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Testimony

The Implications of the Paris Terrorist Attack for American Strategy in Syria and Homeland Security

Brian Michael Jenkins

RAND Office of External Affairs

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Testimony presented before the Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee on November 19, 2015

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The RAND Corporation

The Implications of the Paris Terrorist Attack for American Strategy in Syria and Homeland Security[2]

Before the Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs
United States Senate

November 19, 2015

Chairman Johnson, Ranking Member Carper, distinguished members of the Committee, thank you for inviting me to address this urgent issue.

I would like to be able to report that, in response to the terrorist attacks in Paris, all of the perpetrators have been identified and apprehended, they will be executed promptly, airstrikes have smashed the Islamic State, and an event such as this will never happen again.

The reality, however, is that this conflict is likely to go on, there are no quick or easy solutions, and terrorists will attempt further attacks.

This hearing was urgently called following the November 13 terrorist attack in Paris. Investigations are continuing in France while we are witnessing the consequences of that attack in Syria. Let me offer some quick observations:

The fighting in Syria and Iraq will continue.

Right now, the situation is at a military stalemate. By stalemate, I mean that the insurgents arrayed against the Syrian government and the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL)[3] forces

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[2] This testimony is available for free download at http://www.rand.org/pubs/testimonies/CT445.html.

[3] The organization's name transliterates from Arabic as al-Dawlah al-Islamiyah fi al-'Iraq wa al-Sham (abbreviated as Da'ish or DAESH). In the West, it is commonly referred to as the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, the Islamic State of Iraq and the Sham (both abbreviated as ISIS), or simply as the Islamic State (IS). Arguments abound as to which is the most accurate translation, but here we refer to the group as ISIL.

in Iraq cannot overthrow governments in Damascus or Baghdad, but for the foreseeable future, neither government will be able to restore its authority throughout national territory.

Sectarian and ethnic divisions now drive the conflicts, which have become an existential contest for all of the local parties—it is a fight to the death or, at least, exhaustion.

Syria and Iraq are now effectively partitioned—Iraq into relatively homogenous Shia, Sunni, and Kurdish zones and Syria into a messier mosaic. This partition is likely to persist.

Foreign powers have significant stakes in the conflicts, but competing interests. Absent major military investments, outsiders cannot guarantee the victory of local allies.

The world will be dealing with the fallout of this conflict for years to come.

Such fallout includes a continuing terrorist threat, returning foreign fighters, and a deluge of refugees.

ISIL continues to exhort its affiliate groups and individual followers abroad to carry out terrorist attacks on its behalf and has been involved in a number of terrorist plots.

ISIL's ideology continues to exert a powerful pull. The American-led coalition bombing campaign in Syria and Iraq, along with ground offensives by Iraqi government forces and Kurdish fighters, have recaptured some territory from ISIL, but the number of individuals joining or planning to join ISIL has not diminished.

ISIL is calling on more to come. It offers believers what it portrays as an authentic Islamic state, while its advertised atrocities promise opportunities for unlimited violence.

ISIL portrays its struggle in apocalyptic terms as the final showdown between believers and infidels. This encourages extreme action and individual sacrifice. It also serves a useful propaganda purpose in the Islamic State's current circumstances. ISIL is being bombed; many in its ranks are being killed. ISIL attempts to maintain the morale of its fighters by arguing that this suffering is foretold, that it is God's will, and that it is proof that ISIL is on the right side of the conflict.

I suspect that as ISIS is put under increasing military pressure, we will see more references to the end of times and more calls to its supporters to carry out attacks, lest they be left behind and miss their shot at paradise.

The volume of recruits and potential recruits is overwhelming authorities in Europe. While the number of Americans wanting to go to Syria has increased, it remains a fraction of the number of Europeans who are joining ISIL's cause.

As a consequence of the destructive style of fighting, especially in Syria, 12 million people have been displaced, 8 million internally and 4 million fleeing the country. Another 4 million have fled or have been internally displaced in Iraq.

Hundreds of thousands of these refugees have headed to Europe, raising fears that terrorists can hide among the refugee masses to gain entrance into a country. Thus far, we have seen little evidence of this, although one of the terrorists in the Paris attack may have arrived in Europe as a refugee. This is still being investigated.

