TESTIMONY

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There Will Be Battles in the Heart of Your Abode

The Threat Posed by Foreign Fighters Returning From Syria and Iraq

Addendum

Brian Michael Jenkins

RAND Office of External Affairs

Brian Michael Jenkins[1]
The RAND Corporation

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

April 17, 2015

The subsequent questions and answers found in this document were received from the Committee for additional information following the hearing on March 12, 2014 and were submitted for the record.

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SENATOR CARPER:

Can you please identify and detail some of the "root causes" that may be driving extremists to join the ranks of ISIS and al-Qaeda in Syria and Iraq? Additionally, what would be some of the "root causes" motivating foreign fighters to carry out attacks against the United States?

JENKINS RESPONSE:

Concern about al-Qaeda and ISIS recruiting Western foreign fighters who might be turned around to carry out terrorist attacks or return to continue their terrorist campaigns at home has renewed discussions of *root causes*. Why do people become terrorists? Or, more specifically, in light of its advertised atrocities, how could anyone be attracted to anything as abominable as ISIS?[3]

No Terrorist-Prone Personalities

No single root cause explains why some individuals choose to become terrorists while others do not. In the 1970s, the first decade of contemporary terrorism, there were numerous efforts to identify a terrorist-prone personality—some identifiable pathology that would explain the seemingly crazy behavior of terrorists. None could be found.

Researchers found that terrorists shared no physiological defects or psychological disorders. Behavioral scientists found evidence of self-identity problems among some terrorists, not uncommon among many young people. Many who joined terrorist groups seemed prone to disillusion. Among terrorists (but also among people who were not terrorists), there were true-believer types drawn to rigid, no-room-for-doubt belief systems—black-and-white, us-versus-them ideologies. There were racists and ideological and religious fanatics.

Some sought personal risk to prove their commitment. Some were willing to commit suicide for a cause. But terrorists were not found to be crazy in any clinical sense, although one could find among them what psychologists used to call sociopaths and now refer to as persons with an antisocial personality disorder. The violent videos of ISIS would seem to appeal to this particular type.

"Root Cause" a Code for Inaction

When researchers in the 1970s found that personal pathology did not appear to create terrorists, they turned to the environment. Could root causes, they asked, be found in economic, political, historical, societal, or situational factors that induced this particular form of political violence? Because terrorism did not affect the world evenly, with some areas experiencing much higher levels of terrorism, was there such a thing as a terrorist-prone country? Did the explanation for terrorism lie in the absence of democratic means of expressing dissent? Was terrorism a response to continuing colonialism and the label "terrorism" itself an imperialist plot to delegitimize "national liberation" movements?

Discussions of root causes, which often reflected Cold War divisions and Third World attitudes, tended to delay efforts to enlist international cooperation in practical efforts to deal with immediate problems. Instead of focusing on preventing or discouraging airline hijackings or attacks on diplomats, who were supposed to be internationally protected, international meetings wandered off into futile debates about whether some perpetrators were freedom fighters who should not be labeled "terrorists" because their objectives were legitimate.

Frustrated pragmatists saw "root causes" as code for efforts to portray terrorists as victims of society's ills, thereby mitigating their actions. The term still carries this connotation and risks misunderstanding.

Socioeconomic Grievances an Inadequate Explanation

Some notions emphasize the importance of socioeconomic grievances in terrorist recruitment. According to these theories, poverty, lack of education, and unemployment are the root causes of terrorism. Therefore, economic development, better education, and the provision of jobs will reduce the number of those who become terrorists. This has become a fundamental tenet of counterinsurgency strategy that aims to maintain the allegiance of the population by improving its condition. But it may not work in reducing terrorist recruitment. In fact, a recent RAND study examining how the United States ended its participation in the Iraq war at the end of 2011 found that the largest counterinsurgency and nation-building effort since the Korean War had little effect on the Iraqi public's perceptions and had no effect on those willing to engage in terrorism.[4]

Insurgencies may or may not use terrorist tactics, but very few terrorist campaigns manage to ascend to full-scale insurgencies. They simply lack the numbers to control territory or population. Very small gangs—a handful of people—can carry on terrorist campaigns. The specific causes they pursue can be either extremely narrow or so broad as to be meaningless, such as "worldwide revolution." These campaigns seldom challenge the survival of the state, although they may make it more oppressive.

