ISIS-Post Caliphate: Threat Implications for America and the West

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Chairman McCaul, Ranking Member Thompson, and distinguished members of the committee, it is an honor to appear before you today to testify about the threat implications as the militant group known as the Islamic State (hereafter ISIS) moves into the post-caliphate phase of its existence.

The collapse of ISIS's "caliphate" is indeed an important milestone for the region, and will reduce both the threat of ISIS's external operations (that is, terrorist plots abroad) and the extraordinary appeal that ISIS displayed in electrifying jihadist sympathizers and inspiring lone-actor attacks across the globe. When it controlled significant territory spanning Syria and Iraq, ISIS brutalized the population under its yoke, openly boasted of instituting sex slavery, adopted genocidal policies toward the Yazidis and other religious minorities, and planned large-scale terrorist attacks across the world. The fact that the group no longer controls its own proto-state is a positive turn of events that is hard to understate. But recent geopolitical developments have provided ISIS with breathing room. And even if ISIS's decline were continuing apace, ISIS is not the whole of the jihadist movement, which remains in a relatively strong position. ISIS's territorial decline should be understood in the context of a larger movement that remains dynamic, adaptable and dangerous, and that has grown significantly in strength since the 2011 "Arab Spring" revolutions. Further, technological advances and geopolitical developments have helped to enhance the global jihadist movement in definable ways.

My testimony addresses five critical points that I believe can inform how we should understand and address the threat implications of jihadism after the fall of ISIS's caliphate:

1. Recent geopolitical developments have given ISIS important breathing room.

2. ISIS's ability to preserve or reestablish its "virtual planner" model of external operations will have a significant impact on the threat that the group will pose against the U.S. and other Western countries.

3. The global jihadist movement's overall trajectory is one of growth, not of decline.

4. Al-Qaeda has exploited the heightened counterterrorism focus on ISIS in recent years.

5. Tackling jihadists' exploitation of consumer-oriented technological advances will be critical to mitigating the threat in the future.

Recent Geopolitical Developments Have Slowed ISIS's Decline
ISIS began to experience a precipitous territorial collapse in 2017. When a militant group that had previously held territory experiences sudden decline, as ISIS did, the speed of its decline is often determinative of the extent to which it is able to preserve its most critical functions. ISIS will scramble to preserve its key leaders, as much of its forces as possible, its capacity for external operations, its monetary assets, and records necessary to allow the group to reestablish a viable network, all while trying to keep critical information away from adversaries trying to kill or capture its members.

ISIS's rapid collapse continued until recent months, but the group's losses are now being reversed to some extent. One demonstration of this fact is the recent admission of Col. Ryan Dillon, the

spokesman for the American-led coalition against ISIS, to the *New York Times*. Col. Dillon said that "he and senior coalition commanders are now saying the coalition and its Syrian militia partners have reclaimed more than 90 percent of the territory the Islamic State captured in Iraq and Syria in 2014, instead of the 98 percent figure officials have been using for weeks."[1] In other words, the relevant metric concerning ISIS's territorial loss appears to be moving in the wrong direction, at least for now.

The key reason why ISIS has experienced recent gains is the major offensive that Tukey launched in northern Syria against the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) earlier this year.[2] The Turkish assault diverted the highly effective YPG from its advance into ISIS's territory, and has no doubt given ISIS more breathing room. In turn, this gives ISIS a better chance of preserving some of the vital functions enumerated above, including leadership, forces, external operations capabilities, and finances.

The Turkish offensive into Afrin is not the only recent offensive against Kurdish actors that has helped militants to regroup. The Iraqi government's military offensive against the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) following its independence referendum in October 2017 depleted the KRG's effectiveness in eradicating ISIS and other militant groups in northern Iraq. Outgunned by Baghdad, the Kurdish Peshmerga were quickly overpowered and were forced to withdraw from, among other places, the strategic Hamrin mountains in Iraq's northeast Diyala region. The Hamrin traditionally served as a stronghold for al-Qaeda in Iraq and other anti-government groups. Prior to the Baghdad-directed assault, KRG forces controlled the mountains, limiting their use as a militant safe haven. It is no coincidence that we have seen a significant uptick in militant activity in that area following Iraq's offensive: After the KRG's withdrawal, Iraqi government forces declined to set up a presence across the mountains, leaving a vacuum of authority.[3]

In addition to the recent breathing space that ISIS and other militant groups have gained, militants are likely to capitalize on festering Sunni grievances in Iraq. In the campaign to roll back ISIS gains in Iraq, many Sunnis (Arab or Turkmen) were forcibly displaced by the Iranian-backed Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), just as a large number of Kurds have been displaced by Shiite Arabs since the PMF helped Iraq's government to suppress the KRG last year. Tens of thousands of young men with military training (ISIS or Peshmerga) now stand in limbo, and could potentially be spurred to action by a charismatic and well-resourced patron. The electoral success of Muqtada al-Sadr's Sairoon Alliance, as well as the significant influence that Iran wields inside Iraq, could further fuel the attractiveness of Sunni militancy.

