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**THE WORLD vs. DAESH:
Constructing a Contemporary Terrorist Threat**

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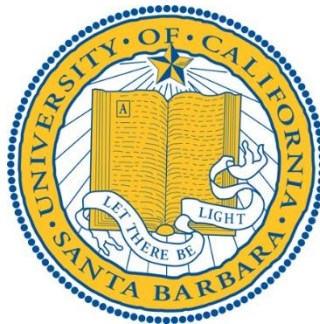
The World vs. Daesh: Constructing a Contemporary Terrorist Threat

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Introduction

In the span of two weeks, Daesh¹ claimed the lives of nearly 400 unarmed civilians of over a dozen nationalities on two continents. The series of assaults in Paris, Beirut, and in the sky over the Sinai desert ran counter to recent assessments and conventional wisdom about the organization. The day when two suicide bombers killed almost fifty in Lebanon, and the day before three teams of terrorists killed almost two hundred in Paris, President Barak Obama assured the world that the threat posed by Daesh had been contained.² Indeed, even a week ago US and British intelligence agencies were only cautiously accepting the claim of responsibility by Daesh for the downing of Russian charter Metrojet Flight 9268 as “possible.”³ The core leadership in Syria and Iraq only loosely governed its affiliated “province” in Sinai, and Daesh seemed to be focused on securing and expanding its self-proclaimed “caliphate.”

The threat posed by Daesh in its present incarnation has developed rapidly, and how it has been understood has likewise traveled a wide arc

The threat posed by Daesh in its present incarnation has developed rapidly, and how it has been understood has likewise traveled a wide arc, from President Obama’s infamous “JV Team” analogy,⁴ to claims, even prior to November 2015, that Daesh posed an “existential threat” to the West and the United States in particular.⁵ Both of these extremes are dangerously inaccurate; President Obama failed to appreciate how “local power struggles” could metastasize into a transnational threat, and Prime Minister Cameron underestimated the resiliency of Western civilization and the liberal legal traditions that underpin European governments. In both

of these perspectives, Daesh is a unique entity, separate from, and something to be compared to, the existing Islamist terrorist threat, al-Qa'ida. Indeed, as Daesh grew in the chaos of the Syrian civil war, it was frequently characterized as being "too radical" even for al-Qa'ida, which in February of 2014 disavowed any connection with Daesh.⁶ In another sense, Daesh is a continuation of that same terrorist organization born in Peshawar, Pakistan in 1988 as a means of managing the foreign jihadis who came to Afghanistan to fight the Soviets. Lack of coordination between the core al-Qa'ida leadership and the leaders of its associates in Iraq during the US occupation, and intentional ambiguity on the part of the early Islamic State in Iraq makes it difficult to trace this lineage with certainty (McCants, 2015).

In this article, we describe the dominant constructions of terrorism as represented by the Islamic State, (ISIS, ISIL, Daesh), and argue that though each of these constructions could accurately describe part of the threat posed by Daesh, they are distinguishable concepts that require different responses. Three dominant constructions of Daesh as a threat have developed, and have modulated slightly since the Paris attack. First, is Daesh the Caliphate, a quasi-state existing across the political frontiers of Iraq and Syria. Second, Daesh is a "Trojan Horse," a threat hidden among refugees, or as returning fighters traveling on Western passports. Finally, the new dominant construction is Daesh as the new source of transnational terrorism. In this section, these three dominant constructions will be defined using news media and official statements made by policy officials and testimony before legislative committees. Collectively these will represent the dominant constructions as presented by media outlets and political elites. After these three constructions have been described, the principal policy responses as stated by senior political leaders will be compared. Finally, by comparing the dominant constructions of Daesh to

the principal policy responses to it, we can discuss how well policy does or does not match the threat as described.

