

ISIS's Persistent Threat and Aggravating Factors for Radicalization Today

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Chairman McCaul, Ranking Member Thompson, and members of the Committee, thank you for this opportunity to address the persistent threat posed by ISIS even as its physical safe haven in Iraq and Syria shrinks and the implications of this persistent threat for the United States and the West.

ISIS's purported caliphate in Iraq and Syria is shriveling, but it is not gone. That, in itself, poses a continuing threat to the United States, one worsened by the current administration's inability to keep our key partner in the fight against ISIS. Moreover, even as ISIS faces increasing pressure in physical space, it retains a significant foothold in virtual space, and will utilize the global following that it has built through the Internet to continue to reach into the United States to recruit and radicalize followers. That threat is, unfortunately, also aggravated by factors of our own current leadership's making, with both rhetoric and policies that are alienating key communities. Finally, ISIS could turn to new forms of attacks against American targets, including novel types of cyber operations, against which the United States appears to be lagging in its preparation.

ISIS's Continuing Hold on Territory in Syria

That ISIS has been dislodged from almost all of the territory that it once held in Iraq and Syria is a tremendous accomplishment for which both the Obama and Trump Administrations deserve major credit. From the work of our military on the ground and in the skies to target ISIS fighters, to the work of our diplomats to build and maintain an unprecedented coalition of partners, to the work of our Intelligence Community to track and locate key ISIS figures, to the work of our law enforcement and homeland security professionals to constrain the flow of Americans to the battlefield as foreign fighters, the progress achieved in the counter-ISIS campaign reflects the remarkable capability and dedication of America's national security officials.

But, as I have noted elsewhere, "the last mile of defeating a terrorist group can be the hardest one, as the United States learned all too well from the lingering remnants of ISIS's predecessor, al-Qaeda in Iraq."¹ And, with respect to ISIS today, thousands of fighters appear to be enjoying a worrisome opportunity to regroup. That is in significant part because the United States has lost its key counterterrorism partner on the ground in Syria, the Syrian Kurds, a major setback that reflects the current administration's inability to manage a delicate diplomatic balance between them and the Turkish Government. Since the earliest days of the counter-ISIS campaign,

¹ Joshua A. Geltzer, "The Perils of a Post-ISIS Middle East," *The Atlantic*, December 27, 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2017/12/middle-east-isis-syria-kurds-iran-iraq-turkey-trump/549227/>.

Washington has had to address both Turkish fears and Syrian Kurdish ambitions so as to retain, on the one hand, a key counter-ISIS and NATO partner in Turkey and, on the other hand, a vital counterterrorism ground force in the Syrian Kurds. In recent months, this delicate but essential arrangement has fallen apart, with the Turks bombing Kurds in the northern Syrian city of Afrin and, in response, fellow Kurds turning away from their pursuit of ISIS into the Euphrates River Valley to defend their brethren against the Turks. All told, and as I have explained at greater length elsewhere, “the Trump administration’s inability to continue managing the tensions between Turkey and the Syrian Kurds is providing the Islamic State with the time and space to regroup and pose a resurgent threat to the United States and the rest of the world.”²

While one recent report suggests that a small number of those partner forces might be returning to the counter-ISIS fight, most appear still to have abandoned it, leaving the counter-ISIS campaign “effectively ground to a halt.”³ That is a dangerous development for at least two reasons. First, it provides the remaining thousands of ISIS fighters with the type of safe haven that enables ISIS to plot attacks and rebuild networks into the West. That means ISIS can continue to use that space to hatch plots against us, as well as the safe havens outside Iraq and Syria that ISIS has built and even appears to be expanding, especially in parts of Africa and Southeast Asia.⁴ Second, it allows ISIS to continue to lay claim to a purported physical caliphate—the rallying cry for ISIS’s continuing virtual presence intended to recruit and radicalize followers through the Internet. That means ISIS can continue to inspire attacks wherever its message resonates with vulnerable individuals, including here in the United States—a broader challenge to which I now turn.

