

## MISOVERESTIMATING ISIS: COMPARISONS WITH AL-QAEDA

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**ABSTRACT:** An examination of the ISIS phenomenon, comparing it with that generated a decade and a half earlier by al-Qaeda. Although the vicious group certainly presents a threat to the people under its control and although it can contribute damagingly to the instability in the Middle East that has followed serial intervention there by the American military, it scarcely presents a challenge to global security. As with al-Qaeda, however, the unwarranted fear and alarm ISIS has generated is likely to persist even if it is effectively extinguished as a physical force in the Middle East.

In 2014, a militant group calling itself the Islamic State, or ISIL, but more generally known as ISIS, burst into official and public attention with some military victories in Iraq and Syria in the middle of the year—particularly taking over Iraq’s second largest city, Mosul. Former NSA and CIA head Michael Hayden was quick to stoke alarm by proclaiming that “this is quite a dangerous thing that we’re seeing unfold here” and applying the predictable comparison: “It’s probably not 9/11, but it’s certainly in the same area code.”<sup>1</sup> And Senators John McCain and Lindsay Graham swiftly declaimed that the group presented an existential threat to the United States.<sup>2</sup>

Cries of alarm escalated substantially a few months later when ISIS performed and webcast several beheadings of defenseless Western hostages. Democratic Senator Dianne Feinstein was soon insisting that “The threat ISIS poses cannot be overstated”—effectively proclaiming, as columnist Dan Froomkin suggests, hyperbole on the subject to be impossible.<sup>3</sup> Equally inspired, Senator Jim Inhofe, born before World War II, has extravagantly claimed that “we’re in the most dangerous position we’ve ever been in” and that ISIS is “rapidly developing a method of blowing up a major U.S. city.” And the media quickly became canny about weaving audience-grabbing references to the arrestingly diabolical ISIS into any story about terrorism. Especially impressive was the ingenious caper of the editors at the Daily Beast when it published a thoughtful article, entitled, “How ISIS’s ‘Attack America’ Plan Is Working.”<sup>4</sup> The teaser for the article left out the word, “How,” cleverly transforming the message of the piece in an effort, presumably, to attract frightened readers and to service their alarm.

This paper examines the ISIS phenomenon, comparing it with that generated a decade and a half earlier by al-Qaeda. The exercise suggests that, although the vicious group certainly presents a threat to the people under its control, and although it can contribute damagingly to the instability in the Middle East that has followed serial intervention there by the American military, it scarcely presents a challenge to global security. As with al-Qaeda, however, the unwarranted fear and alarm ISIS has generated is likely to persist even if it is effectively extinguished as a physical force in the Middle East.

### **Al-Qaeda**

On September 11, 2001, 19 members of al-Qaeda, a small group based in Afghanistan, a fringe group of a fringe group with grandiose visions of its own importance, managed, largely because of luck, to pull off a risky, if clever and carefully planned, terrorist act that became by far the most destructive in history: scarcely any terrorist act before or since has visited even one-tenth as much destruction, even in war zones where terrorist groups have space and time to plot.<sup>5</sup>

As with the assassination of President John Kennedy in 1963, there has been a great reluctance to maintain that such a monumental event—however counterproductive to al-Qaeda’s

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<sup>1</sup> *Fox News Sunday*, June 29, 2014.

<sup>2</sup> McCain: Buchanan 2014a. Graham: Buchanan 2014b.

<sup>3</sup> Froomkin 2014. See also Zenko 2014.

<sup>4</sup> Zalkind 2015.

<sup>5</sup> On al-Qaeda as a fringe group, see especially Gerges 2005, 2011.

purpose—could have been carried out by a fundamentally trivial group, and there has been a consequent tendency to inflate al-Qaeda’s importance and effectiveness. At the extreme, the remnants of the group have even been held to present a threat to the survival—to the very existence—of the United States or even of the world system.<sup>6</sup> To put it mildly, the alarm has been substantially misplaced.

### **Evaluating 9/11**

Although the 9/11 attacks were in many respects clever and well planned, their success was more the result of luck than of cleverness. In fact, it is not at all clear that the planners really appreciated why they might be successful. As pilot Patrick Smith points out, it was not because they “exploited a weakness in airport security by smuggling aboard box cutters.” Rather, “what they actually exploited was a weakness in our mindset—a set of presumptions based on the decades-long track record of hijackings. In years past, a takeover meant hostage negotiations and standoffs; crews were trained in the concept of ‘passive resistance.’”<sup>7</sup>

It was this policy, and experience, that made the 9/11 hijackings possible. However, the policy was obviously shattered by that experience as demonstrated on the fourth plane in which passengers and crew, having learned of what had happened on the earlier flights, fought to overcome the hijackers. Nonetheless, apparently completely oblivious to this highly likely development, the 9/11 planners had also been working on a “second wave” hijacking in which the targets would be skyscrapers in Los Angeles, Seattle, Chicago, and New York.<sup>8</sup> This means they didn’t appreciate the fact that the first attack would make a “second wave” vastly more difficult. As Smith continues, “Any hijacker would face a planeload of angry and frightened people ready to fight back.”<sup>9</sup>

Moreover, the planners’ mindset continued even *after* the 9/11 experience. Impressed by new airline security measures instituted by the Americans (but not, it appears, by the crucial change in mindset), they judged that the prospects for success in a second hijacking were low “at least for the short term,” but they continued to keep the prospect in mind.<sup>10</sup>

In addition, there were many miscues in the execution of the 9/11 plot. Most impressively, Mohamed Atta, one of the ringleaders of the plot and the pilot of the plane that was crashed into the North Tower of the World Trade Center, almost missed his flight. For some unaccountable reason, he decided to go to Maine and take a commuter flight to Boston to connect. As it was, his luggage, filled with personal information, did not make the flight to Boston and was later delivered in pristine shape to investigators.<sup>11</sup>

As Michael Kenney notes, “9/11 was characterized less by flawless execution than by steadfast, malleable militants practicing slipshod tradecraft.” Indeed, “in spite of their training and experience in guerrilla warfare, several 9/11 perpetrators committed basic errors in tradecraft that nearly sabotaged their plans.” Two were completely unprepared for their assigned roles of piloting the suicide aircraft and couldn’t get training in the United States because they couldn’t speak adequate English. One of them abruptly returned to Yemen to visit his family without

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<sup>6</sup> For a discussion, see Mueller 2006, 45-47.

<sup>7</sup> Smith 2007. See also Koerner 2013.

<sup>8</sup> McDermott and Meyer 2012, 154, 311. *U.S. v. Moussaoui*, para. 76-89.

<sup>9</sup> Smith 2007.

<sup>10</sup> *U.S. v. Moussaoui*, para. 89.

<sup>11</sup> McDermott and Meyer 2012, 160, 328n2.

permission, and the other befriended people with no connection to the plot, boasting to one that he would soon become famous. Additionally, continues Kenney, two of them endangered the operation by receiving speeding tickets. One made no fewer than five trips abroad to visit his girlfriend and family. Another al-Qaeda trainee was so incompetent that two days into his aviation training his flight instructor reported him to the FBI as a potential hijacker. He called attention to himself by, among other things, insisting on receiving advanced training for flying large commercial aircraft, asking how much fuel a jumbo jet could carry and how much damage it would cause if it crashed into anything, and getting “extremely agitated” when asked about his religious background.<sup>12</sup>

### **Bin Laden’s shifting visions**

Most important, it appears that Osama bin Laden’s strategic vision for the attacks was, like that of the Japanese at Pearl Harbor, profoundly misguided. He was impressed in particular by the American reaction to losses in Lebanon in 1983 and in Somalia in 1993, concluding that this demonstrated “impotence,” “weakness,” and “false courage.” Accordingly, he appears to have believed that the country would respond to a large direct attack at home by withdrawing from the Middle East.<sup>13</sup>

What he clearly failed to understand was that the United States withdrew from Lebanon and Somalia, not simply because of the losses, but because it did not value the stakes very much in those humanitarian ventures. For Americans (and Canadians, Swedes, Belgians, the Red Cross, and so on), peacekeeping is simply not worth many of their own lives. By contrast, the American public concluded from 9/11 that the country’s very survival was at stake in the conflict with bin Laden’s form of terrorism. Accordingly, its willingness to confront the danger (and to exact revenge) was, as after Pearl Harbor, monumental. As Fawaz Gerges puts it, bin Laden had picked the “wrong yardsticks by which to measure the American response.”<sup>14</sup> Popular support for chasing down the terrorists in Afghanistan, even though there was a prospect for considerable American losses, was exceedingly high—considerably higher, as is suggested in figure 1, than at the beginnings of the wars in Vietnam, Korea, or Iraq.

