



TESTIMONY

CHILDREN AND FAMILIES
EDUCATION AND THE ARTS
ENERGY AND ENVIRONMENT
HEALTH AND HEALTH CARE
INFRASTRUCTURE AND
TRANSPORTATION
INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS
LAW AND BUSINESS
NATIONAL SECURITY
POPULATION AND AGING
PUBLIC SAFETY
SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY
TERRORISM AND
HOMELAND SECURITY

The RAND Corporation is a nonprofit institution that helps improve policy and decisionmaking through research and analysis.

This electronic document was made available from www.rand.org as a public service of the RAND Corporation.

Skip all front matter: [Jump to Page 1](#) ▼

Support RAND

[Browse Reports & Bookstore](#)

[Make a charitable contribution](#)

For More Information

Visit RAND at www.rand.org

Explore [RAND Testimony](#)

View [document details](#)

Testimonies

RAND testimonies record testimony presented by RAND associates to federal, state, or local legislative committees; government-appointed commissions and panels; and private review and oversight bodies.

Limited Electronic Distribution Rights

This document and trademark(s) contained herein are protected by law as indicated in a notice appearing later in this work. This electronic representation of RAND intellectual property is provided for non-commercial use only. Unauthorized posting of RAND electronic documents to a non-RAND website is prohibited. RAND electronic documents are protected under copyright law. Permission is required from RAND to reproduce, or reuse in another form, any of our research documents for commercial use. For information on reprint and linking permissions, please see [RAND Permissions](#).

An Assessment of the Counter-ISIL Campaign

One Year after Mosul

Addendum

Linda Robinson

RAND Office of External Affairs

CT-435/1

August 2015

Document submitted August 24, 2015 as an addendum to testimony presented before the House Armed Services Committee, Subcommittee on Emerging Threats and Capabilities on June 24, 2015

This product is part of the RAND Corporation testimony series. RAND testimonies record testimony presented by RAND associates to federal, state, or local legislative committees; government-appointed commissions and panels; and private review and oversight bodies. The RAND Corporation is a nonprofit research organization providing objective analysis and effective solutions that address the challenges facing the public and private sectors around the world. RAND's publications do not necessarily reflect the opinions of its research clients and sponsors. **RAND**® is a registered trademark.



Published 2015 by the RAND Corporation
1776 Main Street, P.O. Box 2138, Santa Monica, CA 90407-2138
1200 South Hayes Street, Arlington, VA 22202-5050
4570 Fifth Avenue, Suite 600, Pittsburgh, PA 15213-2665
RAND URL: <http://www.rand.org/>
To order RAND documents or to obtain additional information, contact
Distribution Services: Telephone: (310) 451-7002;
Email: order@rand.org

Linda Robinson¹
The RAND Corporation

*An Assessment of the Counter-ISIL Campaign
One Year after Mosul
Addendum²*

Before the Committee on Armed Services
Subcommittee on Emerging Threats and Capabilities
House of Representatives

August 24, 2015

The subsequent questions and answers found in this document were received from the Committee for additional information following the hearing on June 24, 2015 and were submitted for the record.

**Question 1 for the record for Ms. Linda Robinson submitted by James R. Langevin,
Subcommittee on Emerging Threats and Capabilities, The Counterterrorism Strategy
Against the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL): Are We on the Right Path?**

Our comprehensive strategy to combat ISIL includes undercutting their flow of resources. Shutting down access to revenue, and closing the means by which funds flow to and from ISIL, is a critical component of that strategy. The Department of Defense, the Department of State, the Department of the Treasury, the Department of Justice, and other intelligence and national security agencies all play a role in identifying and restricting ISIL's access to revenue, and revenue flows. I am interested to hear your thoughts on the effectiveness of the actions we are taking with respect to counter threat financing, the role the DoD plays in identifying networks and informing those decisions, the threshold for an organization to receive our attention with respect to terrorist financing action, and given the current environment, should that strategy and threshold be revisited? Would you say that counter threat financing efforts are a primary, secondary, or tertiary concern of our military and intelligence community? Finally, how effective have our economic pressures been to date and what is your assessment of the ISIL Counter-Financing Working Group?

