

**Clint Watts**

- **Robert A. Fox Fellow, Foreign Policy Research Institute**
- **Senior Fellow, Center for Cyber and Homeland Security, the George Washington University**

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**“Directing vs. Inspiring: ISIS’ Evolving Tactics and the Orlando Terrorist Attack”**

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Omar Mateen’s violent rampage killing 49 people at an Orlando nightclub on June 12, 2016 solidified a dangerous new trend of cascading terrorist attacks in the West. The November 2015 Paris attacks confirmed Western nation’s greatest fears. Years of foreign fighters flowing into the Islamic State’s ranks had finally created an extended legion of trained and committed terrorists filing back home. The scale and sophistication of the assault, which included the employment of explosive suicide bombings, along with the resulting pursuit of dozens of suspects pointed to Islamic State sponsorship and direction. The brazen success of the Paris attacks has tipped off more than six months of terrorist attacks from both the Islamic State and al Qaeda supporters and ultimately inspired two of the deadliest mass shootings in American history; San Bernardino in December 2015 and Orlando in June 2016.

*Assessing the Islamic State’s terrorism: Directed or Inspired? Does It Matter?*

Successful directed attacks encourage networked terrorist attacks and mobilize inspired supporters to commit violence in their homelands. Dating back more than a year ago to the wake of the Charlie Hebdo attack in Paris, tracing responsibility for terrorist attacks to either the Islamic State or al Qaeda has become increasingly challenging.<sup>1</sup> Some attacks demonstrate direct linkage back to top terror leaders. But most attacks have differing degrees of connection to either terror group’s central headquarters. As of today, the two most recent mass shootings in San Bernardino and Orlando show no direct connection between these inspired supporters and the Islamic State.<sup>2</sup> In some cases,

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<sup>1</sup> Clint Watts. (12 January 2015) *Inspired, Networked, Directed – The Muddled Jihad of ISIS and al Qaeda Post Hebdo*. War On The Rocks. Available at: <http://warontherocks.com/2015/01/inspired-networked-directed-the-muddled-jihad-of-isis-al-qaeda-post-hebdo/>

<sup>2</sup> Dina Temple-Raston. (16 February 2016) *Analysts Parse Differences Between San Bernardino, Paris Attacks*. National Public Radio. Available at: <http://www.npr.org/2016/02/16/466898543/analysts-parse-differences-between-san-bernardino-paris-attacks>

inspired attacks show affinity for one or both terror groups' online propaganda and leaders. The greater the distance between the attack location and Syria or Iraq, the more muddled the linkages become between attackers and terror groups.

Paris, Brussels, San Bernardino and now Orlando show how successful terror attacks breed even more terror attacks as the results of spectacular assaults incentivize additional waves of violence. The Islamic State's successful direction of the Paris attack sparked a rapid increase in *networked* attacks – attacks committed by terror group affiliates and former foreign fighters operating in cells acting largely on their own initiative but relying on support from their chosen groups network. In the weeks after the Paris attacks, Islamic State affiliates perpetrated a suicide bombing in Tunisia, a car bombing and assaults in al Arish and Giza, Egypt, a car bombing in Yemen, a suicide bombing in Istanbul, Turkey, and a multi-prong attack in Jakarta, Indonesia.<sup>3</sup>

Relatively dormant al Qaeda affiliates mobilized in the wake of the Islamic State's Paris success. Mokhtar Belmokhtar's splinter al Murabitoon allegedly reunited with their former overlords al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) conducting raids in Mali, Burkina Faso and Ivory Coast along with many other smaller attacks.<sup>4</sup> Al Qaeda affiliates likely feel compelled to launch attacks. In the Sahel, a strong Islamic State affiliate in Libya pressures the once dominant AQIM from the north. Launching successful operations in Mali and Burkina Faso provides motivation for local members to stay with the brand rather than leave for the more popular Islamic State.<sup>5</sup> AQAP has long been al Qaeda's strongest affiliate but in recent months has felt the rise of a Yemeni Islamic State challenger. AQAP, like AQIM, must demonstrate success to prevent being overtaken by the more fashionable younger generation of the Islamic State.

