

Kim Cragin, PhD¹
National Defense University

Europe's Terrorist Threat

**Before the Committee on Foreign Affairs
Subcommittees on Terrorism, Nonproliferation, and Trade
Europe, Eurasia and Emerging Threats
United States House of Representatives**

27 June 2017

I would like to thank the Chairs and Ranking Members and the House Foreign Affairs' Subcommittees on Terrorism, Nonproliferation, and Trade, as well as Europe, Eurasia and Emerging Threats, for inviting me to testify on the subject of the threat posed to Europe and the West by the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and also to take this opportunity to commend the Committees for recognizing the importance of understanding this evolving threat.

Over the past twenty years, during the course of my research on terrorism, I have explored the topics of what motivates individuals to become terrorists, how terrorist groups adapt, and the effectiveness of counter-terrorism instruments. For the past decade, much of this research has focused on what is often referred to as "foreign fighters." Or, specifically, individuals who leave their homes in (e.g.) France, Australia, or Indonesia and travel abroad to participate in a conflict. My most recent research on this topic can be found in two journal articles: first, "The Challenge of Foreign Fighter Returnees," which was released in April 2017 by the *Journal of Contemporary Criminal Justice*; and, second, an in-depth study of the ISIS attacks in Paris in November 2015, published by *Orbis*, also this past spring.²

I would like to share the results of this research with you today. But also set it in the wider context of "external operations" conducted by the Islamic State over the past three years.

Intentions vis-à-vis the West

As you know, the Islamic State stepped into the global spotlight in June 2014 after its spokesman, Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, announced a newly-formed Islamic caliphate in Iraq and Syria. Al-Adnani claimed that ISIS had established governing structures and religious law in its territories. He also claimed that all Muslims had a religious obligation to transfer their allegiance to ISIS and relocate to this caliphate.³ Significantly, this announcement was made in defiance of Ayman al-Zawahiri and other al-Qaeda leaders based in Pakistan. They had been attempting to broker a peaceful resolution to infighting between Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the leader of what we now refer to as ISIS, and al-Qaeda's representative in Syria, Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani, the leader of al-Nusra Front, now called Jabhat Fatah al-Sham.⁴

This defiance or divergence between al-Qaeda representatives in Iraq and its leaders in Pakistan did not begin in 2013 and 2014. ISIS traces its origins back to Abu Musab al-Zarqawi and "al-Qaeda in Iraq" (AQI), which fought against US and allied forces during Operation Iraqi Freedom (2003-2011).⁵ Al-Zarqawi himself was a foreign fighter. He travelled from his home country of Jordan to Afghanistan in 1989 to fight with the *mujahideen* and then returned again in 2002 to establish a training camp.⁶ During his time in

Afghanistan, al-Zarqawi interacted with al-Qaeda leaders, but he disagreed with them on a number of issues, including the extent to which Muslims perceived as unbelievers or apostates by al-Qaeda, including Shi'a, should be killed in pursuit of an Islamic caliphate.⁷ These disagreements caused friction between al-Qaeda leaders and al-Zarqawi, even after he established AQI in October 2004.⁸ The disagreement finally went public after al-Qaeda leaders rebuked al-Zarqawi first in September and then in December 2005 for AQI's brutal tactics on the battlefields of Iraq and his attacks on Muslims outside Iraq.⁹

This historical tension between AQI and al-Qaeda leaders provides the context for the emergence of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria. When al-Adnani declared the creation of an Islamic caliphate, he did so not only in defiance of al-Zawahiri's attempted brokering of an alliance between al-Qaeda fighters in Syria and Iraq, but also in defiance of the accepted al-Qaeda strategy for waging jihad. That is, al-Qaeda strategists – such as Abu Musa'b al-Suri – argued for a more gradual approach and believed that they should only declare a caliphate once it could be defended successfully. Al-Suri also cautioned against brutal tactics deployed against so-called unbelieving Muslims.¹⁰

Soon after its announcement, ISIS began to consolidate control over territory within Syria and Iraq, but it also established so-called provinces outside the Levant. Today, the Islamic State has 25 provinces in 11 countries worldwide.¹¹ These countries include Yemen, Libya, Afghanistan, Egypt and the Philippines. And while it might be easy to conclude that ISIS has simply convinced terrorist groups in al-Qaeda's network to defect, this is not correct. Based on my analysis, 48 militant groups have pledged their allegiance to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and only one third (16) are former al-Qaeda affiliates.¹²

