

Fifteen Years After 9/11

A Preliminary Balance Sheet

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Fifteen Years After 9/11: A Preliminary Balance Sheet
Testimony of Brian Michael Jenkins¹
The RAND Corporation²

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Fifteen years of U.S. efforts to destroy the jihadist terrorist enterprise have not led to victory in the classic military sense. Indeed, such victory may not be achievable in this kind of war. Instead, there have been both successes and failures in what will likely be an enduring task.

Measuring progress in irregular warfare without front lines is always difficult. The diverse dimensions and multiple fronts of the continuing U.S. campaign against terrorists inspired by jihadist ideologies make doing so an exceptional challenge.

In long wars, there are invariably events that, although external to the immediate conflict, can alter the contest and change strategic calculations.³ Indeed, such events have affected U.S. strategy and altered its path in the war on terror since September 11, 2001. Some of the events are a result of U.S. policy, such as the decision to invade Iraq, the overthrow of Muammar Qaddafi in Libya, and the decision to withdraw from Iraq. Others include the global economic crisis, the still-continuing political upheaval that spread across North Africa and the Middle East, and the emergence of a more aggressive Russia, all of which complicated U.S. efforts against the jihadists. And while the basic goal of destroying the terrorist enterprise of al Qaeda, its affiliates, and its successors remains unchanged, U.S. objectives have also been redefined.

A thorough appreciation of the current situation requires assessing progress in different fields of action and different geographic theaters. A close examination of each of these aspects

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³ The assessment presented in this testimony draws from the analysis in Brian Michael Jenkins, "Fifteen Years On, Where Are We in the 'War on Terror'?" *CTC Sentinel*, West Point, N.Y.: Combating Terrorism Center, September 7, 2016. As of September 19, 2016:

<https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/fifteen-years-on-where-are-we-in-the-war-on-terror>

suggests a complicated balance sheet. In some areas, counterterrorism efforts have been successful; in other areas, less so. And for every plus or minus entry, there is a “however.” Moreover, the situation continues to be dynamic.

On the plus side, the United States’ worst fears have not been realized. There have been no more attacks on the scale of 9/11 and none of the worst-case scenarios that post-9/11 extrapolations suggested. The 9/11 attacks now appear to be a statistical outlier, not a forerunner of further escalation. Terrorists have not used weapons of mass destruction, as many expected they would do. The degradation of al Qaeda’s operational capabilities reflects a massive U.S. intelligence effort coupled with increasingly sophisticated military strategies, particularly special operations.⁴

Contrary to the inflated rhetoric of some in government, the operational capabilities of al Qaeda and the Islamic State remain limited.⁵ Both enterprises are beneficiaries of fortune (they would argue, of “God’s will”). They are successful opportunists. Much of their military successes in Syria and Iraq reflected the collapse of those governments’ forces, not al Qaeda’s or the Islamic State’s military prowess.

Neither al Qaeda nor the Islamic State has become a mass movement. The vast majority of Muslims express negative views of jihadist organizations,⁶ but a significant minority express favorable views of al Qaeda and, more recently, of the Islamic State. However, while the percentage of favorable ratings for the terrorists is generally low, it still represents large numbers of people—a deep reservoir of support.

The constellation of jihadist groups is not as meaningful as it appears to be. Competing for endorsements, al Qaeda and the Islamic State have attracted declarations of loyalty from local groups across Africa, the Middle East, and Asia and have established a host of affiliates, provinces, and jihadist footholds. This is growth by acquisition and branding. A lot of it is public relations. Many of these groups are the products of long-standing local grievances and conflicts that would continue if there were no al Qaeda or Islamic State. Some groups are organizational assertions that represent only a handful of militants. The militants share a banner but are, for the most part, focused on local quarrels rather than a global jihad, and most of their violence is directed at local regimes and populations. There is no central command. There are no joint operations. The groups operate autonomously. In many cases, their connections are tenuous, although, with time, they could evolve into something more connected.

⁴ Helene Cooper and Eric Schmitt, “ISIS Detainee’s Information Led to 2 U.S. Airstrikes, Officials Say,” *New York Times*, March 9, 2016.

⁵ The organization’s name transliterates from Arabic as al-Dawlah al-Islamiyah fi al-Iraq wa al-Sham (abbreviated as Da’ish or DAESH). In the West, it is commonly referred to as the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, the Islamic State of Iraq and the Sham (both abbreviated as ISIS), or simply as the Islamic State. Arguments abound as to which is the most accurate translation, but here I refer to the group as the Islamic State.

