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15 Years after 9-11: The State of the Fight Against Islamic Terrorism

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Chairman Thornberry, Ranking Member Smith, and Members of the Committee, I would like to thank you for giving me the opportunity to testify today.

I have been asked to assess and reflect on the state of our counterterrorism fight since 9-11, provide some lessons learned over the past 15 years, and identify gaps and opportunities that can help us moving forward. As an active duty officer, I should note that my testimony is based on my academic work and my personal and professional experiences. My testimony should not be taken to represent the views and opinions of the U.S. Military Academy, the Army, or the Department of Defense.

Congressional hearings like this provide a venue to critically analyze our counterterrorism efforts and in doing so, allow us to double-down on what we are doing well and identify ways to fix our mistakes. I can tell you that our enemies are doing the same. In 2008, U.S. forces captured a document produced by the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI), the precursor to the organization that today calls itself the Islamic State. At the time, ISI was suffering major setbacks and on the run, forced to retreat from major population centers and into the deserts in western and northwestern Iraq and eastern Syria. The captured document is about 50 pages in length and analyzes in impressive detail the mistakes the group had made up to that point and more importantly, how best to correct them in the future.¹ This is particularly telling for two major reasons. First, even though ISI was experiencing its darkest hours, it was still thinking and planning how to improve its tactics, techniques, and procedures in the future. Islamic State members and supporters are in this fight for the long-term, and it is important that we understand that. Second, it shows the group is a learning organization that does not rest on its laurels or meekly accept defeat; it invests in consistent improvement and learning from the mistakes of its predecessors.

Nature and evolution of the threat

The threat posed by jihadist terrorism has metastasized in ways few could have predicted after 9-11. Prior to 9-11, al-Qa`ida enjoyed a safe haven with the Taliban in Afghanistan with few constraints on their freedom of movement and ability to plan spectacular attacks. With the exception of a few other jihadist groups in the Middle East and Southeast Asia, the jihadist

¹ Harmony Document, NMEC-2007-612449, "An Analysis of the State of ISI," accessible at ctc.usma.edu.

landscape was largely dominated by al-Qa`ida and geographically centered in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region. The group succeeded in conducting three strategic attacks against the United States in a span of three years: the 1998 attacks on our East African embassies in Kenya and Tanzania; the attack in 2000 against the *U.S.S. Cole* in Yemen; and, of course, the attacks of September 11, 2001.

Today, the threat posed by jihadist terrorism is more geographically diffuse, decentralized, and unpredictable than it was on September 12, 2001. At the time, nobody could have predicted that the greatest terrorist threat to the United States 15 years later would not be al-Qa`ida, but its rival and once satellite group, the Islamic State. The span of jihadist influence now ranges from West Africa through the Levant to South and Southeast Asia, from Mali to Manila. In addition, attacks inspired and directed by the Islamic State by homegrown violent extremists and returning foreign fighters from Syria and Iraq threaten the security of the United States, Canada, and Western Europe. The Islamic State continues to hold territory in Syria and Iraq, while al-Qa`ida is one of the main players on the Syrian battlefield, resurgent in its old stomping grounds in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region.² In addition to fending off spectacular 9-11-style attacks, the United States now must cope with a steady stream of less sophisticated attacks aimed at stoking fear and mobilizing more individuals to the cause.

Our national strategy documents for combating terrorism have conceptualized the threat in different ways over the years. The 2003 National Strategy for Combating Terrorism declared that the “enemy is terrorism.”³ Three years later, the next counterterrorism strategy framed the principal enemy in a different fashion, this time as “a transnational movement of extremist organizations, networks, and individuals – and their state and non-state supporters.”⁴ The 2011 National Strategy for Counterterrorism featured yet another conceptualization of the threat. It contradicted previous strategies, making “it clear that [the United States was] not at war with the

² Bill Roggio, “U.S. Adds al Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent, Leader to Terrorism List,” *Long War Journal*, June 30, 2016.

³ White House, *National Strategy for Combating Terrorism*, Washington, D.C. (February 2003), p. 1.

