**

ISIS, alas, is here to stay—at least for the foreseeable future. Some two years before the 2015 Paris attacks, ISIS had built an external operations network in Europe that mostly escaped notice. Known as the Amn al-Kharji or simply as “Enmi” or “Anmi” (the respective Turkish and Arabic rendering of the word, “Amniyat,” or security service), this unit appears to function independently of the group’s waning military and territorial fortunes. For instance, U.S. intelligence and defense officials quoted by Rukmini Callimachi in her revealing August 2016 *New York Times* article believe that ISIS has already sent “hundreds of operatives” into the European Union with “hundreds more” having been dispatched to Turkey as well.<sup>3</sup> If accurate, this investment of operational personnel ensures that ISIS will retain an effective international terrorist strike capability in Europe irrespective of its battlefield reverses in Syria and Iraq. Indeed, ISIS’s leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, has already instructed potential foreign fighters who are unable to travel to the caliphate to instead emigrate to other wilayets (where ISIS branches are located).<sup>4</sup> This suggests that these other branches could develop their own external operations capabilities independent of the parent organization and present significant future threat(s)—much as al-Qa`ida’s franchises have over the past decade in Yemen, North Africa, and South Asia, among other places.

**THE LIKELY ENDURING THREAT POSED BY THE TENS OF THOUSANDS OF FOREIGN FIGHTERS WHO HAVE ANSWERED BOTH ISIS'S AND AL-QA`IDA'S RESPECTIVE CALLS TO BATTLE**

Moreover, in addition to the presumed sleeper cells that ISIS has seeded throughout Europe, there is the further problem of at least some of the estimated 7,000 European foreign fighters returning home.<sup>5</sup> They are only a fraction of the nearly 40,000 persons<sup>6</sup> from more than 100

countries throughout the world<sup>7</sup> who have trained in Syria and Iraq. What this means is that in little more than four years ISIS's international cadre has surpassed even the most liberal estimates of the number of foreign fighters that the U.S. Intelligence Community believes journeyed to Afghanistan during the 1980s and 1990s in order to join al-Qa`ida.<sup>8</sup> In other words, far more foreign nationals have been trained by ISIS in Syria and Iraq during the past couple of years than were by al-Qa`ida in the dozen or so years leading up to the September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001 attacks.<sup>9</sup> This recreates the same constellation of organizational capabilities and trained operatives that made al-Qa`ida so dangerous sixteen years ago.

And, unlike the comparatively narrow geographical demographics of prior al-Qa`ida recruits, ISIS's foreign fighters cadre includes hitherto unrepresented nationalities, such as hundreds of Latin Americans along with citizens from Mali, Benin, and Bangladesh, among other atypical jihadi recruiting grounds.<sup>10</sup> Meanwhile, the danger from so-called lone wolf attacks also remains. The late ISIS commander Abu Muhammad al-Adnani's famous September 2014 summons to battle has hitherto proven far more compelling than al-Qa`ida's longstanding efforts similarly to animate, motivate, and inspire individuals to engage in violence in support of its aims.

**THE PROSPECT OF AL-QA`IDA ABSORBING—WHETHER AMENABLY OR FORCIBLY—  
ISIS'S SURVIVING CADRE**

While ISIS has dominated the headlines and preoccupied the U.S. government's attention for the past four years, al-Qa`ida has been quietly rebuilding and marshaling its resources for the continuation of its twenty year long struggle against the U.S. Indeed, its presence in Syria should be regarded as just as dangerous and even more pernicious than that of ISIS. Evidence of the high priority that the al-Qa`ida Senior Leadership (AQSL) attaches to Syria may be seen in the special messages conveyed in February and June 2012 respectively by Ayman al-Zawahiri and the late Abu Yahya al-Libi in support of the uprising against the Assad regime—calling upon Muslims in Turkey, Iraq, Jordan, and Lebanon to do everything within their power to assist in the overthrow of the apostate Alawites.

