

THE ISLAMIC STATE PHENOMENON

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ABSTRACT: In 2014, a militant group calling itself the Islamic State, or ISIS, burst into official and public attention with some military victories in Iraq and Syria—particularly taking over Iraq’s second largest city, Mosul. At first the American public saw it as minor problem. But alarm greatly escalated a few months later when the group performed and webcast several beheadings of defenseless Western hostages, and by 2016, 77 percent said on polls that they deemed it to present “a serious threat to the existence or survival of the US.” This paper examines this 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 in its neighborhood, 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, much of 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—a process that is now well on its way. If people want to be afraid, nothing will stop them.

Keywords: terrorism, insurgency, public opinion, Islamic State, middle east, threat perception, threat inflation, ISIS

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.”¹ And Senators John McCain and Lindsay Graham swiftly declaimed that the group presented an existential threat to the United States.²

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.³ 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.”⁴ And Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel soared ever skyward, saying, “we’ve never seen a threat” like this before, a “comprehensive threat” with sophistication, armaments, strategic knowledge, funding, capacity, ideology. “It’s new. The threat is significantly worse than we’ve seen before, not just in Iraq, but in the Middle East.”⁵

The public began to accept these extreme characterizations after the beheadings, 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 ploy of the editors at the Daily Beast when it published a thoughtful article, entitled, “How ISIS’s ‘Attack America’ Plan Is Working.”⁶ 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, much of 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—a process that seems to be well underway.⁷

Al-Qaeda

For almost all of the period since September 11, 2001, the chief terrorist group of concern has been al-Qaeda, a fringe element of a fringe movement with grandiose visions of its own

¹ Fox News Sunday, June 29, 2014.

² McCain: Morning Joe, msnbc.com, June 13, 2014. Graham: Terkel 2014. See also Buchanan 2014a, 2014b.

³ Froomkin 2014. See also Zenko 2014.

⁴ Cross 2014.

⁵ Zenko 2014.

⁶ Zalkind 2015.

⁷ This paper expands and updates Mueller and Stewart 2016e.

importance.⁸ It 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 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. The attack also proved to be spectacularly counterproductive. It was apparently designed in the belief that the United States would respond to a massive attack at home by withdrawing from the Middle East.⁹ But it had, to say the least, the opposite effect.

As with the assassination of President John Kennedy in 1963, there has been a great reluctance to accept that such a monumental event could have been carried out by a fundamentally trivial entity, 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.¹⁰

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.’”¹¹

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.¹² 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.”¹³

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.¹⁴

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

⁸ On al-Qaeda as a fringe group, see especially Gerges 2005, 2011.

⁹ Wright 2006, 174, 200. Byman and Williams 2015. Gerges 2011, 85, 90.

¹⁰ For a discussion, see Mueller 2006, 45-47.

¹¹ Smith 2007. See also Koerner 2013.

¹² McDermott and Meyer 2012, 154, 311. U.S. v. Moussaoui, para. 76-89.

¹³ Smith 2007.

¹⁴ U.S. v. Moussaoui, para. 89.

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.¹⁵

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 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.¹⁶

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.¹⁷

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.”¹⁸ 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.¹⁹ 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

¹⁵ McDermott and Meyer 2012, 160, 328n2.

¹⁶ Kenney 2010, 916-17.

¹⁷ Wright 2006, 174, 200. Byman and Williams 2015, 15. Gerges 2011, 85, 90-91.

¹⁸ Gerges 2011, 92.

¹⁹ McDermott and Meyer 2010, 183. U.S. v. Moussaoui, para. 79.

many of its main people but also toppled the country's accommodating Taliban regime. In a videotaped message in 2004, he 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, was one of "bleeding America to the point of bankruptcy," triumphally pointing to the fact that the 9/11 terrorist attacks cost al-Qaeda \$500,000, while the attack and its aftermath inflicted, he claimed, "a cost of more than \$500 billion on the United States."²⁰ But that was more nearly a convenient rationalization than a fair representation of his goals when he had planned the attack—rather like that of his nemesis, George W. Bush, when he eventually argued that his invasion of Iraq was to establish democracy rather than to disrupt Saddam Hussein's supposed, and supposedly-threatening, weapons of mass destruction program.²¹ 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.²²

²⁰ Full transcript of bin Laden's speech, October 30, 2004, www.aljazeera.net.

²¹ On this issue, see Porter 2015, 109; Mueller 2011, ch. 7.