⁴ White House, *National Strategy for Combating Terrorism*, Washington, D.C. (September 2006), p. 5.

tactic of terrorism” or an amorphous transnational movement. Instead, this strategy focused U.S. counterterrorism efforts against a specific organization – al-Qa`ida.⁵

As other scholars have articulated, terrorism is a tactic, so declaring the *tactic* of terrorism as the enemy provided a lack of clarity in terms of the ends we were seeking.⁶ Narrowing the focus in 2006 to a “transnational movement of extremist organizations” provided more specificity, but it gave too much credit to an amorphous, non-monolithic jihadist threat. Pinning the counterterrorism rose squarely on al-Qa`ida in 2011 provided more focus on the most dangerous organization, but it underestimated the fact that the terrorist threat is dynamic and evolving. In my opinion, that narrow definition ran the risk of downplaying new and emerging threats. The Islamic State is just the latest case in point.

What is the best way to conceptualize the threat moving forward? Since 9-11, the United States has conceptualized the conflict as a war – e.g. the war on terror; the war against violent extremism; and the war against al Qaeda, its adherents, and its affiliates. This is, after all, how the United States has conceptualized other major security threats in the past century, whether they were the Axis Powers or the Axis of Evil. The threat posed by jihadist terrorism, however, is different. First, despite the fear that terrorism can evoke, it is not an existential threat like the ones we faced in World War II or in the nuclear-primed Cold War. Second, notwithstanding our desire and capability of reducing the threat posed by these groups, victory in this fight against jihadism will not look like victory in previous wars. There will be no *U.S.S. Missouri*-like ceremony with groups like the Islamic State or al-Qa`ida unconditionally surrendering to coalition forces. Moving forward, unsettling as it may be, another way of conceptualizing the threat posed by jihadist terrorism would be not as a war, but as a chronic disease like cancer. In this light, the fight against radical jihadism is not a national security threat that can be solved, defeated, or vanquished, but one that is an inevitable facet of modern life that can be managed and contained, but never fully eliminated.

⁵ White House, *National Strategy for Counterterrorism*, Washington, D.C. (June 2011), pp. 2-3.

⁶ See, for example, Eugene Robinson, “A Team in Need of a Plan,” *Washington Post*, December 2, 2008, A21.

Successes

Before turning to the lessons learned over the past 15 years, it is important to acknowledge some important counterterrorism successes. The most important accomplishment, which cannot be overstated, is that U.S. counterterrorism efforts have prevented jihadists from successfully executing another strategic, large-scale attack against the homeland. Terrorist attacks like those that took place in Boston, Fort Hood, San Bernardino, and Orlando are certainly tragic, but they do not represent the threat to our security and way of life that the 9-11 attacks did.

Second, the post-9-11 era has seen a successful investment in important kinetic elements of our counterterrorism efforts. No other country can match the U.S.'s operational and intelligence capabilities to identify, track down, and remove terrorists from the battlefield. Such a success can be seen as a double-edged sword, as one could argue that our prowess in this area is one of the reasons policymakers have tended to conceptualize this conflict as a war, and why the military is routinely emphasized over other elements of national power in combating terrorism.

Third, U.S. counterterrorism has dramatically improved its non-kinetic tools to fight jihadist terrorism in other areas, including the tools of counter-threat finance and diplomatic sanctions that freeze terrorist assets and inhibit their ability to travel abroad.⁷ These tools have proven effective in weakening the infrastructure of terrorist groups and making it harder for them to take advantage of the benefits of globalization.

Finally, intergovernmental and intragovernmental counterterrorism coordination has improved significantly since 9-11. The government has taken positive steps toward breaking down organizational stovepipes in the counterterrorism fight, and information is shared more freely within the intelligence community. While better than it was, the challenge of working across deeply ingrained organizational cultures and bureaucratic politics is likely to remain a persistent issue. Additionally, a realization that the United States could not win this conflict unilaterally has led to enhanced cooperation and coordination with partner countries. Programs in security force assistance, building partner capacity, and intelligence sharing with key partners have become,

⁷ See, for example, Juan C. Zarate, *Treasury's War* (New York: Public Affairs, 2013).

and will continue to be, integral components of any U.S. counterterrorism strategy moving forward.

The critical question, then, is whether these improvements now make us safe from jihadist terrorism. The answer is not binary. These tools have undeniably made us *safer*, but Americans will likely never be completely *safe* from terrorism, at least for the foreseeable future. That said, we as a country can continue to mitigate the risk posed by terrorism by continuing to learn and evolve in response to the threat. With that in mind, the following section highlights a few of the lessons learned in the past 15 years that warrant consideration for improving U.S. counterterrorism efforts moving forward.