Insurgency requires much greater strength in numbers and must compete with the state for support. ISIS has managed to do this. Government measures to improve the lives of the people may reduce popular support for the insurgents, however, making it more difficult for them to operate and recruit.

Terrorist groups also may claim popular support, but here the total numbers are less important. Terrorists need only to find like-minded individuals within a narrow slice of their claimed constituency. Government efforts to improve the well-being of the population have little effect in impeding terrorist recruiting; there are enough recruits.

Economic and social conditions are unreliable indicators of terrorism. It is true that Somalia and Afghanistan are among the poorest countries in the world, and both have suffered significant terrorist violence, but overall, it is difficult to discern any correlation between low per-capita GDP and high levels of terrorism.

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[4] Rick Brennan, Jr, Charles P. Ries, Larry Hanauer, Ben Connable, Terrence K. Kelly, Michael J. McNerney, Stephanie Young, Jason H. Campbell, and K. Scott McMahon, *Ending the U.S. War in Iraq: The Final Transition, Operational Maneuver, and Disestablishment of United States Forces-Iraq,* Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-232-USFI, 2013.

At the same time, Western European nations with high per-capita GDPs—Germany, Italy, Spain, and the United Kingdom—all saw high levels of domestic terrorist violence in the 1970s and 1980s. Argentina, Uruguay, and Brazil had the most advanced economies in Latin America in the early 1970s, but they were also the most affected by terrorist violence. Colombia is a democracy with a sophisticated economy, a well-regarded education system, and better than 90-percent literacy rates. It has also suffered extremely high levels of political violence, including terrorism. The United States itself saw high levels of domestic terrorist violence during the 1970s, when there was an average of 50 to 60 terrorist bombings a year.

America's high levels of youth-driven, anti-establishment political violence in the 1970s, much of which reflected so-called New Left ideologies and opposition to the Vietnam War, subsided after several notable actions. In particular, the voting age was lowered from 21 to 18 in 1971 and both parties made efforts to recruit younger voters, America withdrew from the Vietnam War in 1973, and conscription was ended the same year. These measures were implemented as part of a national strategy to reduce violence and channel political activism into acceptable outlets. The measures all seemed to help; the loss of popular support contributed to the decline of the few tiny groups that took up arms.

What lessons can we draw from this experience? First, a cautionary note: Nearly a half-century after these events in our own country, the root causes of this "rebellion" and its end remain a puzzle. It is not obvious why so many young people in an affluent society—especially university students—turned against American material and social values in the 1960s and 1970s. It certainly had little to do with economic deprivation. Opposition to the Vietnam War counts as a precipitating factor. Ending the war removed that particular cause, but there were other contributing factors. The radicals confused popular protest with support for a revolution, which was never there. There was a public backlash against the bombings. The United States had a less ideological society than it has today. The political system proved to be resilient and co-optive. Law enforcement was effective.

One lesson from the 1970s cannot be applied to the current situation in Syria and Iraq. Anger against American government policy at that time was undercut by significant political concessions—ending the war, ending the draft, and extending suffrage to younger voters. It is difficult to imagine making comparable concessions to jihadists. The United States cannot realistically offer to assist in constructing the Islamic State envisioned by ISIS or to accommodate the desires of fundamentalists for separate legal regimes here, even if it were believed that this would reduce the terrorist threat.

