



February 14, 2017

Evolving Threat of Terrorism and Effective Counterterrorism Strategies

Committee on Armed Services, United States House of Representatives,
One Hundred Fifteenth Congress, First Session

HEARING CONTENTS:

Witnesses

Bruce Hoffman
Director, Center for Security Studies
Georgetown University
[\[View Testimony\]](#)

Brian Michael Jenkins
Senior Advisor to the President
RAND Corporation
[\[View Testimony\]](#)

Michael Sheehan
Distinguished Chair
Combating Terrorism Center at West Point
[\[View Testimony\]](#)

Available Webcast(s)*:

[\[Watch Full Hearing\]](#)

Compiled From*:

<https://armedservices.house.gov/legislation/hearings/full-committee-hearing-evolving-threat-terrorism-and-effective-counterterrorism>

** Please Note: External links included in this compilation were functional at the time of its creation but are not maintained thereafter.*

*This hearing compilation was prepared by the Homeland Security Digital Library,
Naval Postgraduate School, Center for Homeland Defense and Security.*

**THE EVOLVING THREAT OF TERRORISM AND EFFECTIVE
COUNTERTERRORISM STRATEGIES**

**U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
COMMITTEE ON ARMED SERVICES**

February 14, 2017

Professor Bruce Hoffman
Center for Security Studies
Georgetown University
Washington, DC

While ISIS¹ poses the most serious, imminent terrorist threat today, al-Qa`ida has been quietly rebuilding and marshaling its resources to reinvigorate the war against the United States declared 20 years ago by its founder and leader, Osama bin Laden.² The result is that both groups have enmeshed the U.S. and the West in a debilitating war of attrition, with all its deleterious consequences. ISIS has built external operations capability that will likely survive its loss of territory in Libya, Iraq, and Syria. Meanwhile, the threat from al-Qa`ida persists and may become more serious as it attempts to capitalize on ISIS's falling star alongside the enhancement of its own terrorist strike capabilities.

In order to better understand the background and dynamics of these developments, this testimony will discuss five key potentialities arising from these current threats:

- First, the resilience of ISIS's external operations arm in a post-caliphate environment;
- Second, the likely enduring threat posed by the tens of thousands of foreign fighters who have answered both ISIS's and al-Qa`ida's respective calls to battle;
- Third, the prospect of al-Qa`ida absorbing—whether amenably or forcibly—ISIS's surviving cadre;

- Fourth, the possibility of terrorist development and use of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) re-appearing as a salient threat consideration; and,
- Fifth, what the new administration should do about it.

THE RESILIENCE OF ISIS'S EXTERNAL OPERATIONS ARM IN A POST-CALIPHATE ENVIRONMENT

ISIS, alas, is here to stay—at least for the foreseeable future. Some two years before the 2015 Paris attacks, ISIS had built an external operations network in Europe that mostly escaped notice. Known as the Amn al-Kharji or simply as “Enmi” or “Anmi” (the respective Turkish and Arabic rendering of the word, “Amniyat,” or security service), this unit appears to function independently of the group’s waning military and territorial fortunes. For instance, U.S. intelligence and defense officials quoted by Rukmini Callimachi in her revealing August 2016 *New York Times* article believe that ISIS has already sent “hundreds of operatives” into the European Union with “hundreds more” having been dispatched to Turkey as well.³ If accurate, this investment of operational personnel ensures that ISIS will retain an effective international terrorist strike capability in Europe irrespective of its battlefield reverses in Syria and Iraq. Indeed, ISIS’s leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, has already instructed potential foreign fighters who are unable to travel to the caliphate to instead emigrate to other wilayets (where ISIS branches are located).⁴ This suggests that these other branches could develop their own external operations capabilities independent of the parent organization and present significant future threat(s)—much as al-Qa`ida’s franchises have over the past decade in Yemen, North Africa, and South Asia, among other places.

THE LIKELY ENDURING THREAT POSED BY THE TENS OF THOUSANDS OF FOREIGN FIGHTERS WHO HAVE ANSWERED BOTH ISIS'S AND AL-QA`IDA'S RESPECTIVE CALLS TO BATTLE

Moreover, in addition to the presumed sleeper cells that ISIS has seeded throughout Europe, there is the further problem of at least some of the estimated 7,000 European foreign fighters returning home.⁵ They are only a fraction of the nearly 40,000 persons⁶ from more than 100

countries throughout the world⁷ who have trained in Syria and Iraq. What this means is that in little more than four years ISIS's international cadre has surpassed even the most liberal estimates of the number of foreign fighters that the U.S. Intelligence Community believes journeyed to Afghanistan during the 1980s and 1990s in order to join al-Qa`ida.⁸ In other words, far more foreign nationals have been trained by ISIS in Syria and Iraq during the past couple of years than were by al-Qa`ida in the dozen or so years leading up to the September 11th 2001 attacks.⁹ This recreates the same constellation of organizational capabilities and trained operatives that made al-Qa`ida so dangerous sixteen years ago.

And, unlike the comparatively narrow geographical demographics of prior al-Qa`ida recruits, ISIS's foreign fighters cadre includes hitherto unrepresented nationalities, such as hundreds of Latin Americans along with citizens from Mali, Benin, and Bangladesh, among other atypical jihadi recruiting grounds.¹⁰ Meanwhile, the danger from so-called lone wolf attacks also remains. The late ISIS commander Abu Muhammad al-Adnani's famous September 2014 summons to battle has hitherto proven far more compelling than al-Qa`ida's longstanding efforts similarly to animate, motivate, and inspire individuals to engage in violence in support of its aims.

**THE PROSPECT OF AL-QA`IDA ABSORBING—WHETHER AMENABLY OR FORCIBLY—
ISIS'S SURVIVING CADRE**

While ISIS has dominated the headlines and preoccupied the U.S. government's attention for the past four years, al-Qa`ida has been quietly rebuilding and marshaling its resources for the continuation of its twenty year long struggle against the U.S. Indeed, its presence in Syria should be regarded as just as dangerous and even more pernicious than that of ISIS. Evidence of the high priority that the al-Qa`ida Senior Leadership (AQSL) attaches to Syria may be seen in the special messages conveyed in February and June 2012 respectively by Ayman al-Zawahiri and the late Abu Yahya al-Libi in support of the uprising against the Assad regime—calling upon Muslims in Turkey, Iraq, Jordan, and Lebanon to do everything within their power to assist in the overthrow of the apostate Alawites.

The fact that Jabhat al-Nusra or Jabhat Fateh al-Sham, regardless of what it calls itself, is even more capable than ISIS and a more dangerous long-term threat seems almost immaterial to many across the region who not only actively support and assist it, but actively seek to partner with what they perversely regard as a more moderate and reasonable rival to ISIS.

This development may be seen as fitting neatly into al-Zawahiri's broader strategy of letting ISIS take all the heat and absorb all the blows from the coalition arrayed against it while al-Qa`ida quietly rebuilds its military strength and basks in its paradoxical new cachet as "moderate extremists" in contrast to the unconstrained ISIS.

Anyone inclined to be taken in by this ruse would do well to heed the admonition of Theo Padnos (Peter Theo Curtis), the American journalist who spent two years in Syria as a hostage of Jabhat al-Nusra. Padnos relates how, "The Nusra Front higher-ups were inviting Westerners to the jihad in Syria not so much because they needed more foot soldiers—they didn't—but because they want to teach the Westerners to take the struggle into every neighborhood and subway back home."¹¹

Finally, the importance of Syria to al-Qa`ida's plans may be seen in the number of AQSL personages who have re-located there. Mushin al-Fadhli, a bin Laden intimate who, until his death from a U.S. airstrike in 2015, had commanded the Khorasan Group—al-Qa`ida's elite, forward-based operational arm in Syria. Haydar Kirkan, a Turkish national and longstanding, senior al-Qa`ida commander, had been sent back to his homeland in 2010—presumably by bin Laden himself. Kirkan's orders were to build an infrastructure in the region to facilitate the movement of key al-Qa`ida personnel hiding in Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Area in order to escape the escalation of drone strikes ordered by President Obama. Kirkan was recently killed as a result of a U.S. bombing raid in Idlib, Syria.

And, in late 2015, al-Zawahiri dispatched Saif al-Adl, al-Qa`ida's most experienced and battle-hardened senior commander, to Syria in order to oversee the group's interests there. With this senior command structure in place, al-Qa`ida is thus well positioned to exploit ISIS's

weakening military position and territorial losses and once again regain its pre-eminent position at the vanguard of the Salafi-Jihadi movement. ISIS in any event can no longer compete with al-Qa`ida in terms of influence, reach, manpower, and cohesion. In only one domain is ISIS currently stronger than its rival: the ability to mount spectacular terrorist strikes in Europe—and this is only because al-Qa`ida has decided for the time being to restrain this type of operation.