The apparent focus by ISIS leaders on *control over territory* caused many to conclude at the time that ISIS was far less interested in attacking the West than al-Qaeda. This also has proven to be false. The first successful attack by a foreign fighter returnee – or an individual who returns home after fighting in Syria and Iraq – took place in May 2014 at the Jewish Museum in Brussels. 4 people were killed in this attack. The perpetrator was a part of a cell led by Abdelhamid Abaaoud, the leader of the November 2015 attacks, and overseen by al-Adnani until his death in August 2016.¹³ This indicates that ISIS leaders intended to attack the West months before they even declared an Islamic caliphate.

External Operations

The overall pattern of attacks by ISIS reinforces the conclusion that its leaders very much want to attack the West today, as they did in the past. Between June 2014 and May 2017, ISIS operatives conducted approximately 225 attacks outside Syria and Iraq. Of these, 58% have been in countries with ISIS provinces. The best way to think about this is that 58% of all ISIS attacks outside Syria and Iraq have occurred in countries with ISIS safe havens. 42% can be considered “external operations” or attacks that take place outside of the 11 countries with ISIS provinces.¹⁴

To put this in perspective, ISIS has been much more aggressive in its external operations than al-Qaeda. For example, only 10% of al-Qaeda's attacks between January 2008 and December 2010 took place outside countries with acknowledged affiliates: 10% for al-Qaeda, 42% for ISIS. Over half – or 52% -- of the Islamic State's *successful* external operations have been in the West.

But, of course, to truly understand the nature and extent of the threat posed by ISIS external operations in the West, we should examine both successful and failed attacks. The numbers become even more grim if we broaden the aperture along these lines: 58% of all ISIS external operations – including both attacks and plots – have taken place in the West. Foreign fighters have been a significant part of this. They have been directly involved – as operators or logisticians – in 47% of all ISIS external operations.¹⁵

Let's take the November 2015 attacks in Paris as a concrete example. As I said, I recently completed an in-depth analysis of the individuals involved in this attack, as well as the planning process. As you know, there were 9 core operatives involved in these attacks: 7 foreign fighter returnees and 2 Iraqis sent by ISIS to participate in the attack. They travelled to Europe in two waves. The first arrived in September 2015 and the second in October. Once in Europe, they rented a total of 8 different safe houses outside of Brussels and Paris (including in Charleroi and Auvelais). They also began to recruit local residents for logistical support: an additional 21 individuals provided direct logistical support to this attack, 7 of them were foreign fighter returnees and 14 were not. This illustrates a secondary threat posed by foreign fighter returnees: they can recruit others to conduct attacks locally.¹⁶

Foreign Fighters

This brings me to the issue of foreign fighters and returnees. As you know, the National Counterterrorism Center has said that 40,000 individuals have travelled to Syria and Iraq to fight in the conflict. These numbers are much higher than we have ever seen before. The next closest was Afghanistan between 1984 and 1993. Between 20 and 25,000 "Arab Afghans" fought in this conflict. Only 5,000 travelled to Iraq during Operation Iraqi Freedom. 3,000 fought in Bosnia.¹⁷

Historically speaking, the recidivism rate of returnees – or the extent to which they re-engage in violence upon their return home – is disturbingly high. Based on my research, only 20% of the Arab Afghans either remained in Pakistan, travelled to other conflict zones, or went to Sudan with Osama bin Laden. The rest returned home. And, if we look at the case of the Algerians in Afghanistan, they had a 90% recidivism rate.¹⁸ That's with no rehabilitation program and, eventually, a horrific civil war. But the case of Indonesia is even more disturbing. Indonesians, who fought in Afghanistan, had a 40% recidivism rate *after a 10 year delay*.¹⁹ They eventually became Jemaah Islamiyah, the group responsible for the 2003 and 2005 Bali bombings. So, if we look at historical precedent, we cannot count on foreign fighters reintegrating peacefully.

That's the bad news.

The good news is that, after the Paris attacks, it became clear that this threat would not go away and Western security services began to take steps to address it. The United Nations Security Council had already passed Resolutions 2170 and 2178, encouraging countries to strengthen their laws to address foreign fighters, prior to the Paris attacks. But the Paris attacks acted as a catalyst for the West. Since then, Spain has detained 159 individuals and interrupted at least 6 plots. France has foiled a total of 22 plots, one per month in 2017. The United Kingdom has detained 294 individuals and foiled 18 plots.

