



Radical Islamic Terrorism

Summary and Key Talking Points

Policy Proposals

1. Finish the job against ISIS while encouraging regional Arab allies to assume greater responsibility for stabilizing eastern Syria.
2. Renew U.S. commitment to preventing terrorist groups from controlling territory.
3. Bolster intelligence sharing on foreign fighters while reassessing domestic security procedures.
4. End the policy of U.S. government engagement with Muslim Brotherhood legacy groups.

Quick Facts

1. As of August 2019, there had been 114 Islamist terrorist plots targeting the U.S. since 9/11.
2. ISIS has affiliates in the Middle East, South and Southeast Asia, and Africa.
3. The Muslim Brotherhood has had offshoot groups operating and recruiting in the U.S. since the 1960s.

Power Phrases

An Ideology of Force

- Radical Islamic ideology dictates that Islamism is an all-encompassing socio-political system in which sovereignty lies with god, and Muslims are required to live in a Caliphate governed by sharia law.

The War on Terror

- After the 9/11 attacks, the U.S. took the fight to al-Qaeda in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq, Syria, Yemen, and Somalia.
- After a U.S.-led coalition destroyed the ISIS Caliphate, ISIS's supporters reverted to their roots as guerilla insurgents in Iraq and Syria.

Domestic Threats

- Many of the plots that the U.S. has faced since 9/11 were the work of those radicalized right here in the U.S.
- The U.S. must renew its commitment to prevent terrorist groups from controlling territory while containing future threats at home and abroad.

The Issue

A Pew poll from 2018 found that terrorism was the number one priority for Americans—above the economy, education, and health care.¹ A separate Pew poll from a year earlier found that approximately three-quarters of Americans were concerned by the threat of Islamist extremism specifically.²

This is an understandable fear. The most devastating terrorist attack in American history occurred on 9/11, resulting in the U.S. taking the fight to al-Qaeda in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq, Syria, Yemen, and Somalia. Many of al-Qaeda's top leaders were killed, with Osama bin Laden tracked down in Pakistan in May 2011. Others were captured and detained at Guantanamo Bay, where 9/11 mastermind Khalid Sheikh Mohammed remains today. The U.S. also pinned al-Qaeda back with its ongoing campaign of drone strikes.

Despite these welcome developments, the threat endures. The rise of an al-Qaeda offshoot, the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS), led to a reign of terror that saw countless innocents, including Americans, killed by Islamists across the Middle East, Africa, Asia, and Europe. While the U.S.-led Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS succeeded in destroying the Islamic 'Caliphate' that ISIS created in Iraq and Syria, the war is far from over. ISIS, which pulled in tens of thousands of foreign fighters, is reverting to its insurgency roots, while al-Qaeda remains a resolute adversary. The U.S. military remains active in Syria and Afghanistan, among other countries, in either a combat or a training role, in an effort to head off the risk this poses.

The threat overseas has been accompanied by an ongoing risk to American lives domestically: There have been well over 100 Islamist terror plots directed at the U.S. since 9/11. While the vast majority have been thwarted by the diligent work of U.S. law enforcement and intelligence communities, attacks in Boston, San Bernardino, Orlando, and New York in recent years are a reminder of the ongoing risk to American lives.

Troublingly, many of the plots that the U.S. has faced were not dreamed up by foreign terrorists, but were the work of those radicalized right here in the U.S. One of the most influential Islamist ideologues in the post-9/11 era was an American citizen—Anwar al-Awlaki, a charismatic al-Qaeda cleric responsible for a wave of plots against the West until his death in a September 2011 drone strike. Unfortunately, Awlaki's online lectures continue to radicalize others.

ISIS, al-Qaeda, and their supporters are ultimately manifestations of a broader ideology: that of Islamism, an ideology that dictates that Islam is not just a religion, but an all-encompassing socio-political system in which sovereignty lies with god over man and Muslims are required to live in an expansionist Caliphate governed by sharia law.

ISIS and al-Qaeda insist that force is required to bring this about, whereas proselytizing Islamist groups like the Muslim Brotherhood believe it can be achieved by preaching, infiltration, and persuasion. While the tactics of violent Islamists may diverge from those of political Islamists, their vision for what the endgame looks like is the same. Complicating the problem, the U.S. is forced to engage Muslim Brotherhood-linked groups overseas because they are part of various governments.

