

**“The Rise of Radicalism: □ Growing Terrorist Sanctuaries and the Threat to the U.S. Homeland”**

**Testimony for a Joint Hearing of the U.S. House Committee on Homeland Security and the House Committee on Foreign Affairs**

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This testimony is divided into six sections:

- the first, who the Westerners being recruited by ISIS are;
- the second, how they are being recruited;
- the third, the threat to the United States by ISIS's American recruits;
- the fourth, the threat to the United States by ISIS's non-American recruits;
- the fifth, how ISIS is expanding its reach;
- the sixth, how to defeat ISIS: twelve action items.<sup>1</sup>

**On Friday November 13, France had its 9/11.** At least 129 people were killed at multiple locations in Paris, including a concert hall, a soccer stadium and a popular restaurant, the kinds of venues that ordinary Parisians flock to on a Friday night. At, or near, these venues the attackers deployed a mix of terrorist tactics, including suicide attackers, an assault using more than one gunman willing to fight to the death, hostage-taking and bombings.

In the years after 9/11, we have seen various forms of this terrible news story play out: the multiple bombs on trains in Madrid that killed 191 in 2004, the four suicide bombings in London that killed 52 commuters in 2005, and the 2008 attacks in Mumbai, India, by 10 gunmen who killed 166. The attackers in Paris seemed to have learned lessons from all these attacks. (By the way, this is also the case of U.S. school shootings in which the perpetrators study the tactics of those who have gone before them.)

French President Francois Hollande blames ISIS, for the attack, and the terror group has claimed responsibility. According to French prosecutors, one of the attackers who has been identified is a French national known to police, and a Syrian passport [was found](#) on one of the bodies of the other attackers. CNN reports that this militant was posing as a Syrian refugee. It is still early in the investigation, but already the *Washington Post* and *New York Times* report that French nationals who have been identified as among the perpetrators of the Paris attacks had traveled to Syria, while Reuters reports that the leader of the attacks is a Belgian citizen who also spent time in Syria.

Until now, French citizen Mehdi Nemmouche was the only case of a Western fighter in Syria accused of returning to conduct a deadly terror attack -- the May 24, 2014, shooting at the Jewish Museum in Brussels, Belgium, that left four people dead. Nemmouche had served time in a French prison, and he had an assault rifle when he was arrested in France. A French journalist held by ISIS reportedly [has identified Nemmouche as one of the group's alleged torturers](#). Nemmouche has been extradited to Belgium, where he awaits trial.

Returning militants from Syria are a worrying potential source of terror attacks. And two major factors place Europe at far greater risk of "returnee" violence from veterans of the Syrian conflict than is the case in the United States: the much larger number of European militants who have gone to fight in Syria and the existence of more developed jihadist networks in Europe.

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<sup>1</sup> **Thanks to Courtney Schuster and David Sterman of New America for their help in preparing this testimony.**

**France has supplied more fighters to the Syrian conflict than any other Western country.** In September, Prime Minister Manuel Valls told Parliament that 1,800 French citizens have been involved in jihadist networks worldwide -- almost all of whom were drawn to the Syrian war. Nine months earlier, Interior Minister Bernard Cazeneuve [estimated](#) that 185 militants had returned to France from Syria. Of those who had returned, he said 82 were in jail and 36 were under other forms of judicial control.

German security services report that 720 Germans have left for Syria, and they estimate that 100 [have been killed](#) there, while another 180 [have returned](#) to Germany. Last year, the Belgian Foreign Ministry [released figures](#) that up to 350 Belgians had left to fight in Syria. More than [700 British citizens have left for Syria](#), with about half estimated to have returned to the United Kingdom, according to British officials. In January, Australian Foreign Minister Julie Bishop [placed the number of Australians fighting](#) abroad at 180, with 20 having died in Syria.

**1. So who exactly are the estimated 4,500 Westerners who have been drawn to join ISIS and other militant groups in Syria?** To provide some answers to that question, New America collected information about 466 individuals from 25 Western countries who have been reported by credible news sources as having left their home countries to join ISIS or other Sunni jihadist groups in Syria or Iraq. The Western fighters drawn to Syria and Iraq represent a new demographic profile, quite different than that of other Western militants who fought in Afghanistan in the 1980s or Bosnia in the 1990s.

