

## Misoverestimating ISIS: Comparisons with Al-Qaeda

by John Mueller and Mark G. Stewart

### **Abstract**

*An examination of the ISIS phenomenon, comparing it with that generated a decade and a half earlier by al-Qaeda. Although the vicious group certainly presents a threat to the people under its control and although it can contribute damagingly to the instability in the Middle East that has followed serial interventions there by the American military, it scarcely presents a challenge to global security. Moreover, the group is in very considerable decline in its key areas, Syria and particularly Iraq. As with al-Qaeda, however, the unwarranted fear and alarm ISIS has generated is likely to persist even if the group is effectively extinguished as a physical force in the Middle East.*

**Keywords:** ISIS; al-Qaeda; terrorism; Islamic State; public opinion

### **Introduction**

In 2014, a militant group calling itself the Islamic State or ISIL, but more generally known as ISIS, burst into official and public attention with some military victories in Iraq and Syria in the middle of the year—particularly taking over Iraq’s second largest city, Mosul. Cries of alarm escalated substantially a few months later when ISIS performed and webcast several beheadings of defenseless Western hostages. Democratic Senator Dianne Feinstein was soon insisting that “The threat ISIS poses cannot be overstated”—effectively proclaiming, as columnist Dan Froomkin suggests, hyperbole on the subject to be impossible.[1]

This article examines the ISIS phenomenon, briefly comparing it with that generated a decade and a half earlier by al-Qaeda. The exercise suggests that, although ISIS certainly presents a threat to the people under its control, and although it can contribute damagingly to the instability in the Middle East that has followed serial interventions there by the American military, it scarcely presents a challenge to global security. Moreover, the group is in very considerable decline in its key areas, Syria and particularly Iraq. As with al-Qaeda, however, the unwarranted fear and alarm ISIS has generated is likely to persist even if the group is effectively extinguished as a physical force in the Middle East.

### **Al-Qaeda**

For almost all of the period since September 11, 2001, the chief group of concern has been al-Qaeda, a fringe element of a fringe movement with grandiose visions of its own importance.[2] With the 9/11 attack it managed, largely because of luck, to pull off a risky, if clever and carefully planned, terrorist act that became by far the most destructive in history: scarcely any terrorist deed before or since has visited even one-tenth as much destruction, even in war zones where terrorist groups have plenty of space and time to plot. It also proved to be spectacularly counterproductive. It was apparently designed in the belief that the United States would respond to a massive attack at home by withdrawing from the Middle East.[3] But the attack had, to say the least, the opposite effect.

As with the assassination of President John Kennedy in 1963, there has been a great reluctance to accept that such a monumental event could have been carried out by a fundamentally trivial entity, and there has been a consequent tendency to inflate al-Qaeda’s importance and effectiveness. At the extreme, the remnants of the group have even been held to present a threat to the survival—to the very existence—of the United States or even of the world system.[4]

The alarm has been substantially misplaced. Al-Qaeda Central, holed up in Pakistan, has consisted of perhaps one or two hundred people who, judging from information obtained in Osama bin Laden's lair when he was killed in May 2011, have been primarily occupied with dodging drone missile attacks, complaining about their lack of funds, and watching a lot of pornography.[5] It has served as something of an inspiration to some Muslim extremists, has done some training, seems to have contributed a bit to the Taliban's far larger insurgency in Afghanistan, and may have participated in a few terrorist acts in Pakistan. In his examination of the major terrorist plots against the West since 9/11, Mitchell Silber finds only two—the shoe bomber attempt of 2001 and the effort to blow up transatlantic airliners with liquid bombs in 2006—that could be said to be under the “command and control” of al-Qaeda Central (as opposed to ones suggested, endorsed, or inspired by the organization), and there are questions about how full its control was even in these two instances, both of which failed miserably.[6] It has also issued videos filled with empty threats. Thus, for example, it was a decade ago that bin Laden denied that the “delay” in carrying out operations in the United States was “due to failure to breach your security measures,” and ominously insisted that “operations are under preparation, and you will see them on your own ground once they are finished, God willing.”[7] God, apparently, has not been willing.