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[1] See: Eric Schmitt, "American Warplanes Shift Tactics to Target Last ISIS Pockets in Eastern Syria," *The New York Times*, April 24, 2018. (https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/24/world/middleeast/american-warplanes-isis-syria.html)

[2] For an informative snapshot of the Turkish offensive, see: Martin Chulov, "Syria's New Exiles: Kurds Flee Afrin After Turkish Assault," *The Guardian* (London), March 18, 2018. (https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/mar/18/syrias-new-exiles-kurds-flee-afrin-after-turkish-assault)

[3] The most significant militant group operating in this area is the White Banners (*Al-Rayat al-Bayda*), which is accurately referred to as "shadowy" in press coverage. See discussion in: Borzou Daragahi, "After the Black Flag of ISIS, Iraq Now Faces the White Flags," *BuzzFeed*, April, 1, 2018. (https://www.buzzfeed.com/borzoudaragahi/isis-iraq-white-flags-syria-new-name?utm_term=.maLzwqZq0#.htO9ZMAM6); Jeff Schogol, "A 'Post-ISIS Insurgency' is Gaining Steam in Northern Iraq, Analysts Say," *Task & Purpose*, April 24, 2018. (https://taskandpurpose.com/post-isis-insurgency-is-gaining-steam-in-iraq/)

ISIS's Ability to Preserve Its Virtual Planner Model is Critical
It is extremely likely that ISIS's ability to launch complex attacks abroad, such as the November 2015 Paris attacks, will decline significantly in the short to medium term. However, in recent years we have seen ISIS pioneer a new model of external operations, dubbed the "virtual planner" model, which combines easy accessibility to operatives via social media with advances in end-to-end encryption.[4] While ISIS's territorial losses will significantly constrain its capacity to launch attacks that rely on traditional safe havens, it is more likely that the militant group will be able to preserve or reestablish its virtual planner attack model.

The virtual planner model allows online operatives to provide the same offerings that were once the domain of physical networks, including recruitment, coordinating the target and timing of attacks, and even providing technical assistance on topics like bomb-making. In this manner, ISIS has engineered a process by which the group's operatives can directly guide lone attackers from thousands of miles away. The virtual planner model is a highly significant development, as it has helped transform lone attackers relying on the Internet from the bungling wannabes of a decade ago into something much more dangerous.[5] The operatives who are recruited and coached by virtual planners have been seamlessly incorporated into jihadist groups' global strategy in a way that "lone wolves" never were before.

In many ways, ISIS's virtual planner model is an outgrowth of, and improvement upon, the radical preacher Anwar al-Awlaki's approach. Awlaki, an official and propagandist for al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), became notorious for using the Internet to call for lone-wolf attacks. He hoped that lone-wolf attackers would complement, rather than replace, al-Qaeda's centrally directed plots – some of which, such as Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab's Christmas Day 2009 underwear bomb plot, Awlaki himself helped to plan.[6] Through his public statements, particularly his infamous YouTube sermons, Awlaki mobilized scores of people, even after a U.S. airstrike took Awlaki's life in 2011. Recent plots influenced (at least in part) by Awlaki include the September 2016 bombings in New York and New Jersey, the 2016 shooting at the Pulse nightclub in Orlando, the 2015 San Bernardino attack, and the 2013 Boston Marathon bombings. Yet despite his skill as an inspirational figure, all Awlaki could do was put out the call and hope someone would take up arms in response. He was a product of the age of mass communication and global interconnectivity, but even Awlaki's superb oratorical skills could not match the feelings of "remote intimacy" with people halfway across the world that can be fostered through social media, or the volume and two-way nature of communications that medium allows.[7] As one

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[4] See discussion in: Daveed Gartenstein-Ross and Madeleine Blackman, "ISIL's Virtual Planners: A Critical Terrorist Innovation," *War on the Rocks*, January 4, 2017. (https://warontherocks.com/2017/01/isils-virtual-planners-a-critical-terrorist-innovation/)

[5] For a good synopsis of the ineffectiveness of DIY terrorism a decade ago, see: Emily Hunt, "Virtual Incompetence," *The Weekly Standard*, August 17, 2006. (http://www.weeklystandard.com/virtual-incompetence/article/13724)

[6] See: Peter Finn, "Al-Awlaki Directed Christmas 'Underwear Bomber' Plot, Justice Department Memo Says," *The Washington Post*, February 10, 2012. (https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/al-awlaki-directed-christmas-underwear-bomber-plot-justice-department-memo-says/2012/02/10/gIQArDOt4Q_story.html?utm_term=.805626d41421)

[7] See discussion in: J.M. Berger, "The Metronome of Apocalyptic Time: Social Media as Carrier Wave for Millenarian Contagion," *Perspectives on Terrorism*, 2015. (http://www.terrorismanalysts.com/pt/index.php/pot/article/view/444/html)

example of the strength of social media-based recruitment activities, Indian intelligence officials believe that ISIS's South Asia virtual planner, Yusuf al-Hindi, was in touch with over 800 Indians through Facebook and WhatsApp.[8] While ISIS's various propagandists seemingly lacked the same kind of raw magnetism that Awlaki had for English speakers, they had the advantage of exploiting a medium that is simply more engrossing due to the constant contact it allows.