In fact, based on my research, the combined efforts by law enforcement, intelligence, and military forces led to a plummet in the number of successful external operations by foreign fighters in late summer 2016. This pre-dates the Mosul Offensive by several months. It tells me that the United States and its allies in the West have come up with the correct formula to minimize the threat posed by returnees. But it's only a short-term solution.

It's only a short-term solution because arresting individuals preemptively leads to short prison terms, only 3-5 years in some instances. It also presents the threat of prison radicalization. And it's hard to see how this formula can be applied by other, less affluent, countries. For example, Tunisia's prisons are already at 150% capacity. Indonesia has arrested and detained 3,000 individuals on terrorism-related charges, even though it only has the capacity for 900 in its Cipinang jail.²⁰ Even though this hearing is focused on the threat facing Europe, it is important to remember that most foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq come from the Middle East and North Africa. It is not a stretch to expect that these foreign fighters will also return home to conduct attacks.

Unfortunately, ISIS also has proven itself to be highly adaptive and the recent attacks in London and Manchester tragically underscore that there is more to be done, even in the West. In fact, I mentioned previously that successful attacks by foreign fighters plummeted in August 2016. But the overall trend in external operations by ISIS continues to go up. Why?

If you look at these data over time, you'll see that as the number of successful attacks by foreign fighter returnees plummets, it is replaced by those conducted by local recruits with detailed guidance from ISIS fighters based in Syria, sometimes referred to as "virtual planners"²¹. These Virtual Planners identify local recruits, put operational teams together, sometimes introduce new recruits to others with technical expertise or provide technical guidance, and help pick the target, all remotely via Telegram or WhatsApp.

Recent examples of this type of external operation by ISIS include a bomb placed outside the Notre Dame Cathedral by an ISIS cell of all women in September 2016. They received detailed guidance from Rachid Kassim, a French-born foreign fighter based in Syria. By my count, Kassim acted as Virtual Planner for at least 4 external operations in France during 2016. He was targeted by US airstrikes in February 2017. Similarly, in December 2016, Indonesia's counter-terrorism police, Detachment 88, disrupted a plot against the Presidential compound in Jakarta. Indonesian foreign fighter, Bahrun Naim, recruited and planned this attack using Telegram Messaging. Thus far, Virtually Planned attacks have not been as successful as attacks conducted by foreign fighter returnees. But it is too soon to claim victory in this area.

Conclusion

Which brings me to the final question posed by this hearing, "what more can be done by the United States and its European partners to mitigate this threat to the West?"

First, I do not want to leave the impression that we have solved the problem of foreign fighter returnees in the West. We have not. But the most urgent need is to find a way to take the formula developed by the United States and its European allies and expand it geographically.

Specifically, we need to augment partner countries' police, judiciary, and prison systems so that they can handle what is likely to be a flood of returnees. This is not simply about the security and stability of the Middle East, North Africa, or Southeast Asia. Some of the most significant attacks and plots against the U.S. homeland have originated overseas, including the 9/11 attacks.

To do this, I recommend a combination of police training, including social media exploitation, as well as training for prosecutors, and resources for rehabilitation programs. It makes sense for these programs to be overseen by US embassies and FBI Legal Attachés on-the-ground. But they need to fit within a transregional strategy and be tightly coordinated with the US intelligence community and military.

Second, at a more strategic level, any diplomatic resolution to the conflict in Syria must include a provision that deals with foreign fighters. Foreign fighters must be told to leave. This is not a new idea. The 1995 Dayton Peace Agreement required that foreign fighters depart the area within 30 days.²²

Third, and finally, it is clear to me that, if the most immediate threat to the West comes from foreign fighters, the future threat is attacks guided by Virtual Planners. I would recommend that as the U.S. government puts together a strategy to deal with ISIS external operations, it also consider an architecture to address the ongoing, global, threat from both foreign fighter returnees and virtual planners.

¹ The opinions and conclusions expressed in this testimony are the author's alone and should not be interpreted as representing those of the National Defense University, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the Department of Defense or the United States government.