The terrorist attack in Paris offers some important takeaways.

The Paris attack reminds us of the continuing terrorist threat, although we should not need reminding. Al Qaeda declared war on the United States nearly 20 years ago and continues to be dedicated to attacking the "far enemy"—that's us. The emergence of ISIL in 2012 has heightened the threat. In their online websites and through social media, both organizations continue to call on followers to attack American targets.

Since 9/11, there have been multiple terrorist attacks on American citizens abroad, attempts to bring down U.S.-bound airliners, and scores of homegrown terrorist plots. We don't like to use the term, but the United States is at war.

The terrorists in Paris attacked soft targets—restaurants, a stadium, a nightclub where they knew they would encounter little or no security. This attack was all about the killing. People were the target.

Terrorists almost always have the advantage. Theoretically, they can attack anything, anywhere, anytime. And governments cannot protect everything, everywhere, all the time. Roughly 80 percent of all terrorist attacks are carried out at locations where there are no security perimeters to penetrate, no armed guards to respond.

The lethality of the attack in Paris reflects the determination of the attackers to kill wantonly, not tactical sophistication or combat skills. The attackers combined suicide bombers with armed assaults and hostage taking at multiple locations—a worst-case scenario for police response. As we have seen in the United States, a single determined shooter can cause havoc. Many deaths can occur in the first few minutes. Despite rapid response, casualties will likely run high.

The Paris attack underscores the importance of intelligence. We do not know how a plot involving eight attackers, the acquisition of automatics weapons, and construction of seven suicide vests got past French authorities. Thousands of French fighters have gone to Syria, and some of them have returned. Thousands more are suspected of preparing to go. Others are most certainly planning attacks in France; several homegrown terrorist plots have been thwarted. The French intelligence services are being overwhelmed by the number of people they must keep under surveillance.

France was targeted because ISIL was able to recruit the human assets—French and Belgian nationals—to carry out the attacks. **The availability of terrorist recruits in France and Belgium reflects societal issues of isolated, marginalized, and alienated communities where extremist ideologies can easily take root. This will take a long time to fix.**

The Paris attack may reflect a new threat configuration. The 9/11 attacks were centrally planned, directed, and supported. The original hijackers were sent to the United States with an agreed-upon plan. They communicated with al Qaeda's operational planners and received additional funds and later reinforcements.

The Shoe bomber and Underwear bomber were lone operatives recruited and equipped to carry out their attacks on airlines headed to the United States.

While al Qaeda taught Najibullah Zazi how to make explosive devices, he planned the attack to carry out suicide bombings on New York's subways.

Responding to exhortations, self-radicalized homegrown terrorists—on their own initiatives—have plotted terrorist attacks.

The investigation is ongoing, but the Paris attack reportedly involved a cell of French nationals with ISIL in Syria determined to carry on a terrorist campaign in France. They remotely recruited and assisted their own acquaintances in France and Belgium to carry out attacks. The ringmaster

was in Syria. The assets were local residents, but some may have come from Syria. In other words, it was not solely a matter of homegrown terrorists, returning fighters, or direction from fellow nationals abroad, but a combination of all three.

The Paris attacks have increased pressure on the United States to step up the fight in Syria and Iraq, but adjustments to strategy should be a matter of degrees, not fundamental course changes.

The terrorist attack in Paris has understandably caused alarm beyond France and has renewed debate about America's strategy to fight terrorism.

For some critics, the continuing chaos in Syria and Russia's intervention are the result of a vacuum created by American timidity. The Paris attack provides further proof that the current strategy of containment—and of what could be described as the "slow strangulation" of ISIL—cannot prevent ISIL from mounting a global terrorist campaign that threatens Europe and the United States. **We need to be prepared for a terrorist backlash.**

On the opposite side of the debate, some Americans are convinced that the United States ought to disengage. They believe that the United States cannot, without a huge military investment, significantly affect the outcome of a nasty civil war, and that attempts to do so will only make matters worse, above all, bogging the United States down in another Middle East war while the country faces more-serious national security challenges elsewhere and even more-pressing domestic problems.