Various variously affiliated groups in places like Iraq and Yemen and Nigeria have done considerable damage in connection with ongoing civil wars, but little to the “far enemy” which is al-Qaeda's stated central goal. [8] For the most part, they haven't even tried. Even isolated and under siege, it is difficult to see why al-Qaeda (of any branch) could not have perpetrated attacks at least as costly and shocking as the shooting rampages (organized by others) that took place in Mumbai in 2008, at a shopping center in Kenya in 2013, in Paris and San Bernardino in 2015, or in Orlando in 2016. None of these required huge resources, presented major logistical challenges, required the organization of a large number of perpetrators, or needed extensive planning.

Operating under an apparently unanimous alarmist mentality after 9/11, U.S. intelligence came extravagantly to imagine by 2002 that the number of trained al-Qaeda operatives in the United States was between 2,000 and 5,000.[9] The actual number, as it turns out, was close to zero. Even though something like 300 million foreigners enter the United States legally every year, al-Qaeda appears to have been unable to smuggle in any operatives at all.[10]

Meanwhile, authorities have been able to roll up dozens of plots by homegrown would-be terrorists, some of which have been inspired by al-Qaeda. Brian Jenkins' summary assessment of these is apt: “their numbers remain small, their determination limp, and their competence poor.”[11] In contrast to this conclusion, there has been a widespread tendency to assume terrorists to be clever, crafty, diabolical, resourceful, ingenious, brilliant, and flexible—opponents fully worthy of the exceedingly expensive efforts being made to counter them. The exaggeration of terrorist capacities has been greatest in the many much overstated assessments of their ability to develop nuclear weapons.[12]

The lack of success of al-Qaeda terrorists in the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, and other Western countries mirrors that in the United States: the number of people killed by Islamist extremist terrorists in the UK is less than four per year, while for Canada and Australia, it is two in the last decade. In all, extremist Islamist terrorism—whether associated with al-Qaeda or not – claimed some 200 to 300 lives yearly worldwide in the several years after 2001 outside of war zones.[13] That is 200 to 300 too many, of course, but it is about the same number as deaths from bathtub drownings in the United States.

The 9/11 attacks by Al Qaeda proved to be a spectacular aberration, not a harbinger.[14] And global security was hardly challenged.

**ISIS**

History may now be repeating itself with ISIS. One of the most remarkable phenomena of the last few years is the way this vicious insurgent group in Iraq and Syria has captured and exercised the imagination of the public in Western countries. From the outset, Senators John McCain and Lindsay Graham proclaimed the group to be an existential threat to the United States.[15] President Barack Obama has repeatedly insisted that this extreme characterization is overblown.[16] However, he clearly has lost the debate. A poll conducted in the spring of 2016 asked the 83 percent of its respondents who said they closely followed news stories about ISIS whether the group presented “a serious threat to the existence or survival of the US.” Fully 77 percent agreed, more than two-thirds of them strongly.[17]

That anxiety was triggered by a set of web-cast, and for ISIS supremely counterproductive, beheadings of Americans in the late summer and fall of 2014. Only 17 percent of the US public had favored sending American ground troops to fight ISIS after it surprisingly routed US-trained Iraqi forces in Mosul in June 2014. However, the beheadings abruptly boosted that support to 40 to 50 percent even as upwards of two-thirds came to deem ISIS to present a major security threat to the United States.[18]

Outrage at the tactics and brutality of ISIS is certainly justified. But, as with al-Qaeda after 9/11, fears that it presents a worldwide security threat are not. Its numbers are small, and it has differentiated itself from al-Qaeda, initially at least, in that it has not sought primarily to target the “far enemy,” preferring instead to carve out a state in the Middle East for itself, mostly killing fellow Muslims who stand in its way.[19] Unlike al-Qaeda Central, it welcomes foreign fighters into its ranks in sizeable numbers, and seeks to administer the territory it occupies. In that, it is far more like an insurgent group than like a terrorist one.[20]

However, as Middle East specialist Ramzy Mardini put it in 2014, “the Islamic State’s fundamentals are weak”; “it does not have a sustainable endgame”; its “extreme ideology, spirit of subjugation, and acts of barbarism prevent it from becoming a political venue for the masses”; its foolhardy efforts to instill fear in everyone limits “its opportunities for alliances” and makes it “vulnerable to popular backlash”; “its potential support across the region ranges from limited to nonexistent”; and it “is completely isolated, encircled by enemies.”[21] In particular, its brutalities, such as staged beheadings of hostages, summary executions of prisoners, and the rape and enslavement of female captives have greatly intensified opposition to the group. As Daniel Byman notes, with its “genius for making enemies,” ISIS can not make common cause even with other Sunni rebel groups, and, by holding territory, presents an obvious and clear target to military opponents.[22]

Not only does it scarcely present an existential threat to the United States (or to the globe), but it seems to be in very considerable decline in its core areas in Syria and Iraq.

