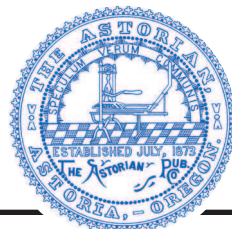


OPINION



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PRO-CON

DOES ISIS REMAIN A THREAT TO THE US AND EUROPE?



Carolyn Cole/Los Angeles Times

Iraq's Popular Mobilization Units, or Hashd al Shaabi, chant before going into battle as they fight alongside Iraq Army forces during the offensive to liberate Mosul from ISIS in October 2016.

Pro: US must never be complacent about ISIS threat

Nobody expects ISIS to go quietly into the night. That's not what Islamist terrorist groups do.

What this particular group wants now is revenge for their humiliating defeat in Syria and Iraq. The question is: Where will they strike to try to save face? America is on watch to make sure it doesn't happen here.

Make no mistake about it, losing its self-proclaimed caliphate was a devastating blow to ISIS, psychologically as well as militarily.

In the Middle East, power is honor. By controlling a vast territory with over 10 million inhabitants, ISIS commanded honor and attracted more followers eager to back this "strong horse."

But that once strong horse is now seen as powerless in the wake of a counteroffensive that eliminated its control of every last village. Nothing could be more degrading.

The only way to get back in the game and regain their "honor" is to demonstrate they can continue to kill innocents — and the bigger the numbers the better.

There is no question that America tops the list of places where ISIS would most like to stage a horrific attack. But the question is: Can they?

Recent media accounts of documents uncovered in the Middle East talk of active operational planning for major terrorist attacks in Europe, similar to the 2015 strike in Paris, France, that left 89 dead. From the reporting, however, it is not clear how much this planning is aspirational and how much reflects actual capability.

That said, it is clear why ISIS might target Europe instead of the U.S.

For one thing, they have done it before and had success. The waves of Middle Eastern migration have been exploited to put in place a network of operatives and sympathizers stretching from the UK over half of Western Europe.

In addition, European police forces are struggling to keep up with the threat. They lack officers with language skills and training in community policing and intelligence-led policing, the tools most useful in rooting out local violent extremist activity.

In contrast, the U.S. is a much harder target. The FBI has made countering transnational Islamist terrorism Job #1. Combatting terrorism is a principle duty of the Department of Homeland Security, as well. State and local law enforcement also continue to dedicate significant resources to the mission.

It is not like the terrorists aren't trying. My colleagues at The Heritage Foundation maintain a database of all the Islamist-related terror plots laid against U.S. territory since 9/11, 2001. It currently documents 109 known plots, including two this month.

What is most significant is that the overwhelming number of these plots are thwarted — often by local law enforcement — before anyone gets hurt.

All the recent plots against the U.S. lack the sophistication and scale of the 9/11 attacks. Transnational terrorist groups have been degraded to the point that they now appear to lack the capacity to pull off anything on that scale.

But we can never say never. Groups like ISIS have demonstrated both resilience and innovation. While they are most likely to be content with targeting Europe and the Greater Middle East including North Africa for now, no one knows when they will come after the red, white, and blue.

Which is why America must always be ready. Readiness includes not just continuing vigilant counter-terrorism operations here at home, but also taking the fight to ISIS and al Qaeda overseas.

They can't be allowed to have sanctuaries. They can't be allowed to rebuild their infrastructure, networks and financing. They can't be allowed to partner-up with transnational criminal networks and state actors.

Americans should never get complacent about the terrorist threat. But as long as we keep heavy pressure on the transnational groups, we can sleep better than most.

James Jay Carafano directs the Heritage Foundation think-tank's research into matters of national security and foreign relations.



JAMES JAY CARAFANO

Con: Talk of looming major attack overblown

Terrorist threats are a cause for concern, but recent claims of a looming major uptick coming out of the Middle East are overblown.

The claims follow the loss of territory by ISIS, whose initials stand for Islamic State in Iraq and Syria. The significant patches of land once held by ISIS in those countries have now evaporated. In Syria in recent days, ISIS has lost its last small sectors of land.

The concern one hears is that ISIS fighters will now switch toward mounting off-on attacks against civilian targets in Europe and North America.

A report issued in February in the Netherlands by its National Coordinator for Security and Counterterrorism makes precisely this prediction.

That office publishes an estimate every quarter titled "Terror Threat Report Netherlands." Its February 2019 report predicts that ISIS fighters with roots in Europe will foment attacks there, and perhaps across the Atlantic Ocean as well.

Any new and higher such threat from ISIS, however, remains a matter of speculation. In recent months, even as ISIS territory was being reduced, Europe has experienced violent attacks by single individuals, some of them Muslim, that have killed small numbers of victims. But more substantial assaults of this type have not been seen in Europe.

ISIS is now far less able to mount attacks in the West after losing its territory. Holding land was key to ISIS success. The prospect of a life in territory governed by ISIS principles was held out to potential adherents as attractive.

That recruiting tool is now gone. ISIS was able to extract wealth from the territory it held in Iraq and Syria, especially by selling oil. That money let ISIS promote its activities around the world. So while ISIS may try to arrange for violent acts outside the Middle East, its capacity for doing so is diminished by its loss of territory.

The concern about the return of jihadists with European roots has left European governments wondering what to do with

them.

President Trump has called on Europe to repatriate them. European leaders want them to stay where they are and be tried there for crimes they have committed. But many are held by the US-backed Kurdish forces in northern Syria, which lacks the capacity to deal with them.

The dilemma is most acute in regard to women from Europe who married ISIS fighters.

Holding nationality in European countries, many want to return. Britain at the moment is considering whether to revoke the British citizenship of one such woman, to keep her from returning.

Opposition politicians in Britain object that this would render her stateless. International law bans citizenship revocation that leaves a person stateless.

The issue has also arisen, though on a smaller scale, for the United States. It currently is trying to decide whether to allow the return of a Yemeni-American woman who has come out of ISIS territory in Syria.

To the extent that ISIS still poses a threat, there is much that can be done to counter it. ISIS exploits our own actions in the Middle East to recruit new adherents.

Trump unfortunately has a knack for giving ISIS issues to use to incite against the United States. Last year, as Israeli snipers shot 6,000 Palestinian protesters along the Gaza border — shootings that the UN called "war crimes" — Trump insisted that Israel was doing nothing wrong.

Last May Trump moved the U.S. Embassy in Israel to Jerusalem, a city that few in the Arab world see as belonging to Israel. More recently, Trump said that Israel owns the Golan Heights, which it seized from Syria in 1967. Actions like these are a gift to ISIS.

Even though ISIS is weakened, it remains a force. We should stop helping it recruit.

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