ISIS’s Persistent Virtual Presence

As I have described in more detail elsewhere, while ISIS’s “claim to a physical caliphate helped [ISIS] to grab attention and gain adherents since its 2014 surge, that message gained swift global traction because of the group’s sophisticated use of social media, file-upload sites, and other modern communications platforms to radicalize and mobilize followers worldwide.”⁵ The crumbling of the physical caliphate will undercut the credibility of key aspects of ISIS’s online appeal, but it will not undermine the group’s messaging entirely, nor will it dislodge the virtual foothold that ISIS has built for itself online, even as leading technology companies have taken some meaningful steps to address ISIS’s persistent presence on their platforms.

That is because ISIS has a multifaceted recruitment message; and, as battlefield losses force it to shift away from online messaging emphasizing the holding of territory and the attempt to

² Joshua A. Geltzer, “When Diplomacy Disappears,” *Foreign Policy*, April 18, 2018, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2018/04/18/when-diplomacy-disappears-counterterrorism-isis-syria-turkey-kurds-ypg-pkk-erdogan-trump/>.

³ 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>.

⁴ Yaroslav Trofimov, “Faraway ISIS Branches Grow as ‘Caliphate’ Fades in Syria and Iraq,” *The Wall Street Journal*, May 17, 2018, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/faraway-isis-branches-grow-as-caliphate-fades-in-syria-and-iraq-1526558401>.

⁵ Joshua A. Geltzer, “ISIL, al-Qaeda, and What Goes Viral Next: Why Tomorrow’s Jihadist Movement Might Not Look so Different from Today’s,” *Texas National Security Review*, March 20, 2018, <https://tnsr.org/roundtable/policy-roundtable-future-jihadist-movement/#essay4>.

govern such territory, ISIS can fall back on other themes to rally the faithful and appeal to those potentially vulnerable to the group's outreach. Charlie Winter has identified six such themes: brutality, mercy, victimhood, war, belonging, and utopianism.⁶ If emphasizing the theme of war appears to ISIS less promising for a period of time, at least in relation to battlefield trends in Iraq and Syria, then the theme of, for example, victimhood remains available. In this sense, ISIS's message is essentially non-falsifiable: victories and progress vindicate aspects of that message, but setbacks and suffering vindicate other aspects.

The most important of ISIS's themes, especially for luring new recruits, may well be that of belonging. Alongside the group's proclaiming of a purported caliphate and holding of a wide swath of territory, its most distinctive accomplishment has been cultivating a sense of belonging among audience members around the world—even many who have never joined the group on the battlefield and do not intend to do so. Through visceral appeals to a sense of community grounded in the physical caliphate but extending far beyond it, ISIS has made these followers and supporters feel part of something bigger than themselves by belonging to ISIS and its movement. This is why my former White House colleague Jen Easterly and I have objected to the use of “lone wolves” to describe those inspired by ISIS to execute attacks from Orlando to Manchester to Berlin: “The Islamic State thus offers a chance to those who feel alone—those who may lack opportunities or who may simply disagree with the politics or mores of the society around them—not to be lone actors” but to belong to something bigger instead.⁷

ISIS's Internet-enabled message has, unfortunately, resonated even here in the United States. From American citizen Omar Mateen, who was responsible for the death of fifty innocent victims through his assault on Orlando's Pulse Nightclub, to lawful permanent resident Sayfullo Saipov, who has been charged with killing eight innocent victims with a rental truck in downtown Manhattan last Halloween, some who live on U.S. soil have proven susceptible to ISIS's hateful exhortations of violence. As Peter Bergen has documented, a common link among those who attempt or succeed in terrorist activity in the United States is their consumption of terrorist recruitment materials online.⁸ ISIS's ability to reach across national borders and into our country to attempt to recruit and radicalize followers is simply not going to disappear even as the group's physical foothold in Iraq and Syria shrinks. If anything, ISIS's virtual foothold may increase in importance to the group, leading it to devote more energy and effort to sustaining and augmenting the sense of belonging that ISIS has been able to cultivate among supporters worldwide. Indeed, as ISIS's leadership reportedly focuses on “crafting an ideological framework that will survive the physical destruction of the caliphate in Iraq and Syria,”⁹ it seems almost certain that the group intends to communicate and propagate that framework in significant part online.