***Military Prowess***

ISIS’s ability to behead defenseless hostages certainly should not be taken as an indication of its military might, and its major military advance, the conquest of Mosul in Iraq in 2014, was essentially a fluke. Its intention seems to have been merely to hold part of the city for a while in an effort to free some prisoners. [23] The defending Iraqi army, trained by the American military at a cost to U.S. taxpayers of more than \$20 billion, simply fell apart in confusion and disarray, abandoning weaponry, and the city itself, to the tiny group of seeming invaders even though it greatly outnumbered them (even taking into account the fact that many soldiers had purchased the right to avoid showing up for duty by paying half their salary to their commanders).[24] The fall of the smaller city of Ramadi a few weeks earlier may have been similar: Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter noted that although they “vastly” outnumbered the ISIS attackers, the Iraqi forces had “failed to fight.”[25]

After its startlingly easy advances of 2014, however, the vicious group's momentum has been substantially halted, and its empire is currently under siege and in retreat. Even by late 2014, it was being pushed back from Kobani, a strategically-located area in northern Syria, and was finding that its supply lines were overstretched and its ranks of experienced fighters were being thinned. The group's magazine claimed that ISIS was "ready to burn 10,000 fighters" in the fight and would "never accept to lose." However, they left after losses of a few hundred.[26]

In late 2015, it tried to push back by launching three badly-coordinated offensives in Northern Iraq. The fighting force in each case comprised 80 to 160 fighters using, among other things, "armored bulldozers." They were readily beaten back.[27] The weakness of the Iraqi army, even after billions more were spent by the United States on training, remains ISIS' main military "strength." And continuous wrangling, often vicious, among the various entities opposing it is also very much to its advantage.[28] However, after an additional expenditure of more than \$1.6 billion by the US, it was being reported that the Iraqi army, or significant portions thereof, had "revived considerably since its disastrous collapse in 2014" and that ISIS was in retreat on many fronts and appeared to be "a rapidly diminishing force." [29] By 2016, ISIS had lost some 40 percent of its territory overall,[30] 65 percent in Iraq.[31] The key issue, as US General Sean MacFarland has stressed, is not how good the forces arrayed against in ISIS are, but "Are they better than the enemy." His conclusion: "Yes they are." [32]

Frontline commanders were observing of ISIS that "They don't fight. They just send car bombs and then run away. And when we surround them they either surrender or infiltrate themselves among the civilians.... Their morale is shaken.... Their leaders are begging them to fight, but they answer that it is a lost cause. They refuse to obey and run away." More generally, concludes one analyst, "They are starting to fall apart. They're a small movement. If you bring them under pressure on half a dozen battlefields at the same time, they can't do it." [33] One local tribal leader said, "As soon as they saw our forces, they ran away.... Every week they execute four or five members because they refuse to obey orders or try to turn against their leaders." [34] In defense, they seem to rely primarily not on counteroffensives, but on planting booby traps, using snipers, and cowering among civilians. [35]

Moreover, to the degree that ISIS, unlike the more wary al-Qaeda central, welcomes fighters from abroad, the group is likely to be penetrated by foreign intelligence operatives. Indeed, the fear of informants in the ranks has fueled paranoia, and executions of suspected spies and traitors to the cause has become common. [36] There may also be another problem for ISIS. By most accounts, their most effective fighters are those imported from Chechnya and nearby areas. Many of these arrived in early 2014 because, fearing terrorism at the time of the Sochi Olympics, Russian authorities were opening borders and urging them to leave. In the latter half of that year, however, the Russians reversed the policy. [37]

### ***Economic and Social Viability***

ISIS is finding that actually controlling and effectively governing wide territories is a major strain, and it has to work hard to keep people from fleeing its brutal lumpen Caliphate. [38] On close examination in fact, its once highly-vaunted economic capacity seems to be proving to be illusory. Even by late 2014, it was finding that there were major problems with providing government services and medical care, keeping prices from soaring, getting schools to function, keeping the water drinkable. [39] Indeed, conclude some analysts, ISIS is "extremely unlikely to be sustainable from a financial perspective. Its economy is small compared to its enemies, its institutions are not conducive to economic growth, and it is reliant on extractive industries that in all other non-democratic countries foster the creation of kleptocratic elites.... Even if it endures as a fragile state, it will be vulnerable to internal strife." [40]