Initially there was panic in al-Qaeda at the unexpected ferocity of the American response.<sup>15</sup> Then bin Laden reformulated his theory after it was blown to shreds when the United States and its allies not only forced al-Qaeda out of its base in Afghanistan and captured or killed many of its main people but also toppled the country’s accommodating Taliban regime. In a videotaped message in 2004, bin Laden mockingly asserted that it is “easy for us to provoke and bait. ... All that we have to do is to send two mujahidin ... to raise a piece of cloth on which is written al-Qaeda in order to make the generals race there to cause America to suffer human, economic, and political losses.” His policy, he proclaimed, is one of “bleeding America to the point of bankruptcy,” triumphantly pointing to the fact that the 9/11 terrorist attacks cost al-Qaeda \$500,000, while the attack and its aftermath inflicted, he claims, “a cost of more than \$500 billion on the United States.”<sup>16</sup> But that is more nearly a convenient rationalization than a fair representation of his goals when he had planned the attack—rather like that of his nemesis,

<sup>12</sup> Kenney 2010, 916–17.

<sup>13</sup> Wright 2006, 174, 200. Byman and Williams 2015, 15. Gerges 2011, 85, 90.

<sup>14</sup> Gerges 2011, 92.

<sup>15</sup> McDermott and Meyer 2010, 183. *U.S. v. Moussaoui*, para.

<sup>16</sup> Full transcript of bin Laden’s speech, October 30, 2004, [www.aljazeera.net](http://www.aljazeera.net).

George W. Bush, when he eventually argued that his invasion of Iraq was to establish democracy rather than to disrupt Saddam Hussein's supposed weapons of mass destruction program.<sup>17</sup> Initially, however, bin Laden apparently expected that the United States would essentially *underreact* to the 9/11 attacks.

Of course, the result of America's massive and self-destructive overreaction to 9/11 may well lead it to substantially withdraw from the Middle East. Thus, by luck, bin Laden's original goal may be eventually achieved, but not at all in the way he planned it.

Impressively, unlike the Wizard of Oz, bin Laden appears to have remained in a state of self-delusion, even to his brutal and abrupt end. The Wizard came to realize that he was a fraud, but bin Laden never experienced a similar revelation, continuing to cling to the belief that another attack like 9/11, or even bigger, might force the United States out of the Middle East. He thus remained absurdly unfazed that the first such effort had proved to be spectacularly counterproductive in the respect that it triggered a deadly invasion of his base in Afghanistan and an equally deadly, long-term, determined pursuit of him and his operatives.<sup>18</sup>

Documents from bin Laden's lair, released in 2015, did show that he continued to harbor, in commentator David Ignatius' characterization, "big ambitions."<sup>19</sup> However, they also show him wallowing in delusion. Apparently abandoning his 2004 declaration that his goal was to bleed the United States into bankruptcy by sucking the country into expensive military ventures abroad, he now decided that the American losses suffered in these ventures (some 5000 soldiers he estimates) had not been nearly sufficient to enrage the American people to force the politicians to withdraw from the Middle East. Consequently, he argued, al-Qaeda must concentrate on "large" operations within the United States—presumably killing many tens of thousands of people since he notes that even 57,000 deaths in Vietnam did not work. At the same time, he held out some hope for targeting imported oil in order that "the income of the American citizen will be affected through the rise in his fuel bill," and he urges his tiny collection of terrorists to undertake "a large intensive media campaign" as well. He supplies no detail about how to carry out "this great feat," but he does rather unhelpfully suggest that the group "must mobilize the best efforts and capabilities" for the task. He also suggests that "the brothers in Somalia" need to take "maximum precautions" against drought and floods caused by climate change, and that "brothers who have a good way of thinking" should be sent to college to learn Management Science and also Strategic Policies and Planning, a field that is "available at low cost."<sup>20</sup>

<sup>17</sup> On this issue, see Porter 2015, 109; Mueller 2011, ch. 7.

<sup>18</sup> Hirsh 2011. On this belief in 2001, see Gerges 2011, 90-91.

<sup>19</sup> Ignatius 2015. Ignatius says that in his letters bin Laden "ominously presses for news about 'a big operation inside America'." However, the document actually says bin Laden was pressing for news about his "nomination of a qualified brother to be in charge of a big operation inside America."

<sup>20</sup> The documents are posted at Will McCants, New Abbottabad Documents, March 15, 2015, [jihadica.com/new-abbottabad-documents/](http://jihadica.com/new-abbottabad-documents/). Bin Laden says that, although 57,000 deaths were not enough to inspire "public outrage and internal opposition" to end the war in Vietnam, that point was reached when President Richard Nixon "made the mistake of ordering the draft so as to continue the war." But, of course, the draft was in place when Nixon took office and it was he who eventually ended it.

### Al-Qaeda after 9/11

After 9/11, al-Qaeda Central has been holed up in Pakistan.<sup>21</sup> However, its record of accomplishment has been rather meager, even taking into consideration that it has been isolated and under siege. It does not seem to have done much of anything except issue videos filled with empty, self-infatuated, and essentially delusional threats. Thus, it was in October 2002 that Osama bin Laden proclaimed,

Understand the lesson of New York and Washington raids, which came in response to some of your previous crimes. ... God is my witness, the youth of Islam are preparing things that will fill your hearts with fear. They will target key sectors of your economy until you stop your injustice and aggression or until the more short-lived of us die.

And in January 2006, he insisted that the “delay” in carrying out operations in the United States “was not due to failure to breach your security measures,” and that “operations are under preparation, and you will see them on your own ground once they are finished, God willing.”<sup>22</sup>

Bin Laden’s small group does appear to have served as something of an inspiration to some Muslim extremists. They may have done some training, may have contributed a bit to the Taliban’s far larger insurgency in Afghanistan, and may have participated in a few terrorist acts in Pakistan.<sup>23</sup> In his examination of the major terrorist plots against the West since 9/11, Mitchell Silber finds only two—the shoe bomber attempt of 2001 and the effort to blow up transatlantic airliners with liquid bombs in 2006—that could be said to be under the “command and control” of al-Qaeda Central (as opposed to ones suggested, endorsed, or inspired by the organization), and there are questions about how full its control was even in these two instances, both of which, as it happens, failed miserably.<sup>24</sup> Even under siege, it is difficult to see why al-Qaeda could not have organized attacks at least as costly and shocking as the shooting rampages (organized by other groups) that took place in Mumbai in 2008, at a shopping center in Kenya in 2013, or in Paris and San Bernardino in 2015. None of these required huge resources, presented major logistical challenges, required the organization of a large number of perpetrators, or needed extensive planning.

And ineptitude seems common, even rampant. Thus, around 2008 the group allowed an American member, Bryant Neal Vinas, to play a supporting role on an al-Qaeda propaganda video, a decision suggesting lack of clear thinking and certainly lack of cleverness. The video appearance might facilitate his identification by their ever-prying enemies, particularly if he were sent on an operation to the United States, as was the likely eventual intention. And communications between an American operative, Zazi, and al-Qaeda Central in 2009 naïvely used the word *wedding* as a code for their planned terrorist attack, even though authorities had

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<sup>21</sup> Before 9/11, al-Qaeda had launched several terrorist attacks, but even those that succeeded were laced with screw-ups. Thus, in picking when to bomb two American embassies in Africa in 1998, the plotters failed to note that the day chosen was a national holiday in one of the cities, thereby much reducing the casualty count. An effort to send a bomb-loaded skiff to attack a U.S. destroyer when it refueled in Yemen failed when the skiff sank as it was launched. A later attempt did damage another U.S. ship, though it failed to sink the ship as apparently was planned, and the video guy assigned to record the deed for posterity and propaganda fell asleep and missed the opportunity. Mueller and Stewart 2016a, 121.

<sup>22</sup> For sources of these threats and for additional threats, see Mueller and Stewart 2011, 36.

<sup>23</sup> See Sageman 2008.