⁶ See “Muslim Publics Share Concerns About Extremist Groups,” Washington, D.C.: Pew Research Center, September 10, 2013; and Jacob Poushter, “In Nations with Significant Muslim Populations, Much Disdain for ISIS,” Washington, D.C.: Pew Research Center, November 17, 2015.

Like all terrorists, jihadis can kill, destroy, disrupt, alarm, and oblige governments to divert vast resources to secure against their attacks, but terrorists still seem unable to translate their attacks into permanent political gain.

The Islamic State is losing territory, and as a quasi-state entity controlling land and people, it can be defeated. With coalition air support and other external assistance, government forces in Iraq and U.S.-backed Kurdish and Arab fighters in Syria have been able to retake territory held by the Islamic State. Progress is slow, though faster than many analysts initially anticipated. Meanwhile, al Qaeda Central's command has been reduced to exhorting others to fight.

The Islamic State has made very effective use of social media to reach a broader audience, although its advertisement of atrocity as evidence of its authenticity appears to have been a magnet for marginal and psychologically disturbed individuals. Jihadist ideology has become a conveyer of individual discontents.

Continuing calls on local terrorist supporters in the West to take action have thus far produced only a meager response. Measured against other recent terrorist campaigns, the level of violence has been low. During the eight years of the Algerian War, more than 5,000 people were killed in France.⁷ More than 3,600 died during the Irish Republican Army's terrorist campaign.⁸ More than 1,000 were killed during the Basque separatists' struggle in Spain.⁹ With larger volumes of homegrown terrorists and returning foreign fighters, Europe faces a greater threat than the United States does. Recent terrorist attacks there have also provoked a backlash, which right-wing extremists have exploited, raising the specter of civil strife.

In the United States, the number of homegrown terrorists remains a fraction of the number seen in Europe. All of the recent Islamic State-inspired attacks and plots uncovered in the United States have been the products of a single individual or a tiny conspiracy with no direct connections to any organization. Nonetheless, these attacks create alarm.

But Americans are safer now than they were on 9/11. In the 15 years since those attacks, jihadist terrorists have been able to kill fewer than 100 people in the United States. While every death is a needless tragedy, this is a far better result than many feared or expected immediately after 9/11. And more than half of those deaths were the result of the violence in an Orlando, Florida, nightclub in June 2016, which many analysts see more as a mass shooting by a disturbed killer than as a true terrorist attack. The Secretary of Homeland Security has warned that more Orlando-type terrorist attacks are possible, but even so, the loss from such events would be orders of magnitude below the prospects of another 9/11-scale attack.

⁷ This includes casualties from violence between Algerian militants inside France, as well as from terrorist attacks on French targets. See Helen Chapin Metz, ed., *Algeria: A Country Study*, Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1994.

⁸ Seamus Kelters, "Violence in the Troubles," BBC, February 2013.

⁹ According to the Global Terrorism Database, 1,047 known fatalities resulted from the Basque separatist struggle in Spain between December 1970 and September 2014. See National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism, Global Terrorism Database, web tool, College Park, Md.: University of Maryland, June 2016.

Despite the difficulty of detecting lone offenders and tiny conspiracies, federal authorities and local police have uncovered and thwarted about 90 percent of the jihadist terrorist plots.¹⁰ Some, however, will succeed.

On the minus side, the targets of the American campaign have survived U.S. counterterrorism efforts. Al Qaeda has survived intense U.S.-led campaigns for 15 years, and now the Islamic State has survived them for two years. Al Qaeda and the Islamic State have been cornered, not crushed. No victory is final. These organizations have proven resilient and adaptive. They have morphed to meet new circumstances and exploit new opportunities, and they will continue to do so.

The United States cannot yet claim to have dented the determination of the jihadis to continue their armed struggle. They derive benefit from commitment, regardless of immediate outcomes, which they believe remain in God's hands. Furthermore, they believe that they will prevail in the long run because they are on the side of God and their enemies are not.

The jihadis have a powerful ideology that arouses extreme emotion and devotion. Observers cannot deny its appeal, especially to persons predisposed by other collective grievances or personal problems. The United States has not yet proved able to effectively combat this narrative, and, realistically, may not be able to do so. But on the plus side, the low numbers of U.S. casualties suggest that the ideology has gained little traction in America's Muslim communities. Personal crisis is the dominant attribute of America's jihadis.

