THE CIPHER BRIEF

SPECIAL REPORT
A NEW WAR ON TERROR

The Origin

The Age of ISIS

Bennett Seftel

Broadcasting brutal murder videos, enslaving religious minorities, training and deploying child soldiers, carrying out suicide bombings at crowded intersections – these are just some of the atrocities committed by the Islamic State (ISIS). To a certain extent, such acts mirror tactics employed by other violent extremist and paramilitary groups, but what separates ISIS from the pack is its ideological message and its means of promulgating that message. So the question emerges: what drives the Islamic State?

From a birds-eye view, ISIS' ideology can be divided into three main components.

First is the group's Salafi interpretation of Islam. Salafism, which originates from the Arabic word salaf, meaning ancestor, refers to a version of Islam practiced by the Prophet Muhammad and the earliest generations of Muslims in the seventh century. Those who adhere to Salafism believe it is their obligation to purify the Islamic faith by ensuring a return of "civilization to a seventh-century legal environment."

"Salafis view themselves as the only true Muslims,

Source: AP Images

considering those who practice so-called 'major idolatry' to be outside the bounds of the Islamic faith," explains Cole Bunzel, an expert in ISIS' theology at Princeton University.

ISIS utilizes extreme tactics to impose its Salafi perspective on all those, including fellow Muslims, who do not share the group's precise religious dogma. Salafis who advocate violence in the name of religion are known as violent Salafis, and the practice of eradicating "non-believers" is known as takfir.

"For violent Salafis, a failure to adopt their worldview is an expression of one's deliberate rejection of Islam – a rejection that justifies a person's excommunication from the fold of Islam (takfir) and permits violence to be carried out against them," writes Jacob Olidort, a leading scholar on Salafism at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy.

"Following takfiri doctrine, the Islamic State is committed to purifying the world by killing vast numbers of people," Graeme Wood, a Fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations wrote in the Atlantic.

But why now? What made the world susceptible to such an explosion of this violent expression of Islam?

According to Olidort, the Arab Spring uprisings of 2011 played a pivotal role. The "collapse of existing governments" across the Arab world, but most specifically in Iraq and Syria, inflamed existing sectarian tensions. "As events proceeded along their bloody course, for some Sunni groups, this sectarian dimension became the definition and explanation of political developments," he wrote in The Cipher Brief.

Second, the convergence of religion and state in the form of a caliphate is fundamental to ISIS' mantra and appeal. Within ISIS' self-declared caliphate, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, serves as both the group's religious and political authority.

"[ISIS] believes a politicized version of Islam must dominate all other forms of social order in a caliphate, which should become global. Their interpretation of sharia controls all forms of human activity," explains Tom Quiggin of the Terrorism and Security Experts of Canada Network.

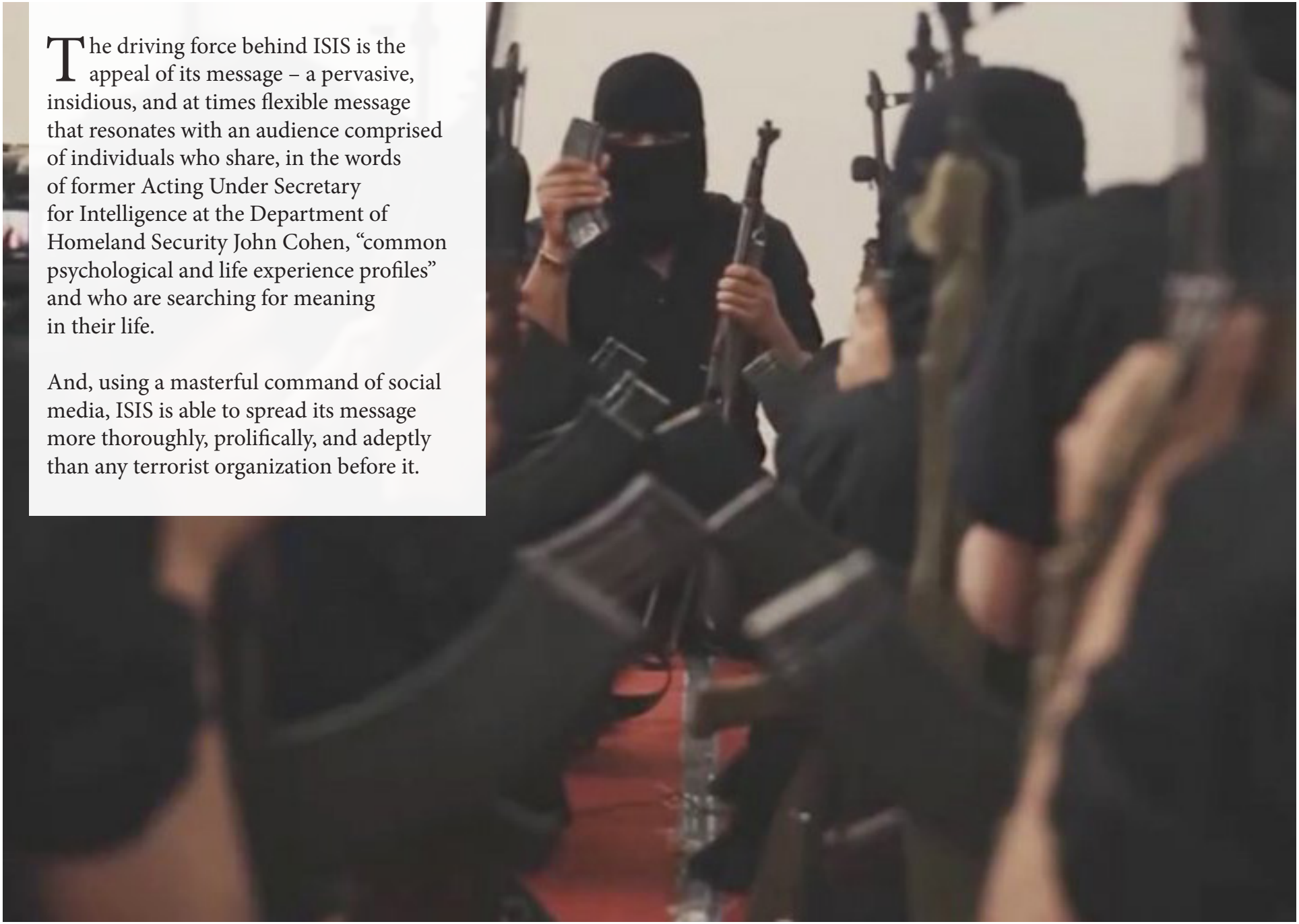
Third, ISIS professes an apocalyptic vision of global jihad, where the Muslim world battles the West to achieve global dominion. The concept of global jihad is based on the perception that secular Western rulers are seeking to impose their will on Muslim lands, and was first put into action during the 1980s by Afghan mujahideen who fought to repel the Soviet Union. According to this jihadi doctrine, all Muslims must take up arms to defeat Western aggressors.