In part because the territory it controlled had diminished so much—thereby reducing the number of people it could tax (or extort) ISIS was forced by the end of 2015 to reduce the salaries of its fighters by half. Those salaries, it appears, constitute two-thirds of the group's operating budget.[41]

By 2016, there were increasing reports of “financial strain,” as well as of “clashes among senior commanders over allegations of corruption, mismanagement and theft.” Not only were the tax or extortion bases much reduced and oil sales disrupted, but the huge cash windfall resulting from the seizure of banks during the group's season of expansion in 2014 was now “mostly gone.”[42]

In 2015, ISIS tried to create a currency that it called the “Gold Dinar.” In what the *Economist* calls “a bizarre sales pitch” for the new currency, it railed about “the dark rise of bank notes, born out of the satanic conception of banks” and proclaimed that the death of its “oppressive banknote” would bring America “to her knees.”[43] However, by 2016, ISIS seems to have scrapped its fanciful new currency and is now relying on US dollars. All utility bills, extortion payments, fines for dressing improperly, and inducements to obtain the release of detainees must be tendered in that currency. The regime also ceased supplying free energy drinks and Snickers bars to its followers. They now have to buy such essentials with their enemy's “oppressive” and “satanic” currency.[44]

### ***Returning Militants and Homegrown Inspirees***

One major fear has been that foreign militants who had gone to fight with ISIS would be trained and then sent back to do damage in their own countries. However, there has been virtually none of that in the United States. In part, this is because, as Daniel Byman and Jeremy Shapiro detail, foreign fighters tend to be killed early (they are common picks for suicide missions), often become disillusioned especially by in-fighting in the ranks, and do not receive much in the way of useful training for terrorist exercises back home.[45]

Although ISIS continues to focus primarily on defending its shrinking lumpen caliphate in Syria and Iraq, in 2015 it appears to have decided to lash out abroad to strike, in particular, foreign countries, fighting them perhaps in part to divert attention from its territorial losses.[46] At least some of those in the small group (not a “terrorist army” as French President François Hollande has labeled them) that perpetrated the Paris attack of November 2015 and the one in Brussels a few months later may have received training and/or support from ISIS.[47] However, the best estimates currently are that only about perhaps one in a hundred returnees from Syria has engaged in terrorism when they went back to Europe.[48]

In a reactive ploy that has become routine for the group, ISIS has claimed responsibility for—or, more accurately, boorishly celebrated – terrorist attacks abroad like those in Paris, Brussels, Nice, and Munich. But there is little indication that ISIS central planned or significantly participated in them. Indeed, in the case of the Brussels attack, notes Benjamin Friedman, ISIS claimed that the attackers “opened fire” with “automatic rifles,” repeating errors that were initially reporting from the scene. Moreover, like the webcast beheadings of 2014 or the burning alive of a captured Jordanian pilot in early 2015, such terrorism has been spectacularly counterproductive and tends, as Friedman continues, “to provoke nationalistic anger, unifying nations against attackers rather acquiescence in their demands.”[49]

Fears have also focused on the dangers presented by potential homegrown terrorists who might be inspired by ISIS's propaganda or example. As early as September 2014, a top ISIS spokesman was urging foreign supporters to kill disbelievers, whether civilian or military, “in any manner or way however it might be”. The “spiteful and filthy French” were singled out for special attention.[50] As several recent attacks, in particular the one in Nice on 14 July 2016, tragically demonstrate, potential targets for dedicated terrorists—peaceful aggregations of civilians—remain legion. However, as terrorism specialist Max Abrahms noted in 2011, “lone wolves have carried out just two of the 1,900 most deadly terrorist incidents over the last four decades.”[51]

Although the attacks in Orlando and Nice in 2016 indicate that even lone wolves can sometimes do substantial damage, global security is unlikely to be challenged, much less upended, by such miscreants.