¹ The opinions and conclusions expressed in this testimony are the author's alone and should not be interpreted as representing those of RAND or any of the sponsors of its research. This product is part of the RAND Corporation testimony series. RAND testimonies record testimony presented by RAND associates to federal, state, or local legislative committees; government-appointed commissions and panels; and private review and oversight bodies. The RAND Corporation is a nonprofit research organization providing objective analysis and effective solutions that address the challenges facing the public and private sectors around the world. RAND's publications do not necessarily reflect the opinions of its research clients and sponsors.

² This testimony is available for free download at <http://www.rand.org/pubs/testimonies/CT435z1.html>.

Response:

I thank Ranking Member Langevin for this important question. The short answer is that counter-threat financing efforts have lagged other aspects of the counter-ISIL effort. One reason is that the Counter-ISIL Financing Working Group has been formed relatively recently. A mechanism for reporting progress on a periodic basis, as well as assessments to ascertain whether the current approach is effective, would be advisable.

Another, more fundamental reason is a shortage of ground-based intelligence due to our current mode of operating and our shortage of intelligence assets. Generating robust and reliable intelligence flows is essential for this line of effort to yield results. There is a need for greater intelligence both inside the Iraq-Syria main theater of operations for ISIL as well as internationally. Since the largest sources of funding are internal, increasing intelligence about funding activities inside Iraq and Syria would be the logical priority.

Most analysis currently suggests that internal sources of revenue are more important to sustaining ISIL than outside resources, such as donations from benefactors in other countries. That is to say, revenues from extortion of the Iraqi and Syrian population, illicit oil and gas smuggling, and sale of looted antiquities are considered to be major sources of ISIL funding at this time. Therefore, the priority for the counter-threat financing line of operations should be to gain precise real-time information about how the internal funding networks operate and to identify the node in that network where resource generation can most efficiently and effectively be disrupted and dismantled.

The computers and communications devices seized in the May 2015 raid by U.S. special operations forces in eastern Syria that killed Abu Sayyaf, a senior member of ISIL's leadership cadre, yielded highly useful information about the organization's current illicit oil, gas, and financial organizations. Furthermore, the analysis from the computers and communications devices seized in that raid is ongoing, and that work will significantly enhance the U.S. government's understanding of how ISIL is operating today. Based on the research I have done on ISIL and on special operations forces, the importance of capturing such data and ISIL leaders and facilitators who can yield important current intelligence cannot be overstated. Certainly, vital intelligence can be gathered through remote technical means, but ISIL's (and other terrorist) leaders have grown increasingly savvy about protecting their communications and information. Therefore, when such targets present themselves, the objective should be to capture them, if at all possible, whether by U.S. or other forces, so that the intelligence can be collected and analyzed. This ultimately contributes far more toward achieving the strategic goal of degrading and

defeating ISIL than airstrikes that kill individual leaders and facilitators but yield no intelligence dividend. Those leaders and facilitators can be replaced with relative ease. ISIL will not be defeated unless the United States and its partners shift to an intelligence-driven war. This is one important change in priority in how the war is fought that I would recommend.

External resources also matter, of course. Two member states of the counter-ISIL coalition, Italy and Saudi Arabia, have agreed to lead a working group focused on this issue along with the United States. Within the U.S. government, the Treasury Department and the National Counterterrorism Center are the lead entities for pursuing counter-threat finance efforts aimed at both internal and external resources fueling ISIL. The coalition's Counter-ISIL Financing Working Group was formed relatively recently, as noted, and a detailed report card on its efforts would be extremely helpful. Finally, the role of Turkey as a conduit for illicit trade has been widely reported. The importance of stopping flows of goods and funds through that major transit point cannot be overstated. Turkey's agreement to allow armed airstrikes against ISIL from bases on its territory may be a hopeful sign that further progress on cross-border flows can be made in the remainder of the year.

