The Terrorist Diaspora

After the Fall of the Caliphate

Addendum

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The Terrorist Diaspora: After the Fall of the Caliphate

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Addendum to testimony before the Committee on Homeland Security
Task Force on Denying Terrorists Entry into the United States
United States House of Representatives

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F ollowing the hearing on July 13, 2017, the congressional committee sought additional information and requested answers to the questions in this document. The answers were submitted for the record.

Questions from Chairman Mike Gallagher

Question 1

You've described the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) as a global group that is regionally anchored and sees its members as players in local conflicts. When it comes to Europe, what is the ISIS strategy? Are they hiding in place or is the problem less severe than that? What about the United States? Are they hoping to attack the United States directly or through proxies? What is their long-term goal when it comes to both the United States and Europe?

Answer

In terms of what the ISIS strategy is in Europe, I'd say that it is multi-tiered. First, I expect ISIS to continue to use its propaganda to attempt to radicalize people living in Europe in hopes of convincing them to launch terrorist attacks, what we might call the classic "lone wolf" or inspired terrorist. Second, ISIS will attempt to make direct contact with individuals through the Internet in what many have called the "virtual planning model" of terrorist attacks, in which ISIS members direct the individuals through encrypted applications and help them plan each step of

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the attack. Third, it is likely that ISIS members are in Europe, either with or without direct instructions, and these members or cells could conduct attacks similar in style to the November 2015 attacks in Paris. Fourth, and finally, ISIS will likely continue to send fighters from the Middle East to try to surreptitiously infiltrate Europe to conduct attacks.

The situation for the United States is different, because the United States is insulated by two oceans and thus safer as a matter of pure geography. The United States also benefits from more-robust defenses, including superior security and intelligence services and far fewer overall targets. Furthermore, it appears that U.S. policing, intelligence, and border officials have been able to prevent ISIS members from arriving in the United States, although there is no way to be certain of this. ISIS will likely focus its attempts on the first two options listed above (lone wolf and virtual planning model) but might also attempt something similar to the recent plot in Australia, in which ISIS mailed explosives to terrorists already living in the country. There is a lower probability (albeit not a negligible one) that ISIS will attempt to send fighters directly to the United States via air travel from Europe or the Middle East, or first to Canada and Mexico or points south and then over the border into the United States.

ISIS's long-term goal when it comes to the United States and Europe is to continue sowing terror and trying to show U.S. and European citizens that their governments are incapable of protecting them. Most experts assess that ISIS would ideally like to conduct an attack in a U.S. or European city using chemical weapons. ISIS, like al-Qa'ida, also remains fixated on attacking aviation, as evidenced by the recent plot in Australia.

Question 2

The recent pace of terrorist plots and attacks in Europe, carried out by both homegrown extremists and foreign fighter returnees, has been staggering. Since the rise of ISIS, the West has experience several "lone wolf" attacks, where the attackers were seemingly inspired by ISIS's ideology or carried the attack out in the name of ISIS. Is it accurate to describe these attacks as "lone wolves," or after closer examination, do ISIS members usually play some role in facilitating the attacks? How should the West address the threat of ISIS operatives exploiting ungoverned spaces to continue directly or indirectly executing and inspiring attacks?

Answer

ISIS operatives do not follow one simple model in planning terrorist attacks; instead, the operatives hedge their bets to achieve the highest rate of success in conducting an attack. There have indeed been true lone wolves who have merely been inspired by Salafi-jihadist ideology—the ISIS and al-Qa'ida ideology that seeks to emulate the presumed practices of the earliest generation of Muslims and that believes in violent struggle against non-Muslims and apostates as an important religious duty. But ISIS would prefer to play a more direct role in these attacks, because virtual planner–style attacks or ISIS-directed attacks involving trained militants dispatched to attack a target typically result in higher lethality rates.

With respect to ungoverned spaces, I think the term itself is somewhat misleading. ISIS prefers "alternatively governed" spaces, where the government in place is tribal, clan-based, or generally anti-Western and that either is overtly tolerant of extremists operating from its soil or

lacks the capacity to do anything about it. In the West, I'm very concerned about places like Molenbeek, Belgium, and the banlieues of France, the ex-urban, depressed suburbs that are homes to many immigrants and that have seemingly become incubators of extremism and given rise to hundreds of jihadists determined to attack the West. In these cases, Western governments need to devise a plan to root out extremists, which is not only a multi-generational effort but one comprising economic, political, social, cultural, religious, and security dimensions. Finally, it will be crucial to monitor social media and online activity to ensure that ISIS does not find safe haven in the virtual space.