

The Global Terror Threat in 2016: A Forecast

By Daniel Benjamin and Steven Simon

The Islamic State faces serious barriers to growth. It has earned an array of capable adversaries, including the United States, Iran, Russia, and the Kurds as well as the Iraqi government and the Syrian regime. Military efforts against the Islamic State have steadily intensified with the accumulation of intelligence against it, which has facilitated targeting, and with greater coordination among and operational competence of its diverse enemies. Its territorial losses and internal strains will erode its ability to recruit. These challenges, however, will likely prompt increased attacks in Europe, Russia, Turkey, and possibly Lebanon and Jordan. Rivalry between jihadi groups could also spur attacks by al-Qa`ida and its affiliates. An eclectic targeting strategy combined with an ability to motivate lone wolves and returnees suggest that an impenetrable defense will be difficult to mount. Yet the actual threat, especially to the United States, is relatively manageable. Despite this reality, U.S. political dynamics have generated a nationwide anxiety that could contribute to violence. In Europe, where the risks are higher, the prospects for social cohesion are bleaker.

What will 2016 bring for the contest between the West and the jihadist movement? The only certainty is, of course, more uncertainty and surprise. But it is, nonetheless, a good bet that we will see the principal paradox of this fight—the erosion of the Islamic State's hold on its territory in Iraq and Syria against a backdrop of continued Western anxiety—sharpen inexorably. That, in turn, will make the challenge of distinguishing appearance from reality in an asymmetric conflict—the core challenge of the endeavor—a near impossibility in the fog of a U.S. national election.

The reality is that the Iraqi army and police, under the tutelage of U.S. and other Western forces, will slowly—at times imperceptibly—climb back from the ignominy of their 2014 defeat in Mosul.

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Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) in Syria and peshmerga in Iraq will continue to whittle away at Islamic State territory while interdiction of its supply lines. This is already underway. Iraqi peshmerga units are cutting off Islamic State access routes to Turkey, while the United States, using air power and special operations forces, blocks maneuver routes between Iraq and Syria. The Islamic State's battlefield successes will become increasingly scarce. Territory actually controlled by the group will shrink. Although Russian airpower has been directed at armed Syrian opposition groups unaffiliated with the Islamic State, it has been directed at the Islamic State as well. And in Iraq, Iran has also contributed to the fight against the Islamic State. Russia's and Iran's tacit collaboration is diplomatically awkward but militarily convenient in the fight against the Islamic State.

Panic and Progress

For all the measurable success against the Islamic State, panic over the group persists throughout the West as it continues to launch terrorist attacks, even as its ambitions to entrench the so-called caliphate in the Middle East fray. Public alarm has grown thanks to a stubbornly chaotic regional landscape in which jihadist violence figures prominently, especially in states affected by the turmoil of the Arab Spring. The contrast between the Islamic State's decay in the Sunni heartland and the public perception of the group as ascendant matters greatly: The success of a terrorist group depends not just on its actual strength, but also on its opponents' perceptions. This fear is stoked by a reckless media and by politicians who believe their electability hinges on pervasive public anxiety and are therefore determined to paint as dire a picture as possible. This stratagem is working, insofar as survey data¹ show clearly that Americans, at least, feel they are under siege and at greater peril than at any time since 9/11.

To dig deeper into the conditions driving these circumstances, consider the following: In 2016, air strikes by the United States and its coalition partners will continue to become more effective as the intelligence base grows. Collection from UAVs (unmanned aerial vehicles), a growing cadre of human sources, defectors, and slowly improving signals intelligence all combine to make the air campaign more effective. Islamic State leaders are being killed at an increasing pace;² those who survive must spend more time and energy on personal security and less on command and control.