ISIS takes its jihadi narrative a step further, calling for an offensive jihad aimed at eliminating all non-believers worldwide, even if they do not threaten Muslim lands. In a 2007 speech, former ISIS leader Abu Umar al Baghdadi (not to be confused with ISIS' current leader Abu Bakr al Baghdadi) stated that the purpose of jihad is to ensure that no idolaters or non-believers remain in the world. It is critical to go "after the apostate unbelievers by attacking [them] in their home territory, in order to make God's word most high and until there is no persecution," Baghdadi declared.

As ISIS continues to promote its radical views and carry out malicious attacks, combating their radical ideology remains key to suppressing their campaign.

The driving force behind ISIS is the appeal of its message – a pervasive, insidious, and at times flexible message that resonates with an audience comprised of individuals who share, in the words of former Acting Under Secretary for Intelligence at the Department of Homeland Security John Cohen, "common psychological and life experience profiles" and who are searching for meaning in their life.

And, using a masterful command of social media, ISIS is able to spread its message more thoroughly, prolifically, and adeptly than any terrorist organization before it.



Source: AP Images

The Weapons

The Power of ISIS' Message

Patrick Skinner
Director of Special Projects,
The Soufan Group

A great deal of attention in the U.S. has understandably been paid to how ISIS promotes its ideology, with a focus on ISIS' social media prowess and its ability to reach a potentially limitless supply of lone wolf actors. Yet the medium is less important than the message, and specifically, the "stickiness" of the message. The term "stickiness," as applied to ideas, was popularized by Malcolm Gladwell in The Tipping Point, in which the ideas that "stick" to people are the most successful. ISIS' message is dangerous because it is extremely sticky, but for a counterintuitive reason. **ISIS rejects almost every other group and belief system, but its message does the exact opposite: it offers something for everyone.** The universality of the message makes the group extremely dangerous; it is able to draw in people from across the spectrum of geography, education, nationality, and personality.

For many, the exclusivity of any given group is what makes it desirable, the reasoning being that the harder it is to gain entry, the better the group must be. Candidates for acceptance must know the minutiae of the group's history, philosophy, goals, and—above all—its rules. It also doesn't hurt to know someone on the inside—this applies to terrorist organizations as well. But exclusivity does not really apply to ISIS when it comes to its ability to inspire domestic terror attacks. Most often, the group does not know the names of the people who aim to kill in its name, nor does it care about the individual motivations of nameless actors; ISIS just wants claim for the action and the regenerative power of publicity.

Behind all of the slick visuals and cinematic sophistication of ISIS propaganda, exhorting lone wolf attacks is ISIS' stickiest idea: That whatever your grievance—no matter what it is—killing for ISIS will meet your need:

- Feeling like an outcast? ISIS will accept you.
- Feeling persecuted? ISIS will empower you.
- Want to be loved? ISIS will love you.
- Want to be famous? ISIS will guarantee you a spotlight and your own Wikipedia page.
- Want your life to mean something? Kill for ISIS.

Source: AP Images

- Want to live forever? Die for ISIS.

To us, this sounds laughably simplistic and childish. Yet ISIS isn't talking to us. It's talking to the people who feel that no one ever truly talks to them—the disaffected, the disillusioned, the discontented, the demented, and the dangerous.

The strange reality of ISIS' appeal to domestic lone wolves is that ISIS has made "off-the-rack" messaging feel like a bespoke suit to each person who encounters ISIS' propaganda. The crowdsourced nature of its messaging ensures that whatever a vulnerable person is looking for—a sense of belonging, video game-style violence, spiritual salvation—
he or she will be able to find it.

This makes detecting potential lone wolves much harder for authorities. The usual suspects—known violent religious radicals and networks—are still in play, but now added to the mix is an unknowable number of people to whom, for countless reasons, the ISIS message might stick. These people don't require a long path to radicalization—the traditional path that authorities depend on to detect, monitor, and disrupt would-be lone wolves. The cyber-speed of radicalization stems not so much from the speed of the message but from the fact that the target audience is already somewhat unstable. The relentless barrage of ISIS messaging is just the shove some people need to tip over into violent action. The stickiness of the message is matched by its ubiquity, presenting authorities with a serious and likely long-term challenge.

ISIS and Social Media

John Cohen
Former Acting Under Secretary for Intelligence, Department of Homeland Security

The Cipher Brief spoke with John Cohen, Professor in the School of Criminal Justice at Rutgers University and Former Acting Under Secretary for Intelligence at the Department of Homeland Security to explore how terrorist organizations use social media as a tool to connect with their target audience of disaffected individuals and recruit them.

The Cipher Brief: What are some of the main online platforms that extremists use to recruit Westerners? Who is their target audience?
John Cohen: Internet accessible communication platforms such as Facebook and Twitter have revolutionized the way in which like-minded people around the world engage, communicate, share ideas, and collaborate. These same communication platforms have dramatically changed the way terrorist groups recruit people to join their organizations. Potential recruits are selected based on their reaction to online postings and then directed to encrypted communication platforms so that they can be further evaluated and recruited.

Equally as disturbing is that groups like the Islamic State (ISIS) have employed highly sophisticated and dynamic social media campaigns to inspire people in Western Europe and the United States to conduct violent attacks at home, independent of the organization's command and control structure. We have found that the content of these campaigns seem to resonate with individuals who share common psychological and life experience profiles: individuals who are from dysfunctional family environments, disconnected from their community, have suffered a series of life failures, and are searching for some cause that provides them a sense of belonging. These individuals tend to spend significant time alone, online, viewing violent postings, and playing violent virtual games. There are some experts who believe that groups like ISIS are specifically targeting this vulnerable population.

