



Fight Against Terror Entering A New Phase, Still Just As Vital

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The war on terror now ranks as America's longest-running war. Yet, increasingly, the fight against terrorism has receded from the headlines, supplanted by acrimonious domestic politics and flashpoints like North Korea's nuclear program and trade disputes with China. Yet the war on terror still rages on — and the battlefield in that fight is changing significantly.

In the Middle East, the military campaign waged by the U.S. and its coalition partners over the past two years may have successfully degraded the Islamic State group's physical "caliphate" in Iraq and Syria. But the group's message and appeal continue to resonate, promulgated via the Internet and social media as part of a sophisticated global media strategy. Moreover, the Islamic State now also poses a different sort of threat, as the "alumni" of its radical proto-state in Syria and Iraq (who hail from more than 80 different nations) begin returning to their countries of origin.
A new round of terrorist threats

Other terror groups, meanwhile, have flourished in the shadows, aided by America's preoccupation with the Islamic State group. Once on its heels as a result of coalition operations in Afghanistan, al-Qaeda has used the past several years to reconstitute its networks and rebrand itself as a more authentic and moderate local alternative to the Islamic State, with significant results. Experts now say that the Bin Laden network controls more territory than at any time in its history, and has positioned itself as a long-term threat to the West. The Taliban, too, is resurgent in Afghanistan, where it once again poses a growing challenge to that country's weak central government. And in Africa, groups like Nigeria's Boko Haram and Ethiopia's al-Shabaab continue to threaten the continental peace, despite the best efforts of local authorities.

Indeed, countries the world over are now grappling with a new round of terrorist threats — one driven by the Islamic State group's collapse, as well as by the resurgence of local extremism. Recent attacks in places like Surabaya, Indonesia, and plots such as the thwarted attempt to bomb a July Fourth parade in Cleveland, Ohio point to the fact that the Islamic State group and its ideological fellow travelers continue to wield the power to inspire, mobilize and threaten democratic societies.
Experts are ringing the alarm bells

Security professionals in the United States and Europe understand this very well, even if the general public and political elites increasingly do not. Indeed, Europol, Europe's continent-wide law enforcement authority, recently classified the threat of terrorism in Europe as "high," despite the decline of the Islamic State. Europe's vulnerability stems from the large-scale migration from the Middle East and North Africa that has taken place over the past half-decade — migration that Islamic extremists have tried to exploit in order to penetrate the eurozone. Meanwhile, the enduring appeal of the Islamic State, al-Qaeda and their assorted local affiliates have prompted various nations from Central Asia to North Africa to step up their efforts to fight extremism ideologically.

What these experts and governments know should be more broadly understood here at home. The past decade has seen the United States score major strategic victories against the Bin Laden network, its affiliates and its offshoots (like the Islamic State). But America should not be lulled into a false sense of security by these successes. Continued vigilance and research is needed in order to understand the ongoing challenge posed by Islamic radicalism — and for American policymakers to be able to properly craft policies capable of addressing the changing nature of the terrorist threat.

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