²² Hirsh 2011. Documents from bin Laden's lair, released in 2015, did show that he continued to harbor, in commentator David Ignatius' characterization, "big ambitions" (2015). (Although Ignatius alarmingly says that in his letters bin Laden "ominously presses for news about 'a big operation inside America'," 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.") However, they also show him wallowing in delusion. Apparently abandoning his 2004 protestations 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 noted 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 urged his tiny collection of terrorists to undertake "a large intensive media campaign" as well. He supplied no detail about how to carry out "this great feat," but he rather unhelpfully suggest that the group "must mobilize the best efforts and capabilities" for the task. Bin Laden concluded 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

Al-Qaeda after 9/11

After 9/11, al-Qaeda Central has been holed up in Pakistan.²³ However, its record of accomplishment has been rather meager, even taking into consideration that it has been isolated and under siege. Alarm about the group has been substantially misplaced.

Al-Qaeda Central, holed up in Pakistan, has consisted of perhaps one or two hundred people who, judging from information obtained in Osama bin Laden's lair when he was killed in May 2011, have been primarily occupied with dodging drone missile attacks, complaining about their lack of funds, and watching a lot of pornography.²⁴ It has served as something of an inspiration to some Muslim extremists, has done some training, seems to have contributed a bit to the Taliban's far larger insurgency in Afghanistan, and may have participated in a few terrorist acts in Pakistan. 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 failed miserably.²⁵

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. 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.²⁶ 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.²⁷ 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.²⁸ Moreover, even with the material at hand, Zazi *still* apparently couldn't figure it out, and he

and it was he who eventually ended it. The documents are posted at Will McCants, New Abbottabad Documents, March 15, 2015, jihadica.com/new-abbottabad-documents/.

²³ 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 potential 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.

²⁴ Mueller and Stewart 2016a, ch. 4; Sageman 2008; Gerges 2011; Jones 2012.

²⁵ Silber 2012. See also Sageman 2008, 139.

²⁶ Apuzzo and Goldman 2013, 109-14.

²⁷ Frieden 2009.

²⁸ 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.

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.²⁹

Zazi, like Neil Vinas a few years earlier, was genuinely dedicated to the Muslim extremist cause, and both were accepted by al-Qaeda. However, this proved to be disastrous for the group. 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.³⁰

Al-Qaeda has also issued 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.”³¹ God, apparently, has not been willing.

And ineptitude seems common, even rampant. Thus, communications between Zazi and al-Qaeda Central in 2009 naïvely used the word *wedding* as a code for their planned terrorist attack, even though authorities had 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.³²

Various variously affiliated groups in places like Iraq and Yemen and Nigeria have done considerable damage in connection with ongoing civil wars, but little to the “far enemy” which is al-Qaeda’s stated central goal.³³ For the most part, they haven’t even tried.

Meanwhile, authorities have been able to roll up dozens of plots by homegrown would-be terrorists, some of which have been inspired by al-Qaeda. Brian Jenkins’ summary assessment of these is apt: “their numbers remain small, their determination limp, and their competence poor.”³⁴ In contrast to this conclusion, there has been a widespread tendency to assume terrorists to be clever, crafty, diabolical, resourceful, ingenious, brilliant, and flexible—opponents fully worthy of the exceedingly expensive efforts being made to counter them.

The lack of success of al-Qaeda terrorists in the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, and other Western countries mirrors that in the United States: the number of people killed by Islamist

²⁹ Mueller 2017, case 28.

³⁰ Mueller 2017, cases 24 and 28.

³¹ For sources of these threats and for additional threats, see Mueller and Stewart 2011, 36.

³² Apuzzo and Goldman 2013, 9.

³³ In seeking to argue that al-Qaeda is “resurgent,” Seth Jones (2012) points almost entirely to the activities of the organization’s affiliates, not of the core group.

³⁴ Jenkins 2011, 1. See also Brooks 2011; Mueller and Stewart 2016a, ch. 3; Mueller 2017.

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 several years after 2001 outside of war zones.³⁵ That's 200 to 300 too many, of course, but it is about the same number as deaths from bathtub drownings in the United States.

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.³⁶ Another study documents the difficulties of network coordination that continually threaten the terrorists' operational unity, trust, cohesion, and ability to act collectively.³⁷

Even isolated and under siege, it is difficult to see why al-Qaeda (of any branch) could not have perpetrated attacks at least as costly and shocking as the shooting rampages (organized by others) that took place in Mumbai in 2008, at a shopping center in Kenya in 2013, in Paris and San Bernardino in 2015, or in Orlando and Berlin in 2016. None of these required huge resources, presented major logistical challenges, required the organization of a large number of perpetrators, or needed extensive planning.

The exaggeration of terrorist capacities has been greatest in the many much overstated assessments of their ability to develop nuclear weapons or devices.³⁸ 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.”³⁹

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

³⁵ 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, 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.

³⁶ Kenney 2010.

³⁷ Eilstrup-Sangiovanni and Jones 2008.

³⁸ For the classic alarmist case, see Allison 2004.