² Kim Cragin, "The Challenge of Foreign Fighter Returnees," *Journal of Contemporary Criminal Justice*, accepted February 2017. First release April 2017, <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/1043986217697872>; and, Kim Cragin, "The November 2015 Paris Attacks: The Impact of Foreign Fighter Returnees," *Orbis*, Spring 2017, available online at <http://www.fpri.org/article/2017/03/november-2015-paris-attacks-impact-foreign-fighter-returnees>.

³ Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, *This is the Promise of Allah*, statement released by al-Hayat Media Center, 30 June 2014.

⁴ "Militants Kill al-Qaeda Emissary in Syria," *Jane's Terrorism and Insurgency Monitor*, 25 February 2014.

⁵ See, for example, Michael Weiss and Hassan Hassan, *ISIS: Inside the Army of Terror* (New York: Regan Arts, 2015); and, William McCants, *The ISIS Apocalypse: The History, Strategy, and Doomsday Vision of The Islamic State* (New York: St Martin's Press, 2015).

⁶ Ahmed Rashid, *Descent into Chaos: The U.S. and the Disaster in Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Central Asia* (New York: Penguin Books, 2009), pp. 281-282; and, Mary Anne Weaver, "The Short, Violent, Life of Abu Musab Zarqawi," *The Atlantic*, 8 June 2006, <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2006/07/the-short-violent-life-of-abu-musab-al-zarqawi/304983/>.

⁷ William McCants, *The ISIS Apocalypse*, pp. 10-11; and Mary Anne Weaver, "The Short, Violent, Life."

⁸ General Stanley McChrystal, *My Share of the Task*, (New York: Penguin, 2014), pp. 152.

⁹ See "Zawahiri's Letter to Zarqawi" and "Atiyah's Letter to Zarqawi," available online at <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/zawahiris-letter-to-zarqawi-english-translation-2>; and, <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/atiyahs-letter-to-zarqawi-english-translation-2>.

¹⁰ M.W. Zackie Masoud, "An Analysis of Abu Musa'b al-Suri's Call to Global Islamic Resistance," *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 6, No. 1 (Spring 2013), pp. 1-18.

¹¹ Kim Cragin, "Why the United States Needs Foreign Law Enforcement to Succeed Against the Islamic State," *Lawfare Blog*, 18 June 2017, available online at <https://www.lawfareblog.com/why-united-states-needs-foreign-law-enforcement-succeed-against-islamic-state>.

¹² Kim Cragin, "The Global Islamic Threat in Historical Context," *Pathways to Peace and Security*, No. 1 (52), May 2017.

¹³ Kim Cragin, "The November 2015 Paris Attacks: The Impact of Foreign Fighter Returnees," *Orbis*, Spring 2017, available online at <http://www.fpri.org/article/2017/03/november-2015-paris-attacks-impact-foreign-fighter-returnees>.

¹⁴ Kim Cragin, "Why the United States Needs Foreign Law Enforcement to Succeed Against the Islamic State," *Lawfare Blog*, 18 June 2017, available online at <https://www.lawfareblog.com/why-united-states-needs-foreign-law-enforcement-succeed-against-islamic-state>.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Kim Cragin, "The November 2015 Paris Attacks: The Impact of Foreign Fighter Returnees," *Orbis*, Spring 2017, available online at <http://www.fpri.org/article/2017/03/november-2015-paris-attacks-impact-foreign-fighter-returnees>.

¹⁷ Kim Cragin, "The Challenge of Foreign Fighter Returnees," *Journal of Contemporary Criminal Justice*, accepted February 2017. First release April 2017, <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/1043986217697872>.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Kim Cragin, "Why the United States Needs Foreign Law Enforcement to Succeed Against the Islamic State," *Lawfare Blog*, 18 June 2017, available online at <https://www.lawfareblog.com/why-united-states-needs-foreign-law-enforcement-succeed-against-islamic-state>.

²¹ See, for example, David Garstenstein-Ross and Madeline Blackman, "ISIS' Virtual Planners: A Critical Terrorist Innovation," *War on the Rocks*, blogpost, 4 January 2017, available online at <https://warontherocks.com/2017/01/isils-virtual-planners-a-critical-terrorist-innovation/>.

²² *Dayton Peace Agreement, General Framework Agreement for Peace in Bosnia and Herzegovina*, 21 November 1995, available online at: <http://www.refworld.org/docid/3de495c34.html>, last accessed 12 September 2016.