Military victories on the battlefield must be backed up by victory in the battle of ideas against Islamism. The U.S. has excelled at the former. The latter has, so far, proved much trickier to achieve. As long as this remains the case, Islamist terrorism will continue to imperil the U.S. and its allies.

Recommendations

Finish the job against ISIS while encouraging regional allies to step up. The U.S. needs to crush ISIS while avoiding the temptation to nation-build in Syria. While a military presence is still required for

counter-terrorism and intelligence gathering, the U.S. should push for regional Arab allies to assume greater responsibility for stabilizing eastern Syria with troops and economic support. While this coalition would require continued U.S. support, it would lighten the burden on the military while bolstering Arab allies.

Renew the U.S. commitment to preventing terrorist groups from controlling territory. The U.S. plays a vital role in containing the terrorist threat emerging from the Middle East, Asia, and Africa. When terrorist groups control territory, it allows them space from which to plan attacks: The 9/11 attacks were planned from Afghanistan, and more recent attacks in Europe were planned from Syria. The control of territory also provides a source of revenue for terrorists, primarily through the extortion of those living under their control. The U.S. must work with its partners around the world to prevent the emergence of territory governed by Islamist groups, cutting off funding for terrorist groups while capturing and killing their fighters.

Harden defenses for the next wave of foreign fighters. Syria drew in tens of thousands of foreign fighters from across the globe. With the Caliphate broken and those fighters dispersing, the U.S. must be dynamic if it wants to stay ahead of the next foreign fighter threat. That would involve monitoring the travel patterns of terrorists and cajoling allies and partners into hardening their own security measures, while working to bolster intelligence sharing about developing threats to the U.S. and its allies. It would also involve an assessment of domestic security procedures and vulnerabilities.

Allocate resources to contain future threats from newly released terrorists—at home and abroad. There are tens of thousands of ISIS suspects being held in Kurdish-run detainee camps in Syria, including terrorists with ties to America. The next Administration should determine which of these detainees have a legal right to enter the U.S., assess whether they have committed federal crimes, and consider prosecuting them. The U.S. also has dozens of terrorists convicted of terrorism-related offences set for release from prison.³ It is possible that these convicted terrorists have not renounced Islamist ideology and could attempt to carry out attacks upon release. The U.S. must ensure it can safely monitor these newly released convicts.

Roll back the Muslim Brotherhood. A strategy is needed for political Islamists such as the Muslim Brotherhood. This strategy may involve designation of the Muslim Brotherhood as a terrorist organization if there is credible evidence of the Brotherhood committing acts of terrorism. However, with the Brotherhood tending to eschew overt acts of violence, the U.S. must also be prepared to try and weaken the movement's ideology. This strategy would take as read that the Brotherhood are adversaries—not allies—and that their worldview does not represent the majority of American Muslim opinion. Putting an end to the policy of U.S. government engagement with Muslim Brotherhood legacy groups in the U.S. should also be part of the strategy.

Facts and Figures

FACT: Islamist terrorism is an ongoing threat to the homeland and to Americans overseas.

- As of August 2019, there had been 114 Islamist plots targeting the U.S. since 9/11—approximately six a year.
- Terrorists have shown themselves willing to attack civilians, the police, and the military. They have used whatever weapon were at hand to carry out these attacks, including homemade bombs, blades, firearms, cars, and even trucks.
- The most devastating Islamist attack since 9/11 occurred in Orlando, Florida, in June 2016. Omar Mateen, an American citizen inspired by ISIS, shot and killed 49 people in a nightclub.
- American civilians are regularly targeted in terrorists attack abroad. Americans have been murdered in France, Belgium, the UK, Tajikistan, Kenya, and Sri Lanka in recent times.

- American embassies and government installations have been targeted by Islamist terrorists for decades. High-profile attacks have occurred in Kenya, Tanzania, Yemen, and Libya.

FACT: ISIS had success persuading a small number of American Muslims to travel to their ‘Caliphate.’