³⁹ Mueller 2010, xi.

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.⁴⁰

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.⁴¹ 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.

Central to the exaggeration exercise has been the identification of a few evil “masterminds” who were dominating the show.⁴² Since it made for good copy, journalists helped spread the word.

In his 2011 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; 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;

⁴⁰ For an extended discussion, see Mueller 2010, ch. 12-15; Jenkins 2008.

⁴¹ Lustick 2006, 171-72.

⁴² For more on this issue, including sources and an examination of other “masterminds,” see Mueller and Stewart 2016a, ch. 4.

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."⁴³

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 Miniter and others, was simply to supply some money.⁴⁴ 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.⁴⁵ 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.

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 5,000.⁴⁶ 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."⁴⁷

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 2008.⁴⁸ None of that happened, of course.

At the same time, the FBI Director Robert Mueller told a Congressional committee that 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

⁴³ McDermott and Meyer 2012, 310-13.

⁴⁴ Miniter 2011, 157. Also McDermott and Meyer 2012, 240.

⁴⁵ McDermott and Meyer 2012, 47.

⁴⁶ Gertz 2001. Sale 2002.

⁴⁷ Lines 2001.

⁴⁸ Clarke 2005.

sleuthing, they had been unable to uncover a single true al-Qaeda sleeper cell anywhere in the United States.⁴⁹

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 over two billion foreigners have entered the United States legally since 9/11, and one would think al-Qaeda could have smuggled in a few at least.

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.”⁵⁰

The 9/11 attacks proved to be a spectacular aberration, not a harbinger.⁵¹ And global security was not hampered, or even challenged.

ISIS

History may now be repeating itself with ISIS. One of the most remarkable phenomena of the last few years is the way this vicious insurgent group in Iraq and Syria has captured and exercised 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—tragic and disgusting, but hardly of the order of magnitude of destruction of 9/11—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.⁵²

From the outset, as noted earlier, Senators John McCain and Lindsay Graham proclaimed the group to be an existential threat to the United States. In 2015 and 2016, President Barack

⁴⁹ Mueller and Stewart 2016a, 23.

⁵⁰ Carle 2008.

⁵¹ On this issue, see Mueller 2002a, 2002b, 2003; Seitz 2004; Diab 2015.

⁵² Kropp 2015. Our thanks to Benjamin Friedman for bringing this item to our attention.

Obama repeatedly insisted that this extreme characterization is overblown.⁵³ However, he clearly lost the debate. 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.” Fully 77 percent agreed, more than two-thirds of them strongly.⁵⁴

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.

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

ISIS seems to be led by millenarian crackpots.⁵⁵ Its numbers are small, and it has differentiated itself from al-Qaeda, initially at least, in that it has not sought primarily to target the “far enemy,” preferring instead to carve out a state in the Middle East for itself, mostly killing fellow Muslims who stand in its way.⁵⁶ Unlike al-Qaeda Central, it welcomes foreign fighters into its ranks in sizeable numbers, and seeks to administer the territory it occupies. That is, it is far more like an insurgent group than like a terrorist one.⁵⁷

Thus, as Middle East specialist Ramzy Mardini put it in 2014, “the Islamic State’s fundamentals are weak”; “it does not have a sustainable endgame”; its “extreme ideology, spirit of subjugation, and acts of barbarism prevent it from becoming a political venue for the masses”; its foolhardy efforts to instill fear in everyone limits “its opportunities for alliances” and makes it “vulnerable to popular backlash”; “its potential support across the region ranges from limited to nonexistent”; and it “is completely isolated, encircled by enemies.”⁵⁸ In particular, its brutalities, such as staged beheadings of hostages, summary executions of prisoners, and the rape and enslavement of female captives have been greatly intensified opposition to the group. As Daniel Byman notes, it has a “genius for making enemies,” can’t make common cause even with other

⁵³ Mueller and Stewart 2016a, 24-25; Schneier 2015. See also Goldberg 2016. For rare journalistic commentary in support of Obama’s position, see Mazzetti et al. 2014.

⁵⁴ For data, see Mueller and Stewart 2017a. Obama arrestingly commented on the phenomenon in an interview. He noted that “ISIS had made a major strategic error by killing them because the anger it generated resulted in the American public’s quickly backing military action. If he had been ‘an adviser to ISIS,’ Mr. Obama added, he would not have killed the hostages but released them and pinned notes on their chests saying, ‘Stay out of here; this is none of your business.’ Such a move, he speculated, might have undercut support for military intervention” (Baker 2014).

⁵⁵ Wood 2015a.

⁵⁶ Byman 2016, 154. Byman and Williams, 2015, 13-14; Byman 2015, 170-72; Cronin 2015; Hegghammer and Nesser 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.