⁶ Charlie Winter, “The Virtual ‘Caliphate’: Understanding Islamic State's Propaganda Strategy,” *Quilliam*, July 2015, www.stratcomcoe.org/download/file/fid/2589.

⁷ Jen Easterly & Joshua A. Geltzer, “The Islamic State and the End of Lone-Wolf Terrorism,” *Foreign Policy*, May 23, 2017, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/05/23/the-islamic-state-and-the-end-of-lone-wolf-terrorism/>.

⁸ Peter Bergen, “Jihadist Terrorism 15 Years After 9/11: A Threat Assessment,” *New America*, September 8, 2016, <https://www.newamerica.org/international-security/policy-papers/jihadist-terrorism-15-years-after-911/>.

⁹ Joby Warrick & Souad Mekhennet, “New Clues Bolster Belief that ISIS Leader Is Still Alive—and Busy with a Chilling New Mission,” *The Washington Post*, May 19, 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/new-clues-bolster-belief-that-isis-leader-is-still-alive--and-busy-with-a-chilling-new-mission/2018/05/19/83c2a62e-5ad2-11e8-858f-12becb4d6067_story.html?utm_term=.83a2b7b662b6.

Aggravating Factors of the White House's Own Making

ISIS's continuing ability to mobilize potential terrorists here in the United States would be concerning enough, but that concern is compounded by rhetoric and policies of the current administration that are making the problem worse. Donald Trump, as a presidential candidate and now as President, has persistently spoken about Islam and Muslims in ways that validate ISIS's attempt to portray the United States as waging war on a religion and its people. As a candidate, Donald Trump said, "We have a problem in this country; it's called Muslims"; he called for "a total and complete shutdown of Muslims entering the United States"; he characterized Muslims as "sick people"; he stated that "We're having problems with the Muslims"; and, regrettably, he has said much more along these lines as well, even as President.¹⁰ In addition to being appalling, this sort of language appears to validate ISIS's message and alienates key communities in the United States and abroad whose cooperation is vital to identifying those who might be vulnerable to ISIS's appeal and to intervening before such individuals turn to violence. Moreover, President Trump's "habit of stoking fears rather than reassuring the public in the wake of terrorist attacks"¹¹ increases the impact of those attacks precisely as terrorists desire, rather than thwarting terrorists' goal of spreading fear as good counterterrorism strategy demands by "building resilience [that] can minimize the effects of terrorism."¹²

Beyond counterproductive language, President Trump has pursued policies that further alienate those communities and make us less safe rather than more. Most notable among these is the travel ban, now in its third iteration and under review by the Supreme Court. As I wrote recently alongside former Director of National Intelligence Jim Clapper and former Director of the National Counterterrorism Center Matt Olsen, "Trump's travel ban fails to respond to threats to our country and actually undermines our security."¹³ The ban simply is not responsive to real threats: no national from any of the countries affected by the ban has caused any of the terrorism-related deaths on U.S. soil since 1975. But the ban does *create* threats to the effectiveness of our country's counterterrorism efforts. As we explained:

The ban is so obviously, palpably, indeed explicitly anti-Muslim in nature that it has—understandably—offended Muslim-American communities around the world, including in the United States. Yet those are precisely the communities that can prove critical for identifying and responding to individuals becoming radicalized by groups like ISIS and al Qaeda. Moreover, effective

¹⁰ Jenna Johnson & Abigail Hauslohner, "I Think Islam Hates Us': A Timeline of Trump's Comments About Islam and Muslims," *The Washington Post*, May 20, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-politics/wp/2017/05/20/i-think-islam-hates-us-a-timeline-of-trumps-comments-about-islam-and-muslims/?utm_term=.05443facd771.

¹¹ Joshua A. Geltzer & Stephen Tankel, "Whatever Happened to Trump's Counterterrorism Policy?," *The Atlantic*, March 1, 2018, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2018/03/trump-terrorism-iraq-syria-al-qaeda-isis/554333/>.