Lessons Learned

1. Understanding the importance of clearly defining our strategic objective(s)

In crafting any effective strategy, policymakers must identify the ends, ways, and means needed to achieve a particular objective. Strategic ends represent what one hopes to ultimately achieve. Strategic ways represent how one operates to achieve that goal, and the means are the resources one uses to execute the strategy. Perhaps the most important of these components are the ends. Without identifying ends that are achievable, realistic, and easy to understand, it really does not matter how great the ways and means are. As Sun Tzu said, “Strategy without tactics is the slowest route to victory. Tactics without strategy is the noise before defeat.”⁸

In my professional opinion, the attacks of 9-11 came as such a strategic surprise to the United States that, in our understandable urgency to respond quickly, we never really took the time to debate what our strategic ends in this conflict should be. Faced with a new and poorly understood threat, we collectively (government, academia, media, polity) focused more on debating the ways and means than on any strategic end in the fight against jihadism. Debates about our strategic ways and means were and remain commonplace, including arguments about the efficacy of preemptive strikes to stave off terrorist threats, the use of drones, detention and immigration policies, and non-kinetic programs to counter violent extremism. Yet there is very

⁸ Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, Samuel B. Griffith, trans. (London: Oxford University Press, 1963).

little debate that addresses the most important questions for a counterterrorism strategy: what is our counterterrorism strategy designed to achieve? What does success look like? What does progress look like? Debating ways and means is important, but having a clear vision of our strategic end is even more important.

2. Understanding the importance of proper expectation management regarding our ability to combat the jihadist threat

The United States has faced several serious security challenges in its history, and it has always found a way to overcome them. Some may view this current conflict as being no different than fighting totalitarianism or communism, but it is different in important ways. Regardless, calling it a war carries with it certain implications. As my fellow panelist Brian Michael Jenkins wrote in the *CTC Sentinel*, it is likely that the “use of the term ‘war’ created unrealistic expectations” in the current conflict with jihadist terrorism.⁹ The United States has been focused on combating the threat since 9-11, spending massive amounts of blood and treasure in the process, yet some debate whether we are any closer to “winning” this conflict.¹⁰

The threat posed by jihadists to U.S. security and that of our allies will endure for the foreseeable future, and likely for several generations. Individual groups like al-Qa`ida and the Islamic State will ebb and flow.¹¹ They may be greatly weakened or marginalized, like al-Qa`ida was in 2011, but successor groups will undoubtedly emerge, especially if there is no change to the socio-political dynamics that foster this kind of political violence around the world. Unfortunately, as the United States and other nations have discovered, finding ways to change those dynamics effectively is extremely challenging.

Moving forward, policymakers may consider redefining our counterterrorism goals accordingly. For example, when the United States publicly identifies *defeat* of groups like al-Qa`ida or the Islamic State as its policy objective, and then fails to achieve this standard, it provides our

⁹ Brian Michael Jenkins, “Fifteen Years On: Where Are We in the War on Terror?” *CTC Sentinel* 9:9 (September 2016), pp 7-12.

¹⁰ Audrey Kurth Cronin, “The ‘War on Terrorism’: What Does It Mean to Win?” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 37:2 (2014), pp. 174-197; Philip H. Gordon, “Can the War on Terror Be Won?” *Foreign Affairs* (November/December 2007), pp. 53-66.

¹¹ Audrey Kurth Cronin, “How al Qaeda Ends,” *International Security* 31:1 (Summer 2006), p. 48.

enemies with ammunition to recruit and fundraise. I believe that declaring *defeat* as the ultimate goal may appeal to the country's sense of pride and match the war paradigm that has been constructed, but every day the Islamic State or al-Qa`ida exists hurts America's credibility and strengthens that of its enemies.

We should be relentless in learning more about how to prevent attacks from occurring and improve our response to them when they inevitably occur, but the government plays an important role in creating realistic public expectations. No politician wants to appear weak on terrorism by publicly acknowledging that future terrorist attacks are inevitable, particularly in an open and free society, but they are inevitable. On the other hand, the public needs to understand that not every terrorist attack is a political failure, nor is it an existential threat to our national security. These subtleties are often lost in the public discourse, which leads to unwarranted fear, divisiveness, and knee-jerk decision-making.