A final note regarding the understanding of ISIL financing networks. Historical information is useful, and can serve to identify previous networks, facilitators and financiers that might still be active. RAND has conducted analysis of documents captured from ISIL's predecessor organization, al Qaeda in Iraq, as well as research on currently active networks.³

Question 2 for the record submitted by James R. Langevin for Ms. Linda Robinson:

Ms. Robinson, I believe an effective strategy must be a coordinated, well-thought-out, whole-of-government effort. You recently returned from Jordan and Iraq and noted the lack of coordination between the U.S. lines of effort, and even more concerning, a lack of consensus on the number of lines of effort. In your opinion, how can these disconnects be addressed to unify the U.S. strategy?

³ See testimony on this subject by RAND political scientists Seth Jones ("Breaking the Bank: Testimony presented before the House Financial Services Committee, Task Force to Investigate Terrorist Financing," April 22, 2015) and Patrick B. Johnston ("Countering ISIL's Financing: Testimony Presented Before the House Financial Services Committee on November 13, 2014," Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, CT-419, November 2014).

Response:

Inadequate unity of effort plagues every level of this war, and it will cripple the coalition unless it is remedied. At the highest level, no single synchronizer of U.S. government efforts has been named. U.S. government departments or agencies are designated the leads for one of the nine lines of effort, but there is no daily orchestration of the campaign in a whole-of-government or whole-of-coalition sense. The White House is coordinating policy deliberations and decisions, but no entity has been charged with coordinating operations across the lines of effort and conducting periodic assessments. Possible models include an interagency task force or a czar, such as the Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan. This coordination work could be done with a dedicated staff in the White House, but it might distract the latter from its proper focus on policy and strategy, as opposed to implementation.

The U.S. military describes the effort as having nine lines, while the White House and the State Department have described it as having four or five; this is indicative, at a very superficial but important level, of a government that is not speaking or thinking with one voice. A great deal more thought should be given to the nature of ISIL, now that we understand it is not going to disappear quickly, and from that fashion the right strategy and the right architecture. Given the complexity of the Iraq-Syria theater and the emergence of a significant network of ISIL affiliates, a division of labor between those two efforts might make sense.

Within the Iraq-Syria theater, greater effort could be made to ensure that strategic, operational, and tactical actions across those two countries are synchronized. The Department of Defense leads two of the nine lines of effort, but the three-star command in charge of both Iraq and Syria, the Combined Joint Task Force–Operation Inherent Resolve, has not been fully staffed, according to the joint manning document. That suggests a lack of commitment to enable this primary warfighting command. I understand that that the Combined Joint Interagency Task Force–Syria has struggled mightily to gain the requested staff. Also, those two commands are not co-located—they are based in two different countries in the region—which creates an additional burden to foster a one-theater and one-team mentality.

While in Iraq, I detected frictions between the military commands and the U.S. embassy, with the trainers and advisers clamoring for equipment but the security-assistance office unable to make the U.S. system work quickly enough to meet all of the needs. I also noted an unclear division of labor on the critical tribal engagement effort and the equally critical

information operations effort. There is also an unfortunate reversal in the unity of effort that was achieved within the special operations community, which reached a high point in Afghanistan. These examples illustrate the variety of areas where our own command and control and unity of effort could be improved.

Finally, the most distressing phenomenon I have observed is a tendency to make even tactical decisions at very high levels of the U.S. government, rather than entrusting highly qualified officers and civilian officials to make decisions at the speed the war demands. The delegation of appropriate authority to lower echelons—what the U.S. military calls “mission command”—should be closely examined to document what I believe to be an enormous gap between doctrine and actual practice and the inefficiencies and ineffectiveness that results. The reason underlying this reluctance to delegate authority is presumably an aversion to risk. Failure is part of war and casualties are part of war; any well-trained officer and official will seek to minimize risk, but at this juncture we may be minimizing risk to forces and maximizing risk to mission.