However, continuous failure on the battlefield may well have a dampening effect on enthusiasm, much of which was impelled by the sudden—and, for some, exhilarating—expansion of ISIS. By one count there were only two Islamist terrorist plots by locals in the United States in 2014, neither of them ISIS-related. In 2015, this rose to 19, 14 of them ISIS-related—that is, both plots related to *and* unrelated to ISIS increased significantly.[52] Thus far in 2016, however, there have been but two (both ISIS-related). In addition, the FBI reports that the trend for Americans seeking to join ISIS is also decidedly downward.[53] In fact, by 2016, the flow of foreign fighters going to ISIS from any country may have dropped by 90 percent over the previous year.[54]

In this connection, there has been a trendy concern about the way ISIS uses social media. However, as Byman and Shapiro and others have pointed out, the foolish willingness of would-be terrorists to spill out their aspirations and their often-childish fantasies on social media has been, on balance, much to the advantage of the police seeking to track them.[55]

Childishness is also found in much of the verbiage spewed out on ISIS websites that is often taken so seriously and seen to be so ominous by commentators. In one, for example, ISIS threatened the Russians: “We will make your wives concubines and make your children our slaves...Soon, very soon, the blood will spill like an ocean...The Kremlin will be ours.”[56] And another bragged, “Know, oh Obama, that we will reach America. Know also that we will cut off your head in the White House and transform America into a Muslim province.”[57] Or there is the trainee in Syria who eagerly asked his mother about what people were saying about a friend of his who had recently blown himself up: “Are they talking about him? Are they praising him? Are they saying he was a lion?”[58] And the preposterous, grandiloquent ravings of Islamic State’s forefather Abu Musab al-Zarqawi (who was killed in 2006), that “We fight here, while our goal is Rome” are gravely and ominously relayed as if they had some serious meaning.[59]

### ***Assessing the Future***

After the heady days of 2014 and early 2015, ISIS appears to be in considerable disarray. Its advances have been stopped and then reversed, and it is in clear decline in its main base areas in the Middle East, especially Iraq. Indeed, there are strong indications that, two years after proclaiming its caliphate and the start of a glorious new epoch in world history, the group is preparing its supporters for the possibility, even likelihood, of total territorial collapse while urging its supporters on with such cheerless proclamations as “a drowning person does not fear getting wet.”[60]

The plan now seems to be to become a sort of virtual Islamic State, exacting revenge and reminding the world of its continued existence by launching sporadic and vicious terrorist attacks in the Middle East and by inspiring them abroad in any country at all, not just ones participating in the fight against ISIS: “We do have, every day, people reaching out and telling us they want to come to the caliphate,” says one operative, “But we tell them to stay in their countries and rather wait to do something there.”[61]

It is certainly possible to see this development as essentially, indeed profoundly, mindless and, as has been suggested by Secretary of State John Kerry, as an indication of the group’s desperation.[62] However, there has been considerable push-back against this plausible hypothesis in prominent publications.

One, for example, somehow concludes that, by massacring people in various locales in various countries, the group was actually growing in appeal—or in “allure” in the words of a headline writer.[63] How this remarkable process has come about is not explained, nor is evidence given to back it up. Indeed, ISIS has followed policies and military approaches that have repeatedly proven to be counterproductive in the extreme

in enhancing its “appeal” and/or “allure.” Opposition to the group among Arab teens and young adults has risen from 60 percent to 80 percent.[64] Any allure the group may have in Iraq certainly fails to register on a poll conducted there in January 2016 in which 99 percent of Shiites and 95 percent of Sunnis express opposition to it.[65] And ISIS’ appeal among jihadists as being dynamic, victorious, and unstoppable has been severely undercut: as noted, the flow of foreign fighters going to join the group has plunged, and there has been a clear decline in the degree to which it inspires what commentator Kurt Eichenwald calls “jihadist cool” and “Rambo envy”.[66]

Another writer acknowledges that the appeal of Islamic State as “the promise of living in an Islamist utopia” and as a victorious military force has been in severe decline, and that the group has suffered many defections in the ranks as well. But the group’s shift in focus from dealing with territorial degradation to slaughtering civilians in random attacks is taken not to be a sign of its “desperation and weakness,” but one that demonstrates its “strength and long-term survival skills.”[67]

In the long term, there is good reason to believe that the ISIS policy will be self-destructive—like just about everything else it (or, for that matter, al-Qaeda in its “far enemy” phase) has done. The killing of civilians by terrorist or insurgent groups has been shown to be especially counterproductive. Thus, in her analysis of civil wars, Virginia Page Fortna concludes that insurgencies that employ “a systematic campaign of indiscriminate violence against public civilian targets” pretty much *never* win. Similarly, Max Abrahms finds that the targeting of civilians by terrorists is “highly correlated with political failure.”[68]

However, as the experience with al-Shabab in Somalia suggests, declining insurgencies can make trouble and create misery in their operational area for years.