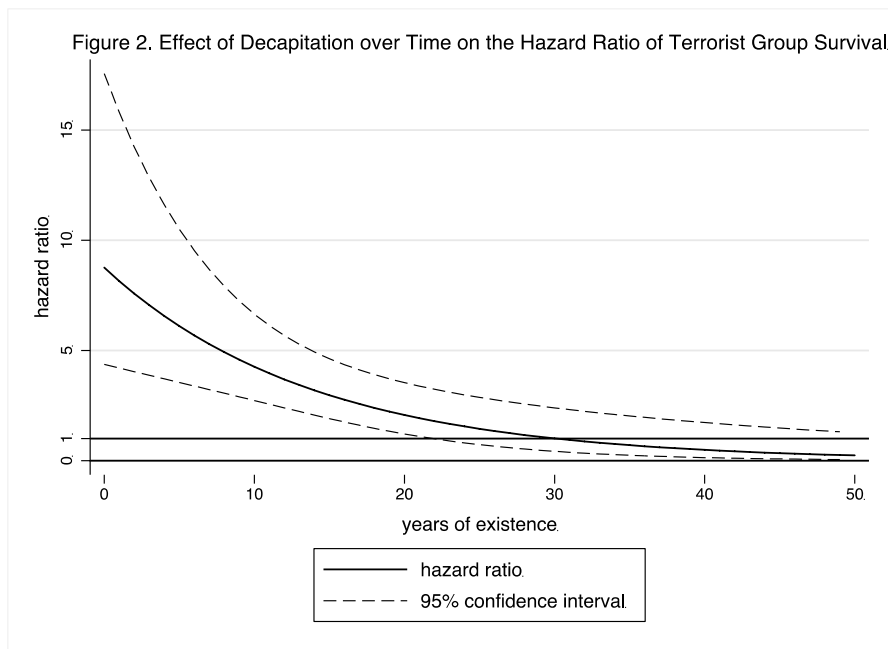
3. Making decapitation tactics a part of a broader strategy

One of the defining features of U.S. counterterrorism since 9-11 has been the military's ability to identify, track down, and target individual terrorists on the battlefield, a task that is often done by unmanned aerial systems (UAS). Decapitation tactics, especially those that result in the lethal targeting of individual terrorists, have been a controversial component of U.S. counterterrorism strategy for a number of reasons.

In addition to making legal and constitutional arguments against the use of such strikes, as well as expressing the humanitarian concerns regarding collateral damage, critics of so-called decapitation strikes argue that they are ineffective and potentially counterproductive in our counterterrorism efforts.¹² They argue that killing terrorist leaders creates a martyr effect that increases recruiting and resources for the terrorist group, not to mention deep-seeded resentment towards the United States in the affected population.

¹² Jenna Jordan, "When Heads Roll: Assessing the Effectiveness of Leadership Decapitation," *Security Studies* 18:4 (2009).

In my own research on the subject, I focused on one of the many questions regarding this approach: does killing or capturing the group’s leader affect the long-term survivability of the organization? The short answer is that it does. In an analysis of 207 groups from 1970-2008, killing or capturing the top terrorist leader significantly increased the mortality rate of terrorist groups.¹³ The long answer is that the efficacy of such decapitation efforts are nuanced. Timing matters. Terrorist groups that lose their leader to kill or capture in their first year of existence are more than eight times more likely to end than groups who have not been decapitated. If leadership decapitation occurs 10 years into the group’s lifecycle, however, effect of decapitation is reduced by half. If decapitation occurs 20 years after the group has formed, then killing or capturing the leader may have no effect on the group’s mortality (see figure below).¹⁴ Al-Qa`ida is well over 20 years old, and the organizational roots of the Islamic State date back to 2003, meaning that decapitation strikes against these groups will have less of an effect on their mortality rates than younger groups. It is also important to emphasize that few groups catastrophically collapse following decapitation. Only 30% of decapitated groups in my dataset ended within two years of losing their leader.¹⁵ Policymakers may ultimately decide that the benefits of these tactics outweigh their costs, but it is critical to recognize the tradeoffs involved.



¹³ Bryan C. Price, “Targeting Top Terrorists: How Leadership Decapitation Contributes to Counterterrorism,” *International Security* 36:4 (Spring 2012), pp. 9-46.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Price, “Targeting Top Terrorists,” p. 43.

What does this mean for the future of targeted killings and those conducted by unmanned aerial systems? Regardless of where one stands in the various debates surrounding this tactic, there are several lessons we should learn from their use over the past 15 years.