Instead of Root Causes, Multiple Factors

The assertions that terrorism is a consequence of oppression or economic deprivation do not work at the individual level either. Some terrorists are dead-end kids, but just as many come from middle-class families in the suburbs, and some are extremely wealthy. Some have criminal backgrounds, but others are well educated, with advanced degrees in medicine, pharmacology, engineering, or other career-track professions. This is especially true among the leadership of radical movements. Much of America's political violence in the 1970s was driven by university students.

A RAND study of individuals convicted in the United States since 9/11 for providing material support to jihadist terrorist organizations, attempting to join jihadist fronts abroad, or plotting to carry out attacks in the United States showed a diverse group. Of 95 individuals for whom information was available, 24 were high school dropouts, 21 had high school diplomas or their equivalent, 38 had attended some college, and 12 were college graduates; six of these had gone on to receive postgraduate degrees.[5]

A separate study of domestic Islamic terrorists arrested in the United States showed the alleged terrorists to be somewhat better educated than the general population of Muslim Americans. Overall, they did not appear to be deprived.[6]

To note that most terrorists are not impoverished or that poverty itself is not an indicator of terrorism is not to say that desperate people may not be inclined to embrace extremist ideologies or join millenarian movements that promise salvation from their hardships in this world or the next. It is simply to note that empirical evidence does not support a causal relationship between economic deprivation and terrorist recruitment.

Recent research at the RAND Corporation suggests that it is a mistake to focus on root causes. They are only one part of the picture, not necessarily the most important part, and they tend be less accessible to external fixes. Rather than having any single causal factor, joining the ranks of a terrorist organization appears instead to be the result of multiple factors, including motivation, countervailing influences, even circumstances. The combinations and relative importance of detailed causes also vary.[7]

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[5] Brian Michael Jenkins, *Stray Dogs and Virtual Armies: Radicalization and Recruitment to Jihadist Terrorism in the United States Since 9/11*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, OP-343-RC, 2011.
[6] Alan B. Krueger, "What Makes a Homegrown Terrorist? Human Capital and Participation in Domestic Islamic Terrorist Groups in the USA," *Economics Letters*, Vol. 101, Issue 3, December 2008, pp. 293–296.
[7] See Paul K. Davis and Kim Cragin (eds.), *Social Science for Counterterrorism: Putting the Pieces Together*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, MG-849-OSD, 2009; in particular, see Darcy M. E. Noricks, "The Root Causes of Terrorism," pp. 11–70, and Todd C. Helmus, "Why and How Some People Become Terrorists," pp. 71–111.

Why Some Join Jihadist Groups

People have joined the ranks of ISIS and al Qaeda in Syria and Iraq for a number of reasons.[8] Their motives have evolved over time. Initially, the popular rebellion against the Bashar al-Assad government in Syria and the regime's brutal response attracted widespread sympathy and supporters from neighboring Arab countries, as well as some from the West. At the same time, al Qaeda and other extremist groups sought to exploit the growing conflict to establish a new foothold. Al Qaeda's affiliate in Iraq, which was then called the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI), sent operatives to organize a Syrian front. In 2012, this became Jabhat al-Nusra (or simply al-Nusra), which is now al Qaeda's official affiliate in Syria.

The continuing insurrection spawned numerous rebel formations. These reflected secular and religious perspectives. Loyalties were fluid. The jihadists had the advantage of better funding and therefore offered better compensation and better weapons. They proved to be the most effective forces in the field and attracted fighters from other groups in Syria. Their jihadist ideology also brought recruits from other countries seeking opportunities to fight and gain combat skills and international contacts that would be valuable in future jihads. Some were recruits sent to Syria by extremist groups in other countries. Others came as individual volunteers. Over time, jihadist ideology appears to have gradually superseded anti-Assad sentiments as the driving force behind the recruitment of foreign fighters.