Looking to the immediate future, ISIS's continuing setbacks and serial weakening arguably create the conditions where some reconciliation with al-Qa`ida might yet be effected. Efforts to reunite have in fact been continuous from both sides virtually from the time of ISIS's expulsion from the al-Qa`ida fold in 2014. Regardless of how it might occur, any kind of reconciliation between ISIS and al-Qa`ida or re-amalgamation or co-operation between the two groups would profoundly change the current conflict and result in a significantly escalated threat of foreign fighter terrorist operations in the West.

THE POSSIBILITY OF TERRORIST DEVELOPMENT AND USE OF WEAPONS OF MASS DESTRUCTION (WMD) RE-APPEARING AS A SALIENT THREAT CONSIDERATION

A quarter of a century ago, Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher described publicity as the oxygen upon which terrorism depended. Today, however, it is access to sanctuary and safe haven that sustains and nourishes terrorism. A depressing pattern has established itself whereby we continue to kill terrorist leaders while the organizations they lead nonetheless continue to seize more territory. Indeed, according to the National Counterterrorism Center, a year before the U.S. launched the current campaign to defeat ISIS, the group had a presence in only seven countries around the world. By 2015, the same year that the Obama administration's latest counterterrorism strategy had been enunciated, that number had nearly doubled. And, as recently as this past August, the NCTC reported that ISIS was "fully operational" in eighteen countries.¹² Meanwhile, Qa`ida is also present in more countries today (nearly two dozen by my count) than it was in 2001—and in three times as many as when the Obama administration took office in 2009. Today, foreign volunteers are fighting in Yemen,

Afghanistan, Pakistan, Somalia, Libya, and Mali as well as in Syria and Iraq, among other places.

Sanctuary also permits more scope for terrorist research and development efforts to produce various weapons of destruction (WMD—more accurately CBRN weapons: chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear weapons). In the case of al-Qa`ida's presence in Afghanistan before the September 11th 2001 attacks, these fears were more than amply justified. The group's interest in acquiring a nuclear weapon had reportedly commenced as far back as 1992—a mere four years after its creation. Indeed, bin Laden's continued interest in nuclear weaponry was also on display at the time of the September 11th, 2001 attacks. Two Pakistani nuclear scientists, identified as Sultan Bashiruddin Mahmood and Abdul Majeed, spent three days that August at a secret al-Qa`ida facility outside Kabul. Although their discussions with bin Laden, al-Zawahiri, and other senior Qa`ida commanders also focused the development and employment of chemical and biological weapons, Mahmood—the former director for nuclear power at Pakistan's Atomic Energy Commission—claimed that bin Laden's foremost interest was in developing a nuclear weapon. Nor is there any reason to suspect that al-Qa`ida's general fascination with either nuclear or other weapons of mass destruction or mass disruption has ever completely abated or disappeared.

Al-Qa`ida's research and development of biological warfare agents, for instance, were not only actively pursued but were also far more advanced than its nuclear ambitions. They appear to have begun in earnest with a memo written by al-Zawahiri on April 15, 1999 to Muhammad Atef, then-deputy commander of al-Qa`ida's military committee. Citing articles from leading scholarly publications such as *Science*, the *Journal of Immunology*, and the *New England Journal of Medicine*, as well as information gleaned from authoritative books such as *Tomorrow's Weapons* (1964), *Peace or Pestilence* (1949), and *Chemical Warfare* (1924), al-Zawahiri outlined in detail his thoughts on the priority that needed to be given to developing a biological weapons capability. At least two separate teams of al-Qa`ida operatives were subsequently tasked to undertake parallel R&D efforts to produce anthrax, ricin, and

chemical warfare agents at the movement's facilities in Kandahar and Derunta. Bio-warfare experts believe that on the eve of the September 11, 2001 attacks, al-Qa`ida was at least two to three years away from producing a sufficient quantity of anthrax to use as a weapon.

More recently, credible intelligence surfaced in 2010 that al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP)—widely considered the movement's most dangerous and capable affiliate—was deeply involved in the development of ricin, a bio-weapon made from castor beans that the FBI has termed the third most toxic substance known to mankind—behind only plutonium and botulism. Then, in May 2013, Turkish authorities seized two kilos of sarin nerve gas—the same weapon used in the 1995 attack on the Tokyo subway system—and arrested twelve men linked to Qa`ida's Syrian affiliate. Days later, another set of sarin-related arrests was made in Iraq of terrorist belonging to ISIS's immediate predecessor, who were reportedly respectively overseeing the production of sarin and mustard blistering agents in at least two different locations. ISIS, of course, has also repeatedly employed chemical weapons, including against civilians, in Syria. It is doubtful whether they would feel constrained from deploying these weapons elsewhere.

WHAT THE NEW ADMINISTRATION SHOULD DO ABOUT IT ALL

In sum, the Trump administration is facing perhaps the most parlous international security environment since the period immediately following the September 11th 2001 attacks—with serious threats now emanating from not one but two terrorist movements and a previous counterterrorism strategy and approach that has failed. Indeed, the three pillars upon which that strategy was based—leadership attrition, training of local forces, and countering violent extremism—have thus failed to deliver a crushing blow to ISIS and al-Qa`ida.¹³

The U.S.-led war on terrorism has now lasted longer than our participation in both world wars. It has surpassed even our active military involvement in Vietnam during the 1960s and 1970s. Like the Viet Cong guerrillas and People's Army of Vietnam main force units, our Salafi-Jihadi enemies have locked us into an enervating war of attrition—the preferred strategy of terrorists and guerrillas from

time immemorial. They hope to undermine national political will, corrode internal popular support, and demoralize us and our regional partners through a prolonged, generally intensifying and increasingly diffuse campaign of terrorism and violence.

In his last publicly released, videotaped statement bin Laden revealed precisely this strategy on the eve of the 2004 presidential election. "So we are continuing this policy in bleeding America to the point of bankruptcy," he declared.

Allah willing, and nothing is too great for Allah. . . . This is in addition to our having experience in using guerrilla warfare and the war of attrition to fight tyrannical superpowers, as we, alongside the mujahidin, bled Russia for 10 years, until it went bankrupt and was forced to withdraw in defeat.¹⁴

Decisively breaking this stasis and emerging from this war of attrition must therefore be among the Trump administration's highest priorities. Simply killing a small number of leaders in terrorist groups, whose ranks in any event are continually replenished, will not end the threats posed by ISIS and al-Qa`ida nor dislodge them from their bases of operation in the Levant and Iraq, North Africa, the Arabian Peninsula, and South Asia. The slow and fractured process of training indigenous government security forces in those regions will not do so either. The inadequacy of these training activities and efforts to build partner capacity are evidenced by the mostly unimpeded escalation of terrorist activities in all those places. Whether in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Mali, Somalia, and especially in Yemen, our efforts to build partner capacity have all foundered. In each, Islamist terrorist numbers grew faster than we were able to train indigenous security forces effectively; terrorist control over territory and the creation of new sanctuaries and safe havens expanded while governmental sovereignty contracted; and, the terrorists' operational effectiveness appreciably outpaced that of their government opponents. While there has been some recent progress in Mali, Nigeria, Syria, and Iraq, it is not clear whether the past problems that undermined the performance of indigenous militaries have been adequately addressed and reversed. Accordingly, the Trump administration should conduct a complete

reevaluation and systemic overhaul of our training and resourcing of foreign partners if we are to prevent the further spread of ISIS and al-Qa`ida branches and counter their entrenchment across the multiple regions in which they have already embedded themselves.

While continued and increased U.S. combat air support is also required—especially in Iraq, Syria, Libya, and in support of French forces in Mali—that alone is not the answer. American and allied air strikes in coordination with local ground forces have not brought any of these counterterrorist campaigns to rapid conclusion. Therefore, in tandem with both the continued use of air power and deployment of supporting American special operations forces personnel, division-size conventional U.S. military forces might be usefully deployed on a strict 90-day rotation into violence-plagued rural areas and urban trouble spots. They have the necessary combat experience and skill-sets to sequentially eliminate terrorist strength in each of these areas and thereby enable indigenous security forces to follow in their wake to stabilize and police newly liberated places. By providing more effective governance and core services—with sustained U.S. and European support—host nations could thus better prevent the recurrence of terrorism and return of terrorist forces.

CONCLUSION

The current threat environment posed by the emergence and spread of ISIS and the stubborn resilience and long-game approach of al-Qa`ida makes a new strategy and new organizational and institutional behaviors necessary. The non-traditional challenges to U.S. national security and foreign policy imperatives posed by elusive and deadly irregular adversaries emphasizes the need to anchor changes that will more effectively close the gap between detecting irregular adversarial activity and rapidly defeating it. The effectiveness of this strategy will be based on our capacity to think like a networked enemy, in anticipation of how they may act in a variety of situations, aided by different resources. This goal requires that the U.S. national security structure organize itself for maximum efficiency, information sharing,

and the ability to function quickly and effectively under new operational definitions.

¹ The Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham—also known as ISIL, the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant; by its pejorative Arabic acronym, Daesh; and, simply as the Islamic State.

