



Statement before the
House Foreign Affairs Committee
Subcommittee on Terrorism, Nonproliferation, and Trade

***“THE PARIS ATTACKS: A STRATEGIC SHIFT
BY ISIS?”***

A Testimony by:

Thomas M. Sanderson

Director and Senior Fellow,
Transnational Threats Project,
Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS)

December 2, 2015

2200 Rayburn House Office Building

ISIS background: rising amid chaos across the MENA region

The advent of the Syrian civil war in 2011 offered ISIS—then known as the Islamic State of Iraq and still a member of the al Qaeda network—an opportunity to assert itself on a broader stage. As ISIS expanded into Syria in 2013 and was later officially excommunicated from the al Qaeda network in February 2014, many Arab States were collapsing across the region, leaving the region in disarray and its populations wanting. The Islamic State rose in parallel to these developments, growing in size and strength despite a sustained assault by several countries and other non-state groups. ISIS' rise and appeal stands as a glaring and dangerous counterpoint to failed Middle Eastern states.

For many, the self-declared ISIS caliphate is seen as a life raft for the marginalized and a beacon of purity and justice for the religiously radicalized. Those that make it there can serve in battle while others can build the society. Many others who believe in the promise and goals of ISIS—and observe coalition attacks against them—remain at home, ready to be called to action by the terrorist group.

Indeed, that call went out and has been answered. In September 2014 ISIS spokesman Mohammed Adnani called on followers to “kill a disbelieving American or European—especially the filthy and spiteful French.” And in May of this year, ISIS declared that every Muslim who could not make the journey to the Islamic State must “attack the crusaders, their allies [and others, such as the Shia] wherever he might be with any means available to him.”

These commands should deeply concern us—they clearly identify a role for violent extremists wherever they may be, while specifying targets such as American citizens. Paris, Beirut, and the Russian airliner over the Sinai are the grim results.

ISIS is many things to many people. For millions of followers, ISIS does represent a state. Though we seek to deny them this—and we should continue to do so—we must also act in light of certain realities on the ground. ISIS controls territory, adjudicates disputes, maintains forces, levies taxes, and provides services. ISIS rules and acts in a despicable manner—but looking around the neighborhood, for many people, they rise above others in viability and legitimacy.

ISIS is also a terrorist group, conducting violent and ruthless operations locally and abroad to further its aims. And ISIS is an idea and a virtual entity—with an unmatched social media presence and a firm place in the minds of countless young men and women who are marginalized, radicalized, and eager to be mobilized. From beheading Christians on Libyan beaches to attacking mosques in Saudi Arabia, British tourists in Tunisia, and Kurdish activists in Turkey, ISIS is our greatest security challenge today.

Let me now move to your specific questions for today's hearing.

Do the attacks in Paris indicate a strategic shift by ISIS?

In short, I believe that the Paris attack—organized and directed by ISIS—does not represent a dramatic change for ISIS. Worrisome and impactful as it is, I believe the strikes on November 13 constitute an evolution for a group that had previously and frequently indicated a desire to strike France and to expand operations beyond its current caliphate in Syria and Iraq. Indeed, ISIS expanded long ago.

We need to look at what ISIS itself has said about striking targets outside of its self-proclaimed caliphate. After taking Mosul, Iraq in June 2014, ISIS leader Omar al-Baghdadi called on followers worldwide to rush to their state, with the promise that if they do so, one day they would conquer “Rome”—shorthand for the West.

And as noted above, it was later that year, in September 2014, several weeks into the US-led bombing campaign in Syria and Iraq, that the ISIS spokesman Adnani called on followers to attack those in the anti-ISIS coalition. And one month later, in October 2014, ISIS’ English-language magazine Dabiq called for sympathizers to strike the West:

"At this point of the crusade against the Islamic State, it is very important that attacks take place in every country that has entered into the alliance against the Islamic State, especially the US, [the] UK, France, Australia and Germany. Every Muslim should get out of his house, find a crusader and kill him."¹

I mention these statements by ISIS and earlier identify the attacks in Libya, Tunisia, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey to suggest that such expeditionary, out-of-area strikes by ISIS are not necessarily a deviation from plan. ISIS called for, planned, and executed these attacks well before the November 2015 Paris attacks.