A dispute in 2013 over who would command the jihadists in Syria led to a major schism between al-Nusra, backed by al Qaeda's central leadership, and ISI, which changed its name to the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, or ISIS. Both competed for local and foreign fighters. Both continued to actively recruit foreigners.[9]

Luring Westerners to the Front

ISIS appears to have been more successful than al-Nusra in attracting Westerners. It asserts its authenticity by advertising its ruthless application of what it regards as Islamic law. The view of Islam that ISIS embraces is ultra puritanical and claims to be based on the earliest teachings of the Prophet Mohammed and his successors. While there are differences in tactics and the types of violence that should be employed to ensure adherence to Islamic law, the foundations for this belief system can be found in other Islamic fundamentalist movements. The opportunity for participating in unlimited violence appeals to a particular brand of recruits who accept this fundamentalist view and who are not repelled by

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[8] Brian Michael Jenkins, *When Jihadis Come Marching Home: The Terrorist Threat Posed by Westerners Returning from Syria and Iraq*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, PE-130-1-RC, 2014.
[9] Brian Michael Jenkins, *Brothers Killing Brothers: The Current Infighting Will Test al Qaeda's Brand*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, PE-123-RC, 2014.

images of mass executions, beheadings, crucifixions, or burning people alive and even may desire to participate in such atrocities.

In 2014, ISIS announced a further transformation, declaring the re-creation of the caliphate as the "Islamic State," with ISIS's leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi as the caliph, under Islamic tradition the supreme religious and political authority, and thereby commanding the loyalty of all Muslims worldwide. While this pretension has been rejected by both moderate and militant Muslim theologians, the existence of an actual homeland—what many fundamentalists see as an authentic expression of Islam as opposed to what they regard as the corrupt states that pretend to be Muslim—has nonetheless caused great excitement. It has galvanized extremists and rallied another set of recruits—individuals not necessarily intending to be fighters but simply wishing to live with like-minded believers. The broad appeal of the Islamic State should not be underestimated.

Rigorous research remains to be done, but it appears that Westerners join al Qaeda, whether in Syria and Iraq or elsewhere, for many reasons. Religious beliefs are an important component. Those who deny this are, well, in denial. This does not mean that the individuals wanting to join are always the most devout Muslims or that they are even knowledgeable about the tenets of their faith. Nonetheless, they subscribe to the jihadist ideology of perpetual war against the West and a personal obligation to defend Islam against what is portrayed as infidel aggression. End-time thinking and the idea of an inevitable final showdown color their thinking; many also believe in the various versions of promised bliss in the afterlife if they are killed. And in violent expressions of religion, some may find justification, even approval, of their own aggressive tendencies. Research suggests that personal identity and religious belief become intertwined with predilections toward violence, as well as cultural acceptance of violence.[10]

But other personal motives also figure into their decision. These include feelings of alienation, especially among young Muslims who have grown up in a post-9/11 environment in which many Muslims feel themselves to be objects of suspicion and discrimination. Rebellion against society, anger over perceived insults, dissatisfaction with their lives, personal crises, adolescent angst, and the desire to participate in an epic struggle that will give meaning to their lives or demonstrate manhood through warrior exploits also appear among their motives. Some see the Islamic State as a utopia. Teenage girls have succumbed to romantic visions of marriage to dashing ISIS fighters.

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[10] Paul K. Davis, Eric V. Larson, Zachary Haldeman, Mustafa Oguz, and Yashodhara Rana, *Understanding and Influencing Public Support for Insurgency and Terrorism,* Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, MG-1122-OSD, 2012.

Initially, there also were those who could be called "jihadi tourists"—young men who went to Syria and pretended to be fighters, yet they stayed clear of the fighting while taking self-portraits and boasting of their adventures to their friends back home. Growing danger has reduced their ranks.