² This presentation is adopted from the author's "Terrorism Challenges for the Trump Administration," *CTC Sentinel*, vol. 9, issue 11 (November/December 2016), at: https://www.ctc.usma.edu/v2/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/CTC-Sentinel_Vol9Iss1113.pdf.

³ Rukmini Callimachi, "How a Secretive Branch of ISIS Built a Global Network of Killers," *New York Times*, August 3, 2016. See also, idem, "How ISIS Built the Machinery of Terror Under Europe's Gaze," *New York Times*, March 29, 2016.

⁴ Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, "This is what Allah and His Messenger had Promised Us," *Islamic State Fuqran Media Foundation*, November 2, 2016.

⁵ See John Gatt-Rutter, director of counterterrorism division, European External Action Service (EEAS) quoted in Martin Banks, "Returning foreign fighters are biggest threat to EU, Parliament warned," *The Parliament: Politics, Policy And People Magazine*, October 12, 2016.

⁶ James R. Clapper, Director of National Intelligence, "Statement for the Record: Worldwide Threat Assessment of the US Intelligence Community," Senate Armed Services Committee, 9 February 2016, pp. 4-6; and, U.S. Department of State, "Country Reports on Terrorism 2015: Special Briefing by Justin Siberell, Acting Coordinator for Counterterrorism," June 2, 2016.

⁷ Clapper, p. 4; and, Matt Bradley, "Rift Grows in Islamic State Between Foreign, Local Fighters," *Wall Street Journal*, March 25, 2016.

⁸ "Esimates of the number of non-Afghan volunteers range from 4,000 to 25,000, with Arab fighters making up the majority." Gina Bennett, 'The Wandering Mujahidin: Armed and Dangerous,' *Weekend Edition: United States Department of State Bureau of Intelligence and*

Research, August 21-22, 1993, pp. 1-2,

<http://www.nationalsecuritymom.com/3/WanderingMujahidin.pdf>.

⁹ "U.S. intelligence estimates the total number of fighters who underwent instruction in Bin Laden-supported camps in Afghanistan from 1996 through 9/11 at 10,000 to 20,000." National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, *The 9/11 Commission Report: Final Report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States: Authorized Version* (New York & London: W.W. Norton, 2004), p. 67.

¹⁰ I am indebted to Professor Jytte Klausen of Brandeis University for her thoughts on this issue. E-mail correspondence, October 21, 2016. See also, Brian Dodwell, Daniel Milton, and Don Rassler, *The Caliphate's Global Workforce: An Inside Look At the Islamic State's Foreign Fighter Paper Trail* (West Point, NY: Combating Terrorism Center, April 2016), p. 9.

¹¹ Theo Padnos, "My Captivity," *New York Times Magazine*, October 29, 2014.

¹² William Arkin, et al., "New Counterterrorism 'Heat Map' Shows ISIS Branches Spreading Worldwide," *NBC News*, August 23, 2016, accessed at: <http://www.nbcnews.com/storyline/isis-terror/new-counterterrorism-heat-map-shows-isis-branches-spreading-worldwide-n621866>.

¹³ The most recent official elucidation of this approach is the 2015 National Security Strategy document. It explains how the U.S. "shifted away from a model of fighting costly, large-scale ground wars in Iraq and Afghanistan in which the United States—particularly our military—bore an enormous burden. Instead, we are now pursuing a more sustainable approach that prioritizes targeted counterterrorism operations, collective action with responsible partners, and increased efforts to prevent the growth of violent extremism and radicalization that drives increased threats."

See *National Security Strategy*, February 2015, p. 9, https://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/docs/2015_national_security_strategy.pdf

¹⁴ "Full transcript of bin Laden's speech," aljazeera.com, November 1, 2004, accessed at:
<http://www.aljazeera.com/archive/2004/11/200849163336457223.html>.

Middle East Turmoil and the Continuing Terrorist Threat—Still No Easy Solutions

Brian Michael Jenkins

CT-462

Testimony presented before the House Committee on Armed Services on February 14, 2017.



For more information on this publication, visit www.rand.org/pubs/testimonies/CT462.html

Testimonies

RAND testimonies record testimony presented or submitted by RAND associates to federal, state, or local legislative committees; government-appointed commissions and panels; and private review and oversight bodies.

Published by the RAND Corporation, Santa Monica, Calif.

© Copyright 2017 RAND Corporation

RAND® is a registered trademark.

Limited Print and Electronic Distribution Rights

This document and trademark(s) contained herein are protected by law. This representation of RAND intellectual property is provided for noncommercial use only. Unauthorized posting of this publication online is prohibited. Permission is given to duplicate this document for personal use only, as long as it is unaltered and complete. Permission is required from RAND to reproduce, or reuse in another form, any of its research documents for commercial use. For information on reprint and linking permissions, please visit www.rand.org/pubs/permissions.html.

www.rand.org

Middle East Turmoil and the Continuing Terrorist Threat—Still No Easy Solutions

Testimony of Brian Michael Jenkins¹
The RAND Corporation²

Before the Committee on Armed Services
United States House of Representatives

February 14, 2017

The United States continues to face an array of armed threats to its national security: a revanchist Russia determined to recover its superpower status and restore its influence worldwide; an increasingly assertive China pushing its claim over the South China Sea; and in the Middle East, a hostile Iran and continuing jihadist terrorist threats.

Jihadist terrorism is the most prominent and persistent threat to U.S. security.

Military confrontation with Russia seems unlikely, although miscalculations remain possible, but Russia poses more than a military threat. Maintaining a strong North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) will, it is hoped, deter Moscow from potentially dangerous courses and allow the United States to play a greater role in checking the growth of Russian influence, which it is presently achieving through measures other than war.³ China's assertions can be best handled diplomatically while maintaining strong regional alliances. This was underscored by James Mattis, who made his first foreign trip as Secretary of Defense to South Korea and Japan, two countries with which the United States has bilateral defense agreements.

The United States has managed a difficult and, at times, dangerous relationship with Iran since 1979. Those in Washington who may have expected the 2015 nuclear weapons deal to presage diplomatic rapprochement with Tehran were disappointed; that seems a long way off. At

¹ The opinions and conclusions expressed in this testimony are the author's alone and should not be interpreted as representing those of the RAND Corporation or any of the sponsors of its research.

² The RAND Corporation is a research organization that develops solutions to public policy challenges to help make communities throughout the world safer and more secure, healthier and more prosperous. RAND is nonprofit, nonpartisan, and committed to the public interest.

³ Brian Michael Jenkins, *A Revanchist Russia Versus an Uncertain West: An Appreciation of the Situation Since the 2014 Ukrainian Crisis*, Sofia, Bulgaria: Center for the Study of Democracy, December 2016b. As of February 13, 2017: <http://www.csd.bg/artShow.php?id=17877>

the same time, there appears to be little domestic and even less international support for upsetting the deal. Meanwhile, I believe that it is not in the interest of the United States that Iran become the dominant power in the region, which it seeks to do; preventing that will shape American actions.

While not the most dangerous threat to the United States, jihadist or Islamist terrorism is the most prominent issue. Other terrorist threats to U.S. citizens and interests abroad have receded, although conflict with Iran or North Korea could provoke state-sponsored terrorist incidents.

Of current threats to U.S. national security, jihadist terrorism is also the least amenable to any obvious or immediate diplomatic or military solution, although military force will remain an important part—but only one part—of U.S. counterterrorist efforts. Other counterterrorism activities must include programs aimed at changing the narrative and reducing the attractiveness of the ideology fueling the violence. And while the danger posed by jihadist terrorists would be quickly surpassed if there were war with any state adversary, jihadist terrorism is a threat the United States is going to be dealing with for the foreseeable future. That is the focus of my testimony today.

Terrorism has increased dramatically worldwide, but the increase is misleading.

Terrorism worldwide has increased in recent years, but we should not overestimate the terrorist threat to the United States. In the 15-year period from 2001 to 2015, the Global Terrorism Database maintained by the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism recorded more than 85,000 incidents of terrorism worldwide, with more than 200,000 fatalities. That amounts to an average of more than 5,000 incidents a year, including almost 15,000 incidents for 2015 alone. This is a dramatic increase from the averages of fewer than 1,000 incidents a year in the 1970s, slightly more than 3,000 incidents a year in the 1980s and 1990s, and about 2,500 a year between 2000 and 2009.⁴ However, the dramatic rise in global terrorism is misleading. The increase in recent years reflects both better reporting of terrorist events in remote parts of the world and the fact that terrorism is now counted as a separate category of violence, even in the midst of war. Most of the recent terrorist incidents have occurred in war zones.

Terrorism remains concentrated in a handful of countries.