Though the Paris assault may not be completely out of line with what ISIS was planning all along, we might also consider that the course of events over the past year—and in particular the summer and early fall of 2015—may have precipitated the series of attacks we saw between October 31 and November 13.

Momentum seemed to be shifting—however slightly—towards the anti-ISIS coalition. Those developments may have induced a change in ISIS’ direction or pace. Some of the advances against ISIS include:

- December 2014 – ISIS’ defeat at Kobane, Syria
- 2015 - Syrian Kurds sharply expand control of the border with Turkey
- April 2015 - Retaking of Tikrit, Iraq by Iraqi Security Forces

¹ International Business Times, “Dabiq Threatens Rome Crusaders,” <http://www.ibtimes.co.uk/isis-magazine-dabiq-threatens-rome-crusaders-flying-islamic-state-flag-vatican-front-cover-1469712> (Oct. 2014)

- May 2015 - U.S. Special Operations killing of ISIS CFO, Abu Sayyaf
- June 2015 - Loss of ISIS territory and supply lines at Tel Abyad, Syria
- July 2015 - Loss of territory at Derna, Libya
- November 2015 - Peshmerga fighters take control of Sinjar, and cut a key ISIS supply line between Raqqa and Mosul.

So it is possible that ISIS initiated high-profile operations in Paris, Beirut, and the Sinai to distract from the above losses while trying to meet some of the following goals:

- Penalize and raise costs for France's involvement in the anti-ISIS coalition (French airstrikes against ISIS began on September 27, 2015)
- Punish Hezbollah for combat operations against ISIS
- Wound Russia and Hezbollah for their roles in prolonging the reign of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and for doing the bidding of Iran
- Generate popular discontent over refugees in coalition host states
- Frighten civilians and induce opposition to participating in the anti-ISIS coalition
- Draw foreign forces into a failed ground war
- Burnish ISIS' position as the vanguard of global jihad
- Stimulate foreign fighter recruitment
- Buttress the cohesion of civilians under ISIS control
- Justify ISIS' widespread taxation and extortion
- Expand territory and influence to advance strategic goals

It is also important to consider the possibility that ISIS leaders did not directly command or approve of all three operations—and that we should not use these events out of context to make a call on the direction of ISIS—nor to monopolize the conversation on what our response should be.

Paris appears to have been directly engineered by ISIS, and perhaps the same goes for Beirut. But it is also likely that earlier calls to jihad opened the door to independent, high-level action by ISIS affiliates, such as the Sinai Province group in Egypt.

The Sinai Province may have been more interested in hurting tourism and the regime of Egyptian President Sisi than in killing Russians. As it turns out, Russia responded to the killing of 224 airline passengers by shifting some of its airstrikes to ISIS and away from the group's adversaries in the anti-Assad opposition—a potential indicator of independent action by the Sinai Province—or simply bad planning by ISIS (unless a Russian overreaction was the goal).

What is the impact of these most recent attacks?

If we begin with the bombing of the Russian airliner over Egypt's Sinai, we already note that the attack backfired on ISIS by altering Russia's target set to include a greater focus on ISIS. Prior to the attack in the Sinai, there was little if any Russian interest in ISIS targets, with Moscow

clearly seeking to disable the moderate Syrian opposition forces that were imperiling its ally, Bashar al-Assad.

But with the death of so many Russian civilian vacationers, Moscow was in the mood for revenge. One result has been more aggressive bombing and more aggressive action in the air. The bombing may help the anti-ISIS effort if it is accurate and effective—but if the end result is a spike in the number of civilian casualties, it becomes a propaganda victory for ISIS and a complication for the U.S.-led anti-ISIS coalition. And the downing of the Russian SU-24 bomber by a Turkish F-16 did generate unwanted tension and complications for the U.S.