Since the November 2015 decision to loosen restrictions on targeting³ and disregard the long-term costs of rebuilding infrastructure in favor of diminishing Islamic State revenue—primarily from oil—the group's fortunes have dwindled as its income shrinks and the costs of a multi-front war mount. Increasingly, the Islamic State relies on taxation of residents in the territory it controls, though perhaps extortion is a more accurate term. Such extortive efforts to raise funds further diminishes its popularity and heightens resentment among inhabitants. The Islamic State had edged away from

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its strategy of intimidating the populace through overwhelming brutality; it may see no alternative but to return to it, flooding the internet with more images of decapitations, crucifixions, and firing squads in order to secure financing.

Perhaps no issue will affect the Islamic State as much as the politicking over—and within—Syria. The ability of the various parties to agree on local ceasefires and to turn their weapons on the Islamic State will be critical. With the tide having turned against the armed opposition, thanks largely to Russian intervention, the possibility of ceasefires that might presage a Syrian iteration of the Iraqi Sunni Awakening becomes more plausible, though by no means guaranteed. One development to watch out for in 2016 is a decision by the U.S. government to press the groups it backs to participate in ceasefires negotiated with the Assad regime and mediated by the United Nations. As important will be the ability of coalition forces to sever Islamic State lines that straddle the Syrian-Iraqi border.

Despite the likelihood of the Islamic State’s slow decomposition in the areas over which it now holds sway, there is only a slender prospect for a successful local or international effort to mitigate the socioeconomic malaise that ultimately underpins the jihad. The combination of unemployment, underemployment, corruption, crumbling infrastructure, environmental degradation, climate change, and deep inequality is currently beyond the capacity of outsiders to manage. There is no reason to anticipate that local efforts will succeed, or even get off the ground. The diversion of international, but especially U.S. and EU, resources to the humanitarian crisis precipitated by the Syrian civil war leaves little in reserve to ease longstanding structural obstacles to growth. And continuing violence will dampen the interest of foreign investors in the countries where their presence would be most beneficial.

Even in its best-case scenario, though, the Islamic State must cope with a worsening reputation and limited horizons. The group’s erstwhile success depended on its ability to hold territory and justify the claim it was building a new caliphate—nothing else was remotely as inspiring for the more than 30,000 foreigners⁴ who traveled to Syria and Iraq to stake their lives on this project. As the viability of the effort becomes increasingly unlikely, the group’s magnetic pull will diminish as well.

Strategy and Targeting

The Islamic State leadership will be forced, by the political economy of terror, to double-down on the strategy it adopted in the second half of 2015: Conventional terror attacks against a wide range of targets near and far will be intended to demonstrate the Islamic State’s vitality even as the caliphate’s deflation suggests the opposite. (The approach is hardly new: Al-Shabaab has pursued a version of this strategy since being evicted from Mogadishu and other cities in Somalia, targeting instead shopping centers and other civilian sites

in Kenya, Uganda, and elsewhere.) As the Islamic State’s social media output declines,⁵ messaging about the historical achievement of the caliphate rings ever more hollow and voices of dissent multiply. That makes a surge in terrorist attacks more necessary for the group to maintain its status in the marketplace.

What will be the targets of choice? Opportunism, already an Islamic State hallmark, will continue to be a defining trait. But some countries are likely to be more affected than others. President Vladimir Putin’s own opportunistic effort to advance Russia’s position in the Middle East through a deployment to Syria will likely be punished anew by Russian-born Islamist extremists, both domestically and abroad. Sharm el-Sheikh is unlikely to be the last place where Russian aviation will be targeted, and poor security practices will make all modes of Russian transportation vulnerable. A new wave of attacks in the Russian Federation is entirely plausible. Turkey, which was late to recognize the dangers of its own support for radical anti-Assad forces, could also find its security tested, as illustrated by the suicide bombing in Istanbul on January 12 that killed 10 Germans and was blamed on the Islamic State.⁶ Neighbors such as Jordan and Lebanon will continue to be at risk of subversion and assault. The Islamic State could probably manage a punishing raid in northern Jordan, which would be repulsed, but only after embarrassing the monarchy. With Hezbollah in control of Lebanon, the Islamic State will not be able to take territory, but it could draw blood through terrorist attacks and attempt to generate a Sunni challenge to Lebanon’s cohesion, particularly in the north.