TCB: Why has online terrorist recruitment been so effective?
JC: Part of it is the broad reach these platforms have and how easy it is for people to access them. Also, using social media provides terrorist groups with an adaptable method of communication. If a site gets shut down, they simply can create a new one. But, the success of these efforts has more to do with the content of the postings and their appeal to a vulnerable subset of our population. These are postings that appeal to and inspire young Westerners. They are short, in English, the speakers use Western slang, and the videos are scored with hip-hop and rap music. They romanticize the cause of these extremist organizations and the conditions in which they operate. But more importantly, they convey a promise to the viewer that they could become a meaningful part of a great cause and therefore their life can have meaning. And while these postings may offer false hope, they are intended to be attractive and resonate with people who are searching for some meaning in their life and for something to belong to. For that group of individuals, these postings are very powerful.

Source: AP Images

TCB: What steps have social media companies taken to limit terrorist recruitment on their platforms?
JC: Some media companies have actively sought to take down sites and/or remove postings that are clearly intended to incite violent behavior. But it is complicated, particularly here in the United States. Companies are generally hesitant to make a determination whether a posting is considered an incitement for violence or protected free speech. In the United States, extreme thoughts and even extreme and hateful speech are protected by the Constitution. Private sector companies are hesitant to serve as the evaluator or censors of what could be constitutionally protected speech.

TCB: How have the U.S. government and social media companies collaborated to track extremists? How could this cooperation be further enhanced?
JC: The U.S. government and some social media companies have sought to find common ground as it relates to the removal of problematic postings. There have been discussions exploring whether there are opportunities for social media to be more active in conveying counter-narratives to the narratives of terrorist groups, such as ISIS. But from my perspective **the most effective way to prevent violence by those inspired by the postings of terrorist groups is through intervention in the physical world as opposed to the virtual world.** Today, the vast majority of violent extremists are self-radicalized, self-trained, self-executing, and ideologically ignorant. Often there is no operational connection with a terrorist/extremist organization.

Furthermore, there is no religious, ethnic or socio-economic profile, even amongst those inspired by the ideology of groups like ISIS. However, we have found that in almost every case, these violent individuals share common behavioral, mental health, and life experience characteristics. And while It may only take a matter of months for someone to become so inspired that they are willing to conduct a violent attack on behalf of an ideological cause, they often exhibit behaviors leading up to the attack that are apparent to family members, co-workers or others in the community that serve as a warning that violence is possible.

Based on the current threat, consideration should be given to updating the way we conduct federal counter-terrorism investigations. Investigators should look beyond establishing a connection to a terrorist organization or proving the elements of a crime. They should also, when appropriate, incorporate the concept of behavioral risk assessment building upon investigative techniques used for decades by the United States Secret Service.

We should also refocus our efforts to counter violent extremism, which today do not address the current threat. Instead, they should emphasize and prioritize the use of community-based, multi-disciplinary intervention strategies as opposed to the current emphasis on engagement and counter-narrative development. At the local level, we must build up the capacity to understand warning signs, identify individuals that pose the risk of violence, and intervene before violence occurs. For this to happen, law enforcement officials must work closely not only with members of the community, but with mental health professionals, faith leaders, educators, and others so that we can better address the underlying causes that make a person susceptible to being influenced by extremist social media campaigns.

Part of the strength of the ISIS message is the concrete proof of their power: the Caliphate itself.

In 2005 al Qaeda's operational chief, Saif al Adl, outlined a seven-phase strategy for the progression of the global jihad. As counterterrorism expert Bruce Hoffman told The Cipher Brief, "the fifth phase, which al Adl—who is currently in Syria directing al Qaeda operations in the Levant—had foreseen as occurring between 2013 and 2014 would result in the declaration of the Caliphate." Interestingly, this was not done by al Qaeda, but rather by ISIS.

Funded by taxation, illicit trafficking of people and antiquities and illegal oil sales, the Caliphate stands as a representation of ISIS' claims of legitimacy. Experts across the board agree that while the Caliphate in Iraq and Syria still stands, ISIS' quest for dominance will maintain momentum and – crucially - credibility.

The Caliphate

The Distinguishing Factor

Bennett Seftel

The pivotal moment in which ISIS seemingly overtook al Qaeda as the leading jihadist organization occurred in June 2014, when ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi declared an Islamic caliphate in Syria and Iraq. Today, ISIS continues to hold and govern large swathes of territory across Syria and Iraq. Both of these are objectives al Qaeda was never able to achieve.

ISIS' aura and physical holdings have enabled the group to morph into a worldwide jihadi network. The number of foreign fighters flowing to join ISIS in the Caliphate is unprecedented—over 20,000. "This exceeds anything that al Qaeda ever dreamed of in terms of a cadre with knowledge of target countries and travel documentation to support infiltration," says John McLaughlin, Cipher Brief expert and former Acting Director of the CIA.

However, he also points out that the forces fighting ISIS in Iraq and Syria are making progress. "This is important because territorial losses tarnish the ISIS image of invulnerability and their claim to have a 'Caliphate' where their followers can congregate."

> **"The fact that ISIS was left relatively alone for such a long time, allowing them to achieve battlefield success and make a claim to creating a long vanished utopian Caliphate, increased their prestige and the rationale for Islamic State inspired terrorists to act in the organization's name,"** said Mitch Silber, Cipher Brief Expert and former Director or Analysis at the New York Police Department.

"There is a strong argument to be made that because ISIS was allowed to grow in ungoverned territory and have its own space, it's become more readily the cause du jour [for all of these attacks], whereas you don't see attacks around the world being carried out in the name of al Qaeda," he continued. "That is because al Qaeda was degraded to the point of being non-operational in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Self-motivated terrorists are no longer doing something in al Qaeda's name."