Furthermore, the Sinai attack on foreign tourists damages one of the most important sectors of the still struggling Egyptian economy, further weakening an important U.S. ally in the Middle East.

Impacts related to the Beirut attacks are also serious. Lebanon is already under tremendous strain from the battle in Syria, and the November 12 ISIS bombings put further strain on a fragile state that plays host to roughly one million Syrian refugees. And though the fighting in Syria has cost Hezbollah lives and other resources, it also sharpens their battlefield experience and adds to their influence in the region—unwelcome developments in the eyes of Israel, the U.S. and others.

Paris offers the most profound conclusion, though it leaves many questions unanswered. First, the attacks demonstrated that ISIS has the ability to plan and execute attacks in the heart of a key coalition member, using French and Belgian citizens trained in Syria and equipped in Belgium. This all took place despite France having superb law enforcement and intelligence capabilities, and despite efforts to share intelligence within and between nations.

The Paris attacks have also prompted responses that should trouble all who stand for democracy, openness, and the free movement of trade, people, and ideas. At least one of the Paris attackers appears to have moved into Europe posing as a refugee, while other members of the ISIS cell were able to move freely between EU states to plan and conduct the November 13 operation. These developments have provoked disturbing statements from some in both the United States and France.

The United States—an immigrant nation long a safe-haven for refugees and the persecuted, has sounded calls to block the arrival of Syrian war refugees. Given America's history, its moral leadership across the globe, and our own degree of responsibility for some of the conditions in the Syria-Iraq battlespace—the anti-refugee reaction by some has been regrettable.

Americans are right to be concerned for their security—and having an ISIS member hide among the desperate refugees moving into Europe is certainly a frightening development. And now that

ISIS recognizes the discord and concern it can ignite by using refugee flows to move its terrorist operators, it will probably deliberately repeat this action for the disruptive value alone.

We should firmly repel this tactic. President Obama, Congress, and U.S. State Governors need to come together and discuss a solution that protects our security, moral authority, and global standing. The House of Representatives has passed the American SAFE Act, so the debate has begun. We cannot reduce the risk to zero, but an eventual solution is not beyond our reach.

The European Union has also been seriously disrupted by the Paris attacks. The EU's open border agreement, the Schengen Zone, allows visa free-travel between almost all of the EU's 28 members. This arrangement is one of the pillars of the European project promoting openness, cultural exchange, and the free movement of people, business, and ideas. The ISIS attack has placed that in jeopardy. We should all be taken aback by this development and see it as a threat to free and open societies.

Finally—and bridging Europe and America on these topics, is the U.S. visa waiver program. This regime allows visa-free travel between the U.S. and 38 nations, 30 of which are European. The fact that members of the ISIS Paris cell were EU passport holding residents highlights the security challenge posed by visa-free travel to the United States. Admittedly, though, concerns over the visa waiver program predate the Paris attacks given that 3,000 and 5,000 violent extremists have traveled to the Syria-Iraq battlefield over the past few years. This past Monday, November 30, the Administration did announce additional, if limited improvements to the program.

We cannot dismiss legitimate security threats, nor should we refrain from patching holes that facilitate attacks. Doing so together as a nation and as allies is critical. But the fact that a terrorist group has forced the United States and the European Union to consider changes to our open societies and to produce such strident anti-refugee rhetoric can only be considered a victory for ISIS.

What do the three most recent attacks mean for the development of ISIS?

ISIS is not on its back foot. Yes, there were some victories against the terrorist group in 2015, and these may have played a small part in precipitating or advancing the timeline of attacks in Beirut, Sinai, and Paris. But these actions are well within expectations for a group that has already established overseas affiliates and accepted pledges of support and allegiance from pre-existing terrorist groups. On balance, the three recent, high-profile attacks represent a marginal evolution in ISIS tactics and strategies.