<sup>24</sup> Silber 2012. See also Sageman 2008, 139.

long been on to that rather childish, and decidedly nonclever, Aesopian euphemism—indeed, the 9/11 had routinely been called “the big wedding,” and it was a running joke among counterterrorists that they were lucky al-Qaeda couldn’t dream up a better code word.<sup>25</sup>

### **The myth of the mastermind**

Arthur Conan Doyle invented Moriarty to give his hero, Sherlock Holmes, an opponent worthy of the efforts of the great, if equally imaginary, detective. The counterterrorism establishment has been similarly inclined—as have those responsible for producing such imaginative products as television’s *24* and *Homeland*. Early on, officials even invited Hollywood scriptwriters to spin out tales of what the “universal adversary” out there might be up to.<sup>26</sup> The enemy, all this implies, has generally been assumed to be clever, crafty, diabolical, resourceful, ingenious, brilliant, flexible, brutal, and equal—an opponent fully worthy of the stupendous and exceedingly expensive countering efforts being made.

The greatest exaggeration of terrorist capacities is their supposed capacity to develop nuclear weapons or devices. Concerns about these escalated greatly after the September 11 attacks. However, to observe that terrorists were able, mostly by thuggish means, to crash airplanes into buildings, and then to conclude from that observation that they might therefore be able to construct an atomic bomb is an extrapolation of cosmic proportions. But it happened, and by 2008 Defense Secretary Robert Gates was assuring a congressional committee that what keeps every senior government leader awake at night is “the thought of a terrorist ending up with a weapon of mass destruction, especially nuclear.”<sup>27</sup>

Few of the sleepless, it seems, found much solace in the fact that an al-Qaeda computer seized in Afghanistan in 2001 indicated that the group’s budget for research on weapons of mass destruction (almost all of it focused on primitive chemical weapons work) was some \$2,000 to \$4,000. In the wake of the killing of Osama bin Laden, officials had many more al-Qaeda computers, and it appears that nothing in their contents suggested the miserable little group had the time or inclination, let alone the money, to set up and staff a uranium-seizing operation, as well as a fancy, super-high-tech facility to fabricate a bomb. It is a process that requires trusting corrupted foreign collaborators and other criminals, obtaining and transporting highly guarded material, setting up a machine shop staffed with top scientists and technicians, and rolling the heavy, cumbersome, and untested finished product into position to be detonated by a skilled crew, all the while attracting no attention from outsiders.<sup>28</sup>

Central to the exaggeration exercise has been the identification of a few evil “masterminds” who were dominating the show.<sup>29</sup> Since it made for good copy, journalists helped spread the word.

In his book *Mastermind: The Many Faces of the 9/11 Architect*, Khalid Shaikh Mohammed, journalist Richard Minter begins by listing his subject’s admitted (or claimed) involvement with terrorist efforts in addition to 9/11. These include the 1993 World Trade Center and 2002 Bali bombings; plots on Heathrow airport, Big Ben, and the Panama Canal;

<sup>25</sup> Apuzzo and Goldman 2013, 9.

<sup>26</sup> Lustick 2006, 171-72.

<sup>27</sup> Mueller 2010, xi.

<sup>28</sup> For an extended discussion, see Mueller 2010, ch. 12-15; Jenkins 2008.

<sup>29</sup> For more on this issue, including sources and an examination of other “masterminds,” see Mueller and Stewart 2016a, ch. 4.

plans to assassinate Bill Clinton, the Pope, and several prime ministers of Pakistan; two efforts to infiltrate agents into the United States; and the plan for a “second wave” of attacks by hijacked airliners on major U.S. landmarks including the U.S. Bank Tower in Los Angeles, the Sears Tower in Chicago, and the Plaza Bank Building in Seattle.

Actually, Minter does not do full service to his subject’s claimed scheming. In addition, to the plots on Minter’s list, KSM declared himself to be the power behind the shoe bomber operation of 2001; an October 2002 attack in Kuwait; plots to attack oil tankers and U.S. naval ships in the Strait of Hormuz, the Strait of Gibraltar, and the port of Singapore; plans to assassinate Jimmy Carter; a plot to blow up suspension bridges in New York City; a plan to destroy the Sears Tower in Chicago with burning fuel trucks (an alternative, presumably, to the airline hijacking plan); plots to “destroy” Canary Wharf in London; a planned attack on “many” nightclubs in Thailand; a plot, rolled up in 2004, to target the New York Stock Exchange and other U.S. financial targets with limousine-borne bombs; a plan to destroy buildings in Eilat, Israel; plans to destroy U.S. embassies in Indonesia, Australia, and Japan; plots to destroy Israeli embassies in India, Azerbaijan, Australia, and the Philippines; surveying and financing an attack on an Israeli El-Al flight from Bangkok; sending several agents into Israel to survey “strategic targets” with the intention of attacking them; a suicide bombing of a hotel in Mombasa, Kenya; the attempt to shoot down an Israeli passenger jet leaving Mombasa airport in Kenya; plans to attack U.S. targets in South Korea; providing financial support for a plan to attack U.S., British, and Jewish targets in Turkey; surveillance of U.S. nuclear power plants in order to attack them; a plot to attack NATO’s headquarters in Europe; planning and surveillance in a 1995 plan (the “Bojinka plot”) to bomb twelve passenger jets bound for the United States; a plot to blow up gas stations in the United States; plans to assassinate Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf; and an attempt to attack a U.S. oil company in Sumatra, Indonesia, that was “owned by the Jewish former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger.” He also took pride in having personally beheaded the defenseless *Wall Street Journal* reporter Daniel Pearl.

What is impressive is that, except for the Bali bombings, just about *all* of KSM’s many schemes either failed or did not even begin to approach fruition. In addition, the role of the “mastermind” in the Bali case, according to Minter and others, was simply to supply some money. And KSM’s entire role in the failed 1993 effort to bring down the World Trade Center was to wire \$660 to one of the conspirators. It is also noteworthy that KSM continued to work on the “second wave” hijacked airplane attack. This suggests that, as discussed earlier, even after the fact, he understood neither the reason 9/11 worked nor the (rather obvious) lesson of the fourth plane.

Overall, as a terrorism planner, KSM has a fertile mind but a feeble record of accomplishment, one characterized by fanciful scheming and stunted execution. In this context, 9/11 clearly stands out as an aberration.

### **Terrorism in Europe**

Kenney has analyzed court documents and interviewed dozens of government officials and intelligence agents in Europe and other Western locations. He finds that would-be terrorists there, like their counterparts in the United States, are operationally unsophisticated, short on know-how, prone to make mistakes, poor at planning, and limited in their capacity to learn.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Kenney 2010.



Another study documents the difficulties of network coordination that continually threaten the terrorists' operational unity, trust, cohesion, and ability to act collectively.<sup>31</sup>

The lack of success of terrorists in the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, and other Western countries mirrors that in the United States: the number of people killed by Islamist extremist terrorists in the UK is less than four per year, while for Canada and Australia, it is two in the last decade. In all, extremist Islamist terrorism—whether associated with al-Qaeda or not—claimed some 200 to 300 lives yearly worldwide in the decade after 2001 outside of war zones.<sup>32</sup> That's 200 to 300 too many, of course, but as can be seen in table 1, it is about the same number as deaths from bathtub drownings in the United States.

### **Plots hatched abroad and focused on the United States**

Several cases of threatened potential terrorist harm to the United States were put together abroad by foreigners, or by foreigners working with Americans.<sup>33</sup> Some of these had at least some direction from al-Qaeda or similar overseas groups. None resulted in any deaths.

Two of these cases involved efforts by foreigners to take down airliners traveling to the United States from Europe, with explosives implanted, in 2001, in the terrorist's shoes and, in 2009, his underwear. Both received overseas training (two years, in the case of the shoe bomber), each from a person who has been described in the media as a "master bomb maker." But each failed miserably in his mission.

In 2003, a man who had been living in Baltimore, named Majid Khan, conspired with al-Qaeda to blow up some gas stations in the United States. However, he couldn't get back to the country because his visa had expired. In short order, all the participants were arrested. Something similar happened with an American, Bryant Neal Vinas, who had managed to be accepted by al-Qaeda. In 2008, he was arrested abroad.