**First, women are represented in unprecedented numbers.** One in seven of the militants in New America's data set are women. Women were rarely, if at all, represented in previous jihadist conflicts. While Western women are not going to fight in the war in Syria, they are playing supporting roles, often marrying front-line fighters and sometimes working as a kind of police officer enforcing ISIS's draconian laws. They are women like Sally Jones, 44, from the United Kingdom, who took her 10-year-old son to Syria in 2013, and Emilie Konig, 31, one of the first women to leave for Syria, who left France and her two children behind in 2012 to join her husband there. The U.S. State Department says both women have encouraged terrorist attacks in their native countries, and it officially [designated](#) both of them terrorists in September.

**Second, the recruits are young.** The average age of Western volunteers drawn to the Syrian jihad is 24. For female recruits, the average age is 21. Almost a fifth are teenagers, more than a third of whom are female. New America has documented an astonishing 80 cases of Western teenagers who have traveled to the war in Syria. More than a third of these teenagers are girls. Hans-Georg Maassen, the head of Germany's domestic security agency, [said, for instance](#), in March that nine female German teens had left for Syria. That same month, [ISIS released a video](#) of a French boy shooting a Palestinian hostage in the forehead.

**Third, many have familial ties to jihadism.** More than a quarter of Western fighters have a familial connection to jihad, whether through relatives who are also fighting in Syria and Iraq, through marriage or through some link to other jihads or terrorist attacks. For instance the father of British ISIS recruit Abdel-Majed Abdel Bary is Adel Abdel

Bary, who was [convicted](#) in New York for his role in the 1998 U.S. embassy bombings in Kenya and Tanzania. Of those with a familial link, one third are through marriage, many of them marriages between female recruits and male fighters conducted after they arrive in Syria. Three-fifths of Western fighters with familial ties to jihad have a relative who has also left for Syria. For example, the Deghayes family in the United Kingdom had three sons, ages 16 to 20, fighting in Syria together.

**Fourth, the Americans drawn to the Syrian jihad -- 250 who have tried or have succeeded in getting to Syria -- share the same profile as the Western fighters overall: Women are well-represented, and the volunteers are young, and many have family ties to jihad.** One in six of the Americans drawn to the Syrian conflict are women. The average age of the American militants is 25, with a fifth still in their teens. Almost a fifth of the American militants have a familial connection to jihad. The American recruits are, perhaps unsurprisingly, particularly active online: Around nine out of 10 American militants are active in online jihadist circles.

**Fifth, for Western militants, the wars engulfing Syria and Iraq have often proved deadly.** Almost half of the male fighters and 6% of the female recruits have been killed in Syria or Iraq.

**Sixth, few of the Western fighters who have traveled to Syria and Iraq are in government custody.** Only one-fifth of Western fighters in New America's data set are in custody, and more than two-fifths of individuals are still at large. (As indicated above, around half the Western militants were killed in the conflicts in Syria or Iraq.)

**Seventh, the most popular route to Syria is through Turkey.** Almost half of the Western foreign fighters made their way to Syria or Iraq via Turkey. Only one of the militants is documented as attempting to use an alternative route via Lebanon. For the rest of the Western militants, it's not clear from the public record how they arrived in Syria.

**Eighth, where an affiliation can be determined, the majority of the Western fighters have joined ISIS:** Three-fifths have joined ISIS, while only a tenth have joined al Qaeda's affiliate in Syria, known as al Nusra Front, and one-seventh have joined other smaller militant groups.

**2. How these Westerners are recruited: Propaganda and motivations.** Who is inspiring these militants to give up their often-comfortable lives in the West for the rigors of the war zone in Syria? Based on court records and press reports, New America has identified several Western militants acting as online recruiters. Among them are a number of Americans. For instance, Abdi Nur, a 20-year-old from Minnesota, allegedly took on the role of online recruiter after leaving for Syria in the summer of 2014. A complaint filed in November that charged six Minnesota men with trying to go to join ISIS [accuses Nur of acting as an online recruiter](#) and providing encouragement and advice to the men via Kik and other social media platforms from Syria. Another is Hoda Muthana, a 20-year-old American woman from Alabama, was [identified by BuzzFeed](#) as the individual behind the Twitter account Umm Jihad, which encouraged militants to

leave for Syria.