¹² Jennie M. Easterly & Joshua A. Geltzer, "More Die in Bathtubs than in Terrorism. It's Still Worth Spending Billions to Fight It," *CNN.com*, May 21, 2018, <https://www.cnn.com/2017/05/21/opinions/deadly-bathtub-compared-to-terrorism-opinion-geltzer-easterly/index.html>.

¹³ James R. Clapper, Jr., Joshua A. Geltzer, & Matthew G. Olsen, "We've Worked on Stopping Terrorism. Trump's Travel Ban Fuels It," *CNN.com*, April 23, 2018, <https://www.cnn.com/2018/04/23/opinions/trump-travel-ban-fuels-terrorism-clapper-geltzer-olsen/index.html>.

counterterrorism relies heavily on robust intelligence-sharing relationships with foreign governments. Banning all travelers from a foreign country seems a surefire way to offend that country's government and impede intelligence-sharing, rather than enhancing the flow of information about terrorist threats as effective counterterrorism requires.

The travel ban is, unfortunately, not alone among President Trump's policies that have been counterproductive for keeping Americans safe from terrorism. For example, the Trump Administration withdrew previously awarded grants to organizations dedicated to addressing white supremacists' brand of violent extremism, a baffling decision that came to look particularly egregious after the deadly violence last August in Charlottesville, Virginia.¹⁴ These types of policies make Americans less safe not only by deliberately doing *less* to protect them from domestic terrorism—which can be just as deadly as terrorism associated with jihadist organizations such as ISIS¹⁵ and, as my Georgetown Law Center colleague Mary McCord has explained, just as morally repugnant¹⁶—but also by giving the distinct impression that the Trump Administration is interested in terrorism only when it is being carried out by groups purporting to act in the name of Islam.

All told, President Trump's anti-Muslim rhetoric and policies play into ISIS's hands as the group seeks to mobilize followers in the United States and around the world. The President's language and policies serve as aggravating factors in the already-difficult challenge associated with addressing ISIS's ability to radicalize followers through the Internet.

New Forms of Cyber Terrorism

Thus far, radicalization has been ISIS's primary utilization of the Internet: as noted, the group has made novel use of social media, file-upload sites, and other modern communication platforms to inspire attacks worldwide. As ISIS loses its hold on physical territory in Syria, one concerning possibility is that the group will look to new forms of cyber terrorism to cause harm here in the United States.

Without as much of a physical safe haven from which to plot attacks and inspire followers, ISIS may seek to wreak havoc through cyber operations that do not require large numbers of fighters or expansive territorial holdings. Such efforts would build on earlier ISIS cyber efforts,

¹⁴ Ron Nixon & Eileen Sullivan, "Revocation of Grants to Help Fight Hate Under New Scrutiny After Charlottesville," *The New York Times*, August 15, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/15/us/politics/right-wing-extremism-charlottesville.html>.

¹⁵ Miriam Valverde, "A Look at the Data on Domestic Terrorism and Who's Behind It," *PolitiFact*, August 16, 2017, <http://www.politifact.com/truth-o-meter/article/2017/aug/16/look-data-domestic-terrorism-and-whos-behind-it/>.

¹⁶ Mary B. McCord, "Criminal Law Should Treat Domestic Terrorism as the Moral Equivalent of International Terrorism," *Lawfare*, August 21, 2017, <https://lawfareblog.com/criminal-law-should-treat-domestic-terrorism-moral-equivalent-international-terrorism>.

such as the collaboration between now-imprisoned Ardit Ferizi¹⁷ and the late Junaid Hussain¹⁸ to obtain and then make public the personally identifiable information of U.S. service members. In the years since those efforts, malicious cyber activity outside the context of terrorism has dramatically increased, with powerful hacking tools no longer the exclusive province of nation-states. This would seem to make obtaining and using those tools increasingly appealing and, unfortunately, increasingly feasible for a terrorist group such as ISIS. For example, if ISIS were able to recruit and utilize the right technological expertise and acquire the increasingly available tools to do so, ISIS might exfiltrate sensitive data from computer systems or simply alter it in ways that could generate mayhem for financial markets or medical records. Alternatively, and perhaps more likely given ISIS's desire to instill fear and grab headlines through dramatic attacks, ISIS might attempt to cause tangible damage in the physical world by hacking into the systems that are used to control and operate power plants and electric grids. These sorts of cyber operations would be novel for a terrorist group; and they would not only cause real damage but also generate the type of excitement and belief among followers and supporters that ISIS surely is seeking to recapture as the physical caliphate that the group once touted shrinks.