⁵⁷ On this distinction, see Cronin 2015; Mueller and Stewart 2016b, 2017b; Byman 2017, 67-68.

⁵⁸ Mardini 2014. See also al-Tamimi 2016; Mueller 2014; Gerges 2016, 284-89; Byman 2016, 138-39, 150-53; John Mueller and Mark Stewart 2016d.

Sunni rebel groups, and, by holding territory, presents an obvious and clear target to military opponents.⁵⁹

Not only does it scarcely present an existential threat to the United States (or to the globe), but it seems to be in very considerable decline in its core areas in Syria and Iraq.

Military prowess

ISIS's ability to behead defenseless hostages certainly should not be taken as an indication of its military might, and its major military advance, the conquest of Mosul in Iraq in 2014, was essentially a fluke. Its intention seems to have been merely to hold part of the city for a while in an effort to free some prisoners.⁶⁰ The far larger defending Iraqi army, trained by the American military at a cost to U.S. taxpayers of more than \$20 billion, 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 by perhaps 30 to one (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).⁶¹ The fall of the smaller city of Ramadi a few weeks earlier may have been similar: Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter noted that, while "vastly" outnumbering the ISIS attackers, the Iraqi forces had "failed to fight."⁶²

After its startlingly easy advances of 2014, however, the vicious group's momentum has been substantially halted, and its empire is currently under siege and in retreat.

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 claimed that ISIS was "ready to burn 10,000 fighters" in the fight and would "never accept to lose." However, they left after losses of a few hundred.⁶³

In late 2015, it tried to push back by launching three badly-coordinated 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.⁶⁴ By that time, ISIS leaders were including admissions that they were fighting the "whole world" and would likely "face even greater misfortunes" in the future in their official urgings of troops to fight on.⁶⁵

The weakness of the Iraqi army, even after billions more were spent by the United States on training, remains ISIS' main military "strength." And continuous wrangling, often vicious, among the various entities opposing it is also very much to its advantage.⁶⁶ However, after an additional expenditure of more than \$1.6 billion by the US, it was being reported that the Iraqi

⁵⁹ Byman 2016, 160, 152. See also Gerges 2016, 165-69, 233, 264. On the near-total rejection of ISIS's interpretation of Islam by scholars and theorists, including those very sympathetic to jihad, see Gerges 2016, ch. 6, 279-64.

⁶⁰ Dexter Filkins on "The Rise of ISIS," Frontline (PBS), October 28, 2014. Ned Parker et al. 2014.

⁶¹ Parker et al., 2014. \$20 billion: Morris and Ryan 2016. Outnumbered: Byman 2017, 72.

⁶² Beauchamp 2015. Beauchamp argues that Carter's statement is a mischaracterization.

⁶³ Fitch and Nissenbaum 2014.

⁶⁴ Gordon 2015. The editors of the *New York Times* placed this uncharacteristically upbeat item on page A16.

⁶⁵ Keating 2015.

⁶⁶ For a discussion of such rivalries, see Sly 2015b.

army, or significant portions thereof, had “revived considerably since its disastrous collapse in 2014” and that ISIS was in retreat on many fronts and appeared to be “a rapidly diminishing force.”⁶⁷ In part, minds may become concentrated and spines steeled by the fact that ISIS has foolishly developed a reputation for massacring people who surrender to it. By 2016, ISIS had lost some 40 percent of its territory overall,⁶⁸ 65 percent in Iraq.⁶⁹ The key issue, as US General Sean MacFarland has stressed, is not how good the forces arrayed against in ISIS are, but “Are they better than the enemy.” His conclusion: “Yes they are.”⁷⁰

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, concluded one analyst in 2016, “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.”⁷¹ 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.”⁷² In defense, they seem to rely primarily not on counteroffensives, but on planting booby traps, using snipers, and cowering among civilians.⁷³ Such tactics currently are on view as the Iraqi army and allies seeks to take back the city of Mosul.

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. Indeed, the fear of informants in the ranks has fueled paranoia, and executions of suspected spies and traitors to the cause has become common.⁷⁴

There has been another problem for ISIS. By most accounts, their most effective fighters had been those imported from Chechnya and nearby areas. 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.⁷⁵

Economic and social viability

ISIS soon found that actually controlling and effectively governing wide territories is a major strain. And it has had to work hard to keep people from fleeing its brutal lumpen Caliphate.⁷⁶ 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,

⁶⁷ Sly 2016. \$1.6 billion: Morris and Ryan 2016.

⁶⁸ Sly 2016. Warrick and Sly 2016.

⁶⁹ PBS NewsHour, May 11, 2016.

⁷⁰ Morris and Ryan 2016.

⁷¹ Sly 2016.

⁷² Sly 2015a.

