



## Counterterrorism in a World of Competing Priorities

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Russell E. Travers  
Deputy Director, U.S. National Counterterrorism Center

### **Remarks as prepared for delivery**

Great Pleasure to be here to speak with you today about the terrorist threat and counterterrorism efforts in a world of competing priorities.

I'll warn you at the outset... I have more questions than answers.

In part, that reflects the period of transition in which we find ourselves.

Other threats have grown in importance relative to terrorism—multiple state actors, cyber, and so forth.

There are some positive trends when it comes to terrorism—but there are also some ominous trends.

And, I think it's fair to say that there's a degree of terrorism fatigue in many countries around the world.

So, how should we be thinking about the threat of terrorism and our counterterrorism initiatives? I'll cover three broad areas:

First, a strategic concern I have regarding the potential for complacency... yes, we have made important progress against some aspects of the terrorism threat. But, we have significant work to do.

Secondly, I'll lay out some of that work – starting at the strategic level and working down to the level of electrons.

And thirdly, I'd like to pose some key questions, the answers to which will say a great deal about the nature of the future threat.

#### **So, first – my strategic concern about Complacency**

There is lots of good news.

The last significant AQ-related attack in the West was Charlie Hebdo – four years ago.... Last successful centrally-directed ISIS attack in the West – Turkish nightclub two years ago... and before that, the attacks in Paris and Brussels.



There has been tremendous military effort in Iraq/Syria to eliminate the so-called Caliphate.

We have captured/killed many skilled operatives.

That has had many second-order effects adversely impacting on ISIS: resource constraints in some areas... less messaging—and importantly, less sophisticated messaging... morale issues... and ideological schisms.

Compared to the situation in past years, there is a diminished large-scale, external attack capability.

Beyond Iraq and Syria, globally, some ISIS affiliates have also been under pressure.

And HVE attacks in Europe dropped substantially from 2017 to 2018.

We've also seen efforts to improve border security—particularly in the EU after the Paris and Brussels attacks... And, there has been improved information sharing and multinational coordination to interrupt plots... And, we've seen a growing partnership with the private sector to make cyberspace less hospitable.

Moreover, we have seen improvements in some countries that have historically been challenged to address inter-service cooperation necessary to mitigate the impact of terrorist attacks.

Compare the Kenyan response to the al-Shabaab attacks in Nairobi against the Westgate Mall in 2013 and DusitD2 hotel a few weeks ago.

Attack of the Westgate Mall in 2013 — 67 victims. Went on for two days.

Dusit Hotel: last month 15 victims. Better coordination among Kenyan CT services. Over in a matter of hours.

We will never eliminate terrorism, but a tremendous amount of good work has been done.

**On the other hand....** In the first two months of this year, we have seen 200+ attacks in 14 countries, killing or injuring more than 800 people. And ongoing arrests have continued in many other countries of individuals tied to ISIS.

More broadly, when I started working counterterrorism after 9/11, we were overwhelmingly focused on al-Qa‘ida and one piece of real estate in the Afghanistan/Pakistan region.

Now we see a primary threat in many of our countries being homegrown violent extremists.



Despite the elimination of the so-called Caliphate, we have an active ISIS insurgency in Iraq and Syria and a sufficient command structure such that it maintains cohesion over twenty-odd ISIS branches and networks around the globe.

al-Qa'ida has received rather less attention over the past few years; but, it too retains a command structure and multiple affiliates around the globe.

**Very diffuse, diverse Sunni extremist threat.**

While I won't have time to address it, we have an active Iranian and Shia terrorist threat.

Beyond Islamic terrorism, we are also seeing a growing threat of both right-wing and left-wing domestic terrorism.

**More conceptually**, I'd suggest looking at terrorist capabilities through the prism of globalization. Terrorism is not, and never has been, "existential,"— unless it changes who we are as a people.

But individual terrorists and associated networks have the ability to have outsized effects because of the ways in which they exploit the attributes of globalization. They're good at it. And they're innovative.

We've seen the use of encrypted communications for operational planning.

The use of social media for everything from the spread of propaganda to knowledge transfer.