The Flow of Volunteers Continues Despite U.S. Bombing

The American-led bombing campaign in Iraq and Syria would seem to further increase the danger of going there, but thus far, it does not appear to have slowed the flow of foreign recruits. Mid-2014 estimates of the number of foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq put the total somewhere between 12,000 and 15,000. U.S. bombing began in Iraq in August and the next month expanded into an international bombing campaign; it was extended to Syria in September. However, by fall 2014, the estimate of the total number of foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq had grown to 16,000, and by the end of February 2015, the U.S. Director of National Intelligence, James Clapper, testified that ISIS alone had 20,000 foreign fighters in its ranks.[11] This is an increase of between 33 and 66 percent despite the bombing campaign. The tally of 20,000 is consistent with the United Nations report on foreign fighters, which also includes those in Afghanistan, Somalia, and Yemen, for an overall total of 25,000. According to the report, this is a 71-percent increase since mid-2014.[12]

U.S. intelligence estimates put the total number of recruits coming from Europe and other Western states at 3,400.[13] France's prime minister warned that as many as 10,000 European volunteers could be in Syria and Iraq by the end of 2015.[14] The number of Americans going or attempting to go to Syria and Iraq is much smaller, although it already exceeds the total number traveling to all other jihadist fronts. In August 2014, the total was reported to be somewhere between 70 and 100. By September, this estimate had risen to 130. Clapper's testimony in February 2014 put the estimate at 180.[15]

What is driving this increase? Does it reflect growing religious fundamentalism and political assertiveness worldwide, or does it reflect new communication strategies? Both al Qaeda and ISIS have exploited the Internet to communicate with adherents and inspire potential recruits, but they differ in how they have done so. Al Qaeda followed a hierarchical approach, establishing official websites, reinforced by tiers of secondary outlets and private communicators.

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[11] James R. Clapper, Opening Statement to Worldwide Threat Assessment Hearing, Senate Armed Services Committee, February 26, 2015.
[12] BBC News, "UN Says '25,000 Foreign Fighters' Joined Islamist Militants," April 2, 2015.
[13] Clapper, 2015.
[14] Agence France Presse, "10,000 Europeans Could Be Waging Jihad by Year-End: French Prime Minister," March 8, 2015.
[15] Clapper, 2015.

ISIS also has its hierarchy of websites, but ISIS activists know how to manipulate social media to ensure that their messages achieve trending topic status and are seen by even more followers. And ISIS encourages direct messaging between its fighters and their home-country audiences of followers. They communicate in the online acronyms and slang and secret insider codes that regular users of social media adore. Seen in terms of a marketing effort, ISIS has more online outlets than al Qaeda and addresses its audience in more-captivating language.

Its emphasis on social media means that ISIS also reaches a younger audience. The median age of Americans going to jihadist fronts in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Somalia, and Yemen up until about 2011, when the Syrian conflict began, was the mid-20s. ISIS seems to be attracting more teenagers—an impressionable and more unsettled group, prone to loneliness and eager for adventure. Adoring teenage fans, however, are a fickle audience; the appeal of ISIS could turn out to be a fad.

Different Regions, Different Incentives

The necessary research has yet to be done, but let me offer a personal hypothesis on the lure of Syria and Iraq to volunteers from different parts of the world. The vast majority of foreign fighters come from neighboring Arab countries. They are close enough to feel a part of the conflict. They go to Syria as a matter of personal commitment and for instrumental reasons. Fighting in Syria will provide them with the skills needed to advance their cause at home. This applies also to the Chechens living in Russia or as refugees in Europe; others coming from North African countries such as Libya and Tunisia; Uzbek, Kazakh, and Kygyz fighters from Central Asia; and Muslim separatists from China.

The exodus of volunteers traveling to Syria from Europe reflects the collective experience of communities as well as individual biographies. Muslim diasporas have not all been easily assimilated in Europe, due to both immigrant resistance and local discrimination, despite government policies encouraging multiculturalism. Feelings of disorientation and alienation are especially acute among second-generation immigrants. For them, the Islamic State offers a utopia, free from the prejudice and hostility they may feel.