A group apparently linked to al-Qaeda worked in London until information surfaced in Pakistan in July 2004 that led to their arrests. They were planning to launch hugely destructive terrorist attacks on American financial buildings, probably by driving limousines full of explosives next to them or into their underground parking areas, and then setting them off. Curiously, even though not under surveillance by police or by informants, they seem never to have done anything about their dramatic plot except scout the buildings. An actual attack was never remotely imminent—indeed, the execution was never considered. In particular, during

<sup>31</sup> Eilstrup-Sangiovanni and Jones 2008

<sup>32</sup> Anthony H. Cordesman, tallies "major attacks by Islamists" outside of Iraq: 830 fatalities for the period April 2002 through July 2005 (2005, 29-31). We have corrected the total for the 2005 London bombings, given as 100 in this source, to 52. Brian Michael Jenkins tallies "major terrorist attacks worldwide" by "jihadist extremists" outside Afghanistan, Iraq, Israel, Palestine, Algeria, Russia, and Kashmir: 1,129 fatalities for the period October 2001 through April 2006 (2006, 179-84). And IntelCenter tallies the "most significant attacks executed by core al-Qaeda, regional arms and affiliate groups excluding operations in insurgency theaters": 1,632 fatalities for the period January 2002 through July 2007. "Jihadi Attack Kill Statistics," [www.intelcenter.com](http://www.intelcenter.com), August 17, 2007, 11. For later years, the results would likely be comparable although "war zones" or "insurgency theaters" in, say, 2013 would include Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq, Syria, Yemen, Libya, and Nigeria. The rise of ISIS and especially of ISIS-affiliates in areas outside war zones would raise this number for the last few years.

<sup>33</sup> For details, see Mueller 2016.

years of work they seem to have done nothing whatever about amassing the requisite operatives in the United States, and they do not seem ever to have explored the difficult issue of obtaining large amounts of explosives, nor to have considered in detail the likely effect of an explosion. Finally, no one in the group seems to have had any real expertise with explosives, a concern absolutely vital, obviously, to the successful carrying out of the grand plan. One analyst speculates that they temporarily shelved their plans because they were busy basking in the success of 9/11. But if their goal was to damage the American economy and spread terror, a quick sequel to 9/11 would seem to have been highly desirable from their point of view. Moreover, the longer they waited, the more likely the police would uncover the plot—which, in fact, is exactly what happened.

There was also a plot in London to set off bombs more or less simultaneously on transatlantic airliners headed from Heathrow Airport to the United States. However, the group was under constant and extensive police surveillance throughout, including all their international communications that they foolishly continued to use. Accordingly, the plot could be closed down at any time, and the London police did so in 2006. It is commonly argued that this plot was “nearly successful.” It was far from that.<sup>34</sup>

The only plot hatched abroad that resulted in a real physical terrorist effort within the United States concerns that of Najibullah Zazi and his friends in 2009. In this, the plotters bumbled at several levels and their efforts were rather quickly closed down. The men were recruited in Pakistan by al-Qaeda, and they eventually agreed to return to carry out a “martyrdom operation” in the United States, setting off bombs on the New York transit system.<sup>35</sup> In preparation, Zazi received explosives training and emailed nine pages of bomb-making instructions to himself. FBI Director Robert Mueller asserts that this training gave Zazi the “capability” to set off a bomb. That, however, seems to be a substantial overstatement because, upon returning to the United States, Zazi spent the better part of a year trying to concoct the bombs he had supposedly learned how to make. In the process, he purchased bomb materials reportedly using stolen credit cards, a bone-headed maneuver that all but guaranteed that red flags would go up about the sale and that surveillance videos in the stores would be maintained rather than routinely erased.<sup>36</sup> Moreover, even with the material at hand, Zazi *still* apparently couldn’t figure it out, and he frantically contacted an unidentified person overseas for help several times. Each of these communications was “more urgent in tone than the last,” according to court documents. Communications between Zazi and al-Qaeda leaders were being monitored even before he began to try to construct his bombs, and the plot was closed down.

Both Vinas and Zazi were genuinely dedicated to the Muslim extremist cause and were accepted by al-Qaeda. However, this proved to be disastrous for the group. Both were eventually captured and, although previously “radicalized,” they abandoned their former comrades almost immediately once they were in captivity and fully cooperated with authorities. Effectively, they acted as if they had been CIA plants from the beginning. Vinas even helped with the disruption of a terrorist plot in Belgium that required his betraying some of the people he had met in an al-Qaeda training camp.

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<sup>34</sup> For a discussion, see Mueller and Stewart 2016a, 33-34.

<sup>35</sup> Apuzzo and Goldman 2013, 109–14.

<sup>36</sup> Zazi also foolishly attracted attention by racing at more than 90 miles per hour across the country in his bomb-material-laden car. Apuzzo and Goldman 2013, 10.

### Official alarmism about al-Qaeda in the United States

Operating under an apparently unanimous alarmist mentality after 9/11, U.S. intelligence came extravagantly to imagine by 2002 that the number of trained al-Qaeda operatives in the United States was between 2,000 and 5,000.<sup>37</sup> An especially imaginative account from London relayed the view of “experts” that Osama bin Laden was ready to unleash an “11,000 strong terrorist army” operating in more than sixty countries, an army “controlled by a Mr. Big who is based in Europe,” while noting rather unhelpfully that intelligence had “no idea where thousands of these men are.”<sup>38</sup>

That sort of dark perspective seems to have been internalized and institutionalized over the years in a great many ways, and it has proved to be notably resistant to counter-information. For example, in early 2005, Richard Clarke, counterterrorism coordinator for the Clinton administration, issued a scenario that appeared as a cover story in the *Atlantic*. In the article, he darkly envisioned terrorist shootings at casinos, campgrounds, theme parks, and malls in 2005, bombings in subways and railroads in 2006, missile attacks on airliners in 2007, and devastating cyberattacks in 2008.<sup>39</sup>

At the same time, the FBI Director Robert Mueller told a Congressional committee the he remained “very concerned about what we are not seeing,” a sentence rendered in bold lettering in his prepared text. However, in a report from the time that was kept secret for some (or no) reason, the FBI and other investigative agencies reported that, after years of well-funded sleuthing, they had been unable to uncover a single true al-Qaeda sleeper cell anywhere in the United States. Nonetheless, some in the FBI remained unmoved: one person told *Fox News* that “just because there’s no concrete evidence of sleeper cells now, doesn’t mean they don’t exist.”<sup>40</sup>

The al-Qaeda threat obviously proved to be far more limited than has persistently been feared. The number of al-Qaeda operatives actually in the country has held at zero or nearly so, and the FBI’s inability to find sleeper cells has persisted to the present day—the ghostly terrorists espied in the thousands by the intelligence community in 2002 either never existed or afterwards obligingly vanished. This is impressive because some 300 million people enter the United States legally every year, and one would think al-Qaeda could have smuggled in a few at least. Meanwhile, authorities have been able to roll up a number of plots by homegrown would-be terrorists, some of whom have been inspired by al-Qaeda. Brian Jenkins’ assessment of these is apt: “their numbers remain small, their determination limp, and their competence poor.”<sup>41</sup>

This remarkably limited record, together with the *Wizard of Oz* conclusion of the ten-year quest for bin Laden, suggest that Glenn Carle, deputy national intelligence officer for transnational threats at the CIA for several years before his retirement in 2008 after 23 years of service, was right when he warned, “We must not take fright at the specter our leaders have exaggerated. In fact, we must see jihadists for the small, lethal, disjointed and miserable opponents that they are.” Al-Qaeda “has only a handful of individuals capable of planning, organizing and leading a terrorist organization,” and although they have threatened attacks, “its capabilities are far inferior to its desires.”<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Gertz 2001. Sale 2002.

<sup>38</sup> Lines 2001.

<sup>39</sup> Clarke 2005.

<sup>40</sup> Mueller and Stewart 2016a, 23.

<sup>41</sup> Jenkins 2011, 1. See also Brooks 2011; Mueller and Stewart 2012, 2016a.

<sup>42</sup> Carle 2008.

The 9/11 attacks proved to be a spectacular aberration, not a harbinger.<sup>43</sup> And global security was not hampered, or even challenged.

### ISIS

One of the most remarkable phenomena of recent years is the way ISIS has captured the imagination of the public in Western countries.

Americans had remained substantially unmoved by even worse human catastrophes in the past, such as genocide in Cambodia in the 1970s and in Rwanda in 1994, as well as sustained criminal predation in eastern Congo in the years after 1997. But following the set of web-cast beheadings of Americans in the late summer and fall of 2014, some 60 to 70 percent of the American public came to view ISIS as a major security threat to the United States. Only 17 percent had advocated sending American ground troops to fight ISIS after it surprisingly routed American-trained (and spectacularly ill-led) Iraqi forces in Mosul, Iraq, in June 2014. However, the beheadings abruptly boosted that support to over 40 percent. For a while in February 2015, after the death of an American captive, Kayla Mueller, support spiked even higher—to upwards of 60 percent (see figure 2). It was around that time that a woman in Salem, Illinois, misunderstood a message stating that retired minister Michael Ice and his wife were coming to her church, and called the Sheriff to report with alarm that the ISIS were coming.<sup>44</sup>

A similar phenomenon has taken place in Europe. In the Czech Republic, for example, the public has come to view Islamist terrorism to be the country's top security threat, even though it has never experienced a single such episode.