The events that will most affect Western public opinion and, ultimately strategy, will occur in Europe and North America. Europe, already sprinting to overcome the shortcomings of nearly a decade and a half of post-9/11 underinvestment in domestic security, and subpar intelligence and law enforcement cooperation, faces the toughest test. Relatively easy access to “Schengenland” from the Middle East’s warzones will provide the Islamic State with tempting targets, and the ability to operate undetected due to encrypted communications will also test European authorities. European leaders are showing themselves to be unsentimental about suspending civil liberties when necessary. Perhaps the biggest questions of 2016 will be whether 15 years of relative complacency in Belgium—and elsewhere—can be overcome quickly and whether the pendulum swings too far, inadvertently creating new recruits to the jihad.

With its relative geographical isolation from the center of the conflict in the Middle East and layers of border security and visa requirements, the United States is less likely to experience an attack under the command and control of the Islamic State, though no defenses are foolproof. A not-so-lone wolf who responds to the pleas of Islamic State operatives abroad is entirely possible.⁷ Islamic State–designed attacks in Europe, much like the two strikes in Paris in 2015, will reverberate loudly in the United States, and the ability of Middle East–based Islamic State fighters to operate in Europe, as they did in Paris, could profoundly shake confidence on both sides of the Atlantic.

The effort to stop the flow of aspiring foreign fighters to Syria and Iraq will intensify, and the work to prevent veterans from returning from Islamic State–controlled lands will continue to be ratcheted up throughout the West. This undertaking will come at some cost to many of the veterans who, if they survive the fighting, will return exhausted and disillusioned to their home countries and will be unlikely to carry out attacks. For the United States and other

nations that have struggled to gain traction in countering Islamic State narratives, it could prove extremely valuable to have these burned-out cases discuss their experiences. Such accounts would certainly be difficult to repudiate and might have a genuine impact on recruitment and radicalization. Nonetheless, given the obvious imperative to maximize security, few officials will be eager to risk giving Islamic State veterans anything other than a trip to prison, and few authorities are likely to devote time or effort to backing such individuals.

The competition between al-Qa`ida and its affiliates and the Islamic State could dramatically affect the security landscape. Al-Qa`ida's need to reassert its leadership of the global jihad may encourage it to attempt a spectacular attack against a Western target. This would, in effect, reaffirm the superiority of its strategy, which aims to compel Western withdrawal from *Dar al-Islam* (Muslim lands), over one obsessed with the near-term reestablishment of a caliphate. Al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) remains, in the view of many experts, the group most capable of such a strike, and it has benefited from the turmoil in Yemen since the Houthi takeover and subsequent Saudi and Emirati military campaign. Since the Islamic State has turned to out-of-area attacks, a race to see who could inflict the most damage is entirely possible. The establishment of the shadowy Khorasan cell in Syria may support this conjecture.

The all-embracing approach to targeting that has characterized jihadist operations since well before 9/11—including all modes of transportation, hotels, schools, shopping malls, sports stadiums, other public places of assembly, military bases, oil and gas installations, and, of course, warships—suggests that point defense will be difficult. Although jihadist tactics are conservative, in the sense that they have not yet made a serious effort to stage mass casualty attacks using chemical, biological, radiological, or nuclear weapons (CBRN), they will remain wide-ranging: Bombs, MANPADS, armed assault, hostage-taking, hijacking, and assassination are all likely tactics. The availability of suicidal personnel confers an extra edge on the jihadis' tactical inventory. Faced with this array of ap-

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proaches, successful attacks must be expected.