The fact that Jabhat al-Nusra or Jabhat Fateh al-Sham, regardless of what it calls itself, is even more capable than ISIS and a more dangerous long-term threat seems almost immaterial to many across the region who not only actively support and assist it, but actively seek to partner with what they perversely regard as a more moderate and reasonable rival to ISIS.

This development may be seen as fitting neatly into al-Zawahiri's broader strategy of letting ISIS take all the heat and absorb all the blows from the coalition arrayed against it while al-Qa`ida quietly rebuilds its military strength and basks in its paradoxical new cachet as "moderate extremists" in contrast to the unconstrained ISIS.

Anyone inclined to be taken in by this ruse would do well to heed the admonition of Theo Padnos (Peter Theo Curtis), the American journalist who spent two years in Syria as a hostage of Jabhat al-Nusra. Padnos relates how, "The Nusra Front higher-ups were inviting Westerners to the jihad in Syria not so much because they needed more foot soldiers—they didn't—but because they want to teach the Westerners to take the struggle into every neighborhood and subway back home."<sup>11</sup>

Finally, the importance of Syria to al-Qa`ida's plans may be seen in the number of AQSL personages who have re-located there. Mushin al-Fadhli, a bin Laden intimate who, until his death from a U.S. airstrike in 2015, had commanded the Khorasan Group—al-Qa`ida's elite, forward-based operational arm in Syria. Haydar Kirkan, a Turkish national and longstanding, senior al-Qa`ida commander, had been sent back to his homeland in 2010—presumably by bin Laden himself. Kirkan's orders were to build an infrastructure in the region to facilitate the movement of key al-Qa`ida personnel hiding in Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Area in order to escape the escalation of drone strikes ordered by President Obama. Kirkan was recently killed as a result of a U.S. bombing raid in Idlib, Syria.

And, in late 2015, al-Zawahiri dispatched Saif al-Adl, al-Qa`ida's most experienced and battle-hardened senior commander, to Syria in order to oversee the group's interests there. With this senior command structure in place, al-Qa`ida is thus well positioned to exploit ISIS's

weakening military position and territorial losses and once again regain its pre-eminent position at the vanguard of the Salafi-Jihadi movement. ISIS in any event can no longer compete with al-Qa`ida in terms of influence, reach, manpower, and cohesion. In only one domain is ISIS currently stronger than its rival: the ability to mount spectacular terrorist strikes in Europe—and this is only because al-Qa`ida has decided for the time being to restrain this type of operation.

Looking to the immediate future, ISIS's continuing setbacks and serial weakening arguably create the conditions where some reconciliation with al-Qa`ida might yet be effected. Efforts to reunite have in fact been continuous from both sides virtually from the time of ISIS's expulsion from the al-Qa`ida fold in 2014. Regardless of how it might occur, any kind of reconciliation between ISIS and al-Qa`ida or re-amalgamation or co-operation between the two groups would profoundly change the current conflict and result in a significantly escalated threat of foreign fighter terrorist operations in the West.

**THE POSSIBILITY OF TERRORIST DEVELOPMENT AND USE OF WEAPONS OF MASS DESTRUCTION (WMD) RE-APPEARING AS A SALIENT THREAT CONSIDERATION**

A quarter of a century ago, Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher described publicity as the oxygen upon which terrorism depended. Today, however, it is access to sanctuary and safe haven that sustains and nourishes terrorism. A depressing pattern has established itself whereby we continue to kill terrorist leaders while the organizations they lead nonetheless continue to seize more territory. Indeed, according to the National Counterterrorism Center, a year before the U.S. launched the current campaign to defeat ISIS, the group had a presence in only seven countries around the world. By 2015, the same year that the Obama administration's latest counterterrorism strategy had been enunciated, that number had nearly doubled. And, as recently as this past August, the NCTC reported that ISIS was "fully operational" in eighteen countries.<sup>12</sup> Meanwhile, Qa`ida is also present in more countries today (nearly two dozen by my count) than it was in 2001—and in three times as many as when the Obama administration took office in 2009. Today, foreign volunteers are fighting in Yemen,

Afghanistan, Pakistan, Somalia, Libya, and Mali as well as in Syria and Iraq, among other places.