Outrage at the tactics of ISIS is certainly justified. But, as with al-Qaeda after 9/11, fears that it presents a global security threat are not.

ISIS differs from al-Qaeda in at least three respects.

First, it has separated itself from al-Qaeda (or had been summarily kicked out of the al-Qaeda area code by al-Qaeda itself) because, instead of focusing on doing damage against the far enemy, the United States in particular, the new group was mainly devoted to killing and terrorizing fellow Muslims and neighboring Christians that it doesn't like.<sup>45</sup>

Second, it welcomes foreign fighters into its ranks in sizeable numbers.

Third, is it far larger than al-Qaeda and seeks to administer the territory it occupies. That is, it is far more like an insurgent group than like a terrorist one.<sup>46</sup>

But it seems likely Islamic State will eventually be overcome by many of the same defects as the group from which it emerged, the al-Qaeda branch in Iraq.

ISIS seems to be led by millenarian crackpots.<sup>47</sup> Moreover, its counterproductive brutalities, such as staged beheadings of hostages, summary executions of prisoners, and the rape and enslavement of female captives have left it without allies and outside support—indeed, it is surrounded by enemies. Its goal to control territory carries with it attendant difficulties of

<sup>43</sup> On this issue, see Mueller 2002a, 2002b, 2002c.

<sup>44</sup> Kropp 2015. My thanks to Benjamin Friedman for bringing this to my attention.

<sup>45</sup> Byman 2014; Byman and Williams 2015, 13-14; Byman 2015, 170-72; Cronin 2015; Gerges 2016, ch. 8. In contrast, see Morell 2015, 305. For similar disputes between al-Qaeda central and a previous group in Iraq from which ISIS emerged, see Sageman 2008, 53-64; Gerges 2011, 108-112.

<sup>46</sup> On this distinction, see Cronin 2015; Mueller and Stewart 2015, 2016b.

<sup>47</sup> Wood 2015a.

governing and of presenting a target. And, by recruiting and welcoming foreigners into its ranks, it advances the potential to be undermined by infiltrators. Certainly in global perspective, its numbers are small.

Middle East specialist Ramzy Mardini notes that “the Islamic State’s fundamentals are weak”; that “it does not have a sustainable endgame”; that its “extreme ideology, spirit of subjugation, and acts of barbarism prevent it from becoming a political venue for the masses”; that its foolhardy efforts to instill fear in everyone limits “its opportunities for alliances” and makes it “vulnerable to popular backlash”; that “its potential support across the region ranges from limited to nonexistent”; and that the group “is completely isolated, encircled by enemies.”<sup>48</sup> Moreover, to the degree that ISIS, unlike the more wary al-Qaeda central, welcomes fighters from abroad, the group is likely to be penetrated by foreign intelligence operatives.

### **Military prowess**

ISIS’s ability to behead defenseless hostages certainly should not be taken to suggest its military might. Its major military advance, the conquest of the city of Mosul in Iraq in 2014, was essentially a fluke. Its idea was to hold part of the city for a while in an effort, it seems, to free some prisoners. The defending Iraqi army, trained by the American military at enormous cost to U.S. taxpayers, simply fell apart in confusion and disarray, abandoning weaponry, and the city, to the tiny group of seeming invaders even though it greatly outnumbered them—even taking into account the fact that many soldiers had purchased the right to avoid showing up for duty by paying half their salary to their commanders.<sup>49</sup> The fall of the smaller city of Ramadi a few weeks earlier was similar. Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter noted that although they “vastly” outnumbered the ISIS attackers, the Iraqi forces had “failed to fight.” And the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff said the Iraqi forces weren’t “driven out of Ramadi” but rather “they drove out.”<sup>50</sup>

After its advances of 2014, however, the vicious group’s momentum has been substantially halted, and its empire is currently under a form of siege. And, by holding territory, it presents an obvious and clear target for airstrikes and other methods by military opponents.

Even by late 2014, it was being pushed back from Kobani, a strategically-located area in northern Syria, and was finding that its supply lines were overstretched and its ranks of experienced fighters were being thinned. The group’s magazine touted the battle as proof of its strength and claimed “ISIS is ready to burn 10,000 fighters” in the fight and would “never accept to lose.” However, they left after losses of a few hundred.<sup>51</sup>

Over the course of the next year, it had lost some 40 percent of the territory it had held at its peak in 2014.<sup>52</sup> In late 2015, it tried to push back by launching three offensives in Northern Iraq. The fighting force in each comprised 80 to 160 fighters using, among other things, “armored bulldozers.” They were readily beaten back.<sup>53</sup>

By 2016, ISIS was in retreat on many fronts and appeared to be “a rapidly diminishing force.” It was even being reported that the Iraqi army had “revived considerably since its

<sup>48</sup> Mardini 2014. See also Mueller 2014; Gerges 2016, 284-89.

<sup>49</sup> Parker et al. 2015. See also “The Rise of ISIS,” Frontline (PBS).

<sup>50</sup> Bacevich 2016, 351.

<sup>51</sup> Fitch and Nissenbaum 2014.

<sup>52</sup> Sly 2016. Warrick and Sly 2016.

<sup>53</sup> Gordon 2015.

disastrous collapse in 2014.” Frontline commanders were observing of ISIS that “They don’t fight. They just send car bombs and then run away. And when we surround them they either surrender or infiltrate themselves among the civilians....Their morale is shaken....Their leaders are begging them to fight, but they answer that it is a lost cause. They refuse to obey and run away.” More generally, concludes one analyst, “They are starting to fall apart. They’re a small movement. If you bring them under pressure on half a dozen battlefields at the same time, they can’t do it.”<sup>54</sup> One local tribal leader says, “As soon as they saw our forces, they ran away....Every week they execute four or five members because they refuse to obey orders or try to turn against their leaders.”<sup>55</sup> In their official urgings of troops to fight on, ISIS leaders have included admissions that they were fighting the “whole world” and would likely “face even greater misfortunes” in the future.<sup>56</sup> Also (and oddly): “a drowning person does not fear getting wet.”<sup>57</sup>

There may also be another problem for ISIS. By most accounts, their most effective fighters are those imported from Chechnya. Many of these arrived in early 2014 because, fearing terrorism at the time of the Sochi Olympics, Russian authorities were opening borders and urging them to leave. In the latter half of that year, however, the Russians reversed the policy.<sup>58</sup>

### **Economic and social viability**

ISIS is finding that actually controlling and effectively governing wide territories is a major strain. And it has to work hard to keep people from fleeing its brutal lumpen Caliphate.<sup>59</sup> On close examination in fact, its once highly-vaunted economic capacity—selling a lot of oil and antiquities, for example—seems to be proving to be illusory. The “Islamic State” is, as Jamie Hansen-Lewis and Jacob Shapiro argued in 2015,

extremely unlikely to be sustainable from a financial perspective. Its economy is small compared to its enemies, its institutions are not conducive to economic growth, and it is reliant on extractive industries that in all other non-democratic countries foster the creation of kleptocratic elites....Even if it endures as a fragile state, it will be vulnerable to internal strife.<sup>60</sup>

Even in late 2014, there were reports indicating that there were major problems with providing services and medical care, keeping prices from soaring, getting schools to function, keeping the water drinkable.<sup>61</sup>

In part because the territory it controlled had diminished so much—thereby reducing the number of people it could tax (or extort)—ISIS was forced by the end of 2015 to reduce the

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<sup>54</sup> Sly 2016.

<sup>55</sup> Sly 2015.

<sup>56</sup> Keating 2015.

<sup>57</sup> Milton and al-‘Ubaydi 2015.

<sup>58</sup> International Crisis Group 2016. My thanks to Emma Ashford for bringing this report to my attention.

<sup>59</sup> Warrick and Sly 2016.

<sup>60</sup> Hansen-Lewis and Shapiro 2015, 152. See also Watts 2015. Shatz 2014; Sly 2014, 2015; Mueller 2014; Shapiro 2013. However, there is considerable disagreement on this issue among people studying it.