Here, too, there is cause for concern that the Trump Administration is not appropriately tackling the challenge. As of this writing, the top position overseeing cyber policy at the White House—the Assistant to the President for Homeland Security and Counterterrorism—is vacant, and the next most senior cyber position—the National Security Council staff's Special Assistant to the President and Cybersecurity Coordinator—was recently eliminated. As I have commented elsewhere, this undoing of key White House leadership on cyber-related policy matters “seems to send a strange message as to how this White House is prioritizing something most of us think the government needs to prioritize more.”¹⁹ While there are various plausible arrangements for structuring the leadership of the National Security Council staff, this seemingly deliberate diminution of leadership on cyber issues is particularly puzzling given how rapidly cyber-related threats are evolving and given how much our response requires the type of strategic leadership and interagency coordination that only the White House can provide. To the extent that ISIS turns to new types of cyber operations to regain momentum and inflict harm, this lack of leadership may prove a serious vulnerability, even as our military is taking the positive step of elevating Cyber Command to a unified combatant command.²⁰ Military and other key tools available to our government in the cyber arena require clear and forward-looking strategies, authorities, policies, and legal frameworks—especially given that the likely target of cyber terrorism may well be critical infrastructure controlled by private industry, which introduces distinctive complexities when it comes to formulating and implementing a governmental response.

¹⁷ Department of Justice, “ISIL-Linked Kosovo Hacker Sentenced to 20 Years in Prison,” September 23, 2016, <https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/isil-linked-kosovo-hacker-sentenced-20-years-prison>.

¹⁸ Nafees Hamid, “The British Hacker Who Became the Islamic State's Chief Terror Cyber-Coach: A Profile of Junaid Hussain,” *CTC Sentinel*, Volume 11, Issue 4, pages 30-37, <https://ctc.usma.edu/app/uploads/2018/04/CTC-SENTINEL-042018-2.pdf>.

¹⁹ Brian Barrett, “White House Cuts Critical Cybersecurity Role as Threats Loom,” *Wired*, May 15, 2018, <https://www.wired.com/story/white-house-cybersecurity-coordinator/> (quoting Joshua A. Geltzer).

²⁰ Matthew Cox, “Cyber Command Elevated to Combatant Command,” *Military.com*, May 4, 2018, <https://www.military.com/defensetech/2018/05/04/cyber-command-elevated-combatant-command.html>.

Conclusion

The crumbling of ISIS's caliphate in Iraq and Syria is a major positive development for U.S. national security, for the security of our allies and partners, and for the stability of the Middle East region. But it is not the end of the threat posed by ISIS to the United States. The group retains some territory in Syria; is expanding its physical presence in other parts of the world; continues to make shrewd use of its virtual presence to recruit and radicalize followers; and could look to novel cyber operations as access to dangerous cyber tools becomes easier for non-state actors. This state of affairs would be challenging enough for the dedicated national security professionals who work to secure our homeland; but the challenge is compounded by aggravating factors of the Trump Administration's own making. The failure to retain our key partner on the ground in the fight against ISIS; the relentless anti-Muslim orientation of President Trump's rhetoric and policies; and the seemingly deliberate absence of White House leadership to provide strategic vision and interagency coordination in the cyber arena all make the persistent threat posed by ISIS harder to address. That is unfortunate given the considerable scope of the challenge in the first place and given ISIS's likely evolution and adaptation to changed circumstances in ways that will pose new forms of terrorist threats to our country.

I am grateful for the opportunity to discuss these important issues and look forward to the Committee's questions.