Daesh as a State

It is impossible to analyze the rise and success of the so-called Islamic State⁷ without considering the US invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the subsequent Sunni insurgency that at its crest in 2007 was claiming 1000 Iraqi civilians each day, according to some estimates. The ill-conceived de-Baathification order and dissolution of the Iraqi Army under the Coalition Provisional Administration left tens of thousands of Sunni Iraqi men unemployed, marginalized, and armed. For their own part, when the Sunni political leadership boycotted the 2004 elections for a constitutional convention and interim parliament they made their political impotency official and durable. With the country awash with caches of small arms and explosives, the insurgency quickly became a serious security concern for the occupying US and coalition forces.

When the Syrian conflict began in 2011, fighters formerly active with al-Qai'da in Iraq began to move into northern Syria at the urging of Ayman Zawahiri, spiritual leader of al-Qa'ida (Byman, 2015). By that time, all the original leaders of the insurgency against coalition forces had been killed and AQI (now known as the Islamic State in Iraq) was led by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the present leader of the Islamic State, also known by the Arabic acronym *Daesh*. In Syria, a secular, popular uprising that was much like the others of the "Arab Spring" at the time was overrun by Sunni jihadi groups. Jihadis began to occupy towns and to enforce compliance with their own version of Islamic Sharia law; this restoration of some order was, at first, frequently welcomed by local populations. However, the multiplicity of groups with their own allegiances often found themselves fighting one another rather than the Assad regime, adding another level

of complexity to the increasingly sectarian Syrian civil war (Byman 2015; Cockburn 2015). If the collapse of the Syrian state created room for maneuver for AQI, then the withdrawal of the last of US military forces from Iraq, and the continued sectarianism of the Iraqi government under Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki opened opportunity for a return to Iraq (Cockburn, 2015).

Daesh has been characterized as providing the same basic services usually provided by governments, but at a price,

“In vast areas of Syria and Iraq with shattered ties to national governments, the jihadists have worked to fill the void, according to interviews with residents from areas in Syria and Iraq ruled by the Islamic State, also known as ISIS or ISIL. The group is offering reliable, if harsh, security; providing jobs in decimated economies; and projecting a rare sense of order in a region overwhelmed by conflict.” (Hubbard, 2015)

Daesh has frequently been described as a newer, more terrifying version of known threats

As a quasi-government, they have directed their new powers toward securing a lasting legacy, focusing on the children in territory,

“Islamic State propaganda videos released online often show children planting bombs to kill Iraqi security forces, cheering for Islamic State convoys and watching executions. One recent video showed young boys in black masks learning to fight, do an army crawl and carry out ambushes with automatic weapons.” (New York Times, 2015)

Since it declared itself as the new Islamic Caliphate in June of 2014, Daesh has frequently been described as a newer, more terrifying version of known threats, as Retired General Keane testified in the House Foreign Affairs Committee,

“ISIL (Daesh) is the new face of the Al Qaeda and the larger radical Islamist movement. ISIL has already accomplished what the 9/11 Al Qaeda, only dreamt about, but forfeited, when they over reached and attacked the American people. As we know, ISIL in 3 short years has managed to take control of a vast swath of territory, essentially villages, towns and cities from East of Aleppo in Syria through the Iraq/Syria border, rendering that border non-existent, to Anbar province in Iraq, west of Baghdad, to Mosul”

Former US Ambassador to Iraq, James F. Jeffrey likened Daesh to the Taliban government in Afghanistan,

“The turn of events in Iraq over the past month, leading to the establishment of the Islamic State (IS) by the Al Qaeda in Iraq offshoot group Islamic State of Iraq and Levant (ISIL), is a stunning blow to US policy and objectives in the Middle East. The creation of an extremist quasi-state, analogous to Afghanistan under the Taliban, carries the risk of further escalation including a regional Sunni-Shia conflagration, and a dramatic loss in US influence in the region.” (Jeffrey 2014)

These assessments are attributed to the rapid battlefield successes enjoyed by Daesh in the Spring and Summer of 2014, which obtained for them territory, weapons, ammunition and equipment, and a steady income in the form of taxes and criminal activity.