Between 2001 and 2015, 73 percent of all recorded terrorist attacks and 78 percent of all fatalities from terrorism occurred in just ten countries: Afghanistan, Algeria, India, Iraq, Nigeria, Pakistan, the Philippines, Somalia, Syria, and Yemen. The centers of the problem are obvious. Forty-six percent of the incidents, accounting for more than 50 percent of the fatalities, took

⁴ National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism, Global Terrorism Database, College Park, Md.: University of Maryland, undated. As of February 13, 2017: <https://www.start.umd.edu/gtd/>

place in just three countries—Afghanistan, Iraq, and Pakistan—all of which were engulfed in intense, ongoing armed conflicts.⁵ Outside of these countries, terrorist attacks occur only occasionally. Although jihadist terrorists have recently carried out some spectacular attacks in Europe, total deaths caused by terrorists in Europe actually have declined during the decades since the 1970s, although there was an increase in 2015 and 2016.

During the same two years, the United States also saw several spectacular attacks. While these attacks had a significant psychological impact, the total number of U.S. casualties caused by jihadist terrorists here since the attacks on September 11, 2001, comes to about 100.⁶ Given its current levels in the United States, terrorism cannot be considered an existential threat. Rather, it is a persistent threat requiring our constant attention to ensure that it does not gain momentum in the United States.

Although terrorism is increasing, the number of wars and the number of casualties in wars are declining.

The increase in terrorism appears all the more dramatic because the incidence of warfare itself and the casualties produced by war have declined during the same period. There are fewer wars and fewer casualties today than there were 50 years ago, and far fewer than there were in the bloody first half of the 20th century.⁷ Terrorism looms larger, in part, because warfare has diminished and because terrorists have carried out more-spectacular attacks.

Terrorist organizations have evolved into global enterprises.

So-called international terrorism—the globalization of terrorist campaigns—is not new. Terrorist organizations have operated internationally for decades, sending their own operatives to carry out attacks abroad and creating alliances with other terrorist organizations to extend their reach. More recently, terrorist organizations have exploited the Internet and social media to inspire and instruct distant followers to carry out attacks on their behalf.

A few groups—notably, al Qaeda and the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL)—operating from sanctuaries in ungoverned spaces, have sent out missions to establish or acquire affiliates. They often do so by attaching themselves to rebels fighting against local governments for local causes. The arrangement may heighten the global profile and increase the prestige of the

⁵ National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism, undated.

⁶ The author's own figures put the total at 89, not counting the perpetrators, but various counts are available. For example, Charles Kurzman reports a higher number of 123, but that includes the deaths of perpetrators, as well as 17 murders attributed to the 2002 "Beltway Sniper" and a few other incidents that I do not see as jihadist terrorism. Admittedly, motives are sometimes murky. See Charles Kurzman, *Muslim-American Involvement with Violent Extremism*, Chapel Hill, N.C.: Triangle Center on Terrorism and Homeland Security, January 26, 2017. As of February 13, 2017: https://sites.duke.edu/tcths/files/2017/01/Kurzman_Muslim-American_Involvement_in_Violent_Extremism_2016.pdf

⁷ Several studies indicate a decline in war. See, for example, Max Roser, "War and Peace," *Our World in Data*, University of Oxford, 2016. As of February 13, 2017: <https://ourworldindata.org/war-and-peace/>

local fighters and potentially gain them limited material support and assistance. For the outsiders, these footholds create the impression of new fronts in a vast enterprise, offer new operating bases, and provide potential recruits for the global effort. The footholds eventually may become formal affiliates of the group or “provinces” of a terrorist state, although some of them are mere assertions.

Some of these alliances are strategic; others are purely tactical. And affiliations change. ISIL broke with al Qaeda. Jabhat al Nusra, al Qaeda’s affiliate in Syria, changed its name and announced that it had severed its ties with al Qaeda.

The competition for colonies has resulted in a proliferation of al Qaeda and ISIL entities across Africa, the Middle East, and Asia. While linked by common, or at least compatible, ideologies and personal oaths of allegiance, the actual connectivity varies. With a weak center, al Qaeda’s affiliates operate with virtual autonomy. ISIL has attempted to impose a more formal structure on its acquisitions, but most of these remain focused on their local struggles. The reduction of ISIL’s Islamic state in Iraq and Syria—its presumptive caliphate—will reduce its attractiveness and erode the bonds.

These developments complicate counterterrorism. While it would be inappropriate to see the spread of al Qaeda or ISIL flags as the advance of an occupying army or evidence of a centrally directed campaign, the terrorist colonizers over time may be able to gradually increase their control over their local allies. The colonies also may harbor fleeing central commanders, guaranteeing the survival of their effort. They cannot be ignored, but each must be addressed within the context of the local situation. Instead of one war, countering the enterprise becomes many wars.

The organizational developments described here reflect the evolution of al Qaeda and ISIL, which have global, even celestial ambitions. Organizations pursuing political ends in other parts of the world and future terrorist organizations may not necessarily follow the jihadist trajectory.

Inspiring attacks via the Internet pushes terrorists toward soft targets and “pure terrorism.”

Although the distance recruiting of homegrown terrorists does not preclude centrally directed terrorist operations or strategic strikes directed by affiliates, central capabilities have declined, and distance recruiting has become more important. Afghanistan provides a useful example.

The U.S. invasion of Afghanistan scattered al Qaeda’s central command. Continued international pressure on the organization made central planning more difficult. Nonetheless, al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula attempted to carry on the campaign against the United States by sabotaging U.S.-bound airliners and inspiring homegrown terrorists.

ISIL has recruited tens of thousands of foreign fighters to come to Syria and Iraq and clearly has global ambitions, but it has not attempted to replicate anything on the scale of al Qaeda’s 9/11 attacks. Instead, ISIL has supported operations by terrorist leaders among its foreign fighters. The precise relationship between these foreign organizers and ISIL’s central command is not clear, nor is it consistent across the various attacks. Are they mere lieutenants carrying out orders, or are they independent entrepreneurs?

ISIL is under heavy pressure and has lost territory and fighters. As it faces defeat on the ground, it could attempt to launch large-scale international terrorist attacks. Terrorist operations are intended not just to harm the enemy but also to recruit and compete for followers. ISIL and al Qaeda, although at war with each other, compete for the same constituents.

ISIL has effectively used social media to reach a broader audience of potential recruits. However, the operational capabilities of these volunteers are not likely to match their ideological fervor, so ISIL, through its online publications and contact via the Internet, recommends simple operations that are within these volunteers' range. This means going after soft targets—that is, venues that are usually unprotected.

Terrorists have traditionally concentrated their attacks on unprotected targets that still provided some political symbolism. The political content has faded. For today's terrorists, death, destruction, and notoriety seem to be the paramount goals. We now see truly random attacks on people at restaurants, shopping malls, subway stations, busy streets—virtually anywhere. Random attacks send the message that nothing is safe.⁸ Often, these are low-level attacks by a single individual using readily available “weapons”—guns when they can get them, but also knives, axes, trucks, and cars.

Terrorism is violence calculated to create fear and alarm—and it often works. The terrorist organization has come to realize that even small-scale attacks can create extreme alarm and oblige governments to take extraordinary security measures.

However, the small number of attacks and attackers suggest that it is not easy to remotely motivate people to take action. The Internet reaches a vast audience, but it also allows vicarious participation—fervent followers can boast and threaten online but then go on with their ordinary lives. Absent physical connectivity, most online, would-be warriors will do nothing. For those charged with security, however, ascertaining who among the radicals will cross the line into violence is challenging.

The current terrorist threat remains inextricably intertwined with events in the Middle East.

It is understandable that Americans see the Middle East through the lens of terrorism. Indeed, most of the terrorist-created crises involving the United States since the late 1960s have related to the Middle East and the adjacent regions of North Africa and Southwest Asia. In the 1970s, hijackings, incidents of airline sabotage, hostage seizures, bombings, and other attacks by Palestinian terrorist groups posed the greatest threat. In the 1980s, Iranian-backed groups in Lebanon added another dimension to the problem. Since the mid-1990s, groups inspired by al Qaeda and its offshoots have become the principal concern. ISIL is only the latest incarnation of the continuing jihadist threat.

⁸ Brian Michael Jenkins, *The Challenge of Protecting Transit and Passenger Rail: How Security Works Against Terrorism*, San Jose, Calif.: Mineta Transportation Institute, forthcoming.

The Middle East also has been the predominant theater of U.S. military operations.

Most of the U.S. military engagements over the past 30 years have been in the Middle East, in North Africa, and in western parts of Asia, Afghanistan, and Pakistan. The United States supported the Afghan rebels fighting against Soviet invaders in the 1980s, sent troops into Lebanon in 1982 and 1983, bombed Libya in 1986, deployed American naval forces and took military action against Iran in 1987, drove Iraqi forces out of Kuwait in 1991 and imposed no-fly zones on Iraq, deployed American forces to Somalia in 1992 and 1993, bombed Iraq in 1993 and Sudan and Afghanistan in 1998, invaded Afghanistan in 2001, invaded Iraq in 2003, participated in the bombing of Libya in 2011, initiated a bombing campaign in Iraq and Syria in 2014, and joined military efforts in Yemen in 2015. About half of these engagements were in response to terrorism. The conflicts in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Somalia, Syria, and Yemen continue. In addition, the United States has conducted special operations and, since 2002, has carried out manned and unmanned air strikes and special operations to kill terrorist leaders and operatives throughout the region.