Sanctuary also permits more scope for terrorist research and development efforts to produce various weapons of destruction (WMD—more accurately CBRN weapons: chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear weapons). In the case of al-Qa`ida's presence in Afghanistan before the September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001 attacks, these fears were more than amply justified. The group's interest in acquiring a nuclear weapon had reportedly commenced as far back as 1992—a mere four years after its creation. Indeed, bin Laden's continued interest in nuclear weaponry was also on display at the time of the September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001 attacks. Two Pakistani nuclear scientists, identified as Sultan Bashiruddin Mahmood and Abdul Majeed, spent three days that August at a secret al-Qa`ida facility outside Kabul. Although their discussions with bin Laden, al-Zawahiri, and other senior Qa`ida commanders also focused the development and employment of chemical and biological weapons, Mahmood—the former director for nuclear power at Pakistan's Atomic Energy Commission—claimed that bin Laden's foremost interest was in developing a nuclear weapon. Nor is there any reason to suspect that al-Qa`ida's general fascination with either nuclear or other weapons of mass destruction or mass disruption has ever completely abated or disappeared.

Al-Qa`ida's research and development of biological warfare agents, for instance, were not only actively pursued but were also far more advanced than its nuclear ambitions. They appear to have begun in earnest with a memo written by al-Zawahiri on April 15, 1999 to Muhammad Atef, then-deputy commander of al-Qa`ida's military committee. Citing articles from leading scholarly publications such as *Science*, the *Journal of Immunology*, and the *New England Journal of Medicine*, as well as information gleaned from authoritative books such as *Tomorrow's Weapons* (1964), *Peace or Pestilence* (1949), and *Chemical Warfare* (1924), al-Zawahiri outlined in detail his thoughts on the priority that needed to be given to developing a biological weapons capability. At least two separate teams of al-Qa`ida operatives were subsequently tasked to undertake parallel R&D efforts to produce anthrax, ricin, and

chemical warfare agents at the movement's facilities in Kandahar and Derunta. Bio-warfare experts believe that on the eve of the September 11, 2001 attacks, al-Qa`ida was at least two to three years away from producing a sufficient quantity of anthrax to use as a weapon.

More recently, credible intelligence surfaced in 2010 that al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP)—widely considered the movement's most dangerous and capable affiliate—was deeply involved in the development of ricin, a bio-weapon made from castor beans that the FBI has termed the third most toxic substance known to mankind—behind only plutonium and botulism. Then, in May 2013, Turkish authorities seized two kilos of sarin nerve gas—the same weapon used in the 1995 attack on the Tokyo subway system—and arrested twelve men linked to Qa`ida's Syrian affiliate. Days later, another set of sarin-related arrests was made in Iraq of terrorist belonging to ISIS's immediate predecessor, who were reportedly respectively overseeing the production of sarin and mustard blistering agents in at least two different locations. ISIS, of course, has also repeatedly employed chemical weapons, including against civilians, in Syria. It is doubtful whether they would feel constrained from deploying these weapons elsewhere.

#### **WHAT THE NEW ADMINISTRATION SHOULD DO ABOUT IT ALL**

In sum, the Trump administration is facing perhaps the most parlous international security environment since the period immediately following the September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001 attacks—with serious threats now emanating from not one but two terrorist movements and a previous counterterrorism strategy and approach that has failed. Indeed, the three pillars upon which that strategy was based—leadership attrition, training of local forces, and countering violent extremism—have thus failed to deliver a crushing blow to ISIS and al-Qa`ida.<sup>13</sup>

The U.S.-led war on terrorism has now lasted longer than our participation in both world wars. It has surpassed even our active military involvement in Vietnam during the 1960s and 1970s. Like the Viet Cong guerrillas and People's Army of Vietnam main force units, our Salafi-Jihadi enemies have locked us into an enervating war of attrition—the preferred strategy of terrorists and guerrillas from

time immemorial. They hope to undermine national political will, corrode internal popular support, and demoralize us and our regional partners through a prolonged, generally intensifying and increasingly diffuse campaign of terrorism and violence.