In a thoughtful analytic perspective on ISIS, Middle East specialist Marc Lynch concludes that ISIS seems to him to be “a fairly ordinary insurgency that has been unduly mystified and exoticized in the public discourse.”[69] It does not differ from many other insurgencies in that it is peculiarly vicious or in that it applies a crackpot ideology—Boko Haram in Nigeria, for example, exhibits those qualities as well. Rather, ISIS differs in the sense of mystery and exoticism it has generated not only in a considerable number of supporters around the globe but in its deeply alarmed opponents worldwide. Something similar could be said for al-Qaeda.

How much substance remains behind the mystery and exoticism ISIS once inspired among jihadists has yet to be determined. ISIS could still provide inspiration to at least some isolated, vicious, and ultimately pathetic death cult sycophants around the world even if it essentially ceases to exist altogether. After all, some still find inspiration in the example of Che Guevara even though he has been dead for half a century.

However, the damage that these inspired individuals manage to commit is likely to remain limited, albeit tragic. Even if all the terrible outrages committed in Europe in 2015 and 2016 are taken to be ISIS-related, far more people on that continent perished yearly at the hands of terrorists in most years in the 1970s and 1980s.[70] The existence and survival of the continent were scarcely imperiled.

Such comparisons are frequently taken to be irrelevant. Terrorists like those in al-Qaeda and ISIS that manage to create a spooky threat that emanates from abroad—one that exudes mystery and exoticism—are commonly taken to present a danger that is not only special, but perpetual. Even though other issues—particularly economic ones—have crowded out terrorism as a topic of daily concern in the US, 9/11 has resulted in a long-term, routinized, mass anxiety—or at least a sense of concern—about that sort of terrorism that, despite many reasons to expect otherwise, has shown little sign of waning over the years since 2001. This was the case even before the threatening and attention-arresting rise of ISIS in 2014.[71]

Thus, as with al-Qaeda, the unwarranted fear and alarm ISIS has generated since 2014 is likely to persist even if the group is effectively destroyed as a physical force in the Middle East. Because of the special formlessness,

even spookiness, of terrorism's hostile foreign referent in this case, it is likely to be exceptionally difficult to get people to believe that the threat has really been extinguished—or at least that it is no longer particularly significant.

It is probably best to see public opinion as the primary driver in the excessive and somewhat bizarre counterterrorism process that has taken place since 9/11. Because of the persistent public fear and alarm about al-Qaeda and ISIS, leaders seem incapable of pointing out that an American's chance of being killed by a terrorist is one in 4 million per year. And to suggest that, at that rate, terrorism might pose an acceptable risk (or even to discuss the issue) appears to be utterly impossible.[72] And it took until 2015, nearly a decade and a half after 9/11, before public officials, including in this case the president of the United States, were willing to suggest that terrorism, even that presented by ISIS, did not, as it happens, present a threat to the country that was “existential” in nature, an observation that is “blindingly obvious” as security specialist Bruce Schneier puts it.[73]

President Obama seems to be ready to go further, but has not summoned the political courage to do so. Reportedly, he “frequently reminds his staff that terrorism takes far fewer lives in America than handguns, car accidents, and falls in bathtubs do.” However, out of concern that Obama will “seem insensitive to the fears of the American people,” his advisers are “fighting a constant rearguard action to keep Obama from placing terrorism in what he considers its ‘proper’ perspective.”[74] That is, the incentives in the United States and elsewhere are to play to the galleries and to exaggerate the threat: if 77 percent of the people appear to be convinced that ISIS presents “a serious threat to the existence or survival of the US,” there is likely to be considerably more purchase in servicing the notion than in seeking to counter it.[75] In the process, the misoverestimation of terrorism and of the threat that ISIS presents will continue apace.

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## Notes

[1] Dan Froomkin, 2014, “The Congressional Hyperbole Caucus,” *firstlook.org/theintercept*, September 10. See also Micah Zenko, 2014, “Exaggeration Nation,” *foreignpolicy.com*, November 12.

[2] On al-Qaeda as a fringe group, see especially Fawaz A. Gerges, 2005, *The Far Enemy: Why Jihad Went Global* (New York: Cambridge University Press); Fawaz A. Gerges, 2011, *The Rise and Fall of Al-Qaeda* (New York: Oxford University Press).