This continuous contact seemingly allowed a higher recruitment rate than the essentially one-way communication of video postings. By building an "intimate" relationship with the potential attacker, the virtual planner provides encouragement and validation, addressing the individual's doubts and hesitations. Virtual planners can replicate the same social pressures that exist in in-person cells. As Peter Weinberger of the University of Maryland's National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism put it, "People will get in these chat rooms and they will feel like they have a relationship with someone. That's where the peer-to-peer contact is drawing them in."[9]

In some instances, virtual planners have been in contact with attackers until the very moment of the attack, supporting and prodding these individuals into action even when they grew hesitant. In a July 2016 suicide bombing outside a concert in Ansbach, Germany, attacker Mohammad Daleel told the virtual planner with whom he was communicating that he found the security measures outside the concert daunting. The *Long War Journal* reports their ensuring conversation:

> The unnamed operative told Daleel … to look for an appropriate place to put his bomb and then try to "disappear into the crowd." The jihadist egged Daleel on, saying the asylum-seeker should "break through police cordons," run away and "do it."
>
> "Pray for me," Daleel wrote at one point. "You do not know what is happening with me right now," Daleel typed, in an apparent moment of doubt.
>
> "Forget the festival and go over to the restaurant," the handler responded. "Hey man, what is going on with you? Even if just two people were killed, I would do it. Trust in Allah and walk straight up to the restaurant."[10]

And that is what Daleel did. He walked into a wine bar and blew himself up, injuring 15 people. Had Daleel not been communicating with a virtual planner up until the moment of attack, his cold feet very likely would have prevented him from completing his terrorist mission.

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[8] "Yusuf al-Hindi: The Mysterious Islamic State Recruiter in India Who's Got Intel Agencies Worried," *First Post*, July 19, 2016. (https://www.firstpost.com/world/yusuf-al-hindi-mysterious-islamic-state-recruiter-in-india-whos-got-intel-agencies-worried-2902536.html)

[9] Quoted in: Stacy Meichtry and Sam Schechner, "How Islamic State Weaponized the Chat App to Direct Attacks on the West," *The Wall Street Journal*, October 20, 2016. (https://www.wsj.com/articles/how-islamic-state-weaponized-the-chat-app-to-direct-attacks-on-the-west-1476955802)

[10] Thomas Joscelyn, "Terror Plots in Germany, France Were 'Remote-Controlled' by Islamic State Operatives," *FDD's Long War Journal*, September 24, 2016. (https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2016/09/terror-plots-in-germany-france-were-remote-controlled-by-islamic-state-operatives.php)

In the past, virtual planners were integrated into ISIS's geographical command structure. ISIS's virtual planners were assigned areas of responsibility according to their nationality and linguistic skills, and tasked with actively recruiting and handling attackers from those areas. The decision to assign virtual planners to geographic areas with which they were familiar allowed them to reach back to contacts they still had in the domestic militant scene.

So will ISIS's virtual planner model survive into its post-caliphate phase? On the one hand, the main equipment that virtual planners require is an Internet connection and good encryption, which militates in favor of the model surviving. On the other hand, there are at least a couple of countervailing considerations that will create complications for ISIS's efforts to make this model continue with the same tempo and the same deadly results. First, it is no coincidence that ISIS's most prominent virtual planners were based in its caliphate territory. While an Internet connection and encryption are theoretically all that a virtual planner requires, the fact that virtual planners in ISIS's territory were not forced to constantly run from authorities helped them to focus on their external operations tasks. Further, the virtual planners were in close proximity to all the expertise they needed to help their operatives do their jobs, if those operatives needed technical assistance. The geographic dispersion of ISIS's virtual planners may diminish the model's effectiveness.

Second, the available evidence suggests that ISIS's model is losing a considerable amount, though not all, of its luster. ISIS recruitment and plots are in decline, a drop that is particularly noticeable in the United States. This fact is consistent with predictions I made in previous testimony before the U.S. Senate, when I described ISIS's appeal as a "winner's message."[11] As ISIS's ability to portray itself as a winning organization declines, so too does its ability to recruit and inspire attacks. Thus, ISIS's plummeting fortunes may also hamper the virtual planner model. However, it is worth noting that new high-profile attacks or a major territorial advance – such as the advance that overran the city of Marawi in the Philippines for several months last year – could breathe new life into virtual planner efforts.

The continuation of the virtual planner model, including the tempo, success, and lethality of virtual planner attacks, will be a leading indicator of the continuing external operations threat that ISIS poses in its post-caliphate manifestation.

Global Jihadism's Growth
As noted at the beginning of this testimony, the global jihadist movement's overall trajectory is one of growth, not of decline. One factor that for years has been highly relevant to analysts' evaluation of the threats posed by jihadist groups has been the presence of ungoverned spaces that they can use as safe havens. Such spaces allow jihadist organizations to establish key organizational functions, train recruits, communicate, and plan terrorist plots or insurgent military operations relatively unimpeded. Ungoverned spaces that jihadist groups can exploit continue to play a larger role in the geopolitical picture than they did at the time of the Arab Spring revolutions, and this remains true even after ISIS's territorial collapse.

