



## Confronting the Ever Evolving Threat of Terrorism

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### The Constant Reminder of Terrorism

On a daily basis, media reports remind us of the brutality and barbaric reality of terrorism. Time and again, we are reminded that there are no safe havens from the reach of jihadists who use terrorism as one of many tools to achieve their objectives. As stated in a Stratfor intelligence report entitled *Gauging the Jihadist Movement, Part 1: The Goals of the Jihadists*, dated December 19, 2013, "There is no single creed, ethnicity, political persuasion or nationality with a monopoly on terrorism."

The following groups all share the similar goal of establishing an Islamic caliphate grounded on their harsh interpretation of Islamic law: The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), based in Iraq and Syria; the al-Nusra Front, an al-Qaeda franchise, based in Syria; al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), based in Yemen; al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, based in Mali and neighboring countries; al-Shabaab, based in Somalia; and Boko Haram, based in Nigeria. There are many other like-minded groups operating around the world, who share similar aspirations.

Currently, the two most vicious groups threatening the local population in their respective spheres of operation are ISIL and Boko Haram. In 2014, ISIL announced the formation of a caliphate in the territory it occupied in Syria and Iraq. Due to their global internet propaganda and recruitment capabilities, ISIL poses a transnational threat. Boko Haram has taken control of considerable territory in Nigeria and is actively trying to expand into Cameroon. Boko Haram poses a regional threat to West Africa. As they have taken over vast territories, both ISIL and Boko Haram have been responsible for the murders of thousands of innocent villagers.

Because of their ability to expertly exploit the internet and social media for recruitment of individuals around the globe, especially with Westerners, ISIL and AQAP present the greatest threat to Western countries. Such recruits have traveled to Syria, Pakistan, Afghanistan and other venues to receive training and/or to fight, or have learned terrorist tradecraft, to varying degrees, on the internet through media like AQAP's *Inspire* magazine and ISIL's *Dabiq* magazine. Both *Inspire* and *Dabiq* are slick publications that serve their purpose well.

In January 2015, we were horrified by terrorist attacks in Paris. Within days of the Paris attacks, law enforcement in Belgium executed search and arrest warrants interdicting an imminent terrorist attack against police and police stations in Belgium. At one search location, two terrorists were killed in a gun

fight. These events were followed by additional arrests in France, Germany, Spain and Greece. In the aftermath of what transpired in Europe, the FBI arrested an Ohio man, Christopher Cornell, who planned to attack the United States (U.S.) Capitol Building and kill government officials. These events were preceded by a hostage, murder situation in Sydney, Australia, in December 2014; two attacks on soldiers in Canada two days apart in October 2014, which left two soldiers dead; an attack on a Jewish Museum in Belgium in May 2014, which resulted in three deaths; and the Boston Marathon bombing in 2013.

## **Our Challenge**

Terrorism has long been a problem. There are no boundaries. Terrorism extends beyond local and regional conflict zones like Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan, Pakistan and Nigeria. The defining moment for terrorism came on September 11, 2001, (9/11) when 3,000 people were killed in attacks against the U.S. at the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. 9/11 served as a wakeup call. It demonstrated how vulnerable we are to terrorists.

The U.S. and their allies decisively responded to the 9/11 attacks. Despite their success in containing terrorists, al-Qaeda and other Islamic groups have been responsible for a number of major terrorist attacks on a recurring basis. Following 9/11, there were two attacks in Bali, Indonesia in October 2002, and October 2005; Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, in May 2003; Madrid, Spain in March 2004; London, England, in July 2005; Amman, Jordan, in November 2005; Islamabad, Pakistan, in September 2008; Mumbai, India, in July 2011; Nairobi, Kenya in September 2013; and Peshawar, Pakistan in December 2014.

A harsh reality is that no country is immune from terrorism. The threat preceded 9/11, was magnified on 9/11, and has been reinforced many times since 9/11. Islamic terrorism is driven by ideology. Jihadists can be contained militarily. However, as long as jihadist ideology persists, and groups like ISIL, al-Qaeda, al-Qaeda franchises and other like-minded groups can continue to attract followers, find safe havens in conflict zones and sustain funding, they will persevere.

Our challenge in confronting terrorism is threefold:

1. Continue to contain and disrupt the threat of terrorism through military, diplomatic, intelligence, law enforcement and sanctions counterterrorism measures;
2. Work with the Islamic community to fight jihadists on the ideological front; and
3. Disrupt and prevent the flow of funds to and from terrorist organizations and operatives.