My own view is that the rise of ISIL and al Qaeda in Syria and Iraq directly threaten U.S. security. Disengagement would be dangerous. The United States clearly has the power to do more militarily, but must keep cool and stay smart. The immediate threat posed by homegrown terrorists, returning foreign fighters, and terrorist infiltrators among Syrian refugees is real but manageable. We should not be provoked into measures that in the long run—and this has the potential to be a very long run—could turn out to be counterproductive.

Conventional American ground forces (with or without North Atlantic Treaty Organization [NATO] allies) can shatter ISIL's military formations, although **we should not underestimate the number of troops required or the friendly casualties that could come from dislodging ISIL from a dug-in defense of the urban areas it now holds.** One need only look at how tough the fighting was for the Kurds taking Sinjar or for the Iraqis to take towns held by ISIL to understand that fighting an enemy that is determined to die in battle is a fundamentally different challenge.

Breaking ISIL's military formations will not end ISIL's campaign, but will push ISIL's fighters underground where they continue their armed struggle as the jihadist insurgents did in the years following the American defeat of Saddam Hussein's army in 2003. **America will still face a long-term pacification problem.** For good reasons, American military commanders are not enthused about the prospect of seeing the armed forces tied down in another bloody and costly counterinsurgency campaign.

The air campaign against ISIL can be intensified. In retaliation for the terrorist attacks, the French already have increased their operations, with more on the way. The United States has recently deployed more aircraft. But the issue is not just more airplanes, but identifying sufficient targets and being willing to increase the risk of collateral casualties and damage. Ruthlessness by itself is not much of a strategy.

The United States can deploy additional special operations forces to assist non-jihadist formations, as it has done to support Kurdish fighters who have had some success in pushing back ISIL. The numbers involved are small, but can make a big difference in facilitating the sharing of intelligence, planning operations, coordinating air support, and facilitating re-supply. However, the other Syrian rebel formations have not yet proved to be a significant fighting force, and a strategy of more Americans on the ground comes with the risk of casualties and politically dangerous hostage situations. **No option is risk free.**

The United States can begin to recruit a Sunni army, initially not to directly challenge ISIL on the battlefield, but instead to draw off those within ISIL's zone of influence who have little income now and face an even more desperate future as the coalition's air campaign destroys what remains of the Islamic State's economy—and who may end up in ISIL's ranks out of sheer hunger. **This is competitive recruiting rather than open combat,** but it is cheaper to pay soldiers than it is to hunt them down as enemies.

Containing ISIL on the ground and protecting surrounding nations, especially Jordan and Saudi Arabia, should be a priority. ISIL's black flag flying over Mecca would have catastrophic consequences.

Smashing ISIL on the ground will scatter its foreign fighters. As foreigners, they will not survive long in an underground resistance movement. Some of these fighters will return home or move on to other jihadist fronts to continue their armed struggle.

Destroying the Islamic State will validate ISIL's Armageddon propaganda while further galvanizing its supporters abroad.

Paradoxically, success against ISIL in Syria and Iraq may heighten the threat of terrorism beyond. As ISIL becomes more desperate, its support for terrorist operations abroad will increase. Some foreign fighters will come back seeking revenge for their defeat. ISIL supporters will want to prove the struggle is not lost.

This is not to argue that leaving ISIL alone will bring peace—it will not—but rather to point out that **future terrorist attacks cannot always be interpreted as evidence of a failing counterterrorist strategy in Syria.**

What we see taking place in the Middle East and Europe has direct implications for U.S. homeland security.

Terrorist plots must be the operative presumption. That has been the case for years, but the current military effort in Syria could produce a surge in terrorist attacks outside of Syria.

Surprises are almost guaranteed. What happened in Paris is shocking but not surprising, in the sense that we know France in particular has been under terrorist assault. Surprises and setbacks are a feature of all wars, and especially of conflicts of long duration.

We should not overreact. It is difficult to stay on course. Americans do not excel at being phlegmatic. We are an impatient nation. We are heavyweight fighters looking for knockout blows in early rounds. To suggest anything less than that risks condemnation.

We need to be prepared but also keep the threat to the United States in context. We suffered a horrific terrorist blow on 9/11, which was unprecedented in the annals of terrorism and has cast a long shadow. We have witnessed appalling terrorist attacks in Madrid, London, and elsewhere throughout the world—now Paris. No doubt, there will be more. This is the way of the world today.