ISIS has disseminated two online guidebooks to encourage its Western recruits. In 2015, ISIS published its how-to guides *Hijrah* and "How to Survive in the West." *Hijrah* provided potential fighters with detailed packing lists -- advice on how to get to Turkey and dupe customs officials into issuing visas for the country; Twitter accounts of fighters living in Syria who can facilitate their travel; and even suggestions for recruits to assess their personality strengths and weaknesses before leaving home to prepare themselves better for jihad.

"How to Survive in the West" is a guide on how to "be a secret agent" in a Western country, giving readers tips on the making of Molotov cocktails, bombs and cell phone detonators; hiding weapons in secret compartments of vehicles, in the same fashion as gangs; and how to identify and evade police surveillance, even suggesting that readers watch the Jason Bourne film series for tips on employing evasion tactics.

What motivates many of these Western fighters to travel to a dangerous war zone with which most have no prior connection? A review of both ISIS propaganda and reporting on the individual cases in New America's data set suggests the answer is a mishmash of motivations that ISIS has picked up on as part of its recruiting strategy, including opposition to Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad, religious invocations of the spiritual benefit of participating in jihad, the belief that religious duty requires living under ISIS's so-called caliphate, anger and alienation from Western society, and for some the "cool" factor of participating in a war.

Here are the rationales for joining ISIS that are provided by a couple of ISIS's alleged American recruits: Abdi Nur, the 20-year-old Minnesotan, tweeted: "Jihad Is The Greatest Honor For Man So Come On And Join Dawla Ya Iqwa (you brothers of the Islamic State))." [Nur later explained](#) to his sister: "If I didn't care I wouldn't have left but I want jannah (paradise) for all of us." Authorities say Chicago teen [Hamzah Khan](#) left a letter for his parents before attempting to travel to Syria in 2014, explaining that "there is an obligation to 'migrate' to the 'Islamic State.'" He was charged with material support of ISIS and has pleaded not guilty.

**3. Threat to the United States by ISIS's American recruits. Four years into the Syrian civil war, little evidence has emerged to support the notion that returning fighters from Syria pose a great threat to the United States.** In the United States, there has only been one case of a fighter returning from Syria and allegedly plotting an attack. [Abdirahman Sheik Mohamud](#), 22, of Columbus, Ohio, left for Syria in April 2014 and fought there before returning home around two months later. The government alleges that a cleric in Syria told Mohamud that he should return to the United States to conduct an act of terrorism and that he discussed some kind of plan (with an informant) to kill American soldiers at a military base in Texas. He has pleaded not guilty to a charge of providing material support to a terrorist group.

Speaking at the Council on Foreign Relations in March, Director of National Intelligence

James Clapper said that about 40 individuals had returned from Syria. "We have since found they went for humanitarian purposes or some other reason that don't relate to plotting," he said.

We identified 23 Americans who actually reached Syria, 46 individuals who attempted or plotted to travel to Syria but were unsuccessful in doing so, and 14 who provided support to others fighting or seeking to fight in Syria.

Instead of being a launch pad for attacks at home, Syria turned out to be a graveyard for the few Americans who made it to the war zone. Of the 23 individuals who reached Syria, nine died there. For instance, Floridian Moner Abu Salha died conducting a suicide bombing in northern Syria last year, and Douglas McAuthur McCain was killed fighting for ISIS. Nine of the Americans who reached Syria remain at large, while five American fighters who returned to the United States from Syria were taken into custody.

**Rather than being an easy target for ISIS recruits, the United States benefits from a series of layered defenses that make returning and plotting a sophisticated attack undetected quite difficult.** It takes more than a plane ticket for a returning fighter to conduct a sophisticated attack: they also have to gather arms, conduct surveillance, and carry out the attack undetected. This is difficult as Muslim communities have often reported suspicious activity and law enforcement has instituted an aggressive effort using informants and other investigative tools to prevent such an occurrence. According to New America's data, Muslim communities and family members have provided tips in 28 percent of the 330 jihadist terrorism related cases since 9/11, and in about 8 percent of cases, other individuals have reported suspicious activity. Almost half of the 330 individuals accused of jihadist terrorism-related crimes since 9/11 have been monitored by an informant.<sup>2</sup> Even in the case of Moner Abu Salha, which is certainly not a success story given his return undetected to the United States after training with the al-Qaeda affiliate in Syria, when he started to try to recruit Americans to go to Syria, a tip put him on the government's radar.<sup>3</sup>