⁷³ Knights and Mello 2015.

⁷⁴ CBS/AP 2016.

⁷⁵ International Crisis Group 2016. Thanks to Emma Ashford for bringing this report to our attention.

⁷⁶ Warrick and Sly 2016.

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.⁷⁷

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.⁷⁸

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 salaries of its fighters by half. Those salaries, it appears, constitute two-thirds of the group's operating budget.⁷⁹

In 2015, ISIS tried to create a currency that it called the “Gold Dinar.” In what the *Economist* calls “a bizarre sales pitch” for the new currency, it railed about “the dark rise of bank notes, born out of the satanic conception of banks” and proclaimed that the death of its “oppressive banknote” would bring America “to her knees.”⁸⁰ However, by 2016, ISIS seems to have scrapped its fanciful new currency and came to rely on US dollars. All utility bills, extortion payments, fines for dressing improperly, and inducements to obtain the release of detainees must be tendered in that currency. The regime also ceased supplying free energy drinks and Snicker bars to its followers. They now have to buy such essentials with their enemy's “oppressive” and “satanic” currency.⁸¹

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 had the tax, or extortion, base been 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.”⁸²

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. And, although ISIS continues to focus primarily on defending its shrinking lumpen caliphate in Syria and Iraq, by 2015 it appeared to have decided to lash out abroad to strike, in particular, foreign countries fighting it perhaps in part to divert attention from its territorial losses.⁸³

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

⁷⁷ Hansen-Lewis and Shapiro 2015, 152. See also Watts 2015; Shatz 2014; Sly 2014, 2015a; Mueller 2014; Shapiro 2013.

⁷⁸ Sly 2014.

⁷⁹ Kavanaugh 2016.

⁸⁰ *Economist* 2015. Thanks to Jacob Shapiro for bringing this article to our attention.

⁸¹ Associated Press 2016.

⁸² Warrick and Sly 2016.

⁸³ Morris 2015. Warrick and Sly 2016. Witte et al. 2016.

disillusioned, especially by in-fighting in the ranks; and do not receive much in the way of useful training for terrorist exercises back home.⁸⁴

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. 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.⁸⁵ His success in November may have made up for this, but his failure rate still remains high.

French President François Hollande argued that the attacks were against “our values, who we are, a free country that speaks to the entire planet.”⁸⁶ 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.”⁸⁷ Or, as a post-attack ISIS video put it, “As long as you keep bombing you will not find peace.”⁸⁸

President Hollande also labeled the Paris attacks as an “act of war” that was committed by a “terrorist army.”⁸⁹ And an 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.”⁹⁰ 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 wildly 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. Calling attention to developments in Somalia, analyst J.M. Berger points out that “The recent example of al-Shabaab 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.”⁹¹ While Berger's comparison with al-Shabaab 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.

The best estimates currently are that only about perhaps one in a hundred returnees from Syria has engaged in terrorism when they went back to Europe.⁹² Thus far, it appears that there

⁸⁴ Byman and Shapiro 2014b. See also Kenner 2014. For a broad consideration, see Hegghammer 2013.

⁸⁵ Higgins and Freytas-Tamura 2015. Callimachi et al. 2015.

⁸⁶ Vinocur 2015.

⁸⁷ Morris 2015.

⁸⁸ Beinart 2016.

⁸⁹ Vinocur 2015.

⁹⁰ Morris 2015.

⁹¹ Morris 2015.

⁹² Developed from Hegghammer and Nesser 2015, 20. See also Jenkins 2014.

has been only one returnee to the United States from the battlefields of Syria and he had actually been in a group that was fighting ISIS.⁹³

In a reactive ploy that has become routine for the group, ISIS has claimed responsibility for—or, more accurately, boorishly celebrated—terrorist attacks abroad like those in Paris, Brussels, Nice, Munich, and Berlin. But there is little indication that 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 initial reporting from the scene. Moreover, like the webcast beheadings of 2014 or the burning alive of a captured Jordanian pilot in early 2015, such terrorism has been spectacularly counterproductive and tends, as Friedman continues, “to provoke nationalistic anger, unifying nations against attackers rather acquiescence in their demands.”⁹⁴

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 early as September 2014, a top ISIS spokesman was urging foreign supporters to kill disbelievers, whether civilian or military, “in any manner or way however it might be” who happened to reside in countries that were “waging war.” The “spiteful and filthy French” were singled out for special attention.⁹⁵ As several recent attacks tragically demonstrate, potential targets for dedicated terrorists—peaceful aggregations of civilians—remain legion. However, as terrorism specialist Max Abrahms noted in 2011, “lone wolves have carried out just two of the 1,900 most deadly terrorist incidents over the last four decades.”⁹⁶ Although the attacks in Orlando and Nice in 2016 indicate that even lone wolves can sometimes do substantial damage, global security is unlikely to be challenged, much less upended, by such miscreants.