Daesh has been defined as a terrorist organization and an insurgency, sparking some disagreement among elites. In January of 2015 a White House spokesperson made the following distinction in explaining why a prisoner exchange with the Taliban in Afghanistan was permissible, but similar arrangements were not with respect to Daesh in Syria and Iraq, “the Taliban is an armed insurgency, ISIL is a terrorist group, so we don’t make concessions to terrorist groups.” Criticizing this characterization, Audrey Kurth Cronin argued in *Foreign Affairs* that when President Obama defined *Daesh*, as “a terrorist organization, plain and simple,” he was precisely, and completely mistaken. She asserts that the organization “hardly fits that description, and indeed, although it uses terrorism as a tactic, it is not really a terrorist organization at all.” She concludes that, “if ISIS is purely and simply anything, it is a pseudo-state led by a conventional army” (Cronin, 2015, p.98). Indeed relative to the Taliban, in Afghanistan, Daesh has been described as an insurgency fighting an insurgency,

“the Islamic State-inspired militants have created a significant shift: The Taliban insurgency, even as it advances against the Western-backed government, is having to wrestle with an insurgent threat of its own.” (New York Times, 2015).

As a quasi-state, Daesh has become a highly visible construction of contemporary terrorism. Indeed, like many states and insurgencies, Daesh uses terrorism to coerce the populations under its control, maintaining authority without having to reach every person unfortunate enough to live where Daesh is now the government. This is very different from spreading fear abroad in places that they do not control, which they have proven capable of doing as well. Frequent reminders of its brutality, the refugee crisis of which it is partly responsible, and the focus of military action has elevated its profile rapidly. In spite of this, what Daesh represents in Syria and

Iraq is not entirely settled among the media and political leaders. It is probably best understood as an insurgency, or quasi-state, that can effectively employ both conventional military tactics and terrorism as a means of advancing its political objectives. Most importantly, that it holds territory and owns a significant logistical and weapons capacity, it is a convenient target for military reprisal. Punishing Daesh as it operates in Syria and Iraq has gained salience after its recent successes at sponsoring transnational terrorism.

Daesh, The Sponsor of Transnational Terrorism

The second construction of Daesh as a terrorist threat is that of a source of transnational terrorism. Even though the rapid succession and scale of attacks in November of 2015 significantly raised the profile of this particular construction, Daesh had previously been identified as an exporter of violence. For example, in Texas, 4 May, 2015 an exceptionally inflammatory contest for cartoons that depict the Prophet Muhammad was unsuccessfully targeted by two gunmen, both of whom were killed at the scene; after the unsuccessful attack, Daesh claimed that the two men were operating as its “soldiers.”⁸ Similarly in March 2015, Daesh targeted the National Bardo Museum in Tunis, killing over twenty and in June killed thirty-nine at a beach resort in Tunisia. While no connection was confirmed, when a lone gunman attacked a war memorial in Ottawa, Canada, killing one soldier there, and also the parliament building there, news media were quick to offer Daesh as at least “inspiring” the attack, reflecting in part the assessments of Canadian government officials.⁹

Just as Daesh is frequently described as surpassing the Taliban, in the size of its territory or the effectiveness of its governance or al-Qa’ida in its material wealth, it is also being

constructed as the new chief exporter of international terrorism, surpassing, even perhaps hastening the end of its progenitor, al-Qa'ida,

“Isis has not simply eclipsed al-Qaida on the battlefields of Syria and Iraq, and in the competition for funding and new recruits. According to a series of exclusive interviews with senior jihadi ideologues, Isis has successfully launched ‘a coup’ against al-Qaida to destroy it from within. As a consequence, they now admit, al-Qaida - as an idea and an organisation - is now on the verge of collapse.” (The Guardian, 2015).

Time magazine drew attention to the rivalry between Daesh and al-Qa'ida, and declared Daesh the decisive winner in that contest,

“The sparring between al-Qaeda and ISIS over tactics is just one front in a much larger struggle within the jihadi universe in which the two networks compete for funding, prestige and recruits. It is a fight that ISIS had been winning decisively prior to the attack in Mali. By seizing and controlling huge chunks of territory in Syria and Iraq—and proclaiming a ‘caliphate’—ISIS had supplanted al-Qaeda as the preeminent force in the international jihadist movement.” (Time, 2015).