Ousting ISIS from its headquarters is critical for curbing the group's momentum and exposing its weaknesses. As former Vice Chief of Staff of the U.S. Army General Jack Keane told The Cipher Brief, "Ironically, the territory that ISIS holds is also its greatest vulnerability. Once it loses territory, ISIS is reduced to simply another terrorist organization, hiding in the shadows or forced to flee to another country."

Source: AP Images

The Lifeline

ISIS' Illicit Networks

Celina Realuyo
Former Director,
U.S. State Department
Counterterrorism
Finance Programs

ISIS has emerged from the chaos in Iraq and the Syrian civil war to seize control of large swathes of Iraq and Syria, declare itself a "Caliphate," and become the richest terrorist group in the world.

ISIS' Illicit Economy

ISIS can be characterized as a "criminalized state" with an illicit economy fueled by extortion, robbery, oil sales, human trafficking, kidnap for ransom, and antiquities looting that sustain its self-proclaimed caliphate. ISIS' income was estimated at some $2 billion for 2014. Though not recognized as a nation-state, ISIS is a state with a government, military, social services, and even its own currency. **While Bin Laden's al Qaeda enjoyed ample donor support and did not engage in crime for fear it might draw law enforcement attention, ISIS relies on crime to generate the revenues needed to run its political, foreign fighter recruitment, and ideological campaigns.** It is the most compelling contemporary case of hybrid terror-crime behavior, and this convergence is destabilizing the Middle East.

Source: AP Images

Much of ISIS' illicit economy is derived from extortion and taxation rackets. ISIS' military advances in Syria and Iraq have allowed it to enrich itself with access to new resources and new subjects; it systematically uses violence and terrorism to impose its will in those territories. The takeover of Iraq's second largest city, Mosul in June 2014, was perhaps the most important military and financial coup for ISIS. According to Iraqi officials, ISIS looted $450 million from Mosul's central bank and continues to extort businesses in Mosul, netting upwards of $8 million a month. The Islamic State controls every aspect of the economy and key supply routes that facilitate its military and criminal operations across Syria and Iraq.

Illegal oil sales, estimated at $40-50 million per month, serve as another significant source of income for ISIS. The oil is used in Iraq and Syria, sold on the black market, and smuggled over the border to Turkey – a route first established by former Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein to circumvent UN oil sanctions at that time. ISIS set up its own oil company and recruited highly skilled engineers and managers to run its oil business, according to the Financial Times. "Operation Inherent Resolve," U.S. Central Command's effort to counter ISIS, is aggressively targeting ISIS-controlled oilfields, refineries, and transportation convoys to disrupt the group's oil production and cut off this critical source of income.

ISIS also derives power and income from kidnap for ransom and human trafficking. Kidnappings reportedly raised over $45 million for ISIS in 2014. Women and children from the occupied territories are trafficked, distributed to ISIS fighters as spoils of war, and subjected to indescribable physical and sexual abuse. According to terrorism and crime expert Louise Shelley, human trafficking generates revenue for the group, provides fighting power, and vanquishes the morale of the enemy.

The looting of antiquities and the razing of archaeological sites in Iraq and Syria serve ISIS financially, while at the same time promote its ideology by destroying ancient pagan sites and what it considers false idols. ISIS' pillage and destruction of ancient sites is considered "cultural cleansing" to erase history and religions counter to ISIS' ideology. The State Department estimates that ISIS makes several millions of dollars from antiquities trafficking. On February 12, 2015 the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 2199 that focuses extensively on terrorist financial support networks, particularly ISIS' fundraising through oil sales, looting of antiquities, kidnapping for ransom, and other illicit activities.

Countering ISIS' Criminalized Caliphate

A dangerous convergence of terrorism and crime generates significant revenues for ISIS that has become the richest terrorist group in the world and a threat to security in the Middle East and beyond. The illicit economy of extortion, oil smuggling, kidnap for ransom, human trafficking, and antiquities looting across Syria and Iraq provide vital support for ISIS' military, financial, recruitment, and propaganda campaigns. To counter ISIS effectively, the terror-crime convergence that boosts its physical, financial, and ideological power must be recognized, degraded, and destroyed by a global, multidisciplinary coalition across the public, private and civic sectors that can harness a broad spectrum of resources to neutralize the terrorism and crime practiced by the Islamic State and take back control of occupied territories in Syria and Iraq.

But crushing the caliphate, while necessary, is not sufficient. Casting a vast net is part of ISIS' grand strategy, which focuses on using terrorist tactics to not only maintain the Islamic Caliphate across Muslim lands but also to attack Western targets as part of its apocalyptic vision. ISIS now maintains branches in Libya, Nigeria, the Sinai, Yemen, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Somalia, West Africa, the Caucasus, and elsewhere. Estimates from March 2016 put the number of ISIS global affiliates at 43, up from the 34 reported December 2015.

"If you're experiencing territorial losses, how do you make up for that? Well, pivoting to asymmetric warfare makes a lot of sense," explained Daveed Gartenstein-Ross, a senior fellow at the Foundation for the Defense of Democracies. "You can impose a cost on countries for being part of an effort to beat you back."

The Target, Part 1

External Attacks – Part of ISIS' DNA

Aki Peritz
Former Counterterrorism Analyst, CIA

It's been a rough several months for the Islamic State in its quixotic effort to build a viable functioning nation-state. The Kurds and the Iraqi military keep slicing meaty territorial chunks from its flanks; the group is slashing its fighters' salaries to make up for financial shortfalls; the U.S. continues to ruthlessly target its leadership and infrastructure. President Obama recently told his national security team, "I want to make totally clear that there will be absolutely no cease-fire with respect to ISIS. We remain relentless in going after them."

Given the Islamic State's increasingly tenuous grip on major Iraqi and Syrian urban centers—Ramadi fell in late December 2015, Fallujah fell earlier this summer, and there are plans to liberate the northern stronghold of Mosul one of these days—it might seem odd the group is devoting finite personnel and resources to striking outside the borders of both Iraq and Syria proper.

But the Islamic State has indeed been diverting resources for the larger cause for a long time. A German citizen's recent jailhouse confession has shown the group, via its external operations branch called Emni in Arabic, to be dedicated to striking outside of Iraq and Syria proper. This secretive unit, according to an anonymous senior intelligence official and a senior defense official speaking to the New York Times, has deployed "hundreds of operatives" in Europe, and "hundreds more" in Turkey.