Sectarianism sells even better than anti-Western sentiment in the wake of the 2003 Iraq war and rise of the Islamic State's precursors. The reasons for this deserve more research, but since 2012 it seems likely that mobilization of Sunni powers against the Assad regime and heightened tensions with Iran have played a key role. Consequently, AQAP may perceive it can reap greater benefits in terms of recruits, donation, and popularity by fighting the Houthis and establishing itself as a champion of Sunni interests. Indeed, the group may benefit from the impression that it is more moderate and predictable than the violently sectarian Islamic State, which has established a foothold in Yemen and may use it to target Saudi and U.S. interests. Sectarian tensions in Iraq and Syria and the wider region, will continue to fuel the rise of jihadism.

In areas where there are few if any Shi'a, such as the Maghreb and Sahel, attacks against Western targets will likely continue, as the killings at the Bamako Radisson suggest. This dynamic will likely put ever greater swaths of global territory off-limits for investment and travel in the near future. That tendency will be accelerated by the perception that global security is decaying and that personal security is more imperiled than ever by a rash of indigent “pop-up” insurgencies that may challenge weak and/or failing states across large stretches of the Muslim Middle East and Africa. Despite some improvements to Egyptian military capabilities, the Islamic State affiliate, Wilayat Sinai, and other jihadist groups

profiting from the repression of the Sisi regime will continue to grow. And Baghdadi's recent menacing rhetoric⁸ toward Israel may be an indication that the Sinai group or Islamic State forces in Syria are preparing to strike at Israel, which, if successful, would be a major public relations coup for radical Islamists.

Attacks in the West and their Implications

The chaos across the Middle East and Africa, however, will be of secondary concern next to the violent acts by lone wolf terrorists in North America, Europe, and Australia, and the implications those hold for re-



This image from an Islamic State video shows one of its fighters in Yemen.

lations between non-Muslim majorities and Muslim minorities. Whether the Islamic State is seen to be ascendant or under threat, some individuals will feel moved to aid in its historic struggle. Though the incidents will be typically low-tech and low-casualty, media coverage will be intense. After Paris and San Bernardino, targeting may seem increasingly random as militants interpret Islamic State guidance to strike infidels wherever and whenever possible. That the relatively low numbers of victims are statistically insignificant will carry no weight with those who view Islam as an unwanted presence in the West. Those people will be tempted to use the emotional impact of the attacks as grist for their xenophobic demagoguery.

Attacks carried out by lone wolf terrorists are, as so many have commented, extraordinarily difficult to prevent because of the perpetrators' limited interaction with broader extremist communities. The pressure, therefore, to increase surveillance on Muslim communities will continue to rise, as will calls for community leaders and members to cooperate with police. Many will see it in their interest to do so, but others—possibly many—will view these entreaties against the backdrop of hostile rhetoric and resent the demands and the pervasive suspicions. Alienation and, possibly, radicalization will grow, exacerbating tensions. Already, in the United States and elsewhere, hate crimes against Muslims are on the rise,⁹ and the outlook for communal relations is hardly encouraging. There is nothing irreversible about any of this, and in some communities, authorities and Muslim leaders will work to ease tensions and build trust. But the pressures on all sides will be considerable, and as political figures vie to show who will be toughest on terrorists, the atmosphere could become even more poisonous.

It is beyond the scope of this essay to examine all the damage that might be done by these dynamics. Two potential consequences, however, are worth highlighting, both related to the mounting refugee crisis that was caused in large measure by the developments in Syria and other collapsing states. Barring any political miracles, refugees will keep heading west and north, but are likely to face closed borders that will both increase the likelihood of a humanitarian catastrophe and greater radicalization.

A second possible outcome is the decay of the European Union, which now faces its greatest crisis. Having survived the Greek financial crisis, the European Union is unlikely to collapse, but the internal strains are increasing sharply. Its ability to enforce norms is weakening, as the example of Hungary and its mistreatment of refugees demonstrates. As the European Union's power wanes, so too will its institutions' ability to be a positive force for relations between non-Muslims and Muslims and its ability to mitigate deteriorating situations beyond its borders. **CTC**

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