The argument is that although al-Qa'ida remains an active exporter of violence—just two weeks after the violence in Beirut and Paris, al-Qa'ida gunmen murdered nearly twenty in a hotel in Bamako, Mali—it is a declining force in the wider jihadist movement.

Daesh propaganda is now infamous, and infamously effective according to the media, as represented by one Paris attack focused CNN report:

“Belgium has emerged as ground zero in the fight against radical Islamic thought in Europe. Several of the Paris attack suspects had links to the country, and per capita, Belgium is among the biggest providers of jihadi fighters to the ranks of ISIS. ISIS, Belgian authorities believe, is recruiting with techniques that mimic those used by cults. And it is targeting an alarmingly young demographic. Children as young as 9 and 10 are being exposed to jihadist thought and the ISIS worldview, authorities say.”

As far away as Finland, Daesh seems to wield impressive pull, as reported by a local Finnish newspaper,

“The people close to him thought that Ali did not understand anything about Islam, but believed everything the extremist Islamists taught online: Come to Syria, they said. Give your life to God. That is exactly what the young man from Espoo decided to do. On the morning of his departure, 12 December 2012, his mother woke him up so that he would get to the airport on time. He posted on his Facebook page in English: ‘Goodbye, Finland!’” (BBC Worldwide Monitoring, 2014).

An effective media campaign has been directly linked to Daesh’s ability to export violence.

The reach of Daesh seems limitless: “Has ISIS reached into California?” readers were urgently asked in a headline of the *Orange County Register*. The article related the story of a local Orange

County, California resident who was arrested while attempting to join Daesh in Syria, and others from California who have notoriously been radicalized in the recent past. (Register, 2014).

An effective media campaign has been directly linked to Daesh's ability to export violence. The argument runs, if they can use propaganda to project a positive image, and pacify the areas they control, then Daesh will be have the institutional capacity to turn its attention to exporting violence. A Reuter's opinion piece warns against this "nice" side of Daesh:

"Thousands of peace-loving people live in Islamic State-occupied areas and are fed a steady stream of positive propaganda: Islamic State members feeding the poor, and hosting ice cream socials, carnivals, and tug-of-war contests. Islamic State is trying — and in some areas, succeeding — in winning hearts and minds. Left unchecked, its public support will grow, making the group more difficult to defeat in the long run and giving it the space it needs to conduct future attacks like those in Paris and Beirut."

In this particular case, effectiveness in propaganda is presented as automatically parlayed into an effective terror campaign abroad.

The effectiveness of Daesh propaganda has been compared to contemporary, professional advertising campaigns. This has led many to identify Daesh (or ISIS/ISIL/Islamic State) as a "brand," using sophisticated marketing techniques,

"ISIS carefully tailors its recruiting pitch, sending starkly different messages to Muslims in the West and to those closer to home. But the image of unstoppable, implacable power animates all of its messaging. The pitch is effective. The militant rebellion in Syria and Iraq has drawn as many as 2,000 Westerners, including

perhaps 100 Americans, and many thousands more from the Middle East and elsewhere, though some have returned home. Experts believe most of those remaining today are fighting with ISIS. (New York Times International, 2014).¹⁰

Daesh's use of social media has been well documented; the Brookings Institute estimated in a US House of Representatives hearing that as of the Autumn of 2014, Daesh or their supporters owned over 45,000 Twitter accounts. In early 2014 (before Twitter began to shut down Daesh-affiliated accounts), some of their Twitter feeds boasted 40,000 to 80,000 followers (Berger, 2014). Perhaps as a testament to the public profile of Daesh on-line propaganda and recruiting material, the on-line "hactivist" group "Anonymous" declared war against Daesh and has targeted hundreds of Daesh websites and social media accounts. In one example, "Anonymous" replaced a Daesh site with an advertisement for the anxiety-relieving drug Prozac.¹¹

Daesh has been fairly consistently described as an effective propaganda machine, surpassing both its contemporary rivals and predecessors in its sophistication and reach. Their capacity to produce slick, attractive messages has been the subject of government hearings and studies and well documented in news media. What changed recently was that with recent high-profile attacks Daesh has elevated its status in the media and among elites as the premier exporter of transnational terrorism. As the "new al-Qa'ida," it has captured the attention of a startled public, who, entranced by a steady diet of information provided by media outlets, demand action from their political leadership.