In this regard, the group has proven remarkably successful in its efforts to spread its particular form of jihad; since last summer, the Islamic State has directed its operatives to murder innocents in France, Turkey, Lebanon, Indonesia, Tunisia, Bangladesh, and elsewhere in terrorist attacks that have varied in both size and complexity. It also famously maintains a sophisticated social media apparatus that acts as a megaphone for its actions, even if the attacks themselves turn out to be duds.

Furthermore, spreading violence across continents is what sets the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq apart from most other terror groups—and even its own franchises. It seems only its Egyptian affiliate, by downing a Russian passenger jet in 2015, committed

a terrorist attack of international implications, but even that was for a target within its general area of operations. Even ISIS' most lethal franchise—Boko Haram in Nigeria—tends to keep its brutality generally geographically confined; the group blows up markets in Maiduguri but probably do not have plans to do the same in Miami or Minneapolis.

So, why is it only the killers from Iraq and Syria who remain particularly interested in pursuing an external attack strategy? This phenomenon is probably because **committing terrorist operations abroad is embedded in the organization's DNA**. Recall the late Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, who founded the Islamic State's predecessor group, al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), wanted to exploit Iraq as a springboard for attacks across the Middle East and elsewhere. Until his death in June 2006, his group boldly struck throughout the region, most notably in Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan. It was his group that carried off the November 2005 operation against three western hotels in Amman, the group's most lethal strike outside Iraq until the 2015 Paris attacks.

In this respect, the Islamic State's global ambitions are similar to their largest competitor for the worldwide jihad, al Qaeda. Since its first incarnation, al Qaeda always maintained a firm interest in pushing the boundaries of jihad beyond localized state borders, even if its franchises were not always interested in carrying out these demands. By directing operations to areas where the Islamic State does not operate in a significant way—Paris or Jakarta, for example—the group is placing a marker of its grandest goals. It is not for nothing that a young Australian Islamic State fighter, surrounded by his masked comrades, shot a video in late 2014 claiming the group will "put the black flag on top of Buckingham Palace…and the White House."

Idle threats and bluster? Sure. But for such a group that believes in tight message discipline, it's probably not beyond its wildest ambitions.

Islamic State's external efforts place the United States in a bind; while America is obviously heavily engaged in the fight against the Islamic State, its current efforts to "degrade" the group will not necessarily "defeat" it. The grim reality is without significant ground forces to liberate Islamic State-controlled lands—and without providing capable governance in those areas in the months and years afterwards—the group will continue to both hatch and direct operations in relative safety.

Yet it is ultimately up to the locals to keep the long-term peace. In 2011, when the U.S. pulled out its combat forces from Iraq, AQI was a shadow of its previous incarnation – its leaders dead or imprisoned, its cause in tatters. But the Iraqis were either unable or unwilling to finish the job. Given Baghdad's sectarian impulses, the terror group was given breathing space that it used to recruit new followers and regain strength.

Given the Islamic State's oft-stated desire to commit attacks outside of Iraq and Syria, it's only a matter of time before the group will successfully carry out an attack on the U.S. homeland or on critical U.S. interests abroad. And when that happens, the U.S. will have little choice but to attempt to excise a malignant terrorist cancer with the full force of its military and intelligence services.

Again.

The Target, Part 2

Crowdsourced Jihad

Mitch Silber
Former Director of Analysis,
New York Police Department

The call came on June 23, 2015.

Abu Mohammed al-Adnani, the spokesman for the Islamic State, urged ISIS followers to go on a month-long killing spree. "Muslims, embark and hasten toward jihad," said al-Adnani in an audio statement released last month. "O mujahideen everywhere, rush and go to make Ramadan a month of disasters for the infidels."

Two days later, on June 25, 2015 ISIS-linked militants conducted three near-simultaneous attacks on three different continents. The group claimed credit for the attacks in Kuwait and Tunisia, and the perpetrator of the assault in France tweeted a picture of his victim's decapitated head to ISIS followers.

The tactics and targets of the attacks were all too familiar: a suicide bombing at a Shia mosque, a shooting at a tourist hotspot, and the beheading of a Western infidel. The organizing principle behind these attacks, however, suggests a new trend in terror—crowdsourced jihad.

Wired Magazine editors Jeff Howe and Mark Robinson coined the term "crowdsourcing" to describe how businesses were using the Internet to outsource work to individuals. This is what ISIS is doing—taking work traditionally performed by "employees" (aka card-carrying members of ISIS) and issuing an open call for individuals outside the organization to carry it out. The State Department in June released its Country Reports on Terrorism, which discusses this new phenomenon but struggles to find nomenclature to describe it:

"In many cases it was difficult to assess whether attacks were directed or inspired by ISIS or by al Qaeda and its affiliates. These attacks may presage a new era in which centralized leadership of a terrorist organization matters less; group identity is more fluid; and violent extremist narratives focus on a wider range of alleged grievances and enemies with which lone actors may identify and seek to carry out self-directed attacks..."

Source: AP Images

The Emergence of a New Trend

For years, al Qaeda and other terrorist groups have urged their followers to conduct lone-wolf attacks. This latest terrorist call to arms is not new. What is new is how this message is transmitted—and retransmitted—through the echo chamber of social media. In the old days, the leadership of a terrorist organization controlled the group's communications. Statements and videos came from the top down, disseminated from leader to follower. Today, communication comes from both foot soldiers and the senior leadership of an organization. Terrorist leaders no longer have the monopoly on the message. A call to arms can come from anyone associated with the group.

ISIS' embrace of crowdsourced jihad began in September of 2014 when the group released a video calling for its followers to kill civilians in the West on their own. Adnani, the ISIS spokesman, was specific in his instructions:

"Rig the roads with explosives for them. Attack their bases. Raid their homes. Cut off their heads. Do not let them feel secure. Hunt them wherever they may be. Turn their worldly life into fear and fire. Remove their families from their homes and thereafter blow up their homes…"

That message—which came three months after ISIS established its Caliphate—was directed at the group's supporters outside of Syria and Iraq. Over the next nine months, a string of crowdsourced attacks followed: Quebec and Ottawa (October 20 and October 22, 2014), New York (October 23, 2014), Sydney (December 15, 2014), Paris (January 11, 2015), Garland (May 3, 2015), and Lyon (June 25, 2015).

