Fifteen Years After 9/11
A Preliminary Balance Sheet

Addendum

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Fifteen Years After 9/11: A Preliminary Balance Sheet

Testimony of Brian Michael Jenkins
The RAND Corporation

Before the Committee on Armed Services
United States House of Representatives

January 11, 2017

The subsequent question and answer found in this document was received from the Committee for additional information following the hearing on September 21, 2016 and were submitted for the record

Question from Senator James Langevin
Mr. Brian Michael Jenkins 2) As we look back to the state of our national security 15 years ago, I believe that we are safer from the type of orchestrated attack that shocked us all on September 11, 2001. However, I am concerned that we have not plugged some of the security gaps that still threaten us today – gaps that led to the attacks in San Bernardino and Orlando, for example – and I worry that the progress of those who wish to do us harm has outpaced our ability to defend against nontraditional threats. Do you believe that we as a government and as a nation have adjusted over the past 15 years – militarily, politically, and mentally – so that we can make more rational and effective decisions to mitigate the evolving threats before us?

Brian Michael Jenkins Response:
I would agree with you that the United States is safer now from the type of orchestrated terrorist attack that we suffered on September 11, 2001. Over the past 15 years, through its military and intelligence efforts, the United States has made progress both in degrading al Qaeda’s operational capabilities and in creating a more hostile operating environment for terrorists. U.S. authorities have a much greater chance now of detecting and disrupting terrorist plots directed from abroad.

The rise of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) created new challenges, both in the Middle East and domestically, but the current military campaigns in Iraq and Syria are reducing ISIL’s territory and its operational capabilities. However, we have to anticipate that the defeat of ISIL on the ground could lead to a surge in terrorist attacks worldwide as foreign fighters scatter

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1 The opinions and conclusions expressed in this testimony are the author’s alone and should not be interpreted as representing those of the RAND Corporation or any of the sponsors of its research.
2 The RAND Corporation is a research organization that develops solutions to public policy challenges to help make communities throughout the world safer and more secure, healthier and more prosperous. RAND is nonprofit, nonpartisan, and committed to the public interest.
to other jihadist fronts or bring their violence home. We also have to recognize that the fall of ISIL does not mean the end of the contest—it will move underground, with perhaps greater incentive to export violence. The terrorist threat will continue.

While further improvements can still be made in domestic intelligence, the United States has expanded its collection effort and has improved information-sharing within the federal government and between the federal government and state and local authorities. As a result, authorities have uncovered and thwarted more than 80 percent of the known domestic terrorist plots inspired from abroad since 2001. Without asserting that every single one of these plots would have led to a deadly attack had authorities not intervened, it is nonetheless a remarkable achievement.

One hundred percent prevention is unrealistic. Further terrorist attacks will occur. It is important to keep in mind that the death toll from those that have occurred thus far is only a tiny fraction of the total volume of ordinary criminal violence in the United States. And, together, just two jihadist terrorist attacks (in San Bernardino and Orlando) account for 71 percent of the total number of fatalities caused by such attacks in the United States since 9/11.

3 Counting terrorist plots can be tricky. In my own research, I have identified more than 80 cases in which individuals in the United States, generally motivated by jihadist ideology, plotted terrorist attacks. These were in various states of maturity from half-baked ideas to actual attacks. An earlier list of these cases can be in Brian Michael Jenkins, Stray Dogs and Virtual Armies: Radicalization and Recruitment to Jihadist Terrorism in the United States since 9/11. Santa Monica, CA: The RAND Corporation, 2011.


Obviously, these lists overlap. I would exclude from the Heritage chronology attempts like that of the Shoe bomber, the Underwear Bomber and other plots against U.S.-bound aircraft or trains where the plotting was done outside of the United States along with several other cases. Ultimately, these are judgment calls. Adding or excluding a case does not change the overall remarkable record of federal and local investigators in thwarting terrorist plots. With these exclusions, my own list runs to 82 jihadist plots. Of these, 69 (or 84 percent) were uncovered and thwarted by the authorities. In the remaining 14 cases, the plotters were able to carry out an attempt, although these attempts were not all successful. Six of the attacks resulted in fatalities, not counting the attacker. Seven cases resulted in injuries. In the remaining case, the plotter’s bomb failed to explode.

4 Ibid. The attacks included above resulted in a total of 89 fatalities; 49 were killed in the Orlando attack and 14 in San Bernardino—a total of 63 (or 70.8 percent of the total.)
You describe these in your question as “nontraditional threats,” and in a way, these attacks—along with others, like the shooting in Chattanooga—depart from the previously presumed patterns of radicalization.

Like most of the previous plots, the attacks in San Bernardino and Orlando involved a single individual or a tiny conspiracy (a husband and wife). The perpetrators of those attacks claimed allegiance to ISIL, which, in turn, claimed responsibility but played no active role beyond inspiration. Authorities also uncovered al Qaeda propaganda, suggesting that the specific group affiliation was not very important to the killers.

The biographies of the Chattanooga and Orlando shooters reveal mental health issues, records of substance abuse, histories of aggression—these were deeply troubled individuals. Violent jihadist ideology reinforced, channeled, and justified their aggressive tendencies but ought not to be seen as the sole source of their inspiration. A complex skein of motives propelled the shooters to action, and it is difficult to weight the contribution of each. Even without a jihadist accelerant, these shooters still might have killed.

Such attacks are not easily prevented. Violent ideologies will continue to inspire violent behavior. Counter-radicalization programs are worth considering, as long as they don’t lead to government attempts to patrol ideologies and dictate personal beliefs. And as we have often seen in the United States, violent behavior may occur without ideological reinforcement. The mental health problems that were present in some of the recent terrorist attacks indicate that, in a sense, the terrorists are not that far from the other shooters who have appeared in our society.

Intelligence agencies are never omniscient, even in police states. Firearms are available, and crude explosive devices can be improvised. Instructions are available on the Internet, but decades ago, similar instruction manuals were readily available at any library or bookstore, and terrorists then built better bombs than they do now.

Have we as a government and as a nation adjusted over the past 15 years—militarily, politically, and mentally—so that we can make more rational and effective decisions to mitigate the evolving threats?

I believe we have, militarily and politically. Mentally, in my view, we have not. American society is obsessed with security. Our only question is, Are we safer now? That is the perspective of victimhood. It reflects fear and apprehension. According to recent public opinion polls⁵, Americans today fear terrorist attacks as much as they did immediately after 9/11. Yet the data show that the terrorist threat has been diminished, if not eliminated, and the level of risk to individual citizens is minuscule.

We have to accept that countering terrorism will be an enduring task, but we need not cower in fear of defeat or domination by Islamic radicals. Instead of fueling fear or overpromising security, we should call upon the traditional American attributes of being tough-minded, showing true grit, and sticking together in the face of threats. Our common defense will come, as it always has, from our collective courage.