Daesh: The “Trojan Horse”

Before this month’s escalation of violence, an important construction of the threat posed by Daesh was the possibility that “Westerners” (presumably from Western Europe, North America and Australia) that travelled to the war-zone in Syria and Iraq could return on their national passports, and bring with them the skills and will to carry on the jihad at home. Media accounts have carried diverse official government statements in both the US and Europe.

Matthew Olsen, the Director of the US National Counter-Terrorism Center (NCTC) was quoted in the New York Times,

“Syria has become really the predominant jihadist battlefield in the world...The concern going forward from a threat perspective is there are individuals traveling to Syria, becoming further radicalized, becoming trained and then returning as part of really a global jihadist movement to Western Europe and, potentially, to the United States.” (Times, 2013, A1)

In the same article, the French Interior Minister characterized the problem as “a ticking time bomb.” US House of Representatives Homeland Security Committee Chairman Michael McCaul wrote in a *Time* magazine opinion article,

“The threat from “returnees” is real and growing. These battle-hardened, violent Islamists have the training and extremist networks to plot deadly terrorist attacks against our homeland. We’ve already seen returning fighters conduct attacks in places like Belgium, and with a continuous trickle of extremists departing the conflict zone, the danger is getting greater each day.” (McCaul, 2014).

In a September 2014 hearing, the Director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation testified,

“foreign fighters traveling to Syria or Iraq could, for example, gain battlefield experience and increased exposure to violent extremist elements that may lead to further radicalization to violence; they may use these skills and exposure to radical ideology to return to their countries of origin, including the United States, to conduct attacks on the Homeland.” (DoJ, 2014)

After the early November 2015 violence, especially focusing on the attacks in Paris, the “hidden danger” construction shifted notably toward the “Trojan Horse” analogy in which committed extremists would infiltrate the tragically wide flows of refugees fleeing violence in Syria and Iraq. Presaging this post Paris construction, Chairman McCaul raised this possibility as the refugee crisis crested late 2014:

“Equally worrisome is that terrorists might use refugee groups as a Trojan Horse to get into the West. Hundreds of thousands of Syrian refugees have poured into Turkey this year, and many of them have left for other European countries by boat” (McCaul, 2014).

Posing as refugees themselves, these terrorists would use a humanitarian crisis to deliver violence to the heart of Western Europe and North America. This particular construction has three main variants. First, the stated position of the President and the present administration: the resettlement of refugees is a potential threat, but we’ve got it covered with already rigorous United Nations and domestic background checks in place. Second, a common position held by candidates for the Republican nomination in the 2016 presidential election: we can’t vet refugees thoroughly enough, the FBI director said so, we haven’t the “databases” to do so, so let’s not try until we can be sure we are completely safe. Finally, a pragmatic alternative assessment, found

in thematic articles and some official testimony: it would be far easier for a committed jihadi to enter using the expedited Visa Waiver Program than to wait through the long, bureaucratic refugee process; raising the alarm over refugees is a red-herring.

Clearly the US administration is maintaining the security of the vetting processes in place and committed to the humanitarian mission. This was made clear by a Department of State official in testimony before the US Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee:

“As an essential, fundamental part of the US Refugee Admission Program, we screen applicants rigorously and carefully in an effort to ensure that no one who poses a threat to the safety and security of Americans is able to enter our country...resettlement is a deliberate process that can take 18-to-24 months.”