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[11] Daveed Gartenstein-Ross, "Jihad 2.0: Social Media in the Next Evolution of Terrorist Recruitment," *Testimony before the Senate Committee on Homeland Security & Governmental Affairs*, May 7, 2015. (http://www.defenddemocracy.org/content/uploads/documents/Gartenstein_Ross_HSGAC_Testimony_Jihad2.0.pdf)

While ISIS is the group that observers associate most closely with the holding of territory, several different jihadist groups now hold or contest territory, even in Syria. In Libya, the government could never reestablish its writ after the fall of Muammar Qaddafi's regime in 2011. Jihadists have predictably exploited this situation. ISIS succeeded in capturing and holding the city of Sirte for months, while other jihadist groups have experienced even more sustained success. The Abu Salim Martyrs Brigade (ASMB) and the Mujahedin Shura Council (MSC), an umbrella organization in which ASMB plays a leading role, have been major players in the eastern coastal city of Derna, frequently exercising control over it. Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb officially endorsed the MSC in July 2015.[12] Jihadists also have significant operating space in Yemen despite the United States escalating its kinetic campaign against al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula. As the *New York Times* recently reported, "the threat of a terrorist attack—with the most commonly feared target a commercial airliner—emanating from the chaotic, ungoverned spaces of Yemen remains high on the government's list of terrorism concerns."[13]

Both Mali and Somalia face burgeoning jihadist-led insurgencies. In Somalia, African Union forces have already begun to reduce their numbers, bolstering the jihadist group al-Shabaab's hopes that it could again become the dominant military force in southern Somalia. In the place where the "global war on terror" began – Afghanistan/Pakistan – not only has the Taliban been gaining ground, but available evidence, including the discovery of a 30-square-mile al-Qaeda training facility near Kandahar, suggests that the Taliban has not severed its ties to al-Qaeda.[14] ISIS has also established a foothold in Afghanistan, where it has been responsible for a string of mass-casualty terrorist attacks.[15] And although it does not fit the mold of other safe havens, which are typically made possible by ungoverned spaces, Turkey merits a mention. In recent years, U.S. officials have openly expressed alarm about Turkey's growing willingness to shelter violent jihadists, including those connected to al-Qaeda.[16]

In addition to ungoverned spaces and safe havens, jihadism has experienced growth in areas where it had previously been marginalized. Prior to the outbreak of the Arab Spring, analysts held that Egypt's Hosni Mubarak had defeated the country's militant Islamic groups after they overplayed their hand in the 1997 Luxor massacre.[17] Today, jihadism has powerfully reemerged, and there are more frequent attacks than ever before by militant groups like ISIS's Wilayat Sinai, including the

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[12] See discussion in: Thomas Joscelyn, "Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb Backs Jihadists Fighting Islamic State in Derna, Libya," *FDD's Long War Journal*, July 9, 2015. (https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2015/07/al-qaeda-in-the-islamic-maghreb-backs-jihadists-fighting-islamic-state-in-derna-libya.php)

[13] Eric Schmitt and Saeed al-Batati, "The U.S. Has Pummeled Al Qaeda in Yemen. But the Threat is Barely Dented," *The New York Times*, December 30, 2017. (https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/30/world/middleeast/yemen-al-qaeda-us-terrorism.html)

[14] See: Dan Lamothe, "'Probably the Largest' al-Qaeda Training Camp Ever Destroyed in Afghanistan," *The Washington Post*, October 30, 2015. (https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/checkpoint/wp/2015/10/30/probably-the-largest-al-qaeda-training-camp-ever-destroyed-in-afghanistan/?utm_term=.afd665dd3af8)

[15] See discussion in, for example: Krishnadev Calamur, "ISIS in Afghanistan is Like a Balloon that Won't Pop," *The Atlantic*, December 28, 2017. (https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2017/12/afghanistan-isis/549311/)

[16] Joby Warrick, "Double Game? Even as it Battles ISIS, Turkey Gives Other Extremists Shelter," *The Washington Post*, July 10, 2016. (https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/double-game-even-as-it-battles-isis-turkey-gives-other-extremists-shelter/2016/07/10/8d6ce040-4053-11e6-a66f-aa6c1883b6b1_story.html?utm_term=.93214ed047f5)

[17] See discussion in: Hassanein Tawfik Ibrahim, "The Rise and Fall of Militant Islamic Groups in Egypt," *Violent Non-State Actors in World Politics*, Ed. Klejda Mulaj (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010).

devastating November 2017 attack on a Sufi mosque in northern Sinai that claimed over 300 lives.[18] In countries like Tunisia and Jordan, jihadism has moved from an afterthought to a first-order strategic concern. Meanwhile, there is a visible jihadist resurgence from South to Southeast Asia, most dramatically underscored last year by the months-long capture of the Philippine city of Marawi by a regional ISIS affiliate.