The shooting attack in Garland, Texas is an example of the new trend. The attack can be traced to the Twitter account of Mujahid Miski, the handle allegedly linked to a Somali-American who is now believed to be in Syria or Iraq. According to an account by the New York Times, Miski shared a link on Twitter to a "Draw Muhammad" contest in Texas, urging his followers to attack. He wrote, "The brothers from the Charlie Hebdo attack did their part. It's time for brothers in the #US to do their part."

According to SITE Intelligence Group, a terrorism analysis organization, one of the would-be attackers, Elton Simpson, retweeted Miski's call to violence. Three days after the tweet, Simpson contacted Miski on Twitter. One week later, Simpson and his co-conspirator launched their ill-fated terrorist assault. Both men were fatally shot by a local cop.

While there is no conclusive evidence ISIS planned or directed the attack, analysis of Simpson's online activities indicate that he may have been a part of a network of ISIS "fanboys" or followers with links to the group's members in Syria who have called for attacks against a number of targets, including the Draw Muhammad contest in Texas.

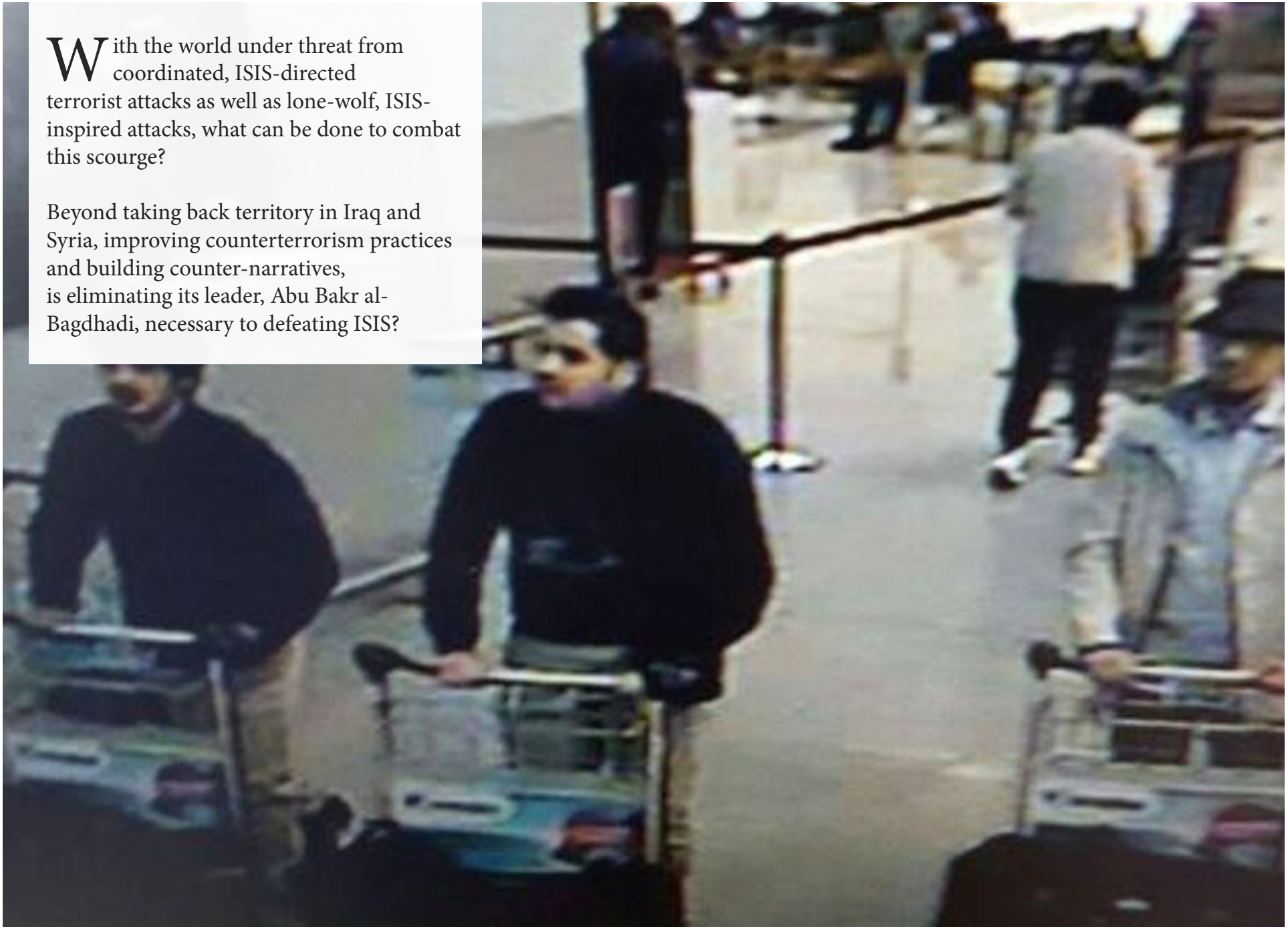
The case shows how terrorism is evolving—or more accurately, devolving—from the al Qaeda model. Counterterrorism analysts have long distinguished between attacks directed and inspired by a group, but FBI Director James Comey is quoted in the New York Times in May acknowledging that this thinking may be outdated. "It's not a useful framework," Comey said.

Crowdsourced jihad may be a more useful way of framing the problem moving forward.

Source: iStock

With the world under threat from coordinated, ISIS-directed terrorist attacks as well as lone-wolf, ISIS-inspired attacks, what can be done to combat this scourge?

Beyond taking back territory in Iraq and Syria, improving counterterrorism practices and building counter-narratives, is eliminating its leader, Abu Bakr al-Bagdhadi, necessary to defeating ISIS?