[3] Lawrence Wright, 2006, *The Looming Tower: Al-Qaeda and the Road to 9/11* (New York: Knopf), 174, 200; Daniel Byman and Jennifer Williams, 2015, “Jihadism's Global Civil War,” *National Interest*, March/April, 15. Gerges, 2011, 85, 90.

[4] For a discussion, see John Mueller, 2006, *Overblown* (New York: Free Press), 45-47.

[5] John Mueller and Mark G. Stewart, 2016a, *Chasing Ghosts: The Policing of Terrorism* (New York: Oxford University Press), chapt. 4; Marc Sageman, 2008, *Leaderless Jihad* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press); Gerges, 2011.

[6] Mitchell D. Silber, 2012, *The Al Qaeda Factor: Plots Against the West* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press). See also Sageman, 2008, 139.

[7] For sources and for additional threats, see John Mueller and Mark G. Stewart, 2011, *Terror, Security, and Money* (New York: Oxford University Press), 36.

[8] Gerges, 2005. On Osama bin Laden's apparent conclusion that 9/11 failed because it didn't kill enough Americans and on his continued plotting to remedy that defect, see Mueller and Stewart, 2016a, 120-21.

[9] Bill Gertz, 2002, “5,000 in U.S. Suspected of Ties to al Qaeda,” *Washington Times*, July 11. Richard Sale, 2002, “U.S. al Qaeda Cells Attacked,” UPI, October 31.

[10] Mueller, 2006, 177.

[11] Brian Michael Jenkins, 2011, *Stray Dogs and Virtual Armies: Radicalization and Recruitment to Jihadist Terrorism in the United States Since 9/11* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND), 1; see also Risa A. Brooks, 2011, “Muslim ‘Homegrown’ Terrorism in the United States: How Serious is the Threat?” *International Security*, Fall; Mueller and Stewart 2016a, chapt. 3.



- [12] For extended discussions of the nuclear issue, see John Mueller, 2010, *Atomic Obsession* (New York: Oxford University Press), chapters. 12-15; Brian Michael Jenkins, 2008, *Will Terrorists Go Nuclear?* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus). For more on this general issue, including an examination of the “myth of the mastermind”, see Mueller and Stewart 2016a, chapt. 4. For the classic alarmist case, see Graham T. Allison, 2004, *Nuclear Terrorism: The Ultimate Preventable Catastrophe* (New York: Times Books).
- [13] For a derivation of this number from three separate sources, see Mueller and Stewart, 2016a, 306, note 4. Changes in the ISIS era are discussed below. For the argument that such numbers stem much more from the inadequacies of the terrorists than from counterterrorism measures, see John Mueller and Mark Stewart, 2016f, “How Safe Are We?” *foreignaffairs.com*, August 15; more generally, see Mueller and Stewart, 2016a.
- [14] On this issue, see John Mueller, 2002, “Harbinger or Aberration?” *National Interest*, Fall; John Mueller, 2003, “Blip or Step Function?” International Studies Association Convention paper, available on the web; Russell Seitz, 2004, “Weaker Than We Think,” *American Conservative*, December 6. See also Gerges, 2005.
- [15] McCain: Morning Joe, 2014, *msnbc.com*, June 13; Graham: Amanda Terkel, 2014, “Lindsey Graham: If Obama Doesn’t Go On Offense, Terrorists Are ‘Coming Here,’” *huffingtonpost.com*, August 11.
- [16] Mueller and Stewart, 2016a, pp. 24-25; Bruce Schneier, 2015, “Obama Says Terrorism Is Not an Existential Threat,” *schneier.com*, February 3. See also Jeffrey Goldberg, 2016, “The Obama Doctrine,” *Atlantic*, April.
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- [18] For data, see John Mueller and Mark G. Stewart, 2016e. Obama has arrestingly commented on the phenomenon in an interview. He noted that “ISIS had made a major strategic error by killing them because the anger it generated resulted in the American public’s quickly backing military action. If he had been ‘an adviser to ISIS,’ Mr. Obama added, he would not have killed the hostages but released them and pinned notes on their chests saying, ‘Stay out of here; this is none of your business.’ Such a move, he speculated, might have undercut support for military intervention”; Peter Baker, 2014, “Paths to War, Then and Now, Haunt Obama,” *nytimes.com*, September 13.
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