The most curious outcome of the Islamic State's Paris attacks leading up to the more recent Orlando assault has been a rash of *inspired* attacks – attacks committed by lone individuals or small groups with no demonstrable connection to jihadi terror groups and motivated simply by propaganda calls for violence. An attempted knife attack in the London subway, a vehicular attack in Valence, France, a Paris police station assault in Paris, a machete attack in Marseilles, a police shooting in Philadelphia; all of these

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<sup>3</sup> (29 April 2016) *ISIS Goes Global: 90 Attacks in 21 Countries Have Killed nearly 1,400 People*. CNN. Available at: <http://www.cnn.com/2015/12/17/world/mapping-isis-attacks-around-the-world/index.html>

<sup>4</sup> Caleb Weiss. (8 June 2016) *al Qaeda has launched more than 100 attacks in West Africa in 2016*. Long War Journal. Available at: <http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2016/06/over-100-al-qaeda-attacks-in-west-africa-since-beginning-of-the-year.php>

<sup>5</sup> Andrew Lebovich. (16 January 2016) *The Hotel Attacks and Militant Realignment in the Sahara-Sahel Region*. Combating Terrorism Center Sentinel. Available at: <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/the-hotel-attacks-and-militant-realignment-in-the-sahara-sahel-region>

attacks along with many other disrupted plots have been inspired by the Islamic State.<sup>6</sup> Only after the Islamic State's brazen Paris attacks did these perpetrators choose to launch deadly strikes.

At any given time around the Western world, lone individuals or small groups sit primed to undertake violence inspired by a jihadi group. These inspired terrorists, whether they opine for al Qaeda or the Islamic State, come in two varieties. The more dangerous and operationally effective inspired extremists are those persistently committed to jihadi ideology, slowly radicalized over extended periods reaching their resolve for violence over many years; deliberately planning and plotting their attacks. They link local frustrations with broad jihadi grievances common to both al Qaeda and the Islamic State. As seen with Nidal Hasan of the Fort Hood shooting, Amedy Coulibaly in Paris, Syed Rizwan Farook and Tashfeen Malik in San Bernardino and now Omar Mateen in Orlando, justifications for violence blend propaganda from both terror groups and the tipping point for action likely came from observing successful jihadi violence elsewhere.

The lesser effective and more common inspired terrorists appear mobilized more by headlines than ideology. Edward Archer in Philadelphia, Michael Zehaf-Bibeau's attack on the Canadian parliament and dozens of other perpetrators with a mix of psychological issues and egomaniacal motivations rapidly mobilize in response to successful Islamic State attacks hoping to join the band wagon. Headline inspired attacks come in reactionary waves and feature a mix of bumbled plots and unforeseeable terrorist successes. These attacks target randomly and despite their wide range of success often times generate additional headline inspired attacks in the name of the Islamic State.

*What's different about the Islamic State's terrorism?*

In the Islamic State era, the pace of terrorist attacks, whether directed or inspired, has proven more rapid in pace, greater in number and as a result more difficult to detect. Al Qaeda throughout its history sought operational control over its directed attacks and those of its networked affiliates resulting in slow and less frequent successes likely influencing its decline. The Islamic State, in contrast to al Qaeda, cares less about potential failures or collateral damage. They allow affiliates, former foreign fighters and inspired supporters to plan, resource and execute attacks with greater independence often learning of attacks in their name only after they've happened. Al Qaeda would conduct rounds of communication between affiliates and its headquarters finely tuning the application of violence, this often times created communication signatures tipping off counterterrorists to upcoming plots.<sup>7</sup> The Islamic State has developed a loose system allowing for lots of

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<sup>6</sup> Karen Yourish, Derek Watkins and Tom Giratikanon. (22 March 2016) *Where ISIS Has Directed And Inspired Attacks Around The World*. New York Times. Available at: <http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2015/06/17/world/middleeast/map-isis-attacks-around-the-world.html>.

<sup>7</sup> Clint Watts. (4 April 2016) *Why ISIS Beats Al Qaeda In Europe*. Foreign Affairs. Available at: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2016-04-04/why-isis-beats-al-qaeda-europe>

plots and few signatures putting counterterrorists at a significant disadvantage. Unlike al Qaeda who sought spectacular attacks on symbolic targets, the Islamic State's message has been to attack soft targets and large gatherings of people anywhere and everywhere.<sup>8</sup>

*What does Orlando mean for the future of terrorism?*

Al Qaeda's calls for inspired attacks during the Anwar al-Awlaki era found some support in the U.S., but the plots never achieved the terror group's vision. The assumption since September 11, 2001 has been that the most deadly attacks would come from directed plots perpetrated by operatives trained, resourced and promoted by terror group headquarters.