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.”⁹⁷ 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, continuous 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. By one count there only two Islamist terrorist plots by locals in the United States in 2014, neither of them ISIS-related. In 2015, this rose to 19, 14 of them ISIS-related—that is, both plots related to *and* unrelated to ISIS increased significantly. In 2016, however, the number of plots declined somewhat to 14 of which 11 were ISIS-related, most of the bone-headed failures.⁹⁸ In addition, the FBI reports that the trend for Americans seeking to join ISIS is also decidedly downward.⁹⁹ In fact, by 2016, the flow of foreign fighters going to

⁹³ Mueller 2017, case 60.

⁹⁴ Friedman, 2016. See also Wood 2015b. On the reaction to killing of the Jordanian pilot, see Warrick 2015, 311-16.

⁹⁵ Hegghammer and Nesser 2015.

⁹⁶ Abrahms 2011; see also Byman 2016, 164.

⁹⁷ Kaplan 2015.

⁹⁸ Mueller 2017; Bergen et al. 2016.

⁹⁹ Tucker 2016. Lichtblau 2016.

ISIS from any country may have dropped by 90 percent over the previous year.¹⁰⁰ Relevant to this issue is Paul Pillar's observation that "groups such as ISIS are less prime movers of terrorism and more of a name and a cause to which radicals attach themselves to believe that they are acting on behalf of something larger than themselves and their own demons and grievances."¹⁰¹

In this connection, there has 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.¹⁰²

Childishness is also found in 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."¹⁰³ And another bloviates, "Know, oh Obama, that we will reach America. Know also that we will cut off your head in the White House and transform America into a Muslim province."¹⁰⁴ Or there is the trainee in Syria who eagerly asked 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?"¹⁰⁵ And the preposterous, grandiloquent ravings of Islamic State forefather Abu Musab al-Zarqawi (who was killed in 2006), that "We fight here, while our goal is Rome" are gravely and ominously relayed as if they had some serious meaning.¹⁰⁶ Brian Jenkins' characterization tends to fit: "It's not a threat. It's a tweet."¹⁰⁷

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."¹⁰⁸

Assessing the future

After the heady days of 2014 and early 2015, ISIS appears to be in considerable disarray. Its advances have been stopped and then reversed, and it is in clear decline in its main base areas

¹⁰⁰ Gibbons-Neff 2016. Witte et al. 2016.

¹⁰¹ Pillar 2016.

¹⁰² Byman and Shapiro 2014a, 2014b; Brooks, 2011; Benson 2014; Bailey 2014; Gerges 2011, 192; Byman 2016, 158. In the United States there have been 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, pp. 97-100.

¹⁰³ McShane 2015.

¹⁰⁴ Pollak 2015.

¹⁰⁵ Druckerman 2016.

¹⁰⁶ Morello and Warrick 2016. On this issue, see also Lynch 2015.

¹⁰⁷ Susman 2015.

¹⁰⁸ Sageman 2008, 153-54. See also Mueller and Stewart 2016a, 130.

in the Middle East, especially Iraq where the siege of Mosul is now underway. Indeed, two years after proclaiming its caliphate and the start of a glorious new epoch in world history, the group was beginning to prepare its supporters for the possibility, even likelihood, of total territorial collapse while urging its supporters on with such cheerless proclamations as “a drowning person does not fear getting wet.”¹⁰⁹

The plan now seems to be to become a sort of virtual Islamic State, exacting revenge and reminding the world of its continued existence by launching sporadic and vicious terrorist attacks in the Middle East and by inspiring them abroad in any country at all, not just ones participating in the fight against ISIS: “We do have, every day, people reaching out and telling us they want to come to the caliphate,” says one operative, “But we tell them to stay in their countries and rather wait to do something there.”¹¹⁰

It is certainly possible to see this development as essentially, indeed profoundly, mindless and, as has been suggested by Secretary of State John Kerry, as an indication of the group’s desperation.¹¹¹

In the long term, there is good reason to believe that the ISIS policy will be self-destructive—like just about everything else it (or, for that matter, al-Qaeda in its “far enemy” phase) has done. The killing of civilians by terrorist or insurgent groups has been shown to be especially counterproductive. Thus, in her analysis of civil wars, Virginia Page Fortna concludes that insurgencies that employ “a systematic campaign of indiscriminate violence against public civilian targets” pretty much *never* win. Similarly, Max Abrahms finds that the targeting of civilians by terrorists is “highly correlated with political failure.”¹¹²

However, as the experience with al-Shabaab in Somalia suggests, declining insurgencies can make trouble and create misery in their operational area for years.