<sup>61</sup> Sly 2014.

salaries of its fighters by half. Those salaries, it appears, constitute two-thirds of the group's operating budget.<sup>62</sup>

By 2016, there were increasing reports of “financial strain,” as well as of “clashes among senior commanders over allegations of corruption, mismanagement and theft.” Not only was the tax, or extortion, base much reduced and oil sales disrupted, but the huge cash windfall from the seizure of banks during the group's season of expansion in 2014 was now “mostly gone.”<sup>63</sup>

### **Returning militants**

A major fear is that foreign militants who have gone to fight with ISIS would be trained and then sent back to do damage in their own countries. However, this may well prove to be a quite limited phenomenon. In part, this is because, as Daniel Byman and Jeremy Shapiro have detailed in a Brookings Institution report, foreign fighters tend to be killed early (they are common picks for suicide missions); often become disillusioned, especially by in-fighting in the ranks; and do not receive much in the way of useful training for terrorist exercises back home.<sup>64</sup> It might also be added that ISIS videos exultantly show foreign fighters burning their passports to demonstrate their terminal commitment to the cause—hardly a good idea if they want to return. In May 2015, an audio message apparently from the leader of ISIS exhorted Muslims either to join the ISIS ranks in the Middle East or to fight at home “wherever that may be.” There was nothing about training people to return home to wreak havoc.<sup>65</sup>

That general policy may have changed somewhat later in the year. Because ISIS has been in decline in its core area, suggests the *Washington Post*, it appears to have lashed out abroad “to divert attention from its territorial losses.”<sup>66</sup> Calling attention to developments in Somalia, analyst J.M. Berger points out that “The recent example of al-Shabab strongly suggests that a catastrophic loss of territory will free up resources for large-scale terrorist attacks, both regionally and globally. Even a small insurgency makes for a massive terrorist group when its resources are no longer needed to hold ground.”<sup>67</sup>

At least some of those in the small group that perpetrated the Paris attack of November 2015 and the one in Brussels a few months later may have received training and/or support from ISIS. French President François Hollande argued that the attacks were against “our values, who we are, a free country that speaks to the entire planet.”<sup>68</sup> However, this seems to be mistaken. As one ISIS sympathizer put it, “Since they are fighting us in our land, we are going to fight them in their lands.”<sup>69</sup> Or, as a post-attack ISIS video put it, “As long as you keep bombing you will not find peace.”<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Kavanaugh 2016.

<sup>63</sup> Warrick and Sly 2016.

<sup>64</sup> Byman and Shapiro 2014b. For a broad consideration, see Hegghammer 2013.

<sup>65</sup> Naylor 2015.

<sup>66</sup> Morris 2015. Warrick and Sly 2016.

<sup>67</sup> Morris 2015.

<sup>68</sup> Vinocur 2015.

<sup>69</sup> Morris 2015.

<sup>70</sup> Beinart 2016.

The returnees may include the Paris plot's apparent ringleader, now dead, who, earlier in the year, had tried several times to institute terrorist acts in the area, none of which succeeded.<sup>71</sup> His success in November may have made up for this, but his failure rate still remains high.

In a reactive pose that has become routine for the group, it has claimed responsibility for—or, more accurately, boorishly celebrated—tragic ventures abroad like those in Paris and Brussels. But there is little indication ISIS central planned or significantly participated in them. Indeed, in the case of the Brussels attack, notes Benjamin Friedman, ISIS claimed that the attackers “opened fire” with “automatic rifles,” repeating errors that were in the initial reporting from the scene. Moreover, like the webcast beheadings of 2014, such terrorism has been spectacularly counterproductive and tends, as Friedman continues, “to provoke nationalistic anger, unifying nations against attackers rather acquiescence in their demands.”<sup>72</sup>

President Hollande labeled the Paris attacks an “act of war” that was committed by a “terrorist army.”<sup>73</sup> And that ISIS sympathizer insisted that “The brothers launched the attack in Paris to prove that we are a strong state and we can fight our enemies anywhere.”<sup>74</sup> However, a “strong state” would have engaged France with direct warfare. ISIS used terrorism instead, the weapon of the weak.

As with al-Qaeda after 9/11, the situation will change only if this “terrorist army” can do massive and continuous damage with its attacks. Or, in the unlikely event that it is able to generate a mass uprising by Muslims within the country, its efforts would be taken to have graduated from terrorism to insurgency. But the attacks in Paris and Brussels seem to have been contrived, after quite a bit of trial and error, by a quite small band, or network, of people. Whether these attacks, like 9/11, will prove to be an aberration rather than a harbinger remains to be seen. But they would have to be much more frequent, destructive, and widespread to even begin to compromise global security. And, while Berger's comparison with al-Shabab is arresting, it should be pointed out that the Somali terrorist group is working in a chaotic area, has done significant, but not massive damage, and has not acted globally.

In the meantime, there may be benefit in suggesting that understandably outraged political leaders cease inflating the terrorists' importance and their assumed capacity with their rhetoric. Marc Sageman argues that to effectively counter terrorism, efforts should reduce the glory from terrorism by treating terrorists more like common criminals—although this would mean, he points out, putting a stop to press conferences in which officials “hold self-congratulatory celebrations of their newest victories in the ‘war on terror’.” He stresses that to allow officials to “exploit the issue of terrorism for political gain is counterproductive.”<sup>75</sup>

### **Inspiring homegrown terrorism**

Fears have also focused on the dangers presented by potential homegrown terrorists who might be inspired by ISIS's propaganda or example. As the Paris, San Bernardino, and Brussels attacks tragically demonstrate, potential targets for dedicated terrorists—peaceful aggregations of civilians—remain legion. However, as terrorism specialist Max Abrahms notes “lone wolves

<sup>71</sup> Higgins and Freytas-Tamura 2015. Callimachi et al. 2015.

<sup>72</sup> Friedman 2016. See also Wood 2015b.

<sup>73</sup> Vinocur 2015.

<sup>74</sup> Morris 2015.

<sup>75</sup> Sageman 2008, 153-54. See also Mueller and Stewart 2016a, 130.



have carried out just two of the 1,900 most deadly terrorist incidents over the last four decades.”<sup>76</sup> Global security is unlikely to be upended by such miscreants—or even challenged.

Columnist Fred Kaplan greatly overstates the case when he contends that “If ISIS were defeated militarily, if the territory it has grabbed were grabbed back, then its appeal would be snuffed out.”<sup>77</sup> ISIS could still provide inspiration to death cult sycophants around the world even if it essentially fails to exist. After all, some find inspiration in the example of Che Guevara even though he has been dead for half a century.

However, failure on the battlefield may well have a dampening effect on enthusiasm, much of which was impelled by the sudden—and, for some, exhilarating—expansion of ISIS in 2014. These seeming successes inspired a considerable amount of ISIS-inspired terrorist plotting by locals in the United States during 2015. This includes the attack in San Bernardino, while the others were all complete, and mostly boneheaded, failures. But there seem to have been few of such cases thus far in 2016 in the United States. Whether that will prove to be a trend is yet to be seen.

In this connection, there has also been a trendy concern about the way ISIS uses social media. However, as Byman and Shapiro and others have pointed out, the foolish willingness of would-be terrorists to spill out their aspirations and their often-childish fantasies on social media has been, on balance, much to the advantage of the police seeking to track them.<sup>78</sup>

Childishness is also found much of the verbiage spewed out on ISIS websites that is often taken so seriously and seen to be so ominous by commentators. In one, for example, ISIS threatened the Russians: “We will make your wives concubines and make your children our slaves...Soon, very soon, the blood will spill like an ocean...The Kremlin will be ours.”<sup>79</sup> Or the trainee in Syria asking his mother about what people were saying about a friend of his who had recently blown himself up: “Are they talking about him? Are they praising him? Are they saying he was a lion?”<sup>80</sup> Some commentators like Kurt Eichenwald contend that peer pressure and what he calls “jihadist cool” and “Rambo envy” are new.<sup>81</sup> They are not.<sup>82</sup>

### **The generation and persistence of fear and alarm**

In 2010, anthropologist Scott Atran mused, “Perhaps never in the history of human conflict have so few people with so few actual means and capabilities frightened so many.”<sup>83</sup>

That condition persists. Even though other issues—particularly economic ones—have crowded out terrorism as a topic of daily concern, 9/11 clearly has achieved perpetual resonance in the American mind. This has resulted in a longterm, routinized, mass anxiety—or at least a sense of concern—that has shown little sign of waning over the years since 2001 (for examples,

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<sup>76</sup> Abrahms 2011.

<sup>77</sup> Kaplan 2015.