As jihadist groups are growing stronger, states face a growing number of challenges. Populations are burgeoning while ecological challenges and resource constraints are growing increasingly burdensome. Some ecological challenges amplify one another: Climate change makes food scarcity and water shortages more acute, which in turn can contribute to more environmental degradation, such as deforestation, as hungry populations scour for sustenance. Many economies cannot keep up with the expectations of their growing populations, while multiple states are saddled by unsustainable debt, leaving them with fewer resources to navigate the extraordinary challenges they confront.

The overall direction of the global jihadist movement is thus one of growth, while the states that the movement seeks to topple face growing challenges.

Al-Qaeda Has Exploited the CT Focus on ISIS
For years, while international efforts focused on ISIS, al-Qaeda flew relatively below the radar, building its support base in countries like Syria and Yemen, establishing safe havens, destabilizing enemy states, and preparing for a post-ISIS future.[19]

Even before ISIS's rise, al-Qaeda had adopted a strategy for growth in the MENA region that entailed minimizing the amount of attention the group attracted. Al-Qaeda's strategists saw the 2011 Arab Spring revolutions as "a great historical event," to quote bin Laden's only public statement on the uprisings.[20] Al-Qaeda's strategists assessed the uprisings as significant in part because they were a "historical opportunity" for the salafi jihadist movement, as senior al-Qaeda official Atiyah Abd al-Rahman put it in a February 2011 statement.[21] Al-Qaeda strategists calculated that the political turmoil and instability of the post-revolutionary environment would play to the group's strengths. Further, dozens to hundreds of veteran jihadists were released from prison during and after the region's revolutions, giving al-Qaeda an immediate infusion of experienced manpower.[22]

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[18] Declan Walsh and Nour Youssef, "Militants Kill 305 at Sufi Mosque in Egypt's Deadliest Terrorist Attack," *The New York Times*, November 24, 2017.
[19] The arguments in this section are adapted from a longer piece that I co-authored. For a more in-depth explanation of how al-Qaeda has been able to exploit ISIS's rise, see: Daveed Gartenstein-Ross and Nathaniel Barr, "How al-Qaeda Survived the Islamic State Challenge," *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology*, March 1, 2017. (https://www.hudson.org/research/12788-how-al-qaeda-survived-the-islamic-state-challenge)
[20] Osama bin Ladin, "*Ila Ummati al-Muslima*," *Al-Sahab* (Al-Qaeda), May 19, 2011.
[21] Atiyah Abd al-Rahman, "The People's Revolt... The Fall of Corrupt Arab Regimes... The Demolition of the Idol of Stability... and the New Beginning," distributed by the Global Islamic Media Front, February 16, 2011.
[22] See contemporaneous discussion in: Daveed Gartenstein-Ross and Aaron Zelin, "How the Arab Spring's Prisoner Releases Have Helped the Jihadi Cause," *The Atlantic*, October 11, 2012. (http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2012/10/how-the-arab-springs-prisoner-releases-have-helped-the-jihadi-cause/263469/); Hani al-Siba'i, in particular, chronicled these prisoner releases as they were occurring in the midst of the regional upheaval. See: Hani al-Siba'i, "The Release of Prisoners After Nearly Twenty Years of Injustice," *Ansar Dawlat al-Iraq al-Islamiyah*, February 23, 2011; Hani al-Siba'i, "The Release of a New Batch

Al-Qaeda also concluded that political dynamics in post-revolutionary countries had created a fertile environment for the group to expand its support base, and to introduce new populations to its theology and ideology. Post-revolutionary governments sought to distinguish themselves from their authoritarian predecessors by lifting restrictions on religious expression. Al-Qaeda saw this as an opportunity, as it allowed the group to publicly disseminate its salafi jihadist views to the general public in post-revolutionary states without fear of an immediate crackdown. As Hamid bin Abdallah al-Ali, a Kuwait-based jihadist commentator, remarked: "The Islamic project [will be] the greatest beneficiary from the environment of freedom."[23] Al-Qaeda strategists directed supporters in Tunisia, Egypt, and other post-revolutionary countries to engage in *dawa* (evangelism), and to "spring into action and initiate or increase their preaching, education, reformation and revitalization in light of the freedom and opportunities now available in this post revolution era."[24]

This is where the group's emphasis on minimizing the attention that it attracted came into play. Al-Qaeda calculated that use of its own moniker could alienate potential supporters and invite negative attention from Western counterterrorism actors. Al-Qaeda thus established or supported groups with ambiguous names, including Ansar al-Sharia in Tunisia and Libya, to mask its presence and spearhead its public campaign in new places. Thus, the group's political operatives focused on *dawa*: preaching, providing social services, and gaining the support of local populations. These political efforts were designed in part to lay the groundwork for an eventual military confrontation with the state. Al-Qaeda's emphasis on *dawa* and community outreach allowed it to amass a considerable following in Libya and Tunisia. A 2012 conference in Tunisia hosted by Ansar al-Sharia, for example, drew between 3,000 and 10,000 participants.[25] In this way, al-Qaeda came to maintain a presence in almost every country that experienced significant turmoil during the Arab uprisings.