We've seen innovative packaging of explosives for many years as terrorists seek to avoid airline screening and detection.

We're in the relatively early stages of terrorist use of drones and UAVs for reconnaissance, swarm attacks, explosive delivery means and even assassination attempts.

High-quality, fraudulent travel documents pose a growing threat to border security.

We will see greater use of cryptocurrencies and mobile banking to fund operations.

And the potential terrorist use of chemical and biological weaponry has moved from being a low-probability, high-impact eventuality to something that is considered much more likely.

In virtually all these cases, the illicit use of technology has advanced far faster than has the legal and policy framework to deal with terrorist potential.

So ... yes, the world has done a great deal to address many aspects of the terrorist threat.



The elimination of the Caliphate has, at least temporarily, adversely impacted ISIS' ability to orchestrate large-scale external operations.

Nevertheless, we need to avoid premature declaration of victory and certainly need to avoid any sense of complacency.

**The second area I want to address constitutes four Must Dos—starting at the Strategic level and working down to the electron level as we seek to posture ourselves for a generational struggle against terrorism.**

**First “must do”** is the need to realistically describe what victory would look like, and put ourselves on a path to getting there. In general, CT strategies all incorporate similar themes: destroy terrorist organizations... protect the homeland... integrate all elements of state power...foster partnerships... deal with underlying conditions... win the war of ideas.

We have seen varying degrees of progress.

We have performed better in the kinetic operations overseas... and the realm of protecting our homeland.

We've seen less progress in the war of ideas/underlying conditions.

What would constitute “victory”?

Presumably, we want to degrade terrorist organizations to the point where local jurisdictions can deal with the threat.

Coherent formulation.

If we view the situation narrowly—focus on winning battles overseas against specific individuals, while shoring up defenses at home—we're doing pretty well.

The fact that we've not seen major externally-directed attacks against the West in a few years would seem to be evidence of that notion.

We've also been saying for well over a decade that we can't capture/kill our way to victory

In that regard.... operational community/kinetic operations have effectively bought us time.

Been used to good effect to eliminate specific plotters.



But, if we believe that a prerequisite for long-term success is the need for structural changes, winning the war of ideas, combatting some portion of underlying conditions, we simply have not seen as much progress.

The imperative for preventative action is not new—our own 9/11 Commission stressed the need.

How do we/should we think about the problem and where to engage in a resource-constrained CT effort?

At the very least, this suggests that we'll need to maintain balance in our toolkit.

Military and law enforcement operations will always have a role.

But any number of academic studies have concluded that there are far more radicalized individuals today than there were at the time of 9/11. The recently released report by the Task Force on Extremism in Fragile States concluded that the number of Salafi-jihadist fighters has more than tripled since 9/11. Other studies suggest the growth has been even greater. And NCTC's terrorist identities data base of known and suspected terrorists has grown by an order of magnitude over the past 15 years.

Kinetic operations and increased border security simply won't keep pace with that problem. We must address the conditions causing disaffected youth embracing violent jihad. More on this later.



The **second “must do”** is the need for integration: Whole of Government... Whole of Society...

The U.S. came to recognize the imperative to operate in a whole-of-government fashion as a result of 9/11. Two of the hijackers – despite being previously known to parts of our government as known or suspected terrorists were not properly watchlisted. As a result they were able to obtain visas, move freely around the country, and eventually board aircraft. The reason was partly about information sharing, but it was more an architecture problem. We had unconnected data bases and watchlists.

We needed to ensure that any government screener, be they a State Department visa officer, an airline security official, a DHS inspector on the Canadian or Mexican border, or a police officer inside the U.S., would be able to determine if the person in front of them was known to any part of the USG as a known or suspected terrorist.

This whole-of-government approach involved changes in information sharing, business processes and our IT architecture.

We built a largely names-based, biographic system that has worked to great effect.

But...the bad guys are getting smarter, and we'll need to evolve. As we saw in the attacks in Paris and Brussels, the use of high-quality, fake national ID cards and passports will challenge any names-based system. To ensure operational relevance, we will need to strive for near real-time vetting such that the officer doing the screening can enter available biographic and biometric information and determine if there is any available data to suggest that the individual is a known or suspected terrorist.