<sup>78</sup> Byman and Shapiro 2014a. See also Brooks 2011; Benson 2014; Bailey 2014; Gerges 2011, 192. In the United States there are many cases in which the would-be perpetrator used chat rooms or Facebook or Twitter to seek out like-minded souls and potential collaborators—and usually simply got connected to the FBI. Mueller and Stewart 2016a, 97-100.

<sup>79</sup> McShane 2015.

<sup>80</sup> Druckerman 2016.

<sup>81</sup> Eichenwald 2016.

<sup>82</sup> See Mueller and Stewart 2012, 2016a, ch. 3.

<sup>83</sup> Atran 2010, xiv.

see figures 3 and 4) This, despite many reasons (13 in our count) to expect otherwise (see table 2). All this, even before the threatening and attention-arresting rise of ISIS in 2014 that, on some polls caused an upward bump in alarm about terrorism—although this effect may prove to be relatively transitory.<sup>84</sup>

Beside the traumatic memory of 9/11, the seemingly constant, if pointillistic, stream of well over 100 small-time terrorism cases that have come to light in the United States since 9/11 may have kept the pot boiling. Special fear and anxiety may also be stoked by the fact that Islamist terrorism seems to be part of a large and hostile conspiracy and network that is international in scope and rather spooky in nature.<sup>85</sup> As with al-Qaeda in the decade and more after 9/11, the unwarranted fear and alarm ISIS has generated since 2014 is likely to persist even if it is effectively extinguished as a physical force in the Middle East.

It is difficult to explain which events and threats will be embraced, and even more so to explain how long they will linger in the public consciousness. Terrorism, like murder, has always existed in some form or other and always will. And, because of the special formlessness, even spookiness, of terrorism's hostile foreign referent in this case, it may be exceptionally difficult to get people to believe that the threat has really been extinguished—or at least is no longer particularly significant.

It is probably best to see public opinion as the primary driver in the excessive and somewhat bizarre counterterrorism process that took place after 9/11. And, to the degree that the public remains terrorized, it seems likely to continue to demand that its leaders pay due deference to its insecurities.

Because of the persistent public fear and alarm about terrorism, they seem incapable of pointing out that an American's chance of being killed by a terrorist is one in 4 million per year, and to suggest that terrorism might pose an acceptable risk (or even to discuss the issue) appears to be utterly impossible.<sup>86</sup> And it took until 2015, nearly a decade and a half after 9/11, before public officials, including in this case the president of the United States, were willing to suggest that terrorism, even that presented by ISIS, did not, as it happens, present a threat to the country that was “existential” in nature, an observation that is “blindingly obvious” as security specialist Bruce Schneier puts it.<sup>87</sup>

Obama is reportedly ready to go further, but hasn't summoned the political courage to do so yet. When his closest adviser told him people were worried that the group would soon take its beheading campaign to the United States, he reportedly replied “They're not coming here to chop our heads off.” And he “frequently reminds his staff that terrorism takes far fewer lives in America than handguns, car accidents, and falls in bathtubs do.” However, out of concern that

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<sup>84</sup> On public opinion on terrorism, see Mueller and Stewart 2016a, ch. 2; 2016d. For extensive trend data, see Mueller and Stewart 2016c. In figure 1, the increases in support for the Iraq War in its 11<sup>th</sup> year and for the Afghan War in its 13<sup>th</sup> year followed the rise of ISIS in 2014.

<sup>85</sup> Mueller and Stewart 2016d. See also Shapiro 2016.

<sup>86</sup> On such issues, see Mueller and Stewart 2011; 2014; 2016a, 251-57. See also Bergen 2016, 270-72; Friedman et al. 2010; Walt 2016.

<sup>87</sup> Schneier 2015. On this issue, see also Mueller and Stewart 2016a, 24-25, 254; Healy 2011; Diab 2015. When he was Homeland Security Secretary, Michael Chertoff went one step further, proclaiming the “struggle” against terrorism to be a “significant existential” one—carefully differentiating it, apparently, from all those insignificant existential struggles Americans have waged in the past. Harris and Taylor 2008.

Obama will “seem insensitive to the fears of the American people,” his advisers are “fighting a constant rearguard action to keep Obama from placing terrorism in what he considers its ‘proper’ perspective.”<sup>88</sup> Thus *Washington Post* reporter Greg Jaffe’s suggestion that Obama “no longer feels compelled to shade his beliefs to the demands of public opinion” seems well off the mark. More impelling is that the administration has taken to heart the lesson Jaffe reports from analyst Stephen Sestanovich: “It’s not good politics to display your irritation with the American people.”<sup>89</sup>

Whether Obama’s tentative “existential threat” development, at once remarkable and absurdly belated, will have some consequence remains to be seen. The incentives are to play to the galleries and to exaggerate the threat. Thus, on Michael Smerconish’s CNN program on July 18, 2015, former Homeland Security chief Tom Ridge was quick to issue an evidence-free suggestion that the then-recent tragic killings in Chattanooga followed a “directive” from ISIS.

Meanwhile, General Michael Flynn, who had recently retired as head of the Defense Intelligence Agency, was given in 2015 to insist that the terrorist enemy is “committed to the destruction of freedom and the American way of life” while seeking “world domination, achieved through violence and bloodshed.” It was reported that his remarks, to an audience of “special operators and intelligence officers,” evoked “many nods of approval,” “occasional cheers,” and “ultimately a standing ovation.”<sup>90</sup>

Five years after 9/11, journalist James Fallows suggested that Americans then “lacked leaders to help keep the danger in perspective.”<sup>91</sup> Despite Obama’s almost embarrassingly modest effort, Fallows’ observation remains valid today. Fred Kaplan urges Obama to “take command of the narrative.”<sup>92</sup> However, even his modest effort to rein in the War on Terror hyperbole seems to have failed to gel. This experience as well as that of the Paris attacks, notes Jaffe, “are a stark reminder that the post-9/11 ‘season of fear,’ which he had hoped to move the country past, hasn’t yet ended.”<sup>93</sup> As part of this process, the misoverestimation of terrorism and of the threat that ISIS presents will continue apace.

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<sup>88</sup> Goldberg 2016.

<sup>89</sup> Jaffe 2015.

<sup>90</sup> Dozier 2015

<sup>91</sup> Fallows 2006.

<sup>92</sup> Kaplan 2015.

<sup>93</sup> Jaffe 2015. See also Shapiro 2016.