After this initial stage of growth, ISIS's emergence as a jihadist competitor presented al-Qaeda with a challenge unlike any other the group had encountered. Among other challenges, ISIS's rapid ascent threatened to disrupt al-Qaeda's deliberate growth model, and oust al-Qaeda from its position of supremacy over the jihadist movement. ISIS's strategy was diametrically opposed to al-Qaeda's. While al-Qaeda often grew through clandestine means, ISIS stole the spotlight at every opportunity. ISIS built a robust propaganda apparatus suited for the digital age, pumping out a constant stream of videos, photos, and statements advertising its victories that were widely disseminated by its social media legions. With this brash approach, ISIS openly wooed al-Qaeda's affiliates, attempting to absorb its parent's global network.

After Long Years Behind Bars," *Al-Jahafal*, February 27, 2011; Hani al-Siba'i, "Urgent: The Release of a New Batch of Those Charged with Military Verdicts," *Ansar Dawlat al-Iraq al-Islamiyah*, March 4, 2011; Al-Maqrizi Center for Historical Studies, "Names of the Released Detainees from the al-Aqrab, al-Istiqbal, al-Wadi, and Burj al-Arab Prisons," *Shumukh al-Islam Network*, March 18, 2011.

[23] Hamid bin Abdallah al-Ali, "The Joy Lies in the Harvest of the Two Revolutions," posted on al-Ali's official website, February 15, 2011.

[24] Atiyah Abd al-Rahman, "The People's Revolt."

[25] Daveed Gartenstein-Ross and Bridget Moreng, "An Escalation in Tunisia: How the State Went to War with Ansar al-Sharia," *War on the Rocks*, February 24, 2014. (http://warontherocks.com/2014/02/an-escalation-in-tunisia-how-the-state-went-to-war-with-ansar-al-sharia/)

It was widely assumed at the time that the only way al-Qaeda could remain influential was by replicating ISIS's conspicuous model – for example, by carrying out spectacular terrorist attacks to reassert the group's relevance.[26] But rather than trying to replicate ISIS's model, al-Qaeda took the opposite approach. Al-Qaeda reduced its public profile, downplayed its successes rather than publicizing them, and embedded further within local populations. In this way, al-Qaeda presented itself to the world as a more palatable alternative to its bloodthirsty rival.

The interactions al-Qaeda leaders had with the media provide a valuable lens through which to understand the group's strategy for benefiting from ISIS's rise. In a discussion with an Al-Jazeera documentarian in early 2015, Abu Sulayman al-Muhajir, a high-ranking Nusra Front religious official who hails from Australia, accused ISIS of "delegitimizing" other Sunni Muslim groups.[27] Muhajir contrasted ISIS with the al-Qaeda-affiliated Nusra Front, which he portrayed as trying to "restore the right of the Muslim people to choose their leaders" in Syria. Further, in June 2015, the *Guardian* published an extended interview with Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi and Abu Qatada, two of al-Qaeda's most senior religious figures, that revealed another remarkable aspect of al-Qaeda's strategy. Rather than trying to convince the audience of al-Qaeda's strength or continued relevance, they instead concentrated on fueling the illusion that ISIS had already destroyed al-Qaeda. Maqdisi claimed that al-Qaeda's organizational structure had "collapsed," while Qatada alleged that al-Qaeda emir Ayman al-Zawahiri had become "isolated."[28]

Consistent with these media themes, when al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) seized control of the Yemeni port city of Mukalla, the group appointed a local council, known as the Hadhrami Domestic Council, to govern the city. Initially AQAP adopted a gradualist, rather lenient approach to the implementation of *Sharia* law (though it eventually began cracking down more heavily on *Sharia* violations).[29] In this way, AQAP tried to win over local Yemenis.

Ultimately, al-Qaeda was able to make some gains based on its response to ISIS's rise. While ISIS horrified the world and alienated Sunni Muslims with its excessive violence and brutality, al-Qaeda appealed to local populations and other armed factions by casting itself as a less extreme, more tolerable, and more effective alternative to ISIS. At the same time, al-Qaeda avoided advertising its victories, and resisted the temptation to engage in a bloody battle for supremacy with ISIS.

Tackling Jihadists' Exploitation of Consumer-Oriented Technological Advances
Turning from the present threat to what we may face in the future, anticipating and mitigating jihadists' ability to leverage technological advances is critical. Technology has historically had an ambiguous impact on sub-state violence. On the one hand, states can leverage new advances,

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[26] See: Clint Watts, "Al Qaeda Loses Touch," *Foreign Affairs*, February 4, 2015. (https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/middle-east/2015-02-04/al-qaeda-loses-touch)
[27] The Al-Jazeera documentary featuring al-Muhajir can be found at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OD_A3CHzvjQ.
[28] Shiv Malik, Mustafa Khalili, Spencer Ackerman, and Ali Younis, "How Isis Crippled Al-Qaida," *The Guardian* (UK), June 10, 2015. (http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jun/10/how-isis-crippled-al-qaida)
[29] Ayesha Amr, "How al Qaeda Rules in Yemen," *Foreign Affairs*, October 28, 2015. (https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/yemen/2015-10-28/how-al-qaeda-rules-yemen)

including for surveillance purposes and gathering information from local populations.[30] On the other hand, militant groups can capitalize on these same platforms. But many key recent advances appear to, on the whole, favor jihadists. This is likely because the world has witnessed breakthroughs across so many spheres – including social media, encrypted end-to-end communication, and consumer drone technology – that exploiting new advances has seemingly proven easier for those who would use these technologies for the more straightforward task of destruction than for those who want to use them to protect.