UAS strikes are often the preferred counterterrorism tool for a number of reasons. Successful strikes provide tangible effects that both the terrorists and our citizens can see and measure. They provide time and maneuver space for the United States and its allies to employ other elements of national power, like diplomacy and governance-improving measures. They force terrorist groups to spend resources to protect their leaders and operational security. They are often the most lethal and precise methods counterterrorism officials can use without putting American servicemen and women in danger.

UAS strikes, however, have important limitations. They are not a silver-bullet solution to the terrorist problem. They are not sufficient by themselves to defeat highly capable groups like al-Qa`ida and the Islamic State. In my opinion, if we make UAS strikes a cornerstone of our counterterrorism strategy moving forward without seriously investing in other areas, we can expect to experience similar levels of terrorist violence, if not more. Another caveat to note is that these strikes have been traditionally conducted in remote regions like the Federally Administered Tribal Areas in Pakistan or in failed or failing states like Yemen, Somalia, and Syria. It is hard to conceptualize how these strikes can be conducted against terrorists operating in fully functional states, urban areas, and mega-cities.

4. Acknowledging that the military is a part of any effective counterterrorism strategy, but it is only one part, and it may not be the most important part for long-term success

One of the most significant lessons we can learn from the past 15 years is that on its own, the military is a necessary but not a sufficient component in the fight against jihadist terrorism. I have had the privilege of briefing many of our nation's top counterterrorism officials for the past four years, including those tasked with leading forces at the proverbial tip of the counterterrorism spear. In these engagements, there has been one common refrain. It is best encapsulated in the

words of former Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, who said in 2008 that “we cannot kill or capture our way to victory” in the long-term campaign against terrorism.¹⁶

An oft-repeated critique of the war in Iraq was that the United States paid too little attention to what would happen after major hostilities ended.¹⁷ If media attention is used to evaluate where the emphasis resides in employing elements of national power, then critics could argue we may be making the same mistake in the war against the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria. In other words, there is no shortage of debate over troop levels, rules of engagement, and military strategy, but very little discussion focuses on how the United States intends to shape political conditions on the ground once the Islamic State is pushed out of the territory that it now controls. In my opinion, recent history in Iraq is proof that failure to address these socio-political concerns can often result in other, potentially more capable jihadist groups entering the fray.

An emphasis on military solutions is also aided by the fact that scholarly work on other, non-kinetic means to combat jihadist terrorism has produced mixed results and few policy-relevant solutions. The pathways to radicalization are varied and complex, and efforts to find effective ways to identify at-risk segments of the population and interdict those who have become radicalized are problematic. With that said, more can be done by academics and policymakers to understand radicalization and ways to prevent it. There is not just a need for this type of work, but a demand for it. In his book *The Great War of Our Time*, former CIA Deputy Director and current CTC Senior Fellow Michael Morell wrote, “For every hour that I spent in the Situation Room talking about counter-radicalization, I spent a thousand hours talking about dealing with young men who had already become radicalized.”¹⁸

This ratio is not unique to the United States, but it is illustrative of the reactive rather than proactive approach many liberal democracies take in combating terrorism. While there will undoubtedly be ways to improve how we respond to and react to terrorists after they radicalize and become violent, we still have a long way to go in learning how to prevent individuals from

¹⁶ Ann Scott Tyson, “Gates Warns of Militarized Policy,” *Washington Post*, July 16, 2008.

¹⁷ See for example Daniel Byman, “An Autopsy of the Iraq Debacle: Policy Failure or a Bridge Too Far,” *Security Studies* 17 (2008), pp. 599-643.

¹⁸ Michael Morell, *The Great War of Our Time* (New York: Twelve, 2015), p. 319.

radicalizing, or to de-radicalize those who have already gone down that path. If there is not more attention given to the prevention side to jihadism, we will likely see little progress in our counterterrorism efforts.