Americans going to Syria and Iraq also complain about the prejudice and hostility they face in America, but the mixture of motives includes more personal rather than community issues. Americans migrating to the Islamic State see it as a permanent move. They have no intention of returning.

Obviously, this is a simplification, which detailed analysis may prove wrong. A sense of religious commitment provides a powerful incentive for many of those going, regardless of origin. And no doubt, personal factors play an important role in all decisions. Nonetheless, there appears to be a difference between those going to gain combat experience for future jihads, those coming from isolated

communities, and those driven primarily by personal circumstances, and these differences appear to correspond with geographic origins.

Looking Ahead

Not all of those going to Syria and Iraq to volunteer for ISIS are destined to be fighters. Some are arrested on the way, some are killed while there, and some have already returned. Debates continue about whether all of those arrested while trying to travel there for terror-related reasons should be prosecuted as terrorist supporters or those coming back should be viewed as potential terrorists. History suggests that most of the returnees are unlikely to engage in acts of terrorism, but whatever their original reasons, time spent in Syria or Iraq will change their outlook. While some will return disillusioned, others will be further radicalized by their experience in the region.

Some already see the United States as the enemy of Islam. Their experience in Syria and Iraq is likely to reinforce that view. They will live among the most violent extremists, and they will be complicit bystanders, if not participants, in routine atrocities. They will be targets of U.S. military operations and see their companions killed. There will be ample motives for acts of revenge. These are the individuals who pose a long-term threat of conducting attacks against the United States or their country of origin.

National interest, not fear of terrorism, drives U.S. policy. American warplanes are bombing the Islamic State. U.S. military interventions may provoke terrorist attacks, a reality we must accept. In today's warfare, there is no distinction between front lines and home fronts. Terrorists make no distinction between combatants and civilians. A decision to employ military force puts American military personnel in harm's way. It also exposes those at home to the threat of terrorism, although the risks of harm at home are statistically very small. The notion of war with zero casualties is unrealistic. The idea of war that requires no sacrifice by any but soldiers and their families is morally unwholesome.

Ambitious Social Engineering Projects Are Not Warranted

No single root cause explains the phenomenon of terrorism, and there is no single combination of the detailed causes involved. Instead, it must be accepted that terrorism, which is simply one form of political violence, results from multiple factors. It is possible to describe and explain these, but prediction remains far more difficult.

Concern about whether and how to address fundamental problems of society—the absence of democracy, oppressed or marginalized communities, poverty, and lack of education and economic

opportunity—is appropriate on its own merits. But there can be no illusions that doing so will effectively prevent or reduce violent extremism.

It is politically incorrect to say so, but religious belief is a causal factor, even if we prefer to call it an ideology that is drawn from or that distorts religion. This is not to say that any faith is flawed. This is delicate turf and requires careful calibration. To focus on the religious component concedes legitimacy to the adversary, risks alienating the broader community, broadens the definition of the adversary, and could make measures to combat terrorism look like a religious war. Clearly, that would be counterproductive. But to ignore a religious component altogether, ban any mention of it as a factor, or pursue unsupportable theories of root causes is to miss an important point. Doing so risks losing credibility and provoking reactions that also are not helpful.

Any effort to address this issue entails risks of misunderstanding. It is, therefore, important to keep in mind the still very small numbers of persons who choose to join jihadist groups abroad or carry out terrorist actions in the United States. We are talking about handfuls of people. They are dangerous, but they do not threaten the republic as long as we keep our heads. The very small numbers and the differences among individuals also mean that any program aimed at preventing radicalization and recruitment will yield small results, measured numerically, and therefore may not be worth the investment and the risks entailed.

This does not mean that benign neglect is appropriate—but it does suggest caution. Encouraging families and communities to dissuade their sons, daughters, and friends from taking a destructive path and encouraging local authorities, including police, to be sensitive to the stresses that current events have created in certain communities is one thing. Ambitious social engineering projects to influence behavior are not warranted.