What is the value of Paris, Beirut, and Sinai for ISIS recruitment? In all likelihood, it has boosted the overall appeal of ISIS. Striking such blows against Shiites in Lebanon, against the Egyptian Government and the Assad-backing Russians, while going to the heart of the French nation and killing 130 civilians stirs the pride of all who gravitate towards ISIS. ISIS is very image

conscious, and these dramatic attacks boost their appeal and empower young people across the globe. It was a total victory with respect to recruitment.

ISIS recruits some individuals who are already radicalized, and who see all of these recent targets as infidels and apostates deserving of death and disruption. These people see glory and redemption in fighting and dying for what they consider a divinely sanctioned and just state. But an even larger pool of recruits—many yet to be radicalized online or through by fighting and indoctrination within the ISIS “state” and its battlefields, join for different reasons. These are the marginalized, the socio-economically deprived, aimless young men with no prospects for advancement, marriage, or success in life. They are without a sense of mission, a sense of belonging (especially the recent immigrants to Europe), and have yet to find dignity and respect.

ISIS’ propaganda machine and legion of recruits are adept at marketing their message to these downtrodden individuals, portraying ISIS as a panacea for what ails them. When these young people witness the Paris, Beirut, and Sinai operations, they want in.

The operations may also have an impact on ISIS’ interests and activities in other states. ISIS movements and followers in Russia, Libya, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Philippines, Nigeria, Somalia—along with lone wolves the world over, are offered yet more evidence and instruction on what is possible when responding to ISIS spokesman Adnani’s call to strike those attacking ISIS.

How might these operations impact ISIS finances?

In brief, the recent ISIS strikes will have both negative and positive results. These dramatic attacks will likely produce greater contributions (and easier compliance with a 10% zakat (tax) requirement both locally and from abroad. Just as al Qaeda received greater donations after its shocking attacks of 2001, a smaller, yet similar benefit will redound to ISIS after taking the battle to the streets of Paris, Beirut, and to the skies over the Sinai. Yet as happened with al Qaeda, the attacks have also led to greater efforts to restrict funding—witness the airstrikes on ISIS oil facilities and trucks soon after the Paris attacks.

Overall, however, ISIS will continue to succeed financially. ISIS established a resilient and diversified income portfolio as it expanded across Syria and Iraq from 2013-2015. There is no donors’ leash on ISIS that can be pulled by financiers in the Arabian Gulf. The vast majority of their income comes from local sources under their control. It also seems clear that ISIS has linked key funding flows to humanitarian needs, which makes it more difficult to attack them. Specifically, ISIS’ role in providing fuel for hospitals, schools, and internally displaced persons (IDP) camps within Syria, and their control of granaries and other food resources make us face a difficult decision over whether to cut off access to resources that might wind up impacting civilians.

Implications for U.S. policy and security

All three attacks offer implications for U.S. security and the anti-ISIS strategy, but for different reasons and to varying degrees. In Beirut, ISIS inserted a few terrorists over a nearby border to strike at Hezbollah and its supporters. Such violence threatens to overwhelm an already fragile state that borders Israel and is home to countless Syrian refugees. But, while the Beirut attack, killing 43, is significant, tragic, and disruptive, it is not fundamentally threatening to U.S. security and our strategies for countering ISIS.

The downing of the Russian commercial airliner plane over the Sinai, killing 224 people, is more significant on both a tactical and strategic level. Compromising airport security and using such a small device to destroy an aircraft in mid-air is a serious change in strategy—and one we have seen previously with al Qaeda. It reminds us that aircraft remain a vulnerable target, that airports with lax safety protocols constitute a weak link in aviation security, and that the impact on commercial aviation is real and costly.

But the Paris attack offers the most serious and far-reaching implications for U.S. security and our counter-ISIS strategy. This was a long-distance, sophisticated, high-risk operation for ISIS—and they succeeded on all accounts. While ISIS initially focused on establishing a caliphate and fighting local enemies in 2013 and 2014, this attack demonstrated that its direct involvement and large community of sympathizers enabled them to inflict a very sharp blow to one of America's closest allies and a frontline member of the anti-ISIS coalition.