In assessing the threat posed by returning American fighters, it is worth putting the current Syrian conflict into historical perspective. The historical comparison most people are aware of is the Afghan war against the Soviets and the ensuing civil war, which helped launch Osama bin Laden's al-Qaeda. Though an important cautionary tale, much has changed since then that makes it a weak comparison for how "blowback" from Syria might affect the United States.<sup>4</sup> For example, on 9/11, there were 16 people on the U.S. "no fly" list. Today, there are more than 48,000 people. In 2001, there were 32 Joint Terrorism Task Force "fusion centers," where multiple law enforcement agencies work together to chase down leads and build terrorism cases. Now there are 104 centers.<sup>5</sup> A decade ago, the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, National Counterterrorism

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<sup>2</sup> "Homegrown Extremism 2001-2015." *New America*. <http://securitydata.newamerica.net/extremists/analysis>.

<sup>3</sup> Sterman, David. "The Traveling Terrorism Fallacy." *Weekly Wonk*. 9/4/2014. <http://weeklywonk.newamerica.net/articles/traveling-terrorism-fallacy/>.

<sup>4</sup> The section below is drawn from Peter Bergen et al. "2014 Jihadist Terrorism and Other Conventional Threats," *Bipartisan Policy Center*, September 2014.

<sup>5</sup> Federal Bureau of Investigation. "Protecting America from Terrorist Attack: Our Joint Terrorism Task Forces." Federal Bureau of Investigation. Accessed August 5, 2013. [http://www.fbi.gov/about-us/investigate/terrorism/terrorism\\_jtjfs](http://www.fbi.gov/about-us/investigate/terrorism/terrorism_jtjfs).

Center, Transportation Security Administration, Northern Command, and Cyber Command didn't exist. In 2014, all of these new post-9/11 institutions make it much harder for terrorists to operate in the United States. The U.S. intelligence budget also grew dramatically after 9/11, with Congress giving the government substantial resources with which to improve its counterterrorism capabilities. In 2013, the United States allocated \$72 billion to intelligence collection and other covert activities.<sup>6</sup> Before 9/11, the budget was around one third of that figure: \$26 billion.

Perhaps of most relevance to the issue of returning fighters is that prior to 9/11, the U.S. law enforcement community demonstrated little interest in investigating or prosecuting individuals who traveled abroad to fight in an overseas jihad. Today, the U.S. government considers such persons to be a serious concern and tracks their activities.

A post-9/11 American fighter flow to jihadist groups abroad that sparked fears but turned out not to be a real threat to the United States was Al-Shabaab's recruitment of American fighters to wage war in Somalia. According to a review by New America, no American fighter who fought in the conflict in Somalia returned to plot an attack in the United States. Instead, about one third of the individuals known to have traveled to fight in Somalia died there, either as suicide bombers or on the battlefield, while others were taken into custody upon their return.<sup>7</sup>

There are, however, worrisome cases of returning militants to the United States since 9/11 that attempted serious attacks. The United States' experience with Americans fighting or training in Afghanistan and Pakistan provides an illustration of what a more serious returnee threat might look like. Najibullah Zazi, Adis Medunjanin, and Zarein Ahmedzay, who all grew up in New York City, traveled to Pakistan, where they ended up receiving training from al-Qaeda, and were sent back to the United States where they were part of a serious plot to bomb the New York City subway in the fall of 2009. On May 1, 2010, Connecticut-based Faisal Shahzad, who was trained in bomb-making techniques in Pakistan by the Pakistani Taliban, left a car bomb undetected in New York City's Times Square that failed to properly explode.