In his last publicly released, videotaped statement bin Laden revealed precisely this strategy on the eve of the 2004 presidential election. "So we are continuing this policy in bleeding America to the point of bankruptcy," he declared.

Allah willing, and nothing is too great for Allah. . . . This is in addition to our having experience in using guerrilla warfare and the war of attrition to fight tyrannical superpowers, as we, alongside the mujahidin, bled Russia for 10 years, until it went bankrupt and was forced to withdraw in defeat.<sup>14</sup>

Decisively breaking this stasis and emerging from this war of attrition must therefore be among the Trump administration's highest priorities. Simply killing a small number of leaders in terrorist groups, whose ranks in any event are continually replenished, will not end the threats posed by ISIS and al-Qa`ida nor dislodge them from their bases of operation in the Levant and Iraq, North Africa, the Arabian Peninsula, and South Asia. The slow and fractured process of training indigenous government security forces in those regions will not do so either. The inadequacy of these training activities and efforts to build partner capacity are evidenced by the mostly unimpeded escalation of terrorist activities in all those places. Whether in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Mali, Somalia, and especially in Yemen, our efforts to build partner capacity have all foundered. In each, Islamist terrorist numbers grew faster than we were able to train indigenous security forces effectively; terrorist control over territory and the creation of new sanctuaries and safe havens expanded while governmental sovereignty contracted; and, the terrorists' operational effectiveness appreciably outpaced that of their government opponents. While there has been some recent progress in Mali, Nigeria, Syria, and Iraq, it is not clear whether the past problems that undermined the performance of indigenous militaries have been adequately addressed and reversed. Accordingly, the Trump administration should conduct a complete



reevaluation and systemic overhaul of our training and resourcing of foreign partners if we are to prevent the further spread of ISIS and al-Qa`ida branches and counter their entrenchment across the multiple regions in which they have already embedded themselves.

While continued and increased U.S. combat air support is also required—especially in Iraq, Syria, Libya, and in support of French forces in Mali—that alone is not the answer. American and allied air strikes in coordination with local ground forces have not brought any of these counterterrorist campaigns to rapid conclusion. Therefore, in tandem with both the continued use of air power and deployment of supporting American special operations forces personnel, division-size conventional U.S. military forces might be usefully deployed on a strict 90-day rotation into violence-plagued rural areas and urban trouble spots. They have the necessary combat experience and skill-sets to sequentially eliminate terrorist strength in each of these areas and thereby enable indigenous security forces to follow in their wake to stabilize and police newly liberated places. By providing more effective governance and core services—with sustained U.S. and European support—host nations could thus better prevent the recurrence of terrorism and return of terrorist forces.

## **CONCLUSION**

The current threat environment posed by the emergence and spread of ISIS and the stubborn resilience and long-game approach of al-Qa`ida makes a new strategy and new organizational and institutional behaviors necessary. The non-traditional challenges to U.S. national security and foreign policy imperatives posed by elusive and deadly irregular adversaries emphasizes the need to anchor changes that will more effectively close the gap between detecting irregular adversarial activity and rapidly defeating it. The effectiveness of this strategy will be based on our capacity to think like a networked enemy, in anticipation of how they may act in a variety of situations, aided by different resources. This goal requires that the U.S. national security structure organize itself for maximum efficiency, information sharing,

and the ability to function quickly and effectively under new operational definitions.

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<sup>1</sup> The Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham—also known as ISIL, the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant; by its pejorative Arabic acronym, Daesh; and, simply as the Islamic State.

<sup>2</sup> This presentation is adopted from the author's "Terrorism Challenges for the Trump Administration," *CTC Sentinel*, vol. 9, issue 11 (November/December 2016), at: [https://www.ctc.usma.edu/v2/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/CTC-Sentinel\\_Vol9Iss1113.pdf](https://www.ctc.usma.edu/v2/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/CTC-Sentinel_Vol9Iss1113.pdf).