We will need to enhance our focus on collection, sharing, and using biometrics.

With upwards of two million screening opportunities per day, this near real-time biographic/biometric screening will be a daunting task, but it will be required to keep pace with the threat.

Beyond whole-of-government, we also need whole-of-society approaches—in particular, the need to partner with the private sector. For example, over the past four years, the technology sector has taken great strides to address the problem of terrorist groups using their platforms to disseminate propaganda and radicalize vulnerable individuals.

For instance,

In 2017, several major technology companies came together to form the Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism (GIF-CT) to share information and disrupt terrorist use of social media.



Twitter suspended well over a million accounts for promoting terrorism. Many were suspended before the account could send its first tweet.

And, since October 2016, Google has been diverting individuals who search for key terrorist terms to anti-extremist search results on YouTube.

These are all great initiatives, but terrorists are innovative and we will need to continue a close partnership.

Ideally, the GIC-CT will expand to smaller companies.

Algorithms used to remove propaganda will need to improve.

And there will be many difficult issues that must be addressed—for instance what exactly constitutes “terrorist content” on the internet, and where are the boundaries with free speech? The answer is not self-evident and must be addressed via close consultations between the government and private sector to strike the right balance.

These kinds of close government/private sector partnerships are equally applicable to other sectors and must be expanded.

**The third “must do”** is to maintain a robust intelligence capability.

A globally dispersed and diffuse terrorism threat places great pressure on our intelligence services.

We need to evaluate the terrorist threat at multiple levels and have sufficient insight to determine if/when they pose an expanding threat.

We are seeing local, indigenous Islamic insurgencies around the globe seek to affiliate themselves with ISIS. And with that comes greater interest in attacking western interests...

I’d cite for instance the longstanding insurgency in northern Mozambique—just last week they conducted an attack on U.S. energy interests.

Extrapolate that to current and budding ISIS affiliates around the world and you get some sense of the intelligence challenge.

Moreover, we need sufficient insight into these indigenous insurgencies to assess if they are expanding beyond a local and regional threat to one that may threaten the homeland. This can be challenging:



In 2009, we thought of AQAP as a regional threat, but on Christmas Day of 2009 Umar Farooq Abdulmutallab attempted to blow up [Northwest] NW Flight 253 over Detroit with an underwear bomb.

And, in 2010, we viewed the Pakistani Taliban as a regionally-based South Asia threat. And yet they trained Faisal Shahzad who went on to attempt a bombing in NYC's Time Square.

Add to these global terrorist organizations the homegrown violent extremist problem.... No longer are we focused primarily on an external threat that is coming to our countries to attack us, but rather a threat that exists within our own homelands.

Many of our European partners are confronting situations where tens of thousands of individuals have been radicalized. Which individual deserves focused attention by limited investigative resources? And how do services prioritize?

And, that feeds into the **fourth must do...** if we're going to get the intelligence right, we need to get the electrons right. The data challenges we face are extraordinarily complex, particularly when we're dealing with information that is invariably incomplete, generally ambiguous, and often wrong.

If I put you in the shoes of an NCTC analyst, he or she has seen well over 200,000 threats since 9/11; the overwhelming majority were bogus. But how can you be entirely certain when the information first comes in?

To get a little more concrete, we average hundreds of threats to our embassies and consulates every year.

To get even more concrete, our analysts will receive something in excess of 10,000 terrorism-related intelligence reports a day. And those 10,000 reports contain 16,000 names. Daily.

All our services are challenged by the need to process ever-expanding amounts of data in order to uncover potential terrorist plots. With the growth of seized media... and the explosion of social media, the magnitude of the problem only gets worse.

The need to bring together foreign and domestic data—including communications, travel, and financial information, poses complex challenges.

Which information is relevant?

Addressing the legal, policy, privacy, operational, and technical equities associated with processing data remains a work in progress.



As the haystack has gotten bigger and the needles more subtle, prioritization becomes difficult. Every service around the globe is struggling with this challenge.

So the agenda is a full one. We need to address an ever-evolving implementation plan that extends from the strategic level all the way down to the level of individual electrons.