Mateen in Orlando and Farook and Malik in San Bernardino have turned this assumption on its head. Inspired, homegrown extremists have perpetrated the most deadly attacks in the U.S. since September 11, 2001 by simply hitting soft targets they know well with gun assaults that could be executed by anyone regardless of skill. The Islamic State and al Qaeda no longer need to direct attacks when their inspired plotters achieve equal body counts and media attention. Today, there are no barriers to another extremist replicating the techniques of Orlando and San Bernardino. All terrorist groups and their supporters, whether international or domestic, directed or inspired, have watched and learned from the Islamic State's successes in Europe and the U.S. and will follow their model in the future: soft targets, gun runs, encrypted communication and openly available assault weapons.

*Post Orlando – Reducing The Likelihood and Impact Of Another Attack*

FBI Director Comey recently noted the FBI has more Islamic State inspired leads to follow than manpower to fulfill the task.<sup>9</sup> Even when the FBI encounters potential extremists, as seen with both the 2013 Boston Bombers and now Omar Mateen, they have only a small window to assess whether an individual's radicalization will lead to violence. Today for law enforcement, identifying where to commit precious resources remains more art than science; a gamble based on limited information.

Evidence grows every day showing Mateen's radicalization and ultimate turn toward violence. But the challenge for law enforcement is two fold. First, how do they assess whether an individual's radicalization will lead to violence? Second, which cases should they focus on amongst a sea of terrorism leads?

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<sup>8</sup> Clint Watts. (23 March 2016) *A Wounded Islamic State Is A Dangerous Islamic State*. Foreign Policy. Available at: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2016/03/23/a-wounded-islamic-state-is-a-dangerous-islamic-state-brussels-attacks/>

<sup>9</sup> Amy Forliti. (7 June 2016) *FBI Director: Number of IS Cases in U.S. has not dropped off*. U.S. News & World Report. Available at: <http://www.usnews.com/news/us/articles/2016-06-07/fbi-director-number-of-is-cases-in-us-has-not-dropped-off>

Individuals undergoing a radicalization process generally move through four phases:<sup>10</sup>

- Introduction – Initial contact with an extremist ideology
- Immersion – Immersion in the thinking and mindset of the extremist ideology
- Frustration – Frustration over inaction of other members of the ideology and a general lack of progress in achieving extremist goals
- Resolve – Resolve to commit violence on behalf of the extremist ideology

Movement along the four phases in this continuum varies for each extremist and is highly influenced by the individual's personal grievances and motivations. The pace and intensity of radicalization often hinges on one or more emotional triggers – significant life factors contributing to an individual's susceptibility to an extremist ideology. Four broad categories of emotional triggers are:

- Family- Death of a family member or divorce may leave one searching for a coping ideology.
- Professional- Failure to achieve professional goals may result in an individual seeking a new identity and purpose.
- Financial- Extremist ideologies often provide both financial and spiritual comfort for those struggling financially.
- Psychological- a wide range of psychological issues may one's susceptibility to an extremist ideology.

Equally important to the radicalization framework and emotional triggers, is the presence of catalysts – people and places that help vulnerable individuals move through the phases of radicalization. Today, catalysts guiding radicalization are often found via extremist social media content, key influencers (former foreign fighters, ideologues or family members) and social circles. As radicalized individuals move along this continuum, they often emit more indicators as they progress toward violence. At the same point, investigators have less and less time to detect and disrupt violence as the individual moves closer to violence.