## **Evolution of the Current Jihadist Movement**

As noted above, jihadists use terrorism as a tool to achieve their goal. The goal of jihadists is to establish a global caliphate as the Prophet Muhammad did many centuries ago. They seek to rule with their harsh interpretations of Islamic law. Like-minded Islamic terrorist groups have existed for many years. Al-Qaeda came to the forefront after being formed in 1988 by Osama Bin Laden. Al-Qaeda was formed to fight the Russians in Afghanistan. Following the Afghanistan war, al-Qaeda found a home in Sudan from 1992 to 1996. In 1996, al-Qaeda moved to Afghanistan where they were given safe haven by the Taliban.



In 1990, Iraq invaded Kuwait. The U.S. intervened and aided Saudi Arabia and Kuwait by sending troops to fight against Iraq. The deployment of American troops to the Middle East greatly angered Osama bin Laden. As a result, he turned his venom on the U.S. His goal was to drive U.S. troops out of the Middle East. Consequently, this led to the first World Trade Center bombing in 1993; the bombing of U.S. Embassies in Nairobi and Kenya in 1998; the Cole bombing in 2000; and culminated with 9/11.

Since 9/11, the U.S. and their allies have decimated the core al-Qaeda group. We have targeted and eliminated many senior leaders, including Osama bin Laden. This has led to al-Qaeda franchise groups growing in stature and independence thus presenting a more significant terrorist threat than the al-Qaeda core group. In August 2010, the CIA reported, for the first time, that AQAP posed a greater threat to the U.S. than the core al-Qaeda group. As noted above, because of their internet and social media sophistication, AQAP evolved into a serious global threat. Since that time other al-Qaeda groups have evolved into national and regional threats in the locations in which they operate. The opportunity for these groups to thrive starts with chaos and corruption within the country the groups operate in, their ability to raise and access funds, and their ability to recruit and grow their organizations.

The best example of such organizational evolution is ISIL. Formerly known as al-Qaeda in Iraq, ISIL expanded from Iraq into Syria and took advantage of regional conflicts to grow their organization both in terms of membership and wealth. ISIL has grown their membership through recruitment of Sunni tribesmen in Syria and Iraq, absorption of other jihadist groups and an influx of foreign fighters. ISIL has enriched itself greatly by controlling significant oil production in portions of Syria and Iraq. ISIL also controls Iraq's second largest city, Mosul. They have levied taxes on citizens in territories they control, most notably in Mosul. They also collect taxes on delivery trucks and other vehicles throughout the territory they control. Other sources of funds are derived from extortion, kidnapping, theft of antiquities, bank robbery and other criminal activity. These and other funding streams help ISIL account for a large cache of organizational wealth.

In 2014, ISIL announced the establishment of an Islamic caliphate in the vast territory it controls in Syria and Iraq. ISIL called upon all Muslims to join the caliphate and to pay homage to their leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. ISIL's declaration establishing a caliphate alienated much of the Muslim world. When ISIL first went into Syria, they announced they were absorbing the al-Nusra Front, the al-Qaeda franchise in Syria. Ayman al-Zawahiri, al-Qaeda's leader, ordered ISIL to return to Iraq. ISIL refused. Subsequently, al-Qaeda disavowed ISIL. The jihadist movement is composed of different actors and groups. Some of these groups believe in different religious doctrines and operational tenets.

The tension between ISIL and al-Qaeda has resulted in two distinct factions being formed. One faction is ISIL and the regional groups and grassroots jihadists who have pledged allegiance to ISIL. For instance, there are indications that Boko Haram is modeling its methods in northeast Nigeria after ISIL's method of operations. However, to date, Boko Haram has not declared allegiance to ISIL. The other faction is al-Qaeda, al-Qaeda franchise groups such as AQAP; the al-Nusra Front; al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb; al-Shabaab; and grassroots jihadists associated with al-Qaeda and the al-Qaeda franchise groups.



The conflict in Syria has drawn well over 12,000 foreign fighters who have joined ISIL, the al-Nusra Front and other jihadist groups in the region. It is estimated that more than 2,000 fighters came from Europe, while hundreds have been drawn from the U.S., Canada and Australia. Before the focus of jihad shifted predominantly to ISIL, AQAP was considered one of the most potent jihadist groups in the world. Even with the current focus on ISIL, AQAP still represents a formidable threat to the West. As noted earlier, both AQAP and ISIL operate sophisticated internet and social media propaganda and recruitment vehicles having a global reach.