The above chronology is instructive: There are few years in which the United States has not been directly or indirectly involved in the Middle East's conflicts. And for the past 15 years, American military engagement has been continuous. The high cost of these continuing military operations adversely affects U.S. military forces and readiness.

Middle East turmoil will continue.

The United States and its allies are currently dealing with terrorist spillover from ongoing conflicts in the Middle East, North Africa, and western Asia. The turmoil in these regions seems likely to continue. Afghanistan has been in a state of war since the late 1970s—some would say throughout much of the nation's history. Al Qaeda found sanctuary in this environment and declared war on the West more than 20 years ago. Somalia has been a theater of conflict since the early 1990s. Iraq has had few years without armed hostilities since the Iran–Iraq War in the 1980s. Yemen's civil wars reach back to the 1960s. The current conflicts in Syria and Iraq have exacerbated sectarian and ethnic conflicts, which will persist into the future.

Progress is being made in reducing ISIL forces and recapturing some of the urban centers and towns the group held, but the reduction of ISIL-controlled territory will not end its campaign, nor will the end of ISIL's open control of territory end its armed struggle. Its leaders will likely go underground, but its foreign fighters cannot so easily survive an underground war. They will scatter to other jihadist fronts in the region or return home, some with intentions to carry on the armed struggle.

No government in Syria will be able to restore central authority throughout its territory. Iraq appears on a path to remain divided. Yemen will not easily be unified. Somalia will not easily be subdued. The violence has increased in Afghanistan. Libya remains in a chaotic state. The terrorist threat made possible by this regional chaos will continue to fuel terrorist threats around the world.

The United States faces a multilayered terrorist threat.

Jihadist terrorists pose a multilayered threat. For the United States and its partners, improved intelligence, greater international cooperation, and continuing military operations have made it more difficult for terrorists to carry out ambitious, centrally directed strategic strikes like the 9/11 attacks—which have been our greatest concern. But jihadist terrorist organizations have demonstrated their continued determination to attack commercial airliners on their way to the United States.

As we have seen in France and Belgium, terrorist volunteers who have joined the ranks of al Qaeda’s affiliates or ISIL may receive assistance in returning to their homelands to link up with local jihadists and carry out attacks. With thousands of nationals who have gone to fight in Syria and Iraq, Europe and even countries like Tunisia face a much greater threat from returning fighters than the United States does; according to the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), about 200 U.S. citizens have joined or tried to join jihadist fronts abroad.⁹

The final layer of the threat comprises those already in the United States who find resonance and reinforcement in jihadist ideology and radicalize themselves.

Homegrown terrorists are America’s principal concern; fortunately, jihadist ideology has gained little traction.

The principal terrorist threat faced by the United States comes overwhelmingly from homegrown terrorists—citizens and residents who radicalize themselves and plot to carry out local attacks. Fortunately, there are relatively few of them. Despite constant exhortations from jihadist organizations abroad, their violent extremist ideology has gained little traction among Americans, in sharp contrast to the situation in Europe.

Since 9/11, several hundred individuals have been arrested for providing material support to jihadist groups or attempting to join terrorist fronts abroad. In addition to these, approximately 150 have been arrested for plotting terrorist attacks in this country.¹⁰ The FBI and local police have uncovered and thwarted more than 80 percent of the jihadist terrorist plots in the United States since 9/11.¹¹ It is a remarkable record. Some of these cases have resulted from investigations initiated by tips from Muslim communities.

As of this writing, only 16 jihadist terrorist plots have succeeded in launching an attack. All but one resulted in injuries, including seven that resulted in fatalities. In the remaining case—the attempted Times Square bombing—the device failed to work. In 15 years, jihadist terrorists in the United States have been able to kill about 100 people—and 49 of those were killed in a single

⁹ Julian Hatttem, “FBI: More Than 200 Americans Have Tried to Fight for ISIS,” *The Hill*, July 8, 2015. As of February 13, 2017: <http://thehill.com/policy/national-security/247256-more-than-200-americans-tried-to-fight-for-isis-fbi-says>

¹⁰ Brian Michael Jenkins, *Fifteen Years After 9/11: A Preliminary Balance Sheet*, testimony before the Committee on Armed Services, United States House of Representatives, September 21, 2016, *Addendum*, January 11, 2017. As of February 13, 2017: <http://www.rand.org/pubs/testimonies/CT458z1.html>

¹¹ Jenkins, 2017.

incident, the 2016 Orlando attack on a nightclub. Owing to different interpretations of motives, which are often murky, other analyses may add some incidents, but not many.

The past two years have seen an increase in the number of attacks. This could be a spike, or it may indicate a longer-term trend. But the increase suggests that the United States, despite its enviable record, must maintain its vigilance and continually review its efforts to control its borders and know who is coming and going.

Europe faces a different, more difficult threat than the United States does.

Europe has suffered a much sharper increase in terrorist activity than the United States has, which some see as presaging a growing volume of terrorism in this country. That may be, but it is important to keep in mind that the situation in Europe differs significantly from that in the United States.

European security services are being overwhelmed by volume. More than 5,000 volunteers went from Europe to Syria to serve in the ranks of the jihadist groups, mainly ISIL. About a third of them have since returned. Thousands more are suspected of trying to travel to Syria or of plotting terrorist attacks at home. The numbers exceed the capacity of the intelligence services and police to monitor.¹² This problem is being addressed, but it will take time to build the necessary strength and skills. Information-sharing among European services is not optimal.

In France and Belgium, the high numbers of travelers to Syria come from subcultures that transcend the criminal underworld and radical underground and which are deeply embedded in some immigrant communities. Returning foreign fighters can hook up with radical jihadists who stayed home and who can provide them with hideouts, weapons, and logistics support, thereby increasing their lethality and ability to evade authorities. These are the personal connections that enable terrorists to operate at a higher level of violence. The network responsible for the deadly 2014–2016 terrorist campaign in Belgium and France provides the best example.¹³

In contrast, the numbers of potential recruits in the United States are significantly lower, and there is no evidence here of an organized terrorist underground. Most terrorist plots have involved a single individual or a tiny conspiracy. While a few of the plotters may have received remote encouragement and guidance from contacts in al Qaeda or ISIL, there is not much connectivity with handlers abroad or with those involved in other terrorist plots. The current jihadist threat also contrasts with the situation in the United States during the 1970s, when there were organized terrorist groups conducting long-term bombing campaigns that lasted years.

¹² Brian Michael Jenkins and Jean-François Clair, *Trains, Concert Halls, Airports, and Restaurants—All Soft Targets: What the Terrorist Campaign in France and Belgium Tells Us About the Future of Jihadist Terrorism in Europe*, San Jose, Calif.: Mineta Transportation Institute, 2016. As of February 13, 2017: <http://transweb.sjsu.edu/project/1532.html>

¹³ The January 2015 terrorist attacks in Paris and the authorities' response were examined in a three-part series by Brian Michael Jenkins and Jean-François Clair, "Attempting to Understand the Paris Attacks," *The Hill*, February 25, 2015; "Predicting the 'Dangerousness' of Potential Terrorists," *The Hill*, February 26, 2015; and "Different Countries, Different Ways of Counting," *The Hill*, February 27, 2015.

The lack of organizational continuity also keeps America's jihadists operating at a low level of competency. It is not that today's jihadists are less intelligent than their 1970s counterparts, who also started their campaigns at a low level of competency, but rather that, over time, the 1970s terrorists had the opportunity to improve their skills by learning from each other and the experience of repeated attacks. The post-9/11 attacks have been one-offs. There is no learning.

Europe also has to deal with hundreds of thousands of political and economic refugees and immigrants pouring in from conflict zones and impoverished areas in Africa and the Middle East; Germany registered more than 1 million asylum seekers in 2015. Refugees land on Europe's shores or cross its land borders and then authorities determine who may be eligible for asylum and who will be deported. In contrast, the United States is able to vet refugees before approving their transfer into the country. Most European countries lack the capacity to handle large numbers of immigrants.

Many of those entering Europe are single, military-age males, and many of these young men have very limited education. They will not easily find work or easily assimilate. Instead, they will spend months in refugee centers. Some will drift into crime. They already are the targets of radical recruiters. In contrast, only a tiny fraction of the refugees entering the United States are young, unattached males.

While we should not overestimate the threat these developments pose to the United States, what is happening in Europe does raise security concerns here. It is certainly not in America's interest to see Europe destabilized by terrorism. The continuing terrorist threat to the West in general underscores current efforts to defeat the jihadist terrorist enterprises, particularly al Qaeda and ISIL. Until these organizations are destroyed, the jihadist terrorist threat will continue.

Military force will remain a component of U.S. counterterrorist efforts abroad.