The Head of the Snake

The Efficacy of Leadership Decapitation

Lieutenant Colonel Bryan Price
Director of the Combating Terrorism Center, United States Military Academy

In March 2016, Pentagon officials announced that U.S. forces had killed Abdul Rahman Mustafa al-Qaduli and several other senior Islamic State leaders in Syria. The death of al-Qaduli, who many believe served as the Islamic State's financial minister, came on the heels of an operation a few weeks earlier that is believed to have killed Omar al-Shishani, the group's so-called minister of war.

Al-Qaduli and al-Shishani join a long list of terrorist leaders who have been targeted by the United States, but do these actions have the desired impact? Leadership decapitation has been an important part of U.S. counterterrorism efforts since 9/11, but there is a contentious debate about its efficacy.

Proponents of leadership decapitation often subscribe to the so-called "snake head" metaphor: remove the head of a snake, and the body will inevitably die. These advocates argue that the tactic removes skilled and charismatic leaders from the battlefield. In addition, targeted killings are thought to reduce the operational capability of terrorist groups by driving surviving leaders further underground and forcing groups to expend limited resources to protect their leadership and communications.

On the other hand, critics argue that this tactic is not only ineffective but counterproductive as well. Such critics are often quick to point out that the most notorious terrorist "snake head," Osama bin Laden, was killed five years ago, yet the "body" of al Qaeda is still alive and remains a threat to U.S. national security. Beyond the direct efficacy of such strikes, opponents contend that targeted killings, particularly those executed by drones, cause an unacceptable level of civilian casualties. This creates blowback and hostility towards the United States, which ultimately results in more recruits for groups to exploit.

Source: AP Images

Until recently, the dearth of rigorous research on this topic forced policymakers to rely almost entirely on anecdotal evidence and emotion to evaluate the efficacy of leadership decapitation. Academic research in the past decade has helped to shed more light on this topic, but more work is needed.

To help clarify the tradeoffs of leadership decapitation, I conducted research to provide policymakers with empirical evidence about the tactic's long-term consequences. I analyzed an original dataset of 207 terrorist groups that were active from 1970-2008 to find out which factors led to the termination of the groups' activities. My findings showed that **decapitated groups were more likely to end than groups that did not experience the loss of their leader, but the timing of decapitation matters.** Kill or capture a leader in the first year of the group's existence, and the group is, on average, over 8.7 times more likely to end than a non-decapitated group. If decapitation occurs after the terrorist group has been in existence for ten years, the effect of leadership decapitation decreases by half. Wait until the organization has been around for 20 years, and removing the leader may have no effect whatsoever on the group's mortality rate.

What does this mean for decapitation strategies against a group like the Islamic State? Since many scholars peg the founding of Jama'at al-Tawhid w'al-Jihad, the predecessor to AQI and the Islamic State, back to 2003, removing Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi would likely make the group more susceptible to organizational death than if he remained in power. Given the timing of the succession, however, the group is much more resilient than it was 13 years ago and it will likely continue to grow more resilient to a leadership decapitation event over time. The fact that it has survived the loss of two leaders prior to al-Baghdadi also bodes well for the group's durability.

However, an organizational feature that makes the Islamic State unique, even when compared to other jihadist organizations like al Qaeda, is its self-imposed constraints on leadership succession. Because the group has declared the establishment of a Caliphate, it can only be led by a caliph who satisfies a number of prerequisites, including a bloodline that can be traced back to the Prophet Mohammad. This reduces the pool of applicants considerably and, if Ayman al-Zawahiri's succession of bin Laden is any indication, replacement leaders are sometimes less capable of steering the ship.

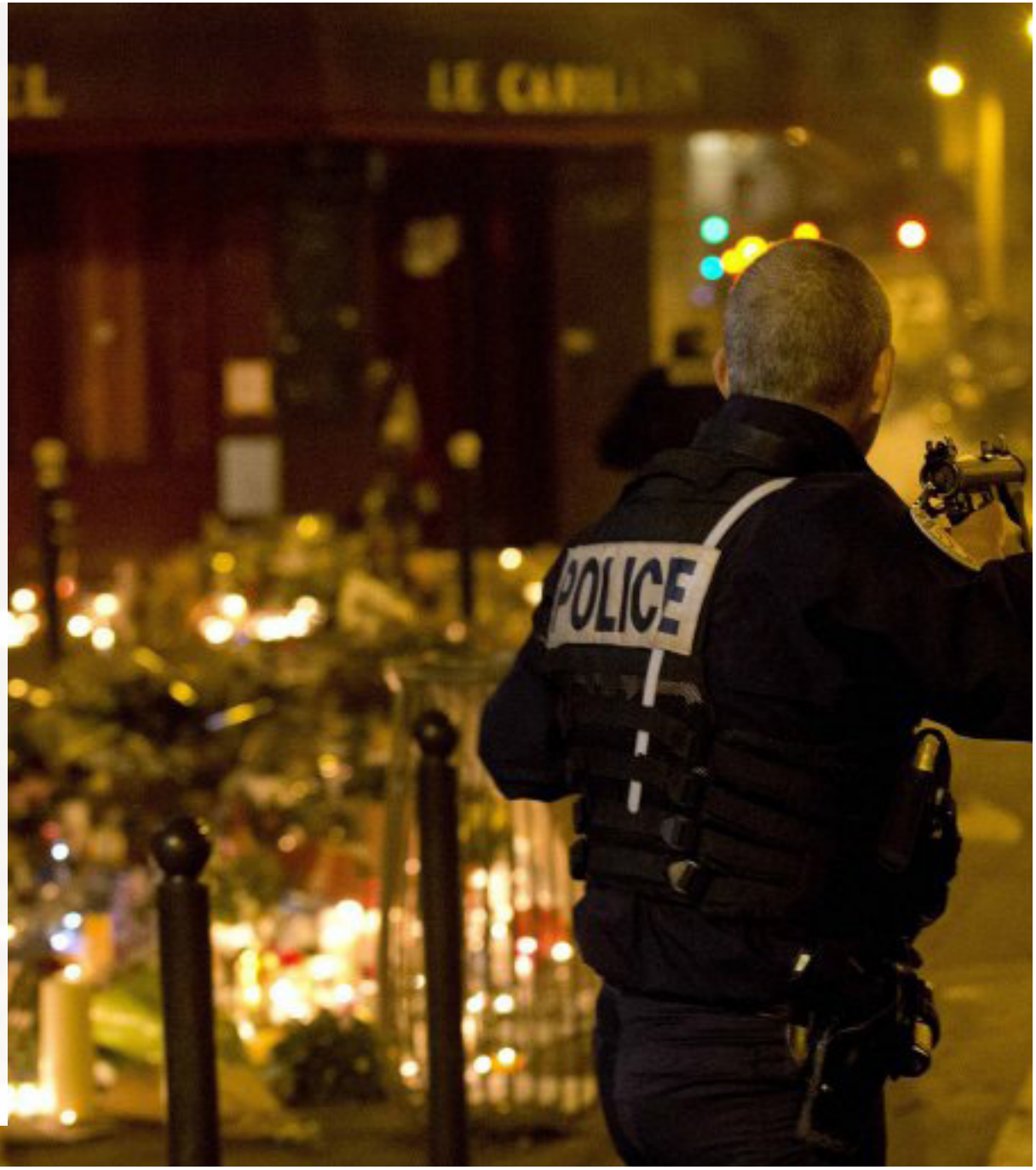
Regardless of whether al-Baghdadi remains in power, leadership decapitation tactics are likely to remain attractive counterterrorism tools for policymakers for two primary reasons. They succeed in applying pressure on terrorist groups without putting large numbers of soldiers in harm's way, and they provide time and maneuver space for allied governments without the organic counterterrorism capability to deal with the threat. Until those dynamics change, policymakers will likely continue to view the long-term benefits of leadership decapitation as outweighing the negative short-term consequences.

