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United States Terrorism & Counterterrorism

How Safe Are We?

Asking the Right Questions About Terrorism

By John Mueller and Mark Stewart

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Are we safer?" might be the most common question asked about terrorism, but it is the

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wrong one. A better place to begin is with this question: “How safe are we?”

In evaluating the threat from terrorism, it seems difficult to escape the conclusion that, although such violence presents a concern for the United States, the scope of the hazard is so limited that it is a considerable stretch to even label it a “threat.”

For a time, of course, this perspective was severely challenged by the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, which inflicted damage that was decidedly not limited. If attacks like that had become common, even routine, everything would have changed. But it didn't. Although “we can't have another 9/11” remains a conversation stopper, that event remains an extreme outlier: scarcely any terrorist deed before or since has visited even one-tenth as much destruction, even in war zones where terrorist groups have plenty of space and time to plot and assemble.

Much of the public fear about terrorism centers on the possibility that radical groups, particularly al Qaeda, might acquire nuclear weapons—the **imminent danger of which** we have been warned about for 15 years. However, no terrorist group has gotten anywhere near going atomic, and, even more telling, none seems to have really even tried.



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In the years since 9/11, Islamist terrorists have managed to kill about seven people a year within the United States. All those deaths are tragic of course, but some comparisons are warranted: lightning kills about 46 people a year, accident-causing deer another 150, and drownings in bathtubs around 300.

During that period, al Qaeda Central's achievements have been rather meager, even taking into consideration that it has been isolated and under siege. An [analysis of the major terrorist plots](#) against the West since 9/11 finds only two—the attempted shoe bombing in 2001 and the effort to blow up transatlantic airliners with liquid bombs in 2006—that could be said to have been under the command and control of al Qaeda Central, and there are questions about how full its control was even in these two instances. What's more, both plots failed miserably. There have also been a few attempts by al Qaeda's branch in Yemen. The most notable is the underwear bomber of 2009, who was outfitted by a Yemeni who is constantly called a “master bomb-maker” with a device that was [almost impossible to detonate](#) and (like the shoe bomb) far too small to bring down the airliner if it had gone off.

Al Qaeda has been quite good, however, at issuing videos threatening violence. Thus, it was over a decade ago that bin Laden denied that the “delay” in carrying out operations in the United States was “[due to failure to breach your security measures](#)” and then ominously revealed that “operations are under preparation, and you will see them on your own ground once they are finished, God willing.” God, apparently, has not been willing.

It is possible to argue, of course, that there [actually is a terrorist threat](#) and that the damage committed by

jihadists since 9/11 is so low because “American defensive measures are working,” as the journalist Peter Bergen wrote in his book *United States of Jihad*. Although these measures should be given some credit, it is not at all clear that they have made a great deal of difference.

To begin with, one can look at the dozens of [plots by Islamist extremists](#), many of them inspired by al Qaeda, seeking to commit terrorism in the United States. A few of these have been carried out, but most have been rolled up by authorities. In general, the capacities of the people involved are singularly unimpressive. A summary assessment by RAND’s Brian Jenkins is apt: “[their numbers remain small](#), their determination limp, and their competence poor.”

Indeed, most of these plots were at best embryonic or facilitated by infiltrating FBI operatives—as in the case of the [Rochester panhandler](#) who planned in the name of ISIS to wreak havoc at a local restaurant (where he had been treated with less than full courtesy) with a machete bought for him at [Walmart by one of the three FBI operatives](#) who had formed something of a cell around him. Left on their own, it is certainly possible that a few of the plotters would have been able to get their acts together and actually do something. But it seems unlikely that the total damage would increase by anywhere near enough to suggest that terrorism is something that could justifiably be said to present a threat.