Critics of American efforts often remind us that military measures alone will not defeat terrorism. We know that. At home, we have successfully employed law enforcement and have worked through our courts. Terrorists arrested in the United State come to trial. But dealing with terrorists operating in conflict zones or ungoverned spaces thousands of miles away where law enforcement regimes do not prevail and where effective government does not exist poses different challenges.

The United States has greatly improved its intelligence collection and analysis, forged new alliances, and fostered international cooperation among security services and law enforcement organizations—which, since 9/11, is unprecedented. As a result, today's terrorists face a more hostile operating environment, which impedes (not prevents) their ability to carry out large-scale terrorist operations abroad.

The United States can rely on law enforcement only where the law rules. Where it does not, military operations, in cooperation with local and allied governments—unilateral when absolutely necessary—will remain a component of America's arsenal. It is an enduring task that could exist for years, if not generations.

There are no easy options.

There are no easy options. None offers a clear solution. All entail risks. Here are some of the approaches that have been suggested and the questions they raise, above all, about defining U.S. national interests and objectives.

Can attacking root causes reduce jihadist terrorism?

One favored option is to attack the root causes driving the terrorist campaigns while reducing the ungoverned spaces where terrorists find sanctuary. This requires addressing chronic grievances, resolving ongoing conflicts, creating stability, ensuring better governance (if not democracy), and providing security, which, in turn, will permit social and economic development. These are laudable goals to be pursued even if there were no terrorists. But they are difficult to do, require major investments, and take years to achieve. And in just about all cases, the United States is at the margin of its influence. Meanwhile, the terrorist threat continues.

Can the United States negotiate an end to the threat?

Negotiations, even with those we label terrorists, should never be off the table. The United States, for example, was deeply involved in negotiations to end the Irish Republican Army's long-running terrorist campaign and has supported negotiations between the Colombian government and Marxist guerrillas that routinely used terrorist tactics. But negotiating an end to the jihadist campaign seems unrealistic. America's jihadist adversaries see this as a struggle to the death mandated by God. The goal is the triumph of their beliefs over the unbelievers.

The jihadists' view of war is process-oriented, not progress-oriented; that is, they derive benefit from mere participation in the armed struggle. God determines the outcome. Their time horizons are long. The war is perpetual and will continue until judgment day. They are not easily discouraged.

Jihadist strategic thinking permits tactical truces if they see these as advantageous. Conceivably, negotiations with a more pragmatic Taliban might be possible. Negotiations with al Qaeda or ISIL are hard to envision, although some lower-level commanders may be persuaded to cut a deal. And not all of the groups currently allied with al Qaeda or ISIL may share their partner's determination to fight to the death.

It may be more productive to think in terms of interim arrangements aimed merely at lowering the level of violence—seeking local accommodations rather than war-ending agreements. A recent RAND Corporation report argues that the cessation of hostilities in Syria sponsored by Russia, Iran, and Turkey could open the way for a more national ceasefire “based upon agreed zones of control”—essentially the partition of Syria with an international administration of Raqqa Province, otherwise known as the Islamic State.¹⁴ The proposal,

¹⁴ James Dobbins, Philip Gordon, and Jeffrey Martini, *A Peace Plan for Syria III: Agreed Zones of Control, Decentralization, and International Administration*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, PE-233-RC, 2017. As of February 13, 2017: <http://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PE233.html>

however, is predicated on the defeat of ISIL and other jihadists in Syria—they are not seen as participants in the discussion. Essentially, it is an agreement to unite the jihadists’ enemies.

Can the United States shorten the time line and defeat the jihadists more quickly through escalation?

Escalation is possible. Suggestions include increasing the presence of U.S. service personnel working with the Iraqi army and irregular forces in Syria to increase their effectiveness. Without personnel on the ground to target and coordinate operations, airpower is largely ineffective over the long run. Some have also argued for relaxing the rules of engagement in order to increase the use of airpower. This can be done, but targets are limited, and bombing errors can lead to backlash and erode international support, not just of the current alliance of nations participating in the air campaign but for overall cooperation against terrorism. The cost may be deemed acceptable, but it is a cost.

Some in Washington have argued for American combat forces to be redeployed in the region. That runs the risk of changing the dynamics of the contest while fueling the jihadist narrative and thereby assisting jihadist recruiting. Putting American boots on the ground might be popular in the immediate wake of a major terrorist incident in the United States, but it raises the questions of what exactly would they do, how would they affect the war, and what would success look like. Whatever initial domestic political support exists for redeployment could quickly evaporate and is probably not sustainable for the long run.

Should the United States cooperate more closely with the Russians?

Partnering with the Russians to destroy ISIL also has been mentioned as an option, but in my view, it comes with a high cost and offers very little in return. Russia’s and Syria’s siege and ruthless bombing campaign succeeded in driving the rebels out of their stronghold in Aleppo, but it appears that civilian buildings and groups, including hospitals and humanitarian aid, were deliberately targeted, in contravention of the rules of war, and civilian casualties reportedly were high.¹⁵ Among others, the United Nations’ Human Rights director called the campaign a war crime.¹⁶

However effective or satisfying it may be to pound ISIL, associating the United States with military operations of that type would have long-term consequences. I suspect it would cause deep concern in the American military. It would damage America’s reputation and repel allies in the Arab world and beyond. It could erode U.S counterterrorist efforts for years to come.

¹⁵ Human Rights Watch, “Russia/Syria: War Crimes in Month of Bombing Aleppo,” December 1, 2016. As of February 13, 2017: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/12/01/russia/syria-war-crimes-month-bombing-aleppo>

¹⁶ Laura Smith-Spark, “UN Human Rights Chief Warns of War Crimes in Aleppo,” CNN, October 21, 2016. As of February 13, 2017: <http://www.cnn.com/2016/10/21/middleeast/syria-aleppo-un/>

Should the United States be doing more with local allies?

U.S. military successes have come from working with locals, including irregular forces. This was the case in Afghanistan in 2001, with the Sunni tribes in Anbar Province in 2006–2007, and most notably with the Kurds in the current conflict in Syria and Iraq.

Supporting local fighters proved less successful with the Free Syrian Army and in the early attempts to field carefully vetted, U.S.-trained rebel formations in Syria. Those failures, which merit more analysis, suggest that it is not enough to train guerrillas and insert them into the battlefield. Their reliability and effectiveness depend on continued engagement—having Americans with them and direct combat support.

The United States may be able to do more than it has done with state partners in the Middle East. Saudi Arabia formed an alliance of Muslim states to fight Islamic extremists.¹⁷ The initiative was dismissed in Washington as unrealistic; Saudi forces are not seen to be effective in suppressing Houthi rebels in neighboring Yemen, even though the United States participates in efforts on behalf of the Yemeni government.

The United States is uncomfortable with the Saudis. Many Americans see Saudi financial support for the spread of Wahhabism as a major source of jihadist radicalization worldwide and suspect the Saudis of duplicity in dealing with al Qaeda and other jihadists in Syria and elsewhere. Others are critical of Saudi Arabia's record on human rights, rigid adherence to Sharia law, and not-always-precise bombing in Yemen. Some in the Barack Obama administration saw a close relationship with Saudi Arabia as an obstacle to what they hoped would be a more friendly relationship with Iran.

These objections notwithstanding, pursuing local alliances makes sense. Politically, local forces are more effective than American combat units. They also have certain operational advantages. They do not necessarily have to be the most-advanced combat units. In some cases, they need only to out-recruit the jihadists—that is, offer higher pay. This will not attract the religious fanatics, but ISIL's ranks contain many who have joined simply in order to survive.

Finally, we may consider the idea of an international force recruited, trained, paid, and led by experienced military commanders from the region and beyond. This option may work where no government or government forces exist. All of these ideas require further exploration. The objective here is to get us out of the mindset that the United States must always be—or even should be—on the front line.

Can the United States walk away?

Should the United States avoid the costs and tribulations of further military involvement by withdrawing from the region, leaving local belligerents to sort things out by themselves? Doing so seemingly would get the United States out of a costly mess and would enable the country to focus on rebuilding the American economy, which is far more important to the country's long-

¹⁷ Brian Michael Jenkins, *A Saudi-Led Military Alliance to Fight Terrorism: Welcome Muscle in the Fight Against Terrorism, Desert Mirage, or Bad Idea*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, PE-189-RC, 2016a. As of February 13, 2017: <http://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PE189.html>

term strategic goals. It would also enable the armed forces to rebuild to meet threats that endanger the republic more than errant jihadists, which law enforcement has mostly contained.

This course of action has great appeal, but few have defined precisely what “getting out” means—withdrawing all American forces from Afghanistan? Ending military support for Iraq’s forces? Halting the bombing in Syria? Ending American support for the Kurds and allied Arab formations? Does the United States continue drone strikes? Does the United States continue to support the Saudi-led fight in Yemen? Should it continue to provide training and other forms of military assistance to willing allies in the region? How can the state institutions—law enforcement, intelligence, and societal programs—be established that will underpin the development required for building and maintaining functional governments that provide security for their populations? And is it the responsibility or in the national interest of the United States to assume this mission?