The generation and persistence of fear and alarm

In a thoughtful analytic perspective, Middle East specialist Marc Lynch concludes that ISIS seems to him to be “a fairly ordinary insurgency that has been unduly mystified and exoticized in the public discourse.”¹¹³ It does not differ from many other insurgencies in that it is peculiarly vicious or in that it applies a crackpot ideology—Boko Haram in Nigeria, for example, often seems to exhibit similar qualities as well.¹¹⁴ Rather, ISIS differs in the sense of mystery and exoticism it has generated not only in a considerable number of supporters around the globe but in its deeply alarmed opponents worldwide. Something similar could be said for al-Qaeda.

Thus there has been considerable push-back in prominent publications against Kerry’s plausible hypothesis that ISIS is getting desperate.

¹⁰⁹ Warrick and Mekhennet 2016. On this issue, see also Jenkins and Clarke 2016. Drowning: Milton and al-‘Ubaydi 2015.

¹¹⁰ Warrick and Mekhennet 2016.

¹¹¹ Morello and Warrick 2016.

¹¹² Fortna 2015. Abrahms 2006, 2016a, 2016b. For discussions of strategies that stress patient containment and harassment rather than direct confrontation while waiting for ISIS to implode, see Watts 2015; Hansen-Lewis and Shapiro 2015; Posen 2015; Biddle and Shapiro 2016.

¹¹³ Lynch 2015.

¹¹⁴ On the decline of the once much-feared Boko Haram, see Allen 2016.

One, for example, somehow concludes that, by massacring people in various locales in various countries, the group was actually growing in appeal—or in “allure” in the words of the headline writer.¹¹⁵ How this remarkable process has come about is not explained, nor is evidence given to back it up. Indeed, ISIS has followed policies and military approaches that have repeatedly proven to be counterproductive in the extreme in enhancing its “appeal” and/or “allure.” By 2016, opposition to the group among Arab teens and young adults had risen from 60 percent to 80 percent.¹¹⁶ Any allure the group may have in Iraq certainly fails to register on a poll conducted there in January 2016 in which 99 percent of Shiites and 95 percent of Sunnis express opposition to it.¹¹⁷ And its appeal among jihadists as dynamic, victorious, and unstoppable has been severely undercut: as noted, the flow of foreign fighters going to join the group has plunged, and there has been a clear decline in the degree to which it inspires what commentator Kurt Eichenwald calls “jihadist cool” and “Rambo envy.”¹¹⁸

Another acknowledges that the appeal of Islamic State as “the promise of living in an Islamist utopia” and as a victorious military force has been in severe decline, and that the group has suffered many defections in the ranks as well. But the group’s shift in focus from dealing with territorial degradation to slaughtering civilians in random attacks is taken not to be a sign of its “desperation and weakness,” but one that demonstrates its “strength and long-term survival skills.”¹¹⁹

How much substance remains behind the mystery and exoticism ISIS once inspired among jihadists has yet to be determined. However, the damage residual inspirees manage to commit is likely to remain limited, if tragic. Even if all the terrible outrages committed in Europe in 2015 and 2016 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.¹²⁰ The existence and survival of the continent were scarcely imperiled.

Such comparisons are frequently taken to be irrelevant. Terrorists like those in al-Qaeda and ISIS that manage to create a spooky threat that emanates from abroad—one that exudes mystery and exoticism—are commonly taken to present a danger that is not only special, but perpetual. 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, see Figure 3 and 4). This, despite many reasons (13 in our count) to expect otherwise (see Table 1). 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 as the group’s potency and appear wane.¹²¹

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

¹¹⁵ Morello and Warrick 2016. See also Warrick 2015, 314.

¹¹⁶ Gibbons-Neff 2016.

¹¹⁷ al-Dagher and Kaltenthaler 2016. See also Mark Tessler et al., 2016.

¹¹⁸ Eichenwald 2016. Byman, 2016, 146. Abrahms 2016b. Witte et al. 2016.

¹¹⁹ Hassan 2016.

¹²⁰ York 2015. Byman 2017, 67.

¹²¹ On public opinion on terrorism, see Mueller and Stewart 2016a, ch. 2; 2016c. For extensive trend data, see Mueller and Stewart 2017a.

may have kept the pot boiling. Special fear and anxiety seems to have been stoked particularly by the fact that Islamist terrorism, whether from al-Qaeda or ISIS, seems to be part of a large and hostile conspiracy and network that is international in scope and rather spooky in nature—rather along the lines, it appears, for international Communism during the Cold War.¹²² As with al-Qaeda in the decade and more after 9/11, the unwarranted fear and alarm ISIS has generated since 2014 may well persist even if it is effectively extinguished as a physical force in the Middle East. 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.”¹²³ That continues to be true today.