Question 3 for the record submitted by James R. Langevin for Ms Linda Robinson:

What should be the United States’ role in fighting Islamic extremism, and what should be the roles of regional actors? Does the U.S. government possess the right tools to fight an ideological war, including information operations authorities? What more should our allies be doing to counter Islamic extremism?

Response:

In my view, the most effective voices in the struggle against Islamic extremism are Muslim voices. In addition, however, a particular subset may have even greater sway over those youths that are being attracted to ISIL’s ranks. That subset is former ISIL fighters who deserted once they came into contact with the reality of the movement and its depravity. Family members and friends who have seen the toll taken on their loved ones provide another source of immediate, graphic testimony that can compete—in visceral, emotional terms—with the terrorist recruiters. The sophistication of this recruitment effort has been documented by an increasing number of enterprising journalists and other enterprises.

The U.S. Congress has shown a great interest in this informational side of irregular warfare, which is the type of warfare that is in fact most common, and which the United States must make a commitment to understanding and grappling with. The United States

can play an important role in understanding, devising, and funding effective information operations, even if the most effective voices in the actual operations are likely to be non-U.S. voices. The first step to effective information operations is achieving a deep understanding of the phenomenon. Much of the relevant discourse is now occurring on social media, and RAND has developed tools and methods to analyze large volumes of social media messages and derive operational insights from them. Understanding the conversation is only the first step; engaging effectively in that conversation is the next step, which is the current urgent need. We must also be able to understand what is in fact effective or ineffective, and for that more rigorous and meaningful impact measures are also sorely needed.

The authorities issue has been tendentious. I recall many battalion commanders who lamented that they could call in a bomb strike but not issue a press release. For many years the U.S. government has been engaged in an internal bureaucratic and intellectual struggle over who within the U.S. government should be in charge of what type of information operations and how they should be conducted. This plays out in a given country between U.S. embassies and military commands, and at the Washington interdepartmental level. The easy default position is to call for the re-creation of the U.S. Information Agency, but this may not be the appropriate model for this era given social and technological changes. An independent commission could study this issue—without regard to bureaucratic equities—and propose policy changes and, if necessary, legislative action to ensure that the United States adequately grapples with this central front in today's irregular conflicts.

From a military perspective, military information support operations units currently have the authority to support other countries' MISO capacity-building and conduct their own activities in the counter-terrorism realm, subject to the support of specific geographic combatant commands and U.S. chiefs of mission. What they most need is support to carry out those programs at a high-level of quality (in both substantive and technical terms) and to develop empirically-grounded measures of effectiveness. This is a vastly under-resourced part of the special operations community. Among the specific technical needs are cyber expertise, regional and historical expertise, marketing and branding expertise, and a case study repository to create a body of knowledge for this nascent field.

The U.S. State Department has been making a serious effort to develop an effective approach to counter-messaging and online engagement, but this is just one aspect of influence and information operations. As part of this work, other countries' efforts at de-

radicalization programs should be closely studied to learn what has and has not worked and why, so that a body of knowledge on best practices can be developed and shared.⁴ This knowledge can be brought to bear in the Middle East through willing states, nongovernmental organizations, and international institutions. A particularly vulnerable population is the youth among the millions of refugees and displaced people in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, and Turkey. The tragedy of today will only be compounded and extended if the next generation of young people are lured into this way of life.

Question 4 for the record submitted by James R. Langevin for Ms. Linda Robinson:

How should the United States define and approach the threat of Islamic extremism?