The United States is not Europe. Even though the number of Americans heading to Syria has increased, it remains a fraction of those going from France, Belgium, the United Kingdom, and Germany.

Terrorist attempts and plots in the United States reveal no evidence of a deep reservoir of recruits. Most are one-off attempts by individuals or tiny conspiracies. There is little organizational connectivity between recent terrorist plots in the United States. Unlike the more turbulent 1970s, there have been no sustained campaigns of terrorism.

The United States must be prepared for an array of terrorist attacks—mini-Mumbai scenarios like the one carried out in Paris cannot be ruled out.

Authorities have uncovered a number of plots involving armed assaults by gunmen and suicide attacks. **More likely to unfold on American soil, however, are the low-level, often amateurish attempts that we are familiar with.**

Larger-scale terrorist plots, if initiated from abroad, would still require local confederates. **The record of U.S. intelligence efforts since 9/11 has been remarkable.** Of close to 60 known jihadist terrorist plots, all but a handful have been interrupted. We are batting .900.

Intelligence has been our first line of defense. The 9/11 attacks brought about unprecedented international cooperation among intelligence services and law enforcement organizations. This needs to be maintained and expanded. **Our European allies are still struggling to achieve the kind of cooperation among their intelligence services that we have achieved here.** The United States should assist Europe in whatever way it can while enhancing American access to vital information on foreign fighters or terrorist networks that could threaten U.S. security.

Americans are uncomfortable with domestic intelligence efforts, and some communities find them offensive. Domestic intelligence is vital to homeland security and to preventing the kind of suspicions and hostilities that arise when terrorist attacks occur. **Efforts aimed at countering violent extremism, which some communities find equally offensive, cannot substitute for domestic intelligence and criminal investigations.**

Foreign fighters coming back from Syria must be identified. **The Visa Waiver program does not offer anybody a free pass to enter the country.** There are still checks in place. But terrorist watch lists need to be informed by continuing exchanges of information between the United States and visa waiver countries.

The intelligence role of U.S. Customs and Border Protection can be enhanced. Secondary interviews of those arriving at U.S. ports of entry should be viewed as opportunities to collect

intelligence. I am not suggesting that we increase the number of secondary interviews, but that we exploit them.

The United States does not face the deluge of refugees pouring into Europe. Unlike Europe, **U.S. authorities will have more opportunities to vet applicants before they arrive, and the numbers being admitted are much smaller.**

However, these are extraordinary circumstances. While the refugees may be fleeing from some of the same groups that are currently being attacked by the United States, they are coming from an active war zone where violence continues, where loyalties are fluid, and where America's opponents are exhorting followers to carry out terrorist attacks in the United States. **Security concerns dictate thorough vetting.**

It is not just a matter of keeping the bad guys out. The refugees currently flowing into Europe include a large percentage of single young males. This is typical of refugee populations, but these young men are coming from violent environments; they have little or no education; they will be difficult to employ. Frustrated and angry, some will turn to crime. Others may be receptive to radical ideologies.

Recruiting does happen here. Beginning in 2007, several dozen Somali-Americans, mainly from Minneapolis, returned to Somalia to fight invaders from Ethiopia and later to join al Qaeda's affiliate, al-Shabaab. This was a community already troubled by its young men joining street gangs. After learning of the recruiting that had secretly been going on, the community cooperated with authorities to successfully halt it.

The United States excels at assimilating immigrants, but a tiny fraction of America's new arrivals invariably bring the quarrels of their homeland with them. In a country of immigrants, this is not a new phenomenon. Previous diasporas have produced their share of terrorist groups and criminal gangs. There is no evidence, as far as I know, to indicate that Arab or Muslim immigrants in this country are having trouble assimilating into American society.

The conflicts in the Middle East and their consequences add layers to the existing terrorist threat. The threat is dynamic, and every major terrorist attack tells us more about how our foes operate.

For the past half century, the United States has dealt with homegrown and foreign terrorist threats. The years since 9/11 have been exceptionally tranquil. **New laws, institutions, and programs have been put in place to prevent terrorist violence; these approaches appear to**

be working. But as with any security measures, there is a tendency for vigilance to decline. The Paris attack tells us to keep our guard up.