**Let me turn finally to a very hazy crystal ball—what are some of the key questions going forward, the answers to which will help us understand the nature of the terrorist threat in the future.**

**First, how will the foreign fighter problem play out?**

We know that 40,000 foreign fighters from over 100 countries traveled to the so-called Caliphate.

Significant uncertainty exists once we get beyond the top line number.

Something like 7,000 foreign fighters are thought to have left the war zone.

And at least 6,000 have been killed. Far more have probably been killed, but we lack that level of granular insight.

More generally, many countries are having difficulty determining the status and whereabouts of foreign fighters. We periodically see references to foreign fighters about whom we were totally unaware.

Thus far we've seen upwards of 100 foreign fighters conduct more than 50 attacks worldwide. Generally this has occurred in their home country and, as we saw in the case of the attacks in Paris and Brussels, they are invariably more deadly than HVE attacks because of the battlefield training.

While there have been ISIS calls for foreign fighters to disperse to other theaters, thus far, that has been the exception. Though last year a Moroccan foreign fighter conducted the first [vehicle-borne improvised explosive device] VBIED suicide bombing in the Philippines.

Amongst the most important foreign fighter questions today revolves around the many hundreds of foreign fighters and their families who are in SDF custody in Syria. And that number is growing.

Thus far, few countries have been willing to repatriate their citizens because of concerns about whether judicial cases could be made.

Depending on how this plays out these individuals could pose a significant threat in the future.

Where foreign fighters end up, the extent to which they remain radicalized, and our collective ability to track them—particularly as they emerge from relatively short prison sentences will be key determinants of the threat going forward.



## **Second, what will be the future of the ISIS insurgency in Syria and Iraq?**

Despite the loss of the Caliphate, ISIS commands at least 14,000 fighters across Iraq and Syria—the number could be far higher. It is worth remembering that prior to the growth of ISIS, the group's predecessor in Iraq was severely degraded and dwindled to fewer than 1,000 fighters with many of its leaders removed from the battlefield.

Today, ISIS is seeking to undermine governance and reconstruction efforts by stoking violence and mistrust along tribal and ethno-sectarian lines.

Since the middle of last year, ISIS has been increasing attacks in areas of Iraq that the group once controlled, conducting kidnappings, assassinations and bombings in many provinces.

And in Syria, ISIS is working to drive a wedge between local authorities and their communities. ISIS has assassinated prominent Arab tribal leaders who worked closely with Kurdish counterparts to bring governance and civil order to Raqqah.

And ISIS is conducting attacks aimed at increasing the financial burden of reconstruction by conducting attacks against government utilities and services, almost certainly with the aim of exacerbating public discord.

We are beginning to see indicators that ISIS is reestablishing control over the populace in some areas.

These efforts are part of the group's strategy to incrementally impose its will and ideology in areas it once openly controlled.

**While the elimination of the Caliphate is to be celebrated, the insurgency has been a couple of years in the planning and will pose a significant concern.**

Absent security force pressure on ISIS, there is no question that the insurgency will spread. Such pressure, however, though necessary, will not be sufficient:

In Iraq and Syria, economic, political, security and societal conditions will continue to allow ISIS to entrench and to attract local support.

Iraq's security, intelligence and justice systems remain fractured and corrupt. This will continue to foment and exacerbate sectarian tensions.

More broadly, humanitarian and reconstruction aid have simply not kept up with the need.

Millions of individuals remain displaced and lack basic necessities.



Governance remains a significant challenge.

Sunni discontent across parts of Iraq and Syria will provide fertile ground for ISIS recruitment.

**The third question relates to AQ and ISIS: How will ISIS evolve in the context of the broader terrorist threat landscape? Here, there are a lot of variables at play.**

AQ's global network has proven its resilience, adapting to the rise of ISIS without losing affiliates. Indeed, it has exploited local conflicts to grow in size and reach.

We don't believe AQ and ISIS will reconcile sufficiently to engage in strategic cooperation—even if one or both groups suffer significant leadership losses. The ideological differences, both in terms of their views on near-term viability of a Caliphate, and the ISIS approach of attacking Shia, are simply too far apart.