An early post-Arab Spring indication of jihadists' ability to leverage technological advances was the manner in which these groups drove a record number of foreign fighters to the Syria-Iraq theater. ISIS, in particular, combined a deft exploitation of social media's potential with breakthroughs in do-it-yourself video production techniques to craft slick and effective propaganda.[31] Suspensions of pro-ISIS accounts by service providers later reduced, but did not eliminate, the returns that ISIS could expect from social media.[32] As I explained earlier in this testimony, ISIS's exploitation of social media would ultimately lend itself to the highly effective virtual planner model.

There are also technological advances that jihadist groups have not yet employed in Western countries, but that they have already begun using in Iraq and Syria. In January 2017, researchers from West Point's Combating Terrorism Center and Harvard University's Belfer Center published an article examining documents that the Iraqi military had captured that shed light on ISIS's program for developing and enhancing its unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) capabilities.[33] They found that ISIS had "a formal, institutionalized, and resourced drone unit as early as 2015," and that the group already planned to use UAVs in an offensive capacity. And ISIS did indeed use UAVs for military purposes. *BuzzFeed*'s Mike Giglio did some valuable embedded reporting from Iraq during the campaign to push ISIS from its territorial stronghold. In a report published in June 2017, he graphically described ISIS's use of UAVs against Iraqi Counter-Terrorism Force (ICTF) fighters with whom he was embedded:

> ISIS drones swarm overhead as the battalion's convoy pushes into the outskirts of western Mosul the next morning. One after another they drop grenades, wreaking havoc as soldiers fire their weapons wildly into the sky. From one of the Humvees, I watch as the battalion's portly cook makes his lunch rounds in an armored truck,

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[30] One of the most important studies on this issue, by political scientists Jacob Shapiro and Nils Weidmann, used micro-level data from Iraq to compare trends in cellphone network penetration with insurgent violence. The trends in declining violence that Shapiro and Weidmann found suggested "that cellphone coverage reduces insurgent violence largely because it enhances voluntary information flow from noncombatants to counterinsurgents by reducing the risks of informing." Jacob N. Shapiro and Nils B. Weidmann, "Is the Phone Mightier Than the Sword?: Cellphones and Insurgent Violence in Iraq," *International Organization*, March 2015, page 271.

[31] See discussion in: J.M. Berger and Jonathon Morgan, *The ISIS Twitter Census: Defining and Describing the Population of ISIS Supporters on Twitter* (Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution, 2015).

[32] J.M. Berger and Heather Perez, *The Islamic State's Diminishing Returns on Twitter: How Suspensions Are Limiting the Social Networks of English-Speaking ISIS Supporters* (Washington, DC: George Washington University, 2016). Since the publication of this study, it has become even more difficult for ISIS and some other jihadist groups to exploit mainstream social media platforms, but their migration to alternative platforms has escalated.

[33] Don Rassler, Muhammad al-'Ubaydi, and Vera Mironovo, "The Islamic State's Drone Documents: Management, Acquisitions, and DIY Tradecraft," *CTC Sentinel*, January 31, 2017. (https://ctc.usma.edu/posts/ctc-perspectives-the-islamic-states-drone-documents-management-acquisitions-and-diy-tradecraft)

> driving up and down the convoy to deliver Styrofoam boxes of food. The drones track him, dropping grenades as soldiers gather to collect the boxes. They are remotely piloted by militants who weave in and out of civilian neighborhoods on motorbikes to take cover from airstrikes. ISIS also uses the video feeds on the drones to coordinate mortars and car bombs. On the front lines, its fighters are standing their ground, and soldiers at the head of the convoy can hear them shouting, "Allahu Akbar."[34]

In January of this year, Russian forces in Syria destroyed a swarm of 13 improvised UAVs as they approached the Khmeimim air base and Tartus naval facility to carry out an attack. Though no Russian forces were killed, this fact should not cause undue complacency: As militant groups innovate, their early efforts often seem to be failures, but instead are sometimes better understood as steps in the learning process. Moreover, the Russian investigation of the UAVs revealed their impressive range. The UAVs were "launched from a site more than 50 kilometres (31 miles) distant from their targets," and had a 62-mile attacking range.[35]