5. Leveraging public-private partnerships in the war of ideas

Just as the United States cannot unilaterally defeat jihadist groups, the government is ill-equipped to unilaterally fight the war of ideas. The Islamic State recognized from the outset the importance of this domain, and they have devoted significant resources to a building a propaganda campaign that is unmatched by previous jihadist groups. The group is also adept at manipulating and taking advantage of the terms of use policies of popular communication platforms, like Twitter and Facebook, that private sector companies have created. The United States, on the other hand, has not been able to match the size, scope, and influence of the Islamic State in its counter-messaging campaign, a dynamic that has existed in our efforts to combat jihadism since 9-11. Commenting on this gap in October of 2001, Richard Holbrooke lamented, “how can a man in a cave [Usama bin Ladin] outcommunicate the world’s leading communications society?”¹⁹

It was not until a decade later that the United States stood up the Counterterrorism Strategic Communications Center (CSCC) in the State Department to compete overtly with jihadists online, and even then, critics argued it was undermanned, underfunded, and too bureaucratically hamstrung to make a serious difference. The establishment of the Global Engagement Center earlier this year was an attempt to address some of these limitations. Time will tell if it has more success than CSCC, but it faces similar challenges.

The first challenge is overcoming the credibility gap that the United States has in strategically communicating to Muslim populations around the world. U.S. government attempts to persuade jihadist fence-sitters that they are at risk of following a perverted interpretation of Islam typically fall on deaf ears. Additionally, it should not come as a surprise that prospective jihadists do not turn to the U.S. State Department for career advice.

¹⁹ Richard Holbrooke, “Get the Message Out,” *Washington Post*, October 28, 2001.

The second challenge is that the rules and regulations associated with government messaging and counter-messaging programs are not conducive to speed or creativity, which are both critical components of effectively competing in today's technology-driven society. Additionally, these efforts lag behind the private sector when it comes to cutting-edge technology. The result is a risk-averse, slow, and uninspiring approach to counter-messaging that does not incentivize creativity, experimentation, or risk-taking.

One fix for this is more public-private collaboration. The government is incentivized to fund such programs, but it does not have the credibility to be the primary messenger and it lacks the latest marketing and advertising capabilities. On the other hand, the private sector, to include non-governmental organizations, often has the credibility and the requisite competencies, but it is not financially incentivized to pursue such endeavors. A public-private collaboration seems to be a logical solution to this problem. To provide one relevant anecdote, in 2015 I asked Pete Favat, the creative force behind the spectacularly effective Truth® anti-smoking campaign, to speak at a counterterrorism conference about the war of ideas. When attendees saw the obvious parallels and similar challenges between advertising that attempts to make teenage smoking “uncool” and our counterterrorism challenge of producing messaging that can make jihad “uncool” in similar demographic audiences, a member asked Favat why he had not worked with the government before.²⁰ “Nobody ever asked me,” he said.

It could be argued that jihadist organizations may always enjoy the upper hand when it comes to their media campaigns, but future counterterrorism strategies should do more in leveraging public-private partnerships to improve how we fight in this domain.

6. Understanding the enemy and exposing their hypocrisy through their own words

Finally, another component that should be included in any counterterrorism strategy moving forward is a dedicated, robust, and systematic effort to understand jihadist groups using primary source materials. This includes more declassification of captured documents produced by jihadist groups after they have been exploited for their tactical and operational value. There are several

²⁰ Pete Favat and Bryan C. Price, “The Truth Campaign and the War of Ideas,” *CTC Sentinel* 8:7 (July 2015), pp. 9-12

organizations that study such materials and produce research that not only helps policymakers understand the fight and make better policy, but helps educate the public as well.

Despite the best attempts by al-Qa`ida and the Islamic State to portray their organizations and their followers as being morally pure and pious, internal documents produced by these groups reveal their true nature. These documents uncover the hypocrisy that pervades these organizations by exposing rampant corruption, bureaucratic infighting, and backroom deals that show leaders routinely compromise their jihadi values.

The Combating Terrorism Center's Harmony Program serves as one successful model. The Harmony Program is a collaborative effort between the Combating Terrorism Center at West Point and U.S. Special Operations Command that declassifies captured battlefield documents and makes them publicly available so that researchers can analyze them. This type of crowd-sourcing expands the capabilities of the government by attracting scholars from all over the world, and it ultimately increases our collective understanding of jihadist groups, their histories, and trajectories. This type of research also attracts the attention of our enemies, including top terrorist leaders. In a letter obtained during the Abbottabad raid and subsequently released by the Office of the Director of National Intelligence, Usama bin Laden wrote, "Please send all that is issued by the combating terrorism center of the American military."²¹

²¹ <https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/ubl/english2/Request%20for%20Documents%20from%20CTC.pdf>