The FBI in 2013 and 2014 likely found Mateen in the “Immersion” or start of the “Frustration” phases of radicalization providing few clues of his eventual attack. Reports to date suggest Mateen was quite confused about what ideology and group he supported. Tips were given to the FBI<sup>11</sup>, connections to other terrorists and terror groups were explored, but at these points Mateen showed no probable cause to continue an investigation. At different times he aligned with three different terror groups (al Qaeda,

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<sup>10</sup> Clint Watts. (26 April 2013) *Detecting the radicalization and recruitment of the Boston Bombers*. Foreign Policy Research Institute. Available at: <http://www.fpri.org/2013/04/detecting-the-radicalization-and-recruitment-of-the-boston-bombers/>

<sup>11</sup> Mohammed A. Malik (20 June 2016) *I reported Omar Mateen to the FBI*. Washington Post. Available at: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/posteverything/wp/2016/06/20/i-reported-omar-mateen-to-the-fbi-trump-is-wrong-that-muslims-dont-do-our-part/>

Hezbollah and the Islamic State) that currently fight each other overseas.<sup>12</sup> The FBI's probe at those two times, lacked coherence from a terrorism perspective and it would be another two years before Mateen would undertake violence.

More importantly, Omar Mateen, regardless of his last minute allegiance to the Islamic State, appears eerily similar to many other American mass shooters – struggling psychologically. Mateen's ex-wife claims he was abusive and other reports suggest he struggled with his sexuality.<sup>13</sup> Common indicators of a lone wolf attack are reconnaissance of targets and attack rehearsals, but Mateen didn't need to scout his assault if he selected a location where he may have been a patron for up to three years.<sup>14</sup> Lone actors are and will always be difficult to detect because they are *alone*; isolated from their communities due in many cases to psychological issues and familial struggles. Their isolation from family and community results in few detectable signals by which law enforcement can anticipate their move to violence.

Moving forward, the U.S. can take steps to reduce the likelihood of another Islamic State inspired attack like Orlando. As the Islamic State loses ground in Iraq and Syria they will be further incentivized to replicate the successes of Paris, Brussels, San Bernardino and Orlando. The faster the Islamic State is defeated on the battlefield, the lower the chances of an Islamic State directed or inspired attack in the U.S. CIA Director Brennan recently noted the Islamic State continues to plan attacks in the West.<sup>15</sup> Destroying the Islamic State's external operations cells will immediately reduce the probability of a directed attack in the U.S. homeland. Fewer attacks combined with continued disruption of Islamic State propaganda will also degrade affinity from global supporters and reduce the frequency of Islamic State inspired attacks. Denying the Islamic State success in the West, whether directed or inspired, will prevent the cascading terrorism we've witnessed in recent months.

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<sup>12</sup> Adam Taylor. (13 June 2016) *Omar Mateen may not have understood the difference between ISIS, al-Qaeda and Hezbollah*. Washington Post. Available at:

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2016/06/13/omar-mateen-may-not-have-understood-the-difference-between-isis-al-qaeda-and-hezbollah/>

<sup>13</sup> Jack Healy. (13 June 2016) *Sitora Yusufiy, Ex-Wife of Orlando Suspect, Describes Abusive Marriage*. New York Times. Available at:

[http://www.nytimes.com/2016/06/14/us/sitora-yusufiy-omar-mateen-orlando-shooting.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/06/14/us/sitora-yusufiy-omar-mateen-orlando-shooting.html?_r=0)

<sup>14</sup> Daniel Dale. (14 June 2016) *Orlando shooter's rumoured back story complicates the story of who he was*. Toronto Star. Available at:

<https://www.thestar.com/news/world/2016/06/14/was-orlando-killer-omar-mateen-a-gay-man.html>

<sup>15</sup> Amy R. Connolly. (16 June 2016) *CIA Director John Brennan warns of more possible attacks in West*. United Press International. Available at:

[http://www.upi.com/Top\\_News/US/2016/06/16/CIA-Director-John-Brennan-warns-of-more-possible-attacks-in-West/8021466090438/](http://www.upi.com/Top_News/US/2016/06/16/CIA-Director-John-Brennan-warns-of-more-possible-attacks-in-West/8021466090438/)

Both Orlando and San Bernardino point to a new breed of homegrown terrorist that now exploits new vulnerabilities that still remain after 9/11. After al Qaeda hit the homeland, the U.S. hardened all symbolic targets and major transportations hubs. But the U.S. cannot harden every workplace or nightclub. Thus increased and improved counterterrorism investigations will be the only way to detect inspired lone actors seeking to commit violence.<sup>16</sup>

Indicators must be developed and expanded to incorporate alternative signs of radicalization coming from terrorism's new breed of assailants. The time for extensive research into domestic radicalization and recruitment to extremist causes is long overdue. A massive research effort exploring all cases of extremist attacks should be initiated to identify the increasing number of psychological and electronic signatures that may suggest an individual's move toward violence. Currently, the radicalization framework and emotional triggers noted earlier in this testimony lack sufficient analytical rigor and cases to provide a substantive, validated set of indicators for law enforcement and homeland security to utilize to detect lone actor radicalization, recruitment and mobilization. New research supporting this needed gap should include *all* domestic lone actor violence and mass shootings to identify commonalities between all of their actions and then from this larger data set distinguish how jihadi extremist groups in particular inspire new members.