The Taliban has been driven from power in Afghanistan, but it remains a formidable foe and will not be tamed. The continued deployment of U.S. forces will be necessary to prevent both the Taliban from regaining control of much of Afghanistan and al Qaeda from making a comeback by riding the Taliban's coattails.

The United States has come to realize that getting out of a conflict and region is difficult. American withdrawals in the wake of terrorist and military disasters in Lebanon and Somalia led to the perception by Osama bin Laden that the United States would fold easily if hit hard, and this perception encouraged the 9/11 attacks. What many regard as a premature withdrawal from Iraq and the abandonment of Libya following the overthrow of Qaddafi arguably contributed to the current bloody conflicts in those countries. Following what appeared to be the successful containment of al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, the United States turned its attention away from Yemen to other matters, only to see a comeback by that group. Does America's homeland security demand open-ended military engagements in the never-ending turbulence of North Africa, the Middle East, and Southwest Asia?

The fighting in Syria and Iraq will go on for the foreseeable future. Foreign powers have much at stake, but they have conflicting agendas and cannot impose peace from the outside. For local belligerents, the contests have become existential.

Faced with loss of its territory, the Islamic State will not quit. A long insurgency is likely to follow. The leaders of the Islamic State fought clandestinely for years in Iraq and could go underground again to continue the struggle. They could relocate to another jihadist stronghold, creating a mobile Islamic State. Or they could try to carry out some sort of dramatic attack that

¹⁰ See Jenkins, 2016.

alters perceptions or changes the dynamics of the conflict. The declining Islamic State has become the launching pad of an international terrorist campaign.

Syria and Iraq will remain fragile states, arenas of international competition, and sources of regional instability and continued violence. Current partitions are likely to persist. National institutions have eroded. Power on the ground has shifted to militias under local or foreign control and to the rebel formations. Neither government can restore authority throughout its national territory. The Shia and Kurdish portions of Iraq and the Alawite-dominated bastion in western Syria may be economically viable, but the poorer and less-populated Sunni areas of both countries currently dominated by the rebels and the Islamic State could become persistent badlands.

The world will be dealing with the effluents of the conflicts in Syria and Iraq for years to come. The tens of thousands of foreign fighters who have joined the Islamic State and other jihadist groups have no future under Iraqi or Syrian government authority and cannot survive in an underground campaign. They will likely migrate to other jihadist formations, try to establish new jihadist fronts, or return home—some traumatized, some disillusioned, but some determined to continue their armed struggles. Again, the destruction of the Islamic State could bring about a spike in terrorist activity by its veterans worldwide.

Europe is particularly vulnerable for a variety of reasons, including continuing radicalization efforts that, until recently, have been left unattended for decades and that have produced large volumes of homegrown extremists and foreign fighters who are now returning; under-resourced intelligence services and police departments; porous borders coupled with persistent obstacles to information-sharing; and, as a consequence of recent events, a rise in xenophobic and extremist right-wing political movements.

Refugees will pose a long-term challenge to society and security. Syria's brutal counterinsurgency strategy has generated huge refugee flows. The refugees will not be able to return for the foreseeable future and are thus permanently displaced. However, given their volume, they also cannot be easily absorbed by neighboring countries with small populations and delicate sectarian balances. Migrants and at least some foreign fighters have exploited the refugee flow to Europe. Most of the refugees will build new homes, but the refugee flow includes a large proportion of single young men, always a problematic demographic and especially so coming from violent environments and having little education. These men will not easily find work or assimilate. They are the targets of radicalization.

The United States faces a multi-tiered threat. While the threat of large-scale attacks by terrorist teams infiltrating the country seems to have diminished, authorities still confront the problem of returning foreign fighters—although the numbers are far less than those in Europe, and returning American jihadis will not have a local underground to provide them with hideouts and assistance. The primary threat will come from the ability of al Qaeda and the Islamic State to inspire attacks by self-radicalized individuals, as well as emotionally disturbed persons seeking attention by associating themselves with a terrorist cause.

The United States is better organized and equipped to combat terrorism than it was on 9/11, but its citizens remain fearful. The United States' frightened, angry, and divided society remains the country's biggest vulnerability. Progress in degrading al Qaeda's capabilities or dismantling

the Islamic State is almost completely divorced from popular perceptions. Rather than appealing to traditional American values of courage, self-reliance, and sense of community, the current political system incentivizes stoking fear.

So, after 15 years, a lot has changed in the fight against terrorism, progress has been made, and Americans are safer. But the fight is not over yet. The threat continues.