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. Donald Trump has certainly grasped and exploited this reality.

Thus, as with al-Qaeda, the unwarranted fear and alarm ISIS has generated since 2014 is likely to persist even if the group is effectively destroyed as a physical force in the Middle East. Because of the special formlessness, even spookiness, of terrorism’s hostile foreign referent in this case, it is likely to be exceptionally difficult to get people to believe that the threat has really been extinguished—or at least that it is no longer particularly significant.

Because of the persistent public fear and alarm about al-Qaeda and ISIS, leaders seem incapable of pointing out that an American’s chance of being killed by a terrorist is one in 4 million per year even with 9/11 included in the count (Table 2) and that Islamist terrorists have managed to kill but six or seven people per year since 2001.¹²⁴ And to suggest that, at that rate, terrorism might pose an acceptable risk (or even to discuss the issue) appears to be utterly impossible.¹²⁵ 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.¹²⁶

Obama seems to have been ready to go further, but never summoned the political courage to do so during his presidency. When his closest adviser told him people were worried that ISIS 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 would frequently remind his staff that “terrorism takes far fewer lives in America than handguns, car accidents, and falls in bathtubs do.” However, out of concern that Obama will “seem insensitive to the fears of the American people,” his advisers fought “a constant rearguard action to keep Obama from placing terrorism in what

¹²² Mueller and Stewart 2016c. See also Shapiro 2016.

¹²³ Atran 2010, xiv.

¹²⁴ Mueller and Stewart 2016f.

¹²⁵ On such issues, see Mueller and Stewart 2011, 2016a, 251-57. See also Bergen 2016, 270-72; Friedman et al, 2010; Walt 2016; Shapiro 2016; Byman 2017, 66-67.

¹²⁶ 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.

he considers its ‘proper’ perspective.”¹²⁷ Thus *Washington Post* reporter Greg Jaffe’s suggestion in 2013 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 a lesson put forward by analyst Stephen Sestanovich: “It’s not good politics to display your irritation with the American people.”¹²⁸

Meanwhile, General Michael Flynn, who had recently retired as head of the Defense Intelligence Agency and who now occupies a senior foreign policy slot in the Trump administration, 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.”¹²⁹

Thus, the incentives in the United States and elsewhere are to play to the galleries and to exaggerate the threat: 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.¹³⁰

Five years after 9/11, journalist James Fallows suggested that Americans then “lacked leaders to help keep the danger in perspective.”¹³¹ Despite Obama’s almost embarrassingly modest effort, Fallows’ observation remains valid today. In 2015, Fred Kaplan urged Obama to “take command of the narrative.”¹³² However, even his modest effort to rein in the War on Terror hyperbole failed to gel. This experience as well as that of the Paris attacks, notes Greg 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.”¹³³ As part of this process, the misoverestimation of terrorism and of the threat that ISIS presents will continue apace. If people want to be afraid, nothing will stop them.

¹²⁷ Goldberg 2016. Goldberg himself apparently does not share Obama’s perspective. See Goldberg 2013.

¹²⁸ Jaffe 2015. Something similar happened to President Dwight Eisenhower on the notion of whether the Soviet Union really threatened to launch a major war. See Mueller 2016b.

¹²⁹ Dozier 2015.

¹³⁰ For example: Dozier 2015, and just about any speech at the Republican Convention of 2016. See also Mueller 2016a.

¹³¹ Fallows 2006.

¹³² Kaplan 2015.

¹³³ Jaffe 2015. See also Shapiro 2016.

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Table 1: 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

Table 2: 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
Terrorism	Northern Ireland	1970–2013	1,780	1 in 50,000
Industrial accidents	US	2007	5,657	1 in 53,000
Homicide	Canada	2008	611	1 in 55,000
Intifada	Israel	2000–2006	553	1 in 72,000
Homicide	Great Britain	2008	887	1 in 67,000
Homicide	Australia	2008	290	1 in 76,000
Terrorism	US	2001	2,982	1 in 101,000
Natural disasters	US	1999–2008	6,294	1 in 480,000
Drowning in bathtub	US	2003	320	1 in 950,000
Terrorism	UK	1970–2013	2,221	1 in 1,200,000
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
Terrorism	US	1970–2013	3,372	1 in 4,000,000
Terrorism	Canada	1970–2013	336	1 in 4,300,000
Terrorism	Great Britain	1970–2013	441	1 in 5,900,000
Peanut allergies	US	yearly average	50-100	1 in 6,000,000
Lightning	US	1999–2008	424	1 in 7,000,000
Terrorism	Australia (including Bali)	1970–2013	120	1 in 8,000,000
Transnational Terrorism	World outside war zones	1975–2003	13,971	1 in 12,500,000