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In addition to those prosecuted on terrorism charges, authorities have encountered a considerable number

of loud-mouthed aspirational terrorists within the United States, and, lacking enough evidence to convict them on terrorism charges, the authorities have levied lesser ones to jail or deport them. For the most part, these plots or aspirations are even less likely to lead to notable violence than the ones that have led to terrorism trials. Further, the bulk of people who are jailed on terrorism-associated prosecutions serve short terms and, accordingly, are soon set free to commit terrorism if they want to do so. Yet, none have attempted to do so.

Nor is it likely that much terrorism has been deterred by security measures. Extensive and very costly security measures may have taken some targets—commercial airliners and military bases, for example—off the list for just about all terrorists. However, no dedicated would-be terrorist should have much difficulty finding other potential targets if the goal is to kill people or destroy property to make a statement—the country is filled with these.

And, even though billions of foreigners have [entered the United States legally since 2001](#), al Qaeda appears to have been unable to smuggle in any operatives at all. No-fly lists and other security measures have doubtless contributed to that agreeable result, but the perfect success rate rather suggests inadequacy or lack of dedication on the part of the terrorist organization as well. Europe is clearly more accessible to the Middle East, but terrorism there during the al Qaeda period was mostly quite limited, and there were no major attacks for a full decade after 2005.

We have now endured a decade and a half in which it has been confidently, authoritatively, and repeatedly [proclaimed that al Qaeda](#) presents an existential threat to the United States (or even to the world system or civilization as we know it). It is time that such serial alarmists were questioned about their extravagant proclamations rather than being given ever more air

time. This is all the more important given that history may now be repeating itself with the Islamic State (ISIS), the vicious insurgent group in Iraq and Syria.

Americans have decided that the group constitutes a major problem. A [poll conducted in the spring of 2016](#) asked the 83 percent of its respondents who said they closely followed news stories about ISIS whether the group presented “a serious threat to the existence or survival of the US.” A full 77 percent agreed—more than two-thirds of them strongly.

And over the last year, people apparently inspired by ISIS did kill 63 in attacks in San Bernardino and Orlando—a bit more than lightning during the same period and far more people than other Islamist extremists killed in the United States in the entire decade and a half after 9/11. However, such attacks are unlikely to become common, and the appeal of ISIS is decidedly on the wane.

After its heady advances in the Middle East in 2014 and early 2015, ISIS now [appears to be in considerable disarray](#). The flow of foreign fighters may have [dropped by 90 percent](#), and the group has progressively been losing territory. Indeed, there are strong indications that, [two years after proclaiming its caliphate](#) and the start of a glorious new epoch, the group is preparing its supporters for the possibility, even likelihood, of total territorial collapse.

Meanwhile, continuous failure on the battlefield is having a dampening effect on enthusiasm and recruitment—the group no longer projects jihadist cool. By one count, there were [two plots by locals to commit terrorism](#) in the United States in 2014, neither of them ISIS-related. In 2015, the figure rose to 19, of which 14 were ISIS-related—that is, both plots related to and unrelated to ISIS increased very significantly.

Thus far in 2016, however, there have been but two (both ISIS-related). In addition, the [FBI reports that the trend for Americans](#) seeking to join ISIS is decidedly downward.

ISIS has a “[genius for making enemies](#),” Georgetown Professor Daniel Byman noted in a recent essay. In its decline, it has extended its perfect record by encouraging and then celebrating acts that are profoundly mindless (to put it oxymoronicly) such as slitting the throat of an 85-year-old French priest. But the damage its inspirees commit is likely to remain limited, if tragic and disgusting. Even if all the terrible outrages committed in Europe in 2015 are taken to be ISIS-related, far more people on that continent perished yearly at the hands of terrorists in most [years in the 1970s and 1980s](#). The continent was scarcely imperiled.

However, as with al Qaeda, the incentives are to play to the galleries: if 77 percent of the people appear to be convinced that ISIS presents “a serious threat to the existence or survival of the US,” there is likely to be considerably more purchase in servicing the notion than in seeking to counter it. You’ll get plenty of air time. 🌐



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