Response:

Purveyors of violent Islamic extremism employ a distorted version of Islam to attract militants to a cause that seeks to undermine established governments, strike Western targets, and impose a draconian medieval type of rule backed by vicious, wanton violence. There is a debate over the correct terminology to use to define Islamic extremism. On one hand, some are wary to avoid antagonizing adherents to a faith, Islam, and unintentionally stimulating sympathy for or converts to violent forms of extreme Salafism or Wahhabism. On the other hand, some object to the anodyne term “violent extremist organization,” in that it does not specifically call out the use made of Islam to sway individuals into the path of violent jihad, senseless brutality, and, in the case of ISIL, nearly limitless atrocities carried out against both Muslim and non-Muslim alike.

Not all violent extremists are Muslims, of course, and it is important to note the many stimulants and rationales that can be used in an effort to justify violent extremism and attract recruits. It is likely that approaches to dealing with various forms of violent extremism will differ. It is imperative, given the powerful attraction that groups like ISIL appear to hold over young and disaffected people in many countries, that specific measures be developed to address the phenomenon of violent Islamic extremism. The terrorist tactics that ISIL and other similar groups are using draw specifically, if erroneously, upon elements of the Islamic faith, its teachings, and its history to advance the organizations’ ends, which are ultimately about power, not religion. The need to combat the distortion of Islam and attack the credibility of these organizations requires

⁴ See, for example, research conducted by RAND senior political scientist Kim Cragin: “Resisting Violent Extremism: A Conceptual Model for Non-Radicalization,” *Terrorism and Political Violence*, Vol. 26, No. 2, 2014.

acknowledgement of the use being made of Islam and a superior knowledge of its true teachings. This is, to some degree, a struggle within Islam—particularly Sunni Islam—and those members of that faith have every reason to lead the effort to debunk, discredit, and defeat those who would tarnish the name of a religion embraced by millions of peace-loving people around the world.

Question 5 for the record submitted by James R. Langevin for Ms. Linda Robinson:

What are the risks and/or trade-offs in how U.S. policy and strategy defines and addresses the nature of the Islamic extremism threat?

Response:

As noted in my previous answer, a key risk is taking actions that prove counterproductive by actually stimulating greater support for terrorism, including additional converts to the ranks of fighters or self-radicalized individual attackers. A particular risk is creating a large and long-term footprint of U.S. military forces that terrorist groups can depict as invaders or occupiers. This can turn the focus away from the reality that most victims of Islamic extremist violence are, in fact, Muslims.

One problem is that, within the U.S. military, the art of supporting others in the fight against terrorism is still insufficiently developed. Another problem is that many potential partners are also very weak and lack reliable capabilities that can be leveraged by the United States. Partnering cannot likely be reduced to a science, as there are many complex factors that will determine a good partner, the right conditions, and the degree and type of U.S. assistance that will enable a given partner to combat the terrorist threat in a credible and effective manner. But rigorous study and refined methods can certainly improve upon “U.S. partnering” and working “by, with, and through” other countries, as the U.S. Special Forces like to say.

This approach and preference to support and work through other countries is now enshrined in U.S. National Security Strategy, U.S. National Military Strategy, and funded initiatives such as the Counter-Terrorism Partnership Fund. But not enough attention has been devoted to refining our partnership approaches, especially in the most common circumstances, where all available partners are flawed in some way yet, at the end of the day, are most likely a preferable primary actor to the U.S. soldier—at least in great numbers. This approach to warfare has not yet been elevated to the central position in U.S. military thinking, organization, doctrine, and personnel training and development that will

be necessary for the United States to become truly adept in this realm. My own research for the special operations community has focused on deep study of their experiences in this realm, and on linking the tactical, operational, and strategic aspects of partnering in both concept and practice. One study outlines steps for improved interagency and special operations—conventional competence, as well as continued funding for those coordinating and training bodies developed over the past 13 years.⁵

⁵ Linda Robinson, Paul D. Miller, John Gordon IV, Jeffrey Decker, Michael Schwille, and Raphael S. Cohen, *Improving Strategic Competence: Lessons from 13 Years of War*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-816-A, 2014.