**Acts of violence by Americans inspired by, but with no direct connection to the terrorist groups in Syria, pose a more immediate challenge than attacks by returning fighters from Syria.** As FBI Director James Comey noted in September 2014 while referring to the December 2013 arrest of Terry Loewen, who was accused of plotting an attack on Wichita Airport in Kansas after being radicalized online: "We have made it so hard for people to get into this country, bad guys, but they can enter as a photon and radicalize somebody in Wichita, Kansas." At the time, Comey also noted that ISIS lacked the capability for a sophisticated attack in the United States.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Intelligence Resource Program. "Intelligence Budget Data." Federation of American Scientists. Accessed August 25, 2014. <http://fas.org/irp/budget/>.

<sup>7</sup> Bergen, Peter and David Sterman. "ISIS Threat to U.S. Mostly Hype." *CNN*. 9/5/2014. <http://edition.cnn.com/2014/09/05/opinion/bergen-sterman-isis-threat-hype/>.

<sup>8</sup> Kendall, Brent and Jay Solomon. "FBI Cites Online Terror Recruiting, Training, Damps Subway-Plot Claim." *Wall Street Journal*. 9/25/2014. <http://www.wsj.com/articles/fbi-director-cites-online-terror-recruiting-training-damps-subway-plot-claim-1411688762>.



On May 3, 2015, the United States saw its first actual attack inspired by ISIS along the lines of similar ISIS-inspired attacks in Ottawa, Copenhagen, and Paris. Two men were killed by police after opening fire at a contest to draw cartoons of the Prophet Mohammed in Garland, Texas, organized by the American Freedom Defense Initiative. The event featured right-wing Dutch politician Geert Wilders, who had been named on an al-Qaeda hit list. One of shooters, Elton Simpson, had previously been convicted of making a false statement to the FBI regarding plans to travel to Somalia. Before conducting the attack Simpson tweeted his allegiance to ISIS.<sup>9</sup> Simpson, a 30-year-old resident of Phoenix, Arizona, who was born in Illinois and converted to Islam during his youth, was joined in the attack by his roommate Nadir Soofi, a 34-year-old who was born in Garland.

The shooting in Texas is not a lone case. While the United States has seen only one possible case of a domestic attack plot by a returned fighter from Syria, it has seen a number of alleged Syria-related plots to conduct violence that were inspired by the propaganda put out by ISIS. For instance, in March, the United States unsealed charges against Hasan Edmonds, a 22-year-old member of the National Guard, and his cousin Jonas Edmonds, alleging that Hasan Edmonds had sought to travel to fight with ISIS and that they had plotted to have Jonas Edmonds conduct an attack against a military facility. The plot was monitored by an undercover officer.<sup>10</sup> They have pleaded not guilty. In April, the United States charged John T. Booker and Alexander Blair with an alleged plot to bomb Fort Riley, in Kansas, in support of ISIS.<sup>11</sup> The two men were monitored by an informant. They have pleaded not guilty. The same month, the United States charged two New York City women, Noelle Velentzas and Asia Siddiqui, in relation to a domestic attack plot in support of ISIS. The two women were monitored by an undercover officer. According to the complaint, Siddiqui had regular contact with members of Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula. When FBI agents arrested Velentzas and Siddiqui in Queens, they seized propane tanks, soldering tools, a pressure cooker, fertilizer, and bomb making instructions.<sup>12</sup>

**4. Threats to the United States by non-American ISIS recruits.** Many fighters from countries other than the United States have traveled to fight in Syria and could pose a potential threat to the United States. So far we have not seen a case of a foreign fighter from another country traveling to the United States to conduct an attack. However, the large number of foreign fighters traveling to fight in Syria from other countries magnifies the potential threat of an infiltration attack, especially given the high numbers of foreign fighters from countries that enjoy the Visa Waiver Program with the United States, such

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<sup>9</sup> Ahmed, Saeed, Ed Lavendera, and Joe Sutton. "Garland, Texas, shooting suspect linked himself to ISIS in tweets" *CNN*. 5/4/2015. <http://www.cnn.com/2015/05/04/us/garland-mohammed-drawing-contest-shooting/>

<sup>10</sup> "US Army National Guard Soldier and his Cousin Arrested for Conspiring to Support Terrorism (ISIL)." *Department of Justice*. 3/26/15. <http://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/us-army-national-guard-soldier-and-his-cousin-arrested-conspiring-support-terrorism-isil>.

<sup>11</sup> "Second Topeka Man Charged in Connection with Car Bomb Plot." *U.S. Attorney's Office*. 4/10/15.