### **Evolution of the Homegrown Threat**

Since 9/11, in assessing the terrorist threat to the U.S. and our allies, the FBI has been extremely concerned about the threat attributed to homegrown cells and lone wolf operatives. Many individuals fitting in this category are unknown to intelligence and law enforcement agencies. This makes stopping them ever more challenging. Al-Qaeda recognized, very quickly, how valuable internet propaganda was for fundraising and recruitment. The al-Qaeda franchise AQAP took internet propaganda to a new level when it began to publish its online magazine *Inspire* in September 2011. ISIL has emulated AQAP's success with the publication of its own online magazine *Dabiq* in July 2014. In addition, ISIL has successfully chronicled on social media the experiences of Westerners who have traveled to fight with ISIL in Syria and Iraq. These propaganda mechanisms have influenced many troubled and disenfranchised individuals throughout the world and alarmingly in Western countries.

A U.S. citizen and convert to Islam, Adam Gadahn, has served as a spokesman for al-Qaeda since 2004. A Canadian citizen, John Maguire, known as Abu Anwar al-Canadi, has appeared on social media as a spokesman for ISIL imploring Canadians to join ISIL and to take up arms in the homeland to fight Canada. He applauded the two October attacks against Canadian soldiers. A British citizen referred to as Jihadi John has appeared on social media with most of the ISIL held hostages who have been beheaded. Individuals like this influence impressionable potential recruits much like *Inspire* and *Dabiq*, foster recruitment. This is where the responsible Islamic community must join with the West to expose the falsity of radical ideology.

These mechanisms have contributed, along with other factors, to the number of people who have flocked to Syria to join the different jihadist groups fighting against the Syrian government and joining ISIL in Iraq to engage in the sectarian fight against the Shiite government. A major concern for Western nations is how to deal with the threat to the homeland presented by fighters returning home from Syria. This was exemplified by the arrests in Belgium in January 2015, wherein returning ISIL fighters were engaged in the interdicted plan to attack police.

AQAP has directly tried to attack the U.S. homeland. It was responsible for the attempted underwear bombing on Christmas 2009 and the bomb being placed on a UPS flight in 2010. Fortunately, those attacks did not succeed, although they could, and probably should have. Other than those two incidents, AQAP has not been able to successfully launch attacks in the U.S. ISIL has also not demonstrated the direct ability to attack the U.S. or the West. Al-Qaeda and AQAP have encouraged



individuals from the West who have received training in their camps to return home to commit attacks. Likewise, ISIL has encouraged returning fighters from Syria to commit attacks in their homelands.

With respect to the grassroots threat, jihadist groups have gravitated to a leaderless operational model. Al-Qaeda, al-Qaeda franchise groups, ISIL, Boko Haram and other like-minded groups have identifiable hierarchical structures. Their leaders are well known. Because these groups do not have direct reach into Western countries, groups like AQAP and ISIL have encouraged recruits to stay home and fight on behalf of the group. Although acting on behalf of the group, these grassroots jihadists operate independently without direction from the group.

This is how the Tsarnaev brothers operated in carrying out the Boston Marathon bombing in 2013. They learned their tradecraft on how to make a bomb and target selection from AQAP's *Inspire* magazine. Al-Qaeda and al-Qaeda franchise groups who provided training in Pakistan, Afghanistan, Yemen and Syria have encouraged those jihadists to return home and plan a terrorist attack. Likewise, these grassroots jihadists are not provided direction from the group in planning or executing their attack. The Kouachi brothers, who were responsible for the Paris attack at the satirical newspaper *Charlie Hebdo*, in January 2015, were trained by AQAP in Yemen in 2011. Even though they had been known to law enforcement as far back as 2008, they maintained a low profile from 2011 until they initiated their attack in 2015. The Belgium arrests in January 2015 included individuals who had returned from Syria.

The spectrum of terrorist operatives ranges from amateur to professional. Members of groups like al-Qaeda, AQAP and ISIL are generally highly trained professionals. Grassroots operatives have generally been amateurs. This group ranges from amateurs with no experience, such as Christopher Cornell who was arrested by the FBI in January 2015; to amateurs who were self-trained, like the Tsarnaev brothers; to amateurs who received training from terrorists, like the Kouachi brothers.