This research should also note what indicators should be added to Suspicious Activity Reporting (SAR) categories. For example, purchase of body armor might be added as a SAR category; a suspicious act committed by Omar Mateen that triggered a call to law enforcement.<sup>17</sup> Across all recent cases of extremism, psychological indicators may have pointed to lone actors turn towards violence. Law enforcement and homeland security should look beyond just communities and parents to mental health professionals for early warning of violence whether it is inspired by the Islamic State or another cause.

Ultimately monitoring of openly available social media remains one of the only methods by which law enforcement can preemptively detect these mass shootings. Lone actors have proven to be isolated from traditional sources of preemptive intelligence; family, neighbors and friends – the preferred approach for countering violent extremism chosen by the U.S. With the exception of the Somali community of Minneapolis, few inspired extremists have come from communities and instead appear almost randomly about the U.S. having principally found their brand of extremism via the Internet. Despite Edward Snowden's revelations and American concerns over privacy, social media monitoring provides nearly the only opportunity to detect lone actor radicalization before an attack. Expanding open source monitoring will be essential to preemptively identifying threats.

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<sup>16</sup> Clint Watts. (14 June 2016) *Terrorism's Deadly New Breed*. Foreign Policy. Available at: <http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/06/14/terrorisms-deadly-new-breed-islamic-state-orlando-paris/>

<sup>17</sup> Gary Detman. (16 June 2016) *Store alerted FBI when Omar Mateen tried to buy body armor, ammo in bulk*. ABC – St. Louis. Available at: <http://abcstlouis.com/news/nation-world/omar-mateen-tried-to-buy-level-3-body-armor-at-jensen-beach-store>

Law enforcement and homeland security must also be provided the means to break encryption, which has provided terrorists and criminals a significant advantage. Rather than compelling Apple and other technology companies to create back doors that weaken mobile cyber security and harm corporate competitiveness, the U.S. should resource and support law enforcement and the National Security Agency's ability to break current and emerging encryption. Proper oversight of this capability can both protect citizen privacy and help ensure their safety.

Recognizing that many recent inspired attacks have returned no direct connections to the Islamic State, the most disciplined lone actors will continue to slip through the cracks and execute soft target attacks. Steps can be made to reduce the impact of these attacks by limiting access to weapons and ending access to assault weapons. Assault weapons, like encryption, give the advantage to criminals and terrorists over law enforcement. The common citizen, today, can easily outgun our law enforcement. Omar Mateen shot over 100 people because he easily acquired and utilized an assault rifle firing a high velocity .223 caliber round. Equipped with any lesser weapon, Omar Mateen would have still perpetrated a heinous act but likely killed far fewer Americans. Assault weapons, will continue to be used by lone actors, terrorist or otherwise, and they will only result in higher body counts. Assault weapons are not designed for self-protection or hunting, but for offensive killing. Omar Mateen carried an equivalent weapon to what I carried as an infantry soldier in the U.S. Army's 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne and 2<sup>nd</sup> Infantry Divisions. These weapons belong on battlefields, not American streets.

Whether or not an assault weapons ban is reenacted, allowing any citizen regardless of mental state, terrorist connections or propensity to violence to easily access firearms decreases the chances law enforcement can detect and preempt mass shootings. Law makers could move today to institute legislation for 1) universal background checks, 2) mandatory waiting periods for weapon purchases, 3) mandatory weapons training and certification, 4) blocking of weapon purchases to those on mental health or terrorist watch lists and 5) requirements for gun owner insurance. All of these measures provide law enforcement and homeland security personnel additional methods to detect, restrict, reduce or slow lone actor acquisition of deadly weapons. These measures would create more indicators for detecting an impending plot and provide investigators more time to disrupt mass shootings, regardless of whether they are connected to the Islamic State, al Qaeda or any other extremist group.