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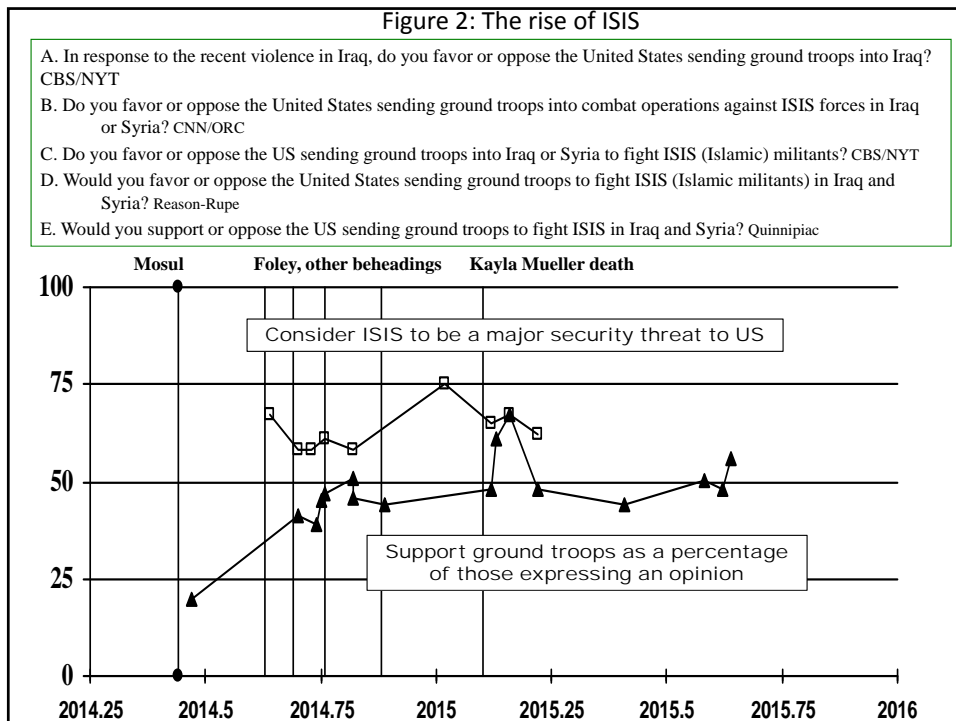
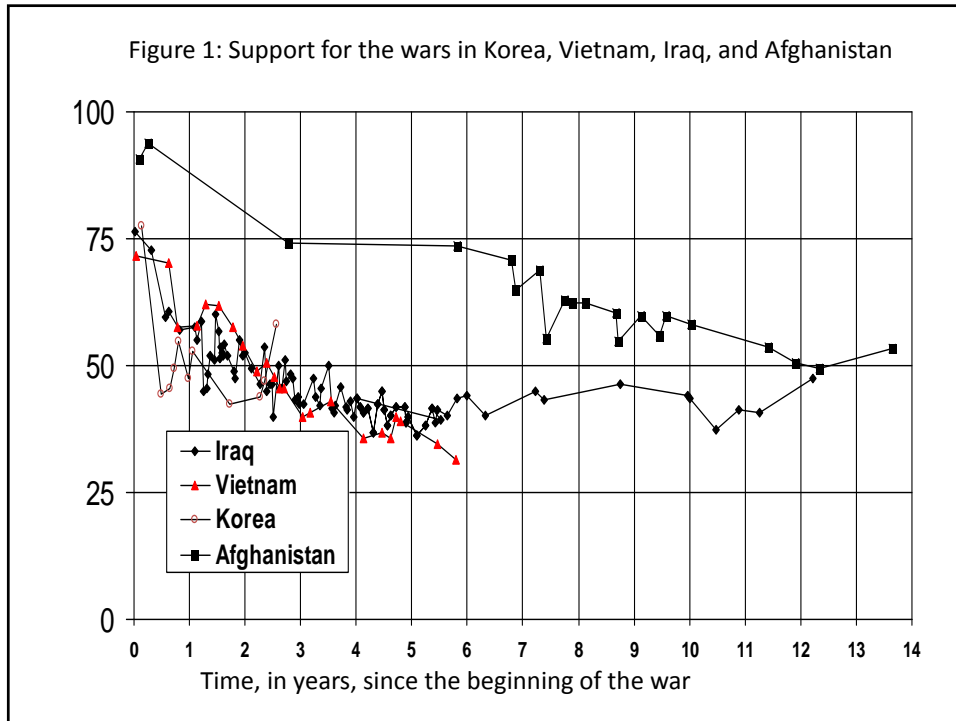


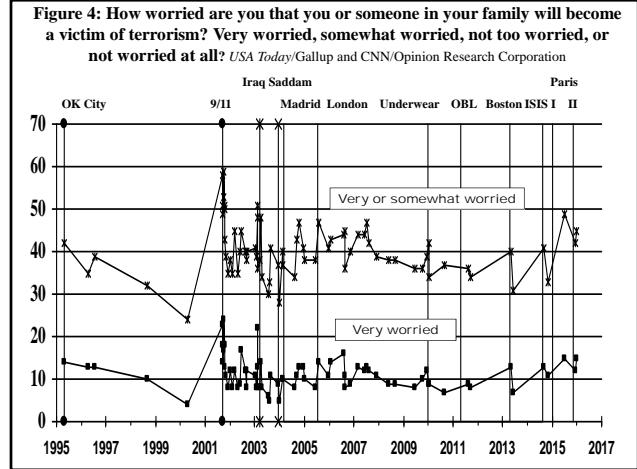
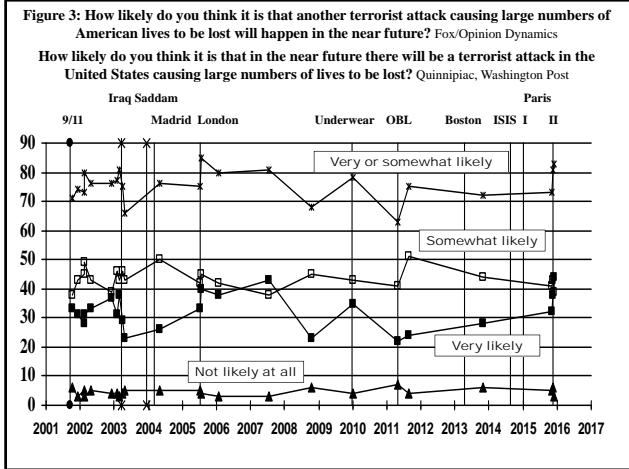
**Table 1: Annual Fatality Risks**

Hazard	Territory	Period	Total Fatalities for the Period	Annual Fatality Risk
World War II	Worldwide	1939–1945	61,000,000	1 in 221
Cancers	US	2009	560,000	1 in 540
War (civilians)	Iraq	2003–2008	113,616	1 in 1,150
All accidents	US	2007	119,000	1 in 2,500
Traffic accidents	US	2008	37,261	1 in 8,200
Traffic accidents	Canada	2008	2,431	1 in 13,500
Traffic accidents	Australia	2008	1,466	1 in 15,000
Homicide	US	2006	14,180	1 in 22,000
Traffic accidents	UK	2008	2,538	1 in 23,000
<b>Terrorism</b>	<b>Northern Ireland</b>	<b>1970–2013</b>	<b>1,780</b>	<b>1 in 50,000</b>
Industrial accidents	US	2007	5,657	1 in 53,000
Homicide	Canada	2008	611	1 in 55,000
<b>Intifada</b>	<b>Israel</b>	<b>2000–2006</b>	<b>553</b>	<b>1 in 72,000</b>
Homicide	Great Britain	2008	887	1 in 67,000
Homicide	Australia	2008	290	1 in 76,000
<b>Terrorism</b>	<b>US</b>	<b>2001</b>	<b>2,982</b>	<b>1 in 101,000</b>
Natural disasters	US	1999–2008	6,294	1 in 480,000
Drowning in bathtub	US	2003	320	1 in 950,000
<b>Terrorism</b>	<b>UK</b>	<b>1970–2013</b>	<b>2,221</b>	<b>1 in 1,200,000</b>
Home appliances	US	yearly average	200	1 in 1,500,000
Deer accidents	US	2006	150	1 in 2,000,000
Commercial aviation	US	yearly average	130	1 in 2,300,000
<b>Terrorism</b>	<b>US</b>	<b>1970–2013</b>	<b>3,372</b>	<b>1 in 4,000,000</b>
<b>Terrorism</b>	<b>Canada</b>	<b>1970–2013</b>	<b>336</b>	<b>1 in 4,300,000</b>
<b>Terrorism</b>	<b>Great Britain</b>	<b>1970–2013</b>	<b>441</b>	<b>1 in 5,900,000</b>
Peanut allergies	US	yearly average	50-100	1 in 6,000,000
Lightning	US	1999–2008	424	1 in 7,000,000
<b>Terrorism</b>	<b>Australia (including Bali)</b>	<b>1970–2013</b>	<b>120</b>	<b>1 in 8,000,000</b>
<b>Transnational Terrorism</b>	<b>World outside war zones</b>	<b>1975–2003</b>	<b>13,971</b>	<b>1 in 12,500,000</b>
<b>Terrorism</b>	<b>US</b>	<b>2002–2013</b>	<b>33</b>	<b>1 in 110,000,000</b>

**Table 2: Reasons to have expected a decline in concern about terrorism**

1. Low objective likelihood of harm from terrorism
2. Absence of large attacks in US
3. Absence of al-Qaeda attacks on the US
4. Absence of al-Qaeda cells in the US
5. Near-absence of terrorist attacks from any source in the US
6. Modest interest in the attacks that have taken place
7. Incompetence of the plotters apprehended in the US
8. Absence of sizable attacks anywhere in the developed world during the decade after 2005
9. The damage committed worldwide by al-Qaeda and al-Qaeda types outside war zones has been rather limited
10. Decline of official and media alarmism on the issue
11. Huge increases in counterterrorism efforts and spending
12. Death of bin Laden
13. Ease of registering change in the polling instrument





OK City: Terrorist bombing in Oklahoma City  
 9/11: Terrorist attacks of September 11  
 Iraq: Beginning of the Iraq War  
 Saddam: Capture of Saddam Hussein  
 Madrid: Terrorist bombings in Madrid  
 London: Terrorist bombings in London  
 Underwear: Underwear bomber  
 OBL: Killing of Osama bin Laden  
 Boston: Terrorist bombings at the Boston Marathon  
 ISIS: First beheadings of Americans by ISIS  
 Paris I: Charlie Hebdo shootings, January 2015  
 Paris II: Multiple shootings, November 13, 2015,  
 followed by Santa Barbara shootings  
 20 days later