Withdrawal also comes with risks. In Afghanistan, the Taliban could take control over larger swaths of the country and ultimately defeat the government’s forces if the American forces were completely withdrawn. The U.S. commander in Afghanistan has testified before the Senate that the situation in Afghanistan is at a stalemate and more forces are needed to break it.¹⁸ Meanwhile, Lieutenant General Townsend, who heads the U.S.-led coalition against ISIL, said recently that ISIL’s strongholds in Mosul in Iraq and Raqqa in Syria could be recaptured in the next six months, but he counsels that another complete U.S. withdrawal is too risky.¹⁹ The United States has achieved a measure of success on several occasions—in Afghanistan, in Iraq, in Yemen—only to see things fall apart when it turned its attention to other fronts.

Many in the United States would say, “That’s their problem.” What are the downsides of withdrawal to the United States? Withdrawal would be perceived as another demonstration that the United States is an unreliable ally. That would have strategic implications beyond the Middle East—in Europe and East Asia, where there are concerns about American commitment to its allies. A U.S. withdrawal could result in further destabilizing surrounding countries. It would leave ungoverned spaces not unlike those in pre-9/11 Afghanistan, which allowed al Qaeda to flourish. It would alter political calculations in Baghdad. It would leave Iran in a commanding position in the region. It could prompt further and more-significant military action against the Kurds by Turkey. The withdrawal of U.S. combat troops from Iraq in 2011 is sometimes cited as a contributing factor to the rise of ISIL, although it was technically necessary under the 2008 Status of Forces Agreement.

Withdrawal could also cause the United States to lose any ability to shape outcomes in the region. Significantly, the recent Syrian ceasefire follow-up meeting in Astana with Turkey, Russia, Iran, and the United Nations did not include the United States. This is unexplored territory.

¹⁸ Rebecca Kheel, “Top US Commander Says He’s Short ‘a Few Thousand’ Troops in Afghanistan,” *The Hill*, February 9, 2017.

¹⁹ Ali Abdul-Hassan, Zeina Karam, and Robert Burns, “U.S. Commander: Mosul, Raqqa Should be Retaken from Islamic State in Six Months,” *New York Times*, February 8, 2017. As of February 13, 2017: https://www.nytimes.com/aponline/2017/02/08/world/middleeast/ap-ml-iraq.html?_r=0

The principal reason for U.S. military involvement in these conflicts is that it is seen as necessary to prevent terrorist attacks on the U.S. homeland. Has that risk sufficiently diminished, or is the situation worse? Would withdrawal reduce or increase the risk? Although it encourages homegrown terrorist attacks, ISIL thus far has not followed al Qaeda's earlier pattern of launching large-scale attacks on the United States, although both groups continue to call for attacks here. Al Qaeda's original objective was to drive the United States—the "far enemy"—out of the Middle East, although some analysts argue that the purpose of the 9/11 attacks was to draw the United States into the fight. How would al Qaeda now react to American withdrawal? If the United States were to withdraw, how would ISIL see launching attacks on the United States as being in its strategic interest?

Would any administration that ordered a withdrawal be able to politically withstand a subsequent terrorist attack? And if one were to occur, what options would the United States have?

As indicated by these questions, whether and how the United States ends—or substantially reduces—its military role remains unexplored territory. Yet Americans must accept that this is an open-ended contest, with no easy off-ramps, or we must devote as much strategic thinking about how this war might end as we have (or have not) devoted to going in.

**Congressional Testimony
House Armed Services Committee
2118 Rayburn House Office Building
14 February 2017**

Ambassador Michael A. Sheehan

The Evolving Threat and Effective Counter Terrorism Strategies

Introduction

Thank you Mr. Chairman, it is my pleasure to testify again before you today, but as a civilian, not a government employee. And BTW, that gives me a bit more leeway in what I have to say. And it is humbling to be here with these two giants of counter terrorism and personal heroes of mine – both of whom I have known and worked with for years – before and after 9-11.

This morning I will discuss the trends in the terrorist threat, evaluate our counter measures and make a few observations about future policies.

Good News - Bad News

Let me start by saying there is good news and bad news.

The good news is that since 9-11, our nation has been successful in denying AQ, ISIS or any of their affiliates from conducting a strategic level attack against our homeland.

The bad news is that over the past six years the number of violent jihadis around the world has increased dramatically. In addition, there are a growing number of conflict zones across the Islamic world -- from South Asia to the Levant and across all of Africa. These conflicts have provided opportunities for the expansion of AQ and ISIS from their traditional strong holds and have exacerbated the anger of homegrown terrorists in Europe and in the United States.

During the past few years, three armies that we armed and trained collapsed in front of lightly armed militia groups -- in Mali in 2012, Iraq in 2014 and Yemen in 2015 – providing our enemy tons of weapons, ammunition and vehicles.

In addition, Iran has increased its malevolent behavior in the past several years, training and arming violent militia groups, stoking sectarian tensions and exacerbating conflicts in a brazen attempt to expand their influence in the region.

These setbacks overseas coincided with a burst of terror attacks in France and Belgium – as well as in Boston, San Bernardino and Tampa.

Things have improved lately -- and we need not panic – nor expend the lives of our troops or our national treasure needlessly. But, additional action is needed to respond to this troubling turn of events in the past three years.

The Evolving Threat

First, let me expand upon the nature of the threat.

AQ conducted three strategic attacks from August 1998 to Sept 11 2001 -- and none since 9-11 -- a remarkable record of success on our part -- and what can only be described as a massive strategic failure on the part of AQ.

Post 9-11 Success

There have been between 12 and 15 terrorist attacks in the USA since 9-11 – and about 100 deaths -- depending on how you count them. These are tragedies for the victims and their families – but have not had a strategic impact on our country.

Additionally, contrary to what many pundits have predicted in the aftermath of 9-11, Americans, from Boston to New York, from Tampa to San Bernadino – have not overreacted or cowered in the face of terrorist attacks – but instead they have been resilient and gone about living their lives without fear.

Bad News: Deteriorating Conditions Across the Globe

Since the Arab Spring, the Islamic world has been beset with ever-expanding conflicts from east to west.

Currently, in the Islamic world there are at least four failed states: Syria, Yemen, Somalia and Libya. There are at least five states with major areas of ungoverned space including Pakistan (the FATA), Afghanistan, Iraq, Sudan and Mali. In addition there are several other states with conflicts of varying degrees of violence and ungoverned space such as the southern Philippines, Niger, Nigeria, Cameroon, Chad, and the Sinai region of Egypt. The roots of many of these conflicts are complex and go back many years -- but most have been exacerbated since the Arab Spring and the involvement of radical jihadis.

Each of these conflicts has its own unique characteristics – it is impossible to generalize about them – or underestimate the difficulty of unwinding them – but each of them – unfortunately -- provides space for the jihadi movements to grow and expand.

Af-Pak: In the FATA and parts of Afghanistan – there is a war raging between the forces of modernity centered in the major cities of Pakistan and Afghanistan and the radical, hyper-salafist model of the Taliban in the rural mountainous regions.

The Levant: In the Levant, the once powerful and now crumbling ISIS caliphate must be understood as a Sunni insurgency fighting against the Shia domination of both the Syrian and Iraqi governments. AQI and then ISIS mobilized this resentment and put a radical, apocalyptic sharia version of a caliphate on top of a largely sectarian movement.

Yemen: In Yemen, a decades old civil war between the north and south has been reignited – unfortunately – with an increasingly sectarian dimension and Iranian involvement – and sadly is increasingly a proxy war between Saudi Arabia and Iran.

Egypt: In the Egyptian Sinai, resistance by Bedouin tribes to control from Cairo has been exploited by al Qaeda affiliates – and although this is a relatively small group -- its terrorists attacks against civil aviation and hotels has ravaged the Egyptian tourist industry – and has destabilized the economy one of our most important allies.

North and West Africa: In the North African Magreb, a Taureg rebellion by the northern desert tribes against the sub-Saharan tribes in Bamako was hijacked by AQIM in 2011 – and thanks to the French intervention – and some important and timely support by the US and other allies -- we avoided another completely failed state. And in northwest Nigeria (and its bordering states), the nihilist Boko Haram is fighting a brutal war against Christianity and modern civilization.

Tunisia: And although I hate to further provide more depressing news, even where there is no conflict raging – such as in Tunisia – where there is a moderate Islamic tradition and a fledgling democracy, rule of law and economic opportunity (albeit with un-employment numbers of youth similar to Greece and Spain) – even there -- a model of what we hope other countries can aspire – Tunisia exports, on a per capita basis, *more jihadis to ISIS than any other Arab nation*. This is extremely troubling, as it defies the conventional wisdom that the jihadi threat can only be limited with political and social modernization – apparently that does not work very well either in deterring a certain number of folks from radicalizing.