<sup>3</sup> Rukmini Callimachi, "How a Secretive Branch of ISIS Built a Global Network of Killers," *New York Times*, August 3, 2016. See also, idem, "How ISIS Built the Machinery of Terror Under Europe's Gaze," *New York Times*, March 29, 2016.

<sup>4</sup> Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, "This is what Allah and His Messenger had Promised Us," *Islamic State Fuqran Media Foundation*, November 2, 2016.

<sup>5</sup> See John Gatt-Rutter, director of counterterrorism division, European External Action Service (EEAS) quoted in Martin Banks, "Returning foreign fighters are biggest threat to EU, Parliament warned," *The Parliament: Politics, Policy And People Magazine*, October 12, 2016.

<sup>6</sup> James R. Clapper, Director of National Intelligence, "Statement for the Record: Worldwide Threat Assessment of the US Intelligence Community," Senate Armed Services Committee, 9 February 2016, pp. 4-6; and, U.S. Department of State, "Country Reports on Terrorism 2015: Special Briefing by Justin Siberell, Acting Coordinator for Counterterrorism," June 2, 2016.

<sup>7</sup> Clapper, p. 4; and, Matt Bradley, "Rift Grows in Islamic State Between Foreign, Local Fighters," *Wall Street Journal*, March 25, 2016.

<sup>8</sup> "Estimates of the number of non-Afghan volunteers range from 4,000 to 25,000, with Arab fighters making up the majority." Gina Bennett, 'The Wandering Mujahidin: Armed and Dangerous,' *Weekend Edition: United States Department of State Bureau of Intelligence and*

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Research, August 21-22, 1993, pp. 1-2,

<http://www.nationalsecuritymom.com/3/WanderingMujahidin.pdf>.

<sup>9</sup> "U.S. intelligence estimates the total number of fighters who underwent instruction in Bin Laden-supported camps in Afghanistan from 1996 through 9/11 at 10,000 to 20,000." National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, *The 9/11 Commission Report: Final Report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States: Authorized Version* (New York & London: W.W. Norton, 2004), p. 67.

<sup>10</sup> I am indebted to Professor Jytte Klausen of Brandeis University for her thoughts on this issue. E-mail correspondence, October 21, 2016. See also, Brian Dodwell, Daniel Milton, and Don Rassler, *The Caliphate's Global Workforce: An Inside Look At the Islamic State's Foreign Fighter Paper Trail* (West Point, NY: Combating Terrorism Center, April 2016), p. 9.

<sup>11</sup> Theo Padnos, "My Captivity," *New York Times Magazine*, October 29, 2014.

<sup>12</sup> William Arkin, et al., "New Counterterrorism 'Heat Map' Shows ISIS Branches Spreading Worldwide," *NBC News*, August 23, 2016, accessed at: <http://www.nbcnews.com/storyline/isis-terror/new-counterterrorism-heat-map-shows-isis-branches-spreading-worldwide-n621866>.

<sup>13</sup> The most recent official elucidation of this approach is the 2015 National Security Strategy document. It explains how the U.S. "shifted away from a model of fighting costly, large-scale ground wars in Iraq and Afghanistan in which the United States—particularly our military—bore an enormous burden. Instead, we are now pursuing a more sustainable approach that prioritizes targeted counterterrorism operations, collective action with responsible partners, and increased efforts to prevent the growth of violent extremism and radicalization that drives increased threats."

See *National Security Strategy*, February 2015, p. 9, [https://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/docs/2015\\_national\\_security\\_strategy.pdf](https://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/docs/2015_national_security_strategy.pdf)

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<sup>14</sup> "Full transcript of bin Laden's speech," aljazeera.com, November 1, 2004, accessed at:  
<http://www.aljazeera.com/archive/2004/11/200849163336457223.html>.