Could the Paris attack in fact signal a shift to training cells to strike long distance targets, including the U.S.? And what if ISIS' battle-tested foreign fighters are instructed to join and fortify those cells after returning to their home countries? Could ISIS also pair these two approaches with stronger encouragement and guidance to lone wolves in America and elsewhere? With the FBI investigating more than 900 individuals with interest in or connections to ISIS, these concerns are well founded.

In light of this, what should the U.S. do?

It is a long and difficult to-do list—many will only be achieved in part, some will fail altogether: reduce ISIS territory and financial flows; arrive at a political settlement in Damascus; expand training and equipping of local forces, including Peshmerga; add U.S. Special Operations Forces to Iraqi Security Force and Kurdish Peshmerga units; establish greater intelligence resources to aid in targeting ISIS leadership; loosen highly restrictive rules of engagement on U.S. Special Operations Forces and on air strikes; exert greater diplomatic pressure on anti-ISIS coalition members to do more in parallel with the U.S.; strongly encourage the Iraqi Government to do more on Sunni political and economic inclusion; and, end the partisanship that hobbles our response. Longer-term: address the core underlying causes and conditions that led us to where we are today, by addressing poor governance, corruption, job creation, demographic strains,

religious radicalism and education. Expanded and focused CVE programming in high-risk countries is key.

Sustained leadership on and off the battlefield is essential. This is a long-term project involving high financial costs, forceful diplomacy, and the potential for lives being lost. This approach is risky and will entail sacrifice. And we must show the world that as we take a more assertive approach to destroying ISIS and reducing the conditions that gave rise to it and similar groups, we must also show restraint, good judgment, moral leadership, and an enduring commitment.

I believe that President Obama has been wise to keep larger U.S. forces out of the battlespace in Syria, Iraq, and elsewhere. We would massively stimulate ISIS with large troop deployments. The ISIS mission would be given greater significance, recruitment would soar, external funding would increase, and a worldwide network of followers would be set into motion. It will be counterproductive. But we must be more aggressive and broad-based in our approach that we are now.

Denying new territory to ISIS and rolling back land currently under control would make the biggest impact. This action requires forces on the ground to engage ISIS, to train local forces, and to hold and develop the space that is won. Unfortunately, this approach carries a very high risk of making matters worse and of incurring extremely steep costs. And it can only be done as a coalition.

Any additional U.S. forces should also include troops from America's local Arab allies and other members of the anti-ISIS coalition. Doing so blunts the charge of disproportionate American force while putting a good share of the responsibility of regional governments. One thing is clear the world over when it comes to making hard choices and putting lives, and treasure at risk: when the U.S. leads a just and essential mission, others will join in.

As the U.S. plans its next move and hopefully makes intelligent changes to the existing strategy, it is essential to consider the following: even if we kill all ISIS members tomorrow, the multitude of conditions and factors underpinning their rise and success and appeal to recruits...remain firmly in place. Furthermore, both Iraq and Syria are very weak states. A comprehensive recovery plan would have to begin even before major fighting ceases—which it may never do. Leaving battered citizens, returning refugees, and feeble governments with dismembered nations and no rescue plan will prolong chaos and provide openings for violent extremists.

Unaddressed sectarian and ethnic divisions must also be dealt with---or progress will be fleeting, if it ever emerges. Turkey's disposition towards Kurdish forces currently occupying much of the Syrian side of their border will make securing Ankara's cooperation unlikely. As it is, Turkey has yet to fully roll-up the welcome mat for foreign fighters and stop trafficking across their border.

Thus, even successful military operations against ISIS would do little to keep a new group from emerging. For the religiously radicalized and for too many of the world's marginalized young men and women, ISIS represents a path to progress, justice, revenge, and salvation. As we begin a more assertive counter-ISIS strategy, we must address these individuals and the local circumstances of those who are the audience, foot soldiers, and financiers of ISIS. Nothing short of a well-conceived, multi-dimensional, and assertive approach will work.