The West: In Europe, and to a lesser extent the US and Canada -- there is a growing number of radicals that aspire to conduct violence – and much of that hatred is generated by social media that focuses primarily violence in the Islamic world – much of what is blamed on the west – rather than on any “social marginalization” in their adopted countries.

Narratives and Counter Narratives

The facts are clear; the radical Islamist-jihadi narrative has been a powerful motivator for thousands of young men over the past two decades.

Efforts to counter this narrative have not had lots of success over the years – many volumes have been written in universities and think tanks about how miserable our efforts have been for the past 20 years. I would offer that the problem is not necessarily the lack of an effective *counter* narrative to the jihadi violence – that often falls on deaf ears anyway. What is needed is a demonstrable *alternative* narrative – and more than just words or slogans – but a *living model of a modern state* that young Sunni men would be willing to fight for against the fanatical and murderous jihadis. And we must encourage our friends to live those models now, in their homelands.

But even with the best of counter or alternative narratives – there are too many young men resistant to this message and will be trying to kill us for many years to come. There is a high likelihood that there will continue to be “one-off” attacks in the US and Western Europe in the years ahead – but it is NOT inevitable that they reconstitute strategic capability if we respond properly to the threat.

Before recommending new actions – let me do a short review on what has worked for the past 15 years – as it is important first to recognize what has worked – before contemplating new steps.

Four Layers of Defense:

Since 9-11 we have bolstered our previously non-existent defenses – with what I describe as four overlapping layers of defense.

It starts with our policies and programs in these ten or twelve sanctuary areas of conflict – those ungoverned spaces where jihadis thrive and threaten our homeland from afar. The second layer is from those sanctuary areas to our border – and all the nations and oceans in between. The third layer of protection is at our border itself – and the fourth within our homeland.

Re: Sanctuaries:

In the principal terrorist sanctuaries we have pounded AQ’s leadership in the FATA, Yemen and Somalia with lethal action from the skies -- and from the land and sea. This model has now been expanded to ISIS targets in Iraq, Syria and Libya. Some pundits call these programs “wack-a-mole” – inferring that the terrorists quickly rebound from these strikes.

My experience in studying the behavior of these groups has been different. In those regions where we conduct these operations – not only do we kill-off the most experienced, talented and dangerous terrorists – but those that come after them are principally concerned about staying alive – and they know it is extremely dangerous for them to talk on a phone, send an email, meet with more than two or three people, travel in a car, set up a safe house or small training area. Those who do –

have a very short life expectancy – and they know it. And it is hard to run an international terrorist organization when your primary task is physical survival.

But our most important long-term instrument in these sanctuary countries is in working with the host country to assist them to control their own security problems. This requires work on the diplomatic front, intelligence sharing and perhaps most important – the training, advise and assistance missions of our military units – particularly the US Army Special Forces. As advisors, in most cases, our soldiers should not be involved in what is known as “actions on the objective” – but leave the fighting to the host country. We should trust our “Green Berets” to use good judgment – but insist that they push the host country soldiers up to the front of the battle. We are their partners – but it is their country and their war. Unilateral US action should be used only for rare and special circumstances.

Pressure on Terrorist Travel:

Since 9-11 when 19 terrorists literally strolled into our country to attack us – we have established an extremely effective network of information sharing with virtually every intelligence service in the world, at some level, some obviously much more than others. Many of most important partners have also suffered attacks from these groups and are eager to share – actually trade-- intelligence on terrorist suspects. We must keep this up; expand these intelligence relationships – providing training and assistance as well -- even with some countries that do not share our values. We can work on those shortcomings --- but in the interim we need to work with them to us safe. CIA, DIA and several DHS agencies can play a role in this regard.

Controlling the Border

At the border – our most important effort is at our airports and is directly related to the watch lists created by the intelligence sharing in the second layer of defense. But we must also be smarter at these checkpoints – and if necessary increase “secondary inspections” of suspicious people – using trained intelligence professionals to pull suspects from airport lines -- which also provides opportunities for intelligence collection and the development of assets. This can be done with respect and dignity – but must be understood as a key means of protecting our border.

In regards to an expanded wall on our southern border – from my counter-narcotics experience that should help stem the flow of drugs – and as a Cold War Army veteran I was familiar with the old Iron Curtain in Eastern Europe – and I served for several years on the DMZ in South Korea – walls do work – as they are primarily used to stem immigration flows -- and certainly can only help our counter terrorism efforts. However, right now, I am more concerned about terrorist movements in our airports and just as concerned about the Canadian border than the one to the south.

Homeland Investigations and Defense

On the domestic front, I will be brief. The FBI should be commended for keeping our nation safe. I know them well – having worked within their JTTF structure in NYC. I can assure you that in my experience, I never saw FBI agents abuse the Patriot Act or any other authorities to do anything other than look for terrorists seeking to conduct violent harm to our nation. And the same was for my detectives at NYPD, they were aggressive -- but always well within the law. They had neither the inclination nor time to waste on those that were not real threats to our immediate safety – and there were plenty of them to worry about. I firmly believe these investigations act as a deterrent as well and have helped keep the City safe for the past 15 years.

Full Court Pressure

It is vitally important that pressure be kept across all four of these layers – like full court pressure in a basketball game – please excuse my basketball analogy. Weakness in one area weakens the entire defense. And no one “layer” can hope to protect the nation by itself. It is too late to pick them up terrorists at mid court – pressure must start at the source – and be sustained all the way to the streets of our cities and towns.

But the effort must be relentless – the traps of the “full court pressure” must be continually increased and adjusted to the evolving threat. Although we can never guarantee a perfect record against small one-off attacks – these efforts are essential for keeping our nation from a strategic attack for another 15 years.

And it is now time to Ramp Up the Pressure

I will conclude with ten points in summary:

- First: On what NOT to do – try to avoid invading countries – that has not worked out too well for us in the past. But at the same time don't let nations or armies we trained fall to the enemy as occurred in Mali, Iraq and Yemen – the clean up after a collapse is much more difficult.
- Second: If we must intervene to prevent a collapse -- look at the French model in Mali – get in and get out – leave a small footprint – turn it over to the UN and local government as soon as possible. Don't try to reinvent the country – just crush the rebellion and leave a very small footprint behind.
- Third: Expand our “train, advise and assist” programs across the danger zones I discussed. Advisors should be able to move forward with their

counterparts to be effective – but actions at the objective – the actual combat operation – should be left to the host country soldiers. Occasionally, we may need to conduct unilateral direct action missions – but rarely and only when absolutely necessary.

- Fourth: Afghanistan and Iraq are important – but I caution about creeping troop increases. Thousands of advisors begin to “look and smell” like an occupation – and that creates many of the problems that you seek to solve. When I was an advisor in El Salvador – on a compound over-run by guerrillas three times in seven years – there were never more than two or three Special Forces advisors per Brigade – and for six months I was by myself. Sometimes less is more.
- Fifth: Aviation is a game changer; drones collect intelligence and target terror leadership. Attack helicopters, C-130s and A-10s are a “ground pounders” best friend in a firefight. If you want to do more in tough combat zones – expand aviation – but be careful about the footprint of ground forces. Troop increases should be in the tens – not thousands.
- Sixth: Keep your socio-political objectives and spending in these countries humble and limited. These internal problems are very complex – and even if you solve them (like in Tunisia) it does not guarantee that you will solve the jihadi export program. American support for these international programs is waning – don’t lose their support by over extending or overspending scarce resources.
- Seventh: Support our allies in the region that are on the front lines of this fight, particularly Egypt, Jordan, the UAE and others like Niger that are hosting our aircraft in Africa. They are not perfect – but they are our friends and need our support – we are fighting against the same threat – this is not charity – it is partnership. Sometimes just some political support at a crucial moment is needed.
- Eighth: Crank up the pressure on Iran. No longer accept Iranian transgressions against our soldiers or sailors. A swift and determined response should be conducted for any future transgressions. Failure to do so risks further escalation from this rogue regime.
- Ninth: Preserve our troops – their lives are precious – and there are a growing number of requirements around the world. As they continue to fight terrorist threat for another 15 years -- they are also being asked to prepare for a wide range of missions from Central Europe to East Asia.
- Finally, we are in a long war against a determined enemy. The key to success is sustained pressure, in a targeted fashion across the entire “court” – with a

policy that can be sustained perhaps for decades – to prevent strategic attacks and minimize the lone wolf attacks -- while at the same time preparing for other threats that loom on the horizon – threats that with you, Mr. Chairman, are also very familiar.

Thank you

Michael A. Sheehan is a former officer in the US Army Special Forces. He has served at the White House on the NSC staff while on active duty. He was previously Ambassador at Large for Counter Terrorism at State, Deputy Commissioner for Counter Terrorism at NYPD and Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low Intensity Conflict at Defense. He is currently the Distinguished Chair of the Combating Terrorism Center at his alma mater, the United States Military Academy.