<http://www.fbi.gov/kansascity/press-releases/2015/second-topeka-man-charged-in-connection-with-car-bomb-plot>; Criminal Complaint, United States v. Blair, No. 15-mj-5040-KGS (D. Kansas, Apr. 10, 2015).

<sup>12</sup> "Two Queens Residents Charged with Conspiracy to Use a Weapon of Mass Destruction." *U.S. Attorney's Office*. 4/2/15.

<http://www.fbi.gov/newyork/press-releases/2015/two-queens-residents-charged-with-conspiracy-to-use-a-weapon-of-mass-destruction>; Letter to Judge Pohorelsky at 2, United States v. Velentzas, No. 1:15-mj-00303-VVP (E.D.N.Y., Apr. 1, 2015); Complaint and Affidavit in Support of Arrest Warrant at 3, United States v. Velentzas, No. 1:15-mj-00303-VVP (E.D.N.Y., Apr. 1, 2015).



as Australia, Belgium, France, Germany, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom.

Tracking the many foreign fighters from Western countries who have gone to Syria and who have returned to the West poses a greater challenge, given their larger numbers, than tracking the handful of returning American fighters. With the large numbers of Europeans traveling to fight in Syria, nations such as France and Germany are reporting significant strain on their ability to monitor returnees effectively. In December, Germany's federal prosecutor general, Harald Range, [said](#) of the number of terrorism cases being prosecuted in his country, "We are at the limits of our capacity," adding that new cases kept emerging. "What worries me is the speed with which people are radicalizing, or being radicalized. We are facing a phenomenon which needs a broad strategy of prevention."

Each French individual placed under surveillance requires 25 agents to maintain round-the-clock monitoring, and the strain on resources produced by ever increasing numbers of militants who need to be monitored was in part behind [the failure to maintain surveillance](#) of the Kouachi brothers, who conducted the attack on the Charlie Hebdo magazine in Paris earlier this year. It would take many thousands of agents to monitor each of the more than a 1,000 Frenchmen reportedly involved in the Syrian war, and France simply doesn't have that kind of manpower. The fact that a French prosecutor says that one of the Paris attackers on November 13 was a French national who was known to police is an indicator of how difficult tracking all of these militants has proven to be.

**5. ISIS expands its reach.** ISIS controls territory in Syria and Iraq that by some estimates is the size of the United Kingdom, and it lords over millions of people in both countries. The group has also secured pledges of allegiance from two dozen militant organizations from around the Muslim world, including in the Sinai and Egypt's neighbor Libya, while around 10 other groups have declared some form of solidarity with ISIS. The key to ISIS's success is not the group's military strength — ISIS in Syria and Iraq may number only about 20,000 to 30,000 fighters — but the weaknesses of the regimes where the group is doing well.

**Think of the Sunni militant group ISIS as a pathogen that preys on weak hosts in the Muslim world. In fact, there something of a law: The weaker a Muslim state the stronger will be the presence of ISIS or like-minded groups.**

In 2014 ISIS seized huge swaths of Iraq, exploiting the fact that the country had been in a civil war for more than a decade and the Iraqi government had pursued a policy of excluding Sunnis from power. ISIS is one of the most powerful players in Syria because the country has been embroiled in a civil war since 2011 and the regime of Bashar al-Assad has imposed a reign of terror on its Sunni population, including the use of chemical weapons and widespread torture. For the moment, ISIS and the countries allied against it, including the United States, have come to something of a stalemate in Iraq and Syria.

ISIS also has a significant foothold in Libya because the country is embroiled in a civil war, which was instigated by the U.S.-led overthrow of Libyan dictator Moammar

Gadhafi four years ago. (This move may turn out to be the most significant foreign policy blunder of the Obama administration, as there was no serious American plan for what would follow Gadhafi — the same negligence that had characterized George W. Bush's overthrow of Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein.) ISIS is growing in Egypt because a military dictator who seized power in a coup leads the country, and he has brutally quashed all forms of dissent, including criminalizing the Muslim Brotherhood, which has many millions of members in Egypt and had formed the previous government. It's fertile soil for ISIS, which had done particularly well in the Sinai, leading an insurgency there that has killed hundreds.