(DoS, 2015)

The White House website assures its US readers that, “We are going to do the right thing in the right way—protecting the American people even as we provide refuge to some of the world’s most vulnerable people” and that, “Refugees are subject to the highest level of security checks of any category of traveler to the United States.”¹² Some political leaders in Europe have carried a similar theme, German Chancellor Angela Merkel announced her government’s position on refugees, “Germany will help where help is necessary, and of course we need to put this into practice. We cannot act as if this situation was a perfectly normal one. And it will only work if we take this new path together.”¹³

Fueled in part by a super-charged partisan environment of the longest US presidential primary election season in history, taking a hard line against a potential threat from incoming

refugees is a safe way to earn approval from a population that is historically hesitant to receive refugees. The Gallup organization recently published a retrospective on public opinion on this issue over fifteen crisis points in the 20th Century. In only two instances did the majority of US residents support accepting refugees; in 1999 a majority of Americans polled was supportive of allowing refugees from the Kosovo crisis and in 1979 a slim majority agreed that “Indochinese or ‘boat people’ –would be welcomed in your community.” Over seventy percent polled were opposed to President Truman’s call in 1946 to allow additional refugees displaced by the Second World War; in 1939 only twenty-six percent supported government plans to accept Jewish children fleeing Nazi Germany (Gallup, 2015).

Presidential Candidate and former Neurosurgeon Ben Carson made the following analogy regarding the threat allegedly posed by Syrian refugees,

“If there's a rabid dog running around in your neighborhood, you're probably not going to assume something good about that dog, and you're probably going to put your children out of the way. That doesn't mean that you hate all dogs.”

He carried his analogy to a policy prescription,

“But you're going to put your intellect into motion and you're thinking, ‘How do I protect my children at the same time? ... I'm going to call the humane society and hopefully they can come and take this dog away and create a safe environment once again.’”¹⁴

Laying aside for the moment that rabid dogs are not known for their cunning and secrecy, while people clandestinely planning a terrorist attack generally are, this statement can inadvertently fuel radical Islamist narratives. At his kindest, by saying that clearly not all dogs are rabid, he

suggests that not all Muslim Syrian refugees are terrorists, he still likens the peaceful majority of refugees to dogs. An analogy such as this that is deeply offensive to Arabs and Muslims could easily be manipulated and offered by Daesh propagandists as “proof” of US disdain for Muslims worldwide.

Speaker of the House of Representatives Paul Ryan made it clear that acting to “pause” the refugee program was from his perspective an unfortunate necessity,

“Terrorists have made it clear that they intend to infiltrate this refugee population to reach the West and carry out other attacks. Most refugees pose absolutely no threat to us, but we simply don't have a sufficient process for figuring out who each person is and verifying his or her background.”

Quoting FBI Director James Comey, and Homeland Security Secretary Jeh Johnson, Ryan calculated that US intelligence agencies do not have the resources to ensure the complete safety of the refugee program, concluding that, “this is a moment, then, when it's better to be safe than sorry.”¹⁵

Still others maintain that the threat is exaggerated, suggesting alternate means for potential terrorists to enter Europe or the US. The data available on the refugee program tend to support the argument that the “Trojan Horse” threat is exaggerated. According to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees and the Refugee Processing Center, in 2015, the United States has accepted only 1,682 Syrian refugees, or 0.042 percent of the 4,045,650 registered Syrian refugees. Only one out of every 2,405 Syrian refugees in a camp was resettled in the United States in 2015. Of the 859,629 refugees admitted to the United States from 2001-2015, three

were convicted on terrorism charges, none of the three successfully carried out their plans. That is one conviction for every 286,543 refugees that have been admitted (Nowrasteh, 2015).

Constructed as a threat that can reach beyond its territory in Syria and Iraq, Daesh can both sponsor and inspire violence indirectly

Gilles de Kerchove, Counter-terrorism Coordinator for the European Union suggested that while the threat from refugees is exaggerated, a more potent hidden danger is still very concerning,

“I don’t believe Daesh really needs to sneak in and use the migration flow to send fighters to Europe. First, they can tap on a huge reservoir of Europeans who are already radicalized and inspire them; they may [also] send back Europeans who went [abroad] for jihad and some of them may not have been detected by police.”¹⁶

Identifying an alternative vector for a terror threat, US Senator Richard Burr, Chairman of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, warned,

“I would tell you, from a threat standpoint, I’m probably more concerned with the visa waiver program today. Were I in Europe already, and I wanted to go the United States, and were I not on a watch list or a no-fly list and I wanted to get there, the likelihood is I would use the visa waiver program before I would try to pawn myself off as a refugee.”