The militant uses I have outlined of social media, encryption, and drones illustrate a key pattern: As a consumer technology becomes widely available, terrorists will look for ways to adapt it. Looking to the future, artificial intelligence (AI) will almost certainly end up fitting into this pattern. Like drones, AI will become more widely available in commercial markets at reduced costs, and individuals will be able to modify and repurpose it.[36] AI already enjoys diverse applications, from products like Apple's Siri, to voice-to-text, to Facebook's counter-extremism detection systems.[37]

So how might terrorists use AI? Perhaps they will start with social-network mapping. ISIS's early battlefield victories were enabled, in part, by ex-Baathist intelligence operatives who mapped a city's key players and power brokers, monitored their pattern of life, and then helped ISIS to arrest or kill them. Similarly, when North African ISIS operatives attacked the Tunisian town of Ben Gardane in March 2016, the available evidence – including the efficient way they killed key security officials – suggested that the militants had similarly worked to learn the human terrain in advance.[38] Will social networks built using AI capabilities reduce the intelligence burden on militant groups and make it easier for them to conquer towns and cities? What of the next generation of terror drones? Will they use AI-enabled swarming to become more powerful and deadlier? Will terrorists use self-driving vehicles for their next car bombs and ramming attacks?

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[34] Mike Giglio, "Inside the Fight for Mosul," *BuzzFeed*, June 3, 2017. (https://www.buzzfeed.com/mikegiglio/on-the-front-lines-of-the-fight-with-isis?utm_term=.derRJnBnX#.gy94lZxZ2)

[35] Peter Dockrill, "First-Ever Drone Swarm Attack Has Struck Russian Military Bases, Sources Claim," *Science Alert*, January 11, 2018. (http://www.sciencealert.com/swarm-home-made-drones-strike-military-base-first-attack-kind-russia-uavs)

[36] Stuart Russell, Daniel Dewey, and Max Tegmark, "Research Priorities for Robust and Beneficial Artificial Intelligence," *AI Magazine*, Winter 2015. (https://futureoflife.org/data/documents/research_priorities.pdf?x70892)

[37] "Transcript of Mark Zuckerberg's Senate Hearing," *The Washington Post*, April 10, 2018. (https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-switch/wp/2018/04/10/transcript-of-mark-zuckerbergs-senate-hearing/?utm_term=.d7f4a1d66685&noredirect=on)

[38] Farah Samti and Declan Walsh, "Tunisian Clash Spreads Fear that Libyan War is Spilling Over," *The New York Times,* March 7, 2016. (https://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/08/world/africa/attack-tunisia-libya-border.html)

How about assassinations? Max Tegmark's book *Life 3.0* notes the concern of UC Berkeley computer scientist Stuart Russell, who worries that the biggest winners from an AI arms race would be "small rogue states and non-state actors such as terrorists" who can access these weapons through the black market.[39] Tegmark writes that after they are "mass-produced, small AI-powered killer drones are likely to cost little more than a smartphone." Would-be assassins could simply "upload their target's photo and address into the killer drone: it can then fly to the destination, identify and eliminate the person, and self-destruct to ensure that nobody knows who was responsible."

Thinking beyond trigger-pulling, artificial intelligence could boost a wide range of violent non-state actors' criminal activities, including extortion and kidnapping, through the automation of social engineering attacks.[40] The militant recruiters of the near-future may boost their online radicalization efforts with chatbots, which played a "small but strategic role" in shaping the Brexit vote.[41]

The 9/11 Commission's report famously devoted an entire section to discussing how the 9/11 attacks' success in part represented a failure in imagination by authorities.[42] A failure in imagination as AI, and emergent technologies, become cheaper and more widely available could potentially be even costlier.

Conclusion
As I have explained, ISIS's territorial decline does in fact make us safer. Yet despite ISIS's decline, the global jihadist movement is not receding, but rather growing, while the states that the movement seeks to topple experience mounting challenges. As I have outlined, the continuity of ISIS's virtual planner model will be a leading-edge indicator of the threat that the organization poses in the short to medium term to the American homeland and other Western states. Meanwhile, al-Qaeda remains robust, and managed to in many ways turn ISIS's meteoric ascent into a strategic opportunity.

But as challenging as the current environment is, the rapid improvement and diffusion of a range of consumer technologies will likely allow various terrorist groups to pose a greater threat in the future. That is why I closed this testimony by emphasizing how these groups will attempt to exploit emerging technologies. Although jihadists currently seem to be getting more out of new technologies than do states, the advantages bestowed by new technologies can be understood as a pendulum, and states may be able to gain the upper hand in the future. In the interim, we should brace ourselves to deal with greater terrorist challenges related to these groups' adoption of new technologies.

Thank you again for inviting me to testify today. I look forward to answering your questions.

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[39] Max Tegmark, *Life 3.0: Being Human in the Age of Artificial Intelligence*, Kindle ed. (New York: Knopf, 2017), loc. 2142 of 6579.

[40] John Markoff, "As Artificial Intelligence Evolves, So Does Its Criminal Potential," *The New York Times*, October 23, 2016. (https://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/24/technology/artificial-intelligence-evolves-with-its-criminal-potential.html)

[41] Ibid.

[42] National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States, *The 9/11 Commission Report* (2004), pages 339-48.