When ISIS first gained significant ground in Iraq and Syria in 2014, it focused almost entirely on its actions there and encouraged its overseas followers to join the jihad. Writing in the third issue of *Dabiq*, its English-language online magazine, an ISIS writer asserted, "This life of jihad is not possible until you pack and move to the Khilafah," meaning to leave your home and travel to ISIS's areas of control in Iraq and Syria.

**In the past weeks, ISIS has shifted its strategy, attacking on a large scale outside of Iraq and Syria.** The group claimed responsibility for the downing of the Russian Metrojet carrying 224 passengers and crew on October 31 in the Sinai in Egypt. Although the investigation of the crash has not been completed, there is little reason to discount this claim. On November 12 ISIS suicide bombers killed 43 in a Shia-dominated area of Beirut, the worst bombing since the Lebanese civil war ended in 1990. The very next day the team of ISIS militants attacked at multiple locations in Paris.

**At the same time, the US-led coalition has scored two important tactical victories against ISIS.** The first is the reported assassination of "Jihadi John," the notorious British terrorist who starred in many of ISIS's beheading videos. [U.S. officials now say they are "reasonably certain"](#) that he was killed in a drone strike. An investigation by the *Washington Post* found that he was Mohammed Emwazi, Kuwait-born and London-raised. Jihadi John's death would mean justice for the man who presided over ISIS's most notorious kidnappings and murders, which included four Americans, two British citizens and two Japanese hostages. It would also show that more than a year after the murder of American journalist James Foley--the first of Jihadi John's Western victims to appear in an ISIS video--U.S. intelligence is finally developing quite reliable intelligence inside Raqqa, ISIS's de facto capital in Syria, where Jihadi John was targeted in the American drone strike. However, there is no evidence suggesting that Jihadi John was an important spiritual leader of the group, as ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi is, nor is there any evidence that he played any kind of important military role for ISIS. Therefore, while Jihadi John's death would surely be a psychological victory in the war against ISIS, it is nothing more than that.

The second tactical victory against ISIS will likely have far greater significance: It is the seizure last week of the town of Sinjar in Iraq by Kurdish forces. Sinjar sits along the road that connects Raqqa with ISIS's de facto capital in Iraq, the city of Mosul. The seizure of Sinjar will help put pressure on ISIS in both Mosul and Raqqa, as ISIS forces

in these cities can no longer easily reinforce each other.

Neither of these tactical victories are, however, strategic victories such as would be the capture of Raqqa or of Mosul or of the other significant Iraqi city held by ISIS, Ramadi. President Obama told ABC News last week that ISIS is “contained” and has not gained ground in Iraq or Syria, and there has also been progress in stemming the flow of foreign recruits trying to join the group. The president acknowledged that the coalition hasn't been able to “completely decapitate” ISIS's leadership.

Does this mean that the coalition against ISIS is locked in a stalemate with the terrorist army, or has the momentum of the military campaign started to shift against ISIS? In September, Gen. Martin Dempsey, the outgoing chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said that the war against ISIS was “tactically stalemated.” Indeed, during this past year ISIS has retreated from the town of Kobani on the Syrian-Turkish border and it also lost the Iraqi city of Tikrit. Despite these losses, ISIS during the same time period captured the city of Ramadi in western Iraq as well as the town of Palmyra in Syria.

As the president noted, the stream of “foreign fighters” from around the Muslim world, which has consistently replenished ISIS's ranks, has been somewhat reduced. An estimated 30,000 foreign fighter volunteers [have joined ISIS](#), averaging about 1,000 a month. Turkey, which had long been criticized by Western countries for allowing foreign fighters to move through its territory on their way to Syria, has started to clamp down on that traffic into Syria. Those efforts by the Turks are paying off, according to ISIS itself. In early 2015, ISIS posted advice in one of its English-language online publications to would-be foreign fighters, saying, "It is important to know that the Turkish intelligence agencies are in no way friends of the Islamic State [ISIS]." Also, some 40 countries [have also](#) introduced new laws to prevent the recruitment of fighters to ISIS or have launched criminal investigations of militants who have joined the group. These developments are surely having some effect on ISIS's ability to recruit foreign fighters to its ranks.