Constructed as a threat that can reach beyond its territory in Syria and Iraq, Daesh can both sponsor and inspire violence indirectly and, via trained fighters travelling on their own Western passports, on visas, or as refugees. This construction has undergone some transformation, first in the form of Europeans and Americans returning from the battlefields of Syria and Iraq to wage a clandestine war at home; second, as a “Trojan Horse” with violent men hidden among the refugees flowing into Europe and eventually the US; and finally, as individuals taking advantage of relaxed visa requirements. The threat of terrorists hiding among refugees was quickly and decisively politicized in the heat of the US presidential primary season. None of these pose an “existential threat” to anything, despite the doomsday language of political leaders and some media commentators. Regardless of the vector, this construction presents the least likely danger, but is an ongoing intelligence challenge.

Policy Response: The World vs. Daesh

In spite of this proliferation of constructions, the most visible solution to the problem of Daesh has remained the same: bomb their positions in Syria and Iraq. After the attacks in Paris in November, the President of France, Francois Hollande told the French Parliament, “France is at war...These attacks were war. It was an attack against our values, against our youth and our way of life.” In response, he declared France’s intention to continue to strike Daesh targets in Syria,

“We will pursue these attacks throughout the coming weeks. On Thursday, aircraft carrier *Charles de Gaulle* will go to the Eastern Mediterranean, and that will treble our capacity for action. There will be no pity and no fear. The ones who

19rganized the Paris attacks must realise their crimes, rather than making France fear responding, reinforces our determination to destroy them.”

After conceding that a bomb, likely planted by a Daesh-affiliated group brought down the Russian Metrojet charter over the Sinai desert on 31 October, President Putin of Russia said, “we will find them at any place on this planet and punish them.” As of the 26th of November, France and Russia agreed to cooperate against Daesh, as related by President Putin, he and Hollande,

“agreed on a very important issue: To strike the terrorists only, Daesh and the jihadi groups only, and not to strike the forces and the groups that are fighting against the terrorists. And we are going to exchange some information about that: what can be struck, and what must not be struck.”¹⁷

Putin went further to say, “we are ready to cooperate with the coalition which is led by the United States.”¹⁸ As of the 29th of November, British Prime Minister David Cameron was preparing for a vote to expand his country’s aerial bombardment campaign to include targets inside Syria. For its part, the United Nations Security Council called upon all UN member states with the capacity to do so,

“to take all necessary measures, in compliance with international law...to redouble and coordinate their efforts to prevent and suppress terrorist acts committed specifically by ISIL also known as Da’esh as well as ANF, and all other individuals, groups, undertakings, and entities associated with Al Qaeda...and to eradicate the safe haven they have established over significant parts of Iraq and Syria” (UNSC 2249, 2015)

Declaring “war on ...” is an often used rhetorical device to demonstrate resolve and didn’t begin with the November series of attacks. France’s Prime Minister declared war on “Islamic Extremism” after the January 2015 attack against the Charlie Hebdo editorial offices in Paris; the President of Tunisia declared that a state of war existed between Daesh and his country after the June 2015 murder of nearly forty tourists at a beach resort in Sousse, Tunisia.¹⁹ In the wake of that same attack in which the majority of victims were Britons, British Prime Minister David Cameron told parliament that a state of war existed between Great Britain and ISIS.²⁰

Semi-retired journalist Tom Brokaw, who anchored NBC’s nightly news program for twenty-two years, and hosted all three of NBC’s major news programs, ended the Sunday 22 November “Meet the Press” program with,

“I don’t want this broadcast to end without all of us dealing with the new reality. We’re at war, this has changed, Paris has changed the place of America in this war against ISIS and it is now a war. The President’s, what I would call, ‘benign neglect’ about the continuing expansion of ISIS, the more sophistication of it all the time, has to come to a halt.”²¹

CNN international journalist drew a similar conclusion,

“President Obama says the strategy is working. Most strategists say, no, it's not...So, many analysts are saying, now with Russia, you have to divide and conquer in Syria. You know, take different areas of the country, smother with air strikes and go into those specific areas and eradicate is from Raqqa and other places where they are. That's the only way it's going to happen.”