As jihadists from the West, who fought in Syria return home, grassroots operatives will move from amateur to professional. This should be a major concern to all of us. The more professional the jihadist, the more we have to be concerned about. The more professional the jihadist, the more the threat evolves. The more the threat evolves, the more we must do to confront the evolving threat.

### **Confronting the Evolving Terrorist Threat**

The first challenge in confronting the evolving terrorist threat is to understand the threat. When we understand the threat, we can develop and implement mechanisms to address the threat. Such mechanisms will require reactive and proactive strategies. Since terrorists, like criminals, have the advantage of being proactive, we must first develop reactive strategies. In light of the evolving threat, those strategies must be "urgently" reactive. We must deal with the threat of terrorism on all levels with a sense of "urgency". In conjunction with "urgent" reactive strategies, we must develop proactive strategies in the public sector, the private sector, and most importantly, between the public and private sectors.



As previously stated, there are three challenges we must confront. We must develop coordinated strategies to address these challenges in order to disrupt and diminish the evolving threat of terrorism. Each of the three responses requires “urgently” reactive and proactive strategies.

1. Continue to contain and disrupt the threat of terrorism through military, diplomatic, intelligence, law enforcement and sanctions counterterrorism measures.

There must be coordination, cooperation and communication between all government agencies. Through interagency working groups and task forces, we should consider all available options and tools in our arsenal to contain terrorists, to disrupt their operations and to dismantle their infrastructure and ability to sustain their operations and organizations. We must prioritize and coordinate our military, diplomatic, intelligence, law enforcement and sanctions options. As an example, our military is leading airstrikes against ISIL in Syria and Iraq; we have taken diplomatic action to build a strong international coalition to participate in the U.S. led airstrikes. Simultaneously, our intelligence and law enforcement are taking reactive and proactive steps to identify individuals who have joined ISIL or the al Nusra Front in Syria and to track them returning home. Meanwhile, the Treasury Department, in conjunction with other agencies, continues to impose sanctions and identify funding streams to and from ISIL and other jihadist groups posing a threat.

Where we need to see more consistent action is between the public and private sector in developing both reactive and proactive strategies. The public sector does not rely enough on the private sector. A good example of this is on the financial front, where financial institutions possess extensive financial intelligence. For instance, if more security clearances could be given to financial institution personnel, classified information could be shared that could be used to monitor for and identify terrorist financing.

2. Work with the Islamic community to fight jihadists on the ideological front.

The truth of the matter is, regardless of how well we fight militarily and through the other government channels, we cannot eliminate the Islamic jihadist threat without an ideological solution. We can contain the threat, we can disrupt the threat; but until we can successfully counter terrorists by confronting and counteracting ideology, we cannot eliminate the threat of terrorism. Jihadist groups have proven to be resilient. This is where the government and the mainstream Muslim community must work together to develop reactive and proactive strategies to demonstrate the flawed ideology of the radical jihadist groups. In this regard, the Muslim community must take the lead and be the face of the ideological fight against terrorism.

Because of the serious infighting and tension between al-Qaeda and ISIL, we are at a critical juncture on the ideological battlefield. The rift between al-Qaeda and ISIL has divided and weakened the jihadist movement globally. Al-Qaeda and ISIL are hurting each other on the ideological front by pointing out each other’s hypocrisy. This is where we must implement a proactive ideological strategy to demonstrate the falsity of terrorist ideology.



3. To disrupt and prevent the flow of funds to and from terrorist organizations and operations.

Finance and communications are the two biggest vulnerabilities facing terrorist groups. If we can constrict, disrupt and/or prevent the flow of funds to and from jihadist groups, we can impede their ability to sustain their operations and organizations. In the financial fight there are two battlefronts. There is the government sanctioning front, and there is financial institution compliance front. Here is where we need a strong public/private alliance and where we need “urgent” reactive and proactive strategies. There is much the financial services industry can do through transaction monitoring, targeted transaction monitoring, checking IP addresses, negative media checks, social media checks and by exploiting other financial information associated with potential terrorist activity.

## **Conclusion**

Terrorism is a pervasive global threat. It has evolved considerably since 9/11. We must strengthen our resolve to evolve with the threat and to mitigate our vulnerability to terrorism. Understanding the threat is the first step toward disrupting and preventing acts of terrorism. Both the public and private sectors are stakeholders in developing “urgently” reactive and proactive strategies to confront the ever evolving threat of terrorism. Our strategies must focus on confronting ideology, recruitment, safe havens and finance. This is a daunting task but one that is attainable.