"We have contained them." Those words from U.S. President Barack Obama about the status of The Islamic State (ISIS) came the day before the Paris terrorist attacks of November 2015 and continue to reverberate around the world.

The President has since said he was referring to stopping ISIS' march across Syria and Iraq when he made those comments. But with ISIS taking responsibility for Paris, as well as several other deadly incidents in the ensuing months, Obama's critics accuse him of not doing enough to defeat the terrorist group. Lisa Monaco, a top counterterrorism official at the White House, conceded that terrorist threat today "is broader, more diffuse—and less predictable—than at any time since 9/11."

Since President Obama's statements last fall, the U.S. has ramped up its effort to defeat ISIS and the group has incurred territorial losses to its self-declared Caliphate in Syria and Iraq. Yet ISIS remains committed to spreading its ideological message, harsh rule, and terrorist tactics to new outposts.

So: where does the West stand? What does it do next?



The West Fights Back

The Islamic State – What Can Be Done?

John McLaughlin
Former Acting Director, CIA

Few things are more hotly debated in Washington and other capitals than the question of how to defeat the Islamic State. Ideas are all over the map, but a starting point for strategy has to be acceptance of the realities we face. Here are four:

First, the context is totally different than any previous Middle East crisis. The region today is torn by no less than five dimensions of conflict: Persian vs. Arab; Shia vs. Sunni; democrats vs. authoritarians; terrorists vs. regimes; and terrorists vs. terrorists. Maneuvering through this requires unprecedented agility.

Second, ISIS possesses at least four advantages that al Qaeda never had:

- Territory – despite losses of more than 40 percent in Iraq and 20 percent in Syria, ISIS still controls or influences more physical territory
- Money – once between $500M and $1B, according to U.S. Treasury officials and now somewhat reduced by coalition efforts – but still making ISIS the wealthiest terrorist group of modern times;
- Access – with about 4,000 fighters from Western countries, many possess the documentation to infiltrate the West;
- Narrative – slick propaganda riding on social media and tempting alienated youth with offers of jobs and a sense of belonging.

Third, Iraq and Syria are a "package." It is the alienation of abused Sunnis (70 percent of Syria and 25 percent of Iraq) that is the underlying architecture of the IS drive. Until their grievances are met by transition to more inclusive government in Damascus and stronger evidence of such in Baghdad, the IS beast will resist extinction.

Fourth, Iran and Russia will continue to be players and will have a say in any political settlement of Syria. Tehran because its "boots" have been on the ground and partnered with Shia militias that have done much of the anti-IS fighting in Iraq -- while its Hezbollah proxy does the same in Syria. Moscow because of its military intervention in Syria and its influence with Syria's Assad.

This array of realities defies simple strategic formulas. Experts have put many ideas on the table: more heavily arming the Kurdish Peshmerga, probably the region's fiercest and most reliable fighting force; sending U.S. Special Operations forces and targeteers still further forward with Iraqi troops to bolster leadership and combat effectiveness; speeding up the training of anti-IS fighters for Syria; broadening, manning, and protecting more robustly a "Safe Zone" for anti-IS forces, especially in Syria.

All of these ideas have merit, but their proponents are united on another proposition; that defeating the IS will take a very long time. Even the president has all but acknowledged that the "ultimate defeat" of the IS will be up to his successor.

In situations like this, when dozens of ideas are swirling about with no consensus, it is useful to ask the classic "paradigm shift" question: what is it that, if it could be done, would move the problem closest to solution? In this situation, there are two things that together would crack through the largest number of problems.

The first, not surprisingly, is to keep taking back substantial territory from ISIS. To have them on the run and in retreat would undermine their narrative, erode their image of invincibility, and embolden cowed populations now under their sway.

But to be ultimately successful, this will require a post-conflict stabilization plan. Cities like Mosul in Iraq and Raqqa in Syria are likely to be shattered by offensives to liberate them. It is not too soon to start mapping out who will occupy them, organize a rebuilding effort, and assure some degree of security and stability. Failing this, ISIS is likely to fade into the countryside with a good chance of mounting a comeback.

The second thing that would cut through many of the obstacles is a Syria settlement that assuages the concerns of the country's long-suffering majority Sunnis. This is a more challenging diplomatic feat even than the Balkan settlement of the 1990s, in part because the US, Iran, Russia – and Saudi Arabia – would have to find some way to bring their interests into sufficient alignment to see Assad to the door and create a more pluralistic government. Despite strenuous efforts by Secretary of State Kerry and others to achieve such a settlement, the parties simply do not have consensus on an end state for the conflict.

It is easy to say this cannot be achieved, but the truth is that nothing else is likely to bring the Middle East back to some semblance of stability.