- Dozens of Americans successfully traveled to Syria to take part in the fighting there, most going on to join ISIS.
- ISIS recruits with close ties to America, including possible American citizens, remain detained in Kurdish-run camps in Syria.

FACT: Al-Qaeda and ISIS have terrorist affiliates around the world.

- Al-Qaeda’s senior leaders are largely based in the AfPak (Afghanistan and Pakistan) region and Iran. Yet Al-Qaeda also has formal affiliates known to be operating in the Indian Subcontinent, the Sahel, Somalia, Syria, and Yemen.
- ISIS has affiliates in the Middle East, South and Southeast Asia, and throughout Africa. Following the death of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, many of these affiliates then pledged allegiance to Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi al-Qurashi, ISIS’ new leader.

FACT: The Muslim Brotherhood has a decades-old presence in the U.S.

- The Muslim Brotherhood has operated and recruited in the U.S. since the 1960s, initially focusing on university campuses.
- Mohammed Morsi, the former President of Egypt, was recruited into the Brotherhood while studying at the University of Southern California.
- Muslim Brotherhood offshoot groups based in the U.S., such as the Council on American–Islamic Relations, have been engaged with by both Democrat and Republican Administrations as well as members of Congress on both sides of the aisle.

Additional Resources

James Carafano, “Trump’s New Travel Ban Is Standard Security Policy,” Heritage Foundation *Commentary*, September 25, 2017, <https://www.heritage.org/immigration/commentary/trumps-new-travel-ban-standard-security-policy>.

Luke Coffey, “Brussels Mini Summit: The U.S. and NATO Must Remain Committed to Afghanistan,” Heritage Foundation *Issue Brief* No. 4703, May 10, 2017, https://www.heritage.org/sites/default/files/2017-05/IB4703_0.pdf.

David Inserra, “An Interactive Timeline of Islamist Terror Plots Since 9/11,” Daily Signal, September 10, 2015, <https://www.dailysignal.com/2015/09/10/a-timeline-of-73-islamist-terror-plots-since-911/>.

James Phillips and Luke Coffey, “Next Steps for U.S. Policy in Syria and Iraq,” Heritage Foundation *Issue Brief* No. 4846, April 26, 2018, https://www.heritage.org/sites/default/files/2018-04/IB4846_1.pdf.

Robin Simcox, “The Trump Administration Must Investigate the Muslim Brotherhood’s U.S. Activities,” Heritage Foundation *Issue Brief* No. 4687, April 20, 2017, <https://www.heritage.org/sites/default/files/2017-04/IB4687.pdf>.

Robin Simcox, “Foreign Fighters: The Rule of Law Is the Best Response to Islamist Fighters from Western Countries,” Heritage Foundation *Backgrounder* No. 3288, February 28, 2018, https://www.heritage.org/sites/default/files/2018-03/BG3288_0.pdf.

Robin Simcox, “The Trump Administration Should Hold Former ISIS Members Accountable Regardless of Gender,” Heritage Foundation *Issue Brief* No. 4940, March 5, 2019, <https://www.heritage.org/sites/default/files/2019-03/IB4940.pdf>.

Charles D. Stimson and Hugh Danilack, “The Case Law Concerning the 2001 Authorization for Use of Military Force and Its Application to ISIS,” Heritage Foundation *Legal Memorandum* No. 203, April 17, 2017, https://www.heritage.org/sites/default/files/2017-04/LM-203_1.pdf.

ENDNOTES

1. “Economic Issues Decline Among Public’s Policy Priorities,” Pew Research Center, January 25, 2018, <https://www.people-press.org/2018/01/25/economic-issues-decline-among-publics-policy-priorities/> (accessed December 12, 2019).
2. “Majorities in Europe, North America Worried About Islamic Eextremism,” Pew Research Center, May 24, 2017, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/05/24/majorities-in-europe-north-america-worried-about-islamic-extremism/> (accessed December 12, 2019).
3. Lorenzo Vidino and Seamus Hughes, “America’s Terrorism Problem Doesn’t End with Prison—It Might Just Begin There,” Lawfare, June 17, 2018, <https://www.lawfareblog.com/americas-terrorism-problem-doesnt-end-prison%E2%80%94it-might-just-begin-there> (accessed December 12, 2019).