But... depending on the region, we do see tactical cooperation. For instance this is the case in West Africa. In other regions, for instance East Africa and Yemen, there is conflict between the groups.

Looking beyond notions of cooperation, we also see a certain ideological blending—particularly in the homegrown violent extremist context.

In many cases, we see HVEs showing support for or drawing inspiration from both groups. Presumably, this reflects the overarching Sunni violent extremist narrative calling for attacks against the West because of perceived Western aggression toward Islam.

In Europe, both attackers and longstanding networks sometimes draw inspiration or help from both ISIS and AQ-aligned groups and ideologies. This has been true in multiple attacks over the past several years—Paris in 2015 and since then, Manchester and London Bridge.

At this point, it simply isn't clear whether we'll see ISIS continue in its current form, see it partially supplanted by AQ, or see further ideological blending.



## The last question, and perhaps the most important... What can/will be done to address the resonance of the ideology?

As noted earlier, we can't capture/kill our way out of this. So, unless you believe the fervor will simply burn itself out, we will be faced with a growing radicalization problem around the globe. Much of the answer must be found within Islam, but Western countries have a role.

No single factor captures the complexity of the radicalization process among disaffected Sunni youth worldwide. We believe a mix of factors contribute to the radicalization of Sunni youth, their recruitment to extremist organizations, and their mobilization to violence.

In the U.S., **Group factors** played an important role in the radicalization of the Tsarnaev brothers who attacked Boston. **Personal factors** including individual setbacks, **sociopolitical factors** related to U.S. involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan, and **ideological factors** related to consumption of violent extremist messages.

In Germany, Denis Cuspert, a notorious foreign fighter, was influenced by a combination of **personal factors**, including a drive for belonging and achievement, and **ideological factors**.

In Belgium, Abdelhamid Abaaoud who led the Paris attacks was radicalized in prison. **Community factors**, including insularity and isolation from broader society, likely interacted with **sociopolitical factors** related to the Syrian conflict.

Outside the West, we are gradually accumulating more empirical data. For instance:

The International Centre for the Study of Radicalization (ICSR) examined a documentation for 759 Saudi recruits attempting to join ISIS in 2013 and 2014. They found that “the greater political turmoil and instability and the heightened sectarianism in the region explains more about the radicalization of Saudi IS foreign terrorist fighters than mere socioeconomic or pure religious ideology.”

In 2017, The United Nations Development Program Regional Bureau for Africa evaluated 718 active or former African extremists—mostly from al-Shabaab or Boko Haram—identifying that religious and economic factors as well as government actions played a role in their radicalization and recruitment into these extremist organizations.

In addition to teens and adults in all of our societies, we face growing radicalization in prisons and even amongst young children who are being targeted by extremist propaganda.

To address the problem, there are various initiatives around the globe associated with messaging, de-radicalization, defection programs, reintegration efforts, and off-ramping—as well as broader programs focused on good governance, economic development and human rights.



We will need a far greater concerted effort to understand the exact nature of the problem and determine what works, and under what circumstances, if we hope to stem the growth trend in worldwide radicalization.

#### CONCLUSION:

I finish where I started—we have made huge progress against aspects of terrorism – particularly in kinetic operations that have largely eliminated the so-called Caliphate. These efforts have bought the world time.

But when it comes to drivers of terrorism and whole-of-government efforts to address the problem, the world has made far less progress. We've got a lot of work to do in the non-kinetic space. What can we, should we, be doing to mitigate the risks of terrorism going forward?

As busy policymakers find themselves with competing demands, we may find ourselves challenged to fashion whole-of-government CT efforts. We will need to insure integration across governments and society, the maintenance of a robust intelligence capability against terrorism, and that in term will implicate some very challenging data issues.

And finally, questions like the future of the foreign fighter problem, the outcome of the insurgency in Iraq/Syria, the evolving relationship between AQ and ISIS, and the global approach to dealing with the resonance of the ideology for disaffected youth, are all currently unknown and will have a significant impact on the future of the terrorist threat.

Thank you very much, and I'd be happy to take your questions.

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