Although it has not enjoyed any of the kind of success that ISIS has, al-Qaeda is also benefiting from the crisis of governance that has gripped much of the Middle East since the Arab Spring in 2011. The civil war in Yemen precipitated by the Arab Spring has boosted al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, which is expanding its operations in southern Yemen. Al-Qaeda is also enjoying something of a comeback in the place from which it launched the 9/11 strikes: southern Afghanistan. Earlier this month U.S. and Afghan forces in Kandahar province destroyed “probably the largest” al-Qaeda training camp discovered during the 14-year Afghan War, according to Gen. John Campbell, the U.S. commander in Afghanistan.

## **6. How to Defeat ISIS: Twelve Action Items:**

1. Enlist [defectors from ISIS](#) to tell their stories publicly. Nothing is more powerful than hearing from former members of the group that ISIS is not creating an Islamist utopia in the areas it controls, but a hell on earth. The flow of “foreign fighters” to ISIS from around the Muslim world is estimated to be about 1,000 a month. Reducing that flow is a key to reducing ISIS manpower.
2. Amplify voices such as that of [the ISIS opposition group Raqqa is Being Slaughtered Silently](#), which routinely posts photos online of bread lines in Raqqa, the de facto capital of ISIS in northern Syria, and writes about electricity shortages in the city. This will help to undercut ISIS propaganda that it is a truly functioning state.
3. Amplify the work of former jihadists like the Canadian [Mubin Shaikh](#), who intervenes directly with young people online who he sees are being recruited virtually by ISIS.
4. Support the work of clerics such as [Imam Mohamed Magid](#) of Northern Virginia, who has personally convinced a number of American Muslims seduced by ISIS that what the group is doing is against Islam.
5. Keep up pressure on social media companies such as Twitter to enforce their own Terms of Use to take down any ISIS material that encourages violence. Earlier this year, [Twitter quietly took down](#) 2,000 accounts used by ISIS supporters, but the group continues to use Twitter and other social media platforms to propagate its message.
6. Keep up the military campaign against ISIS. The less the ISIS “caliphate” exists as a physical entity, the less the group can claim it is the “Islamic State” that it purports to be. That should involve more U.S. Special Forces on the ground embedded with Iraqi and other coalition forces and more U.S. forward air controllers calling in close air support strikes for those forces.
7. Applaud the work that the Turks have already done to tamp down the foreign fighter flow through their country to ISIS in neighboring Syria, and get them to do more.
8. Provide “off ramps” to young ISIS recruits with no history of violence, so that instead of serving long prison terms for attempting to join ISIS — as they presently do in the United States — they would instead serve long periods of supervised probation. This will help families that presently face a hard choice: If they suspect a young family member is radicalizing and they go to the FBI, that person can end up in prison for up to 15 years on charges of attempting to support ISIS; but if they don’t go to the authorities and their child ends up traveling to Syria, he or she may well end up being killed there. Providing off-ramps would offer families a way out of this almost impossible choice.
9. Educate Muslim-American parents about the seductive messages that ISIS is propagating online.
10. Relentlessly hammer home the message that ISIS positions itself as the defender of Muslims, but its victims are overwhelmingly fellow Muslims.

11. Build a database of all the foreign fighters who have gone to Syria to fight for ISIS and Nusra. This is one of the recommendations of the House Homeland Security Committee's September 2015 report on foreign fighters in Syria and it is a very good one. How can you prevent an attack by returning foreign fighters if you are not cognizant of their names and links to ISIS? Right now INTERPOL has a list of some 5,000 foreign fighters, but that is simply dwarfed by the estimated 30,000 foreign fighters who have gone to fight in Syria.

12. Stay in Afghanistan beyond 2016. One only has to look at the debacle that has unfolded in Iraq after the withdrawal of U.S. troops at the end of 2011 to have a preview of what could take place in an Afghanistan without some kind of residual American presence. Without American forces in the country, there is a strong possibility Afghanistan could host a reinvigorated Taliban allied to a reinvigorated al-Qaeda – not to mention ISIS, which is also gaining a foothold in the region. This U.S. military presence in Afghanistan doesn't have to be large, nor does it need to play a combat role, but U.S. troops should remain in Afghanistan to advise the Afghan army and provide intelligence support past 2016.