Though the details on levels of commitment reveal a wide range of responses, at a minimum, political and media elites advance the “war” and “victory” frames, and focus on intensifying the air campaign against Daesh, with increased international coordination.

Terrorism or Insurgency?

Daesh has been defined both as a terrorist organization and as an insurgency. The fact that *Daesh* seems to defy definition among sensible, well-intentioned people raises the possibility that it could represent different things to different audiences. Ross Harrison has aptly suggested that this is in fact part of the problem:

“ISIS represents a threat with three different faces. To the United States and its western allies, it is a terrorist organization. However, for Arab states, ISIS represents an insurgency without political boundaries that threatens the survival of countries...When examined from a regional perspective, ISIS represents the spearhead of a broader movement threatening to sunder the Arab political order that has existed since the end of World War I” (Harrison, 2012, p. 37).

As Daesh has now recently regained attention as a terrorist organization, and since Western political leaders are calling for redoubled action against it, it should be helpful to clearly differentiate between terrorism and insurgency.

According to the United States Army Counterinsurgency (COIN) field manual, an insurgency is “an organized movement aimed at the overthrow of a constituted government through the use of subversion and armed conflict.” Putting it in other terms, the manual goes on to say that an insurgency is “an organized, protracted politico-military struggle designed to

weaken the control and legitimacy of an established government, occupying power, or other political authority while increasing insurgent control” (FM 3-24, 2006). Therefore, as defined by the US government, an insurgency is an effort organized with the goal of militarily overthrowing an existing political order, to eventually replace that order with something new. Terrorism, on the other hand, is violent political speech. What distinguishes terrorism from other forms of violence (even asymmetric warfare) is that the death and suffering of the immediate victims of violence is intended as a means to some other end. The terror group is not particularly interested in their victims, but rather their audience is the survivors and people who might be in a position to give the terrorist group what it wants. Michael Walzer defined the boundaries of terrorist violence as:

“it is the difference of aiming and not aiming—or, more accurately, between aiming at particular people because of things they have done or are doing, and aiming at whole groups of people, indiscriminately, because of who they are” (Walzer, 1977, p. 200).

If the goal of warfare is the destruction of enemy forces, as Clausewitz defined it, then the goal of terrorism is to induce compliant behavior on the part of the audience to violence. Terrorism is coercion—I hit him to get you to do what I want.

While terrorism is almost universally condemned it can be mislabeled for political purposes because it generates such condemnation. It is important that we carefully distinguish between terrorism and other violent acts because the response to terrorism involves communication as well as security (police or military) strategies and actions. Terrorists seek through their acts of violence (whether perpetrated or threatened) to create fear and/or

compliant behavior in a victim and/or an audience for the act or threat. Not all violent acts are terrorism. What distinguishes the terrorist act is that the violence is directed at an audience beyond the victim(s) and that is the main purpose of the violence. That is, terrorism is communicatively constituted violence and it is the action not the actor that makes a particular act, terrorism. The violence which occurs in the context of a pitched battle thus is not generally considered terrorism.

The focus on the actions requires that that we distinguish the victims of the violent act from the targets (the audience of that violence). As difficult as it is for us to accept in the immediate aftermath of an attack with victims in plain view, the terrorists are primarily interested in the audience, not the victims. The deaths or injury of the victims of terror are intended as a means to some other political objective. There are a number of consequences of viewing terrorism in this manner. It means not every action by an organization that employs terrorism is terrorism and not all violence is terrorism.

Insurgencies can employ terrorism as a tactic—in fact they often do to undermine the people’s confidence in the government the insurgency is trying to overthrow. Terrorism is also employed by insurgent groups to coerce support from a population. But it is important to maintain the distinction: terror is a tool, a means of communication. It is defined not by who commits a particular act, but by the intention of the act itself. Insurgencies have broad politico-military objectives that include radically altering a political system. This is what Daesh is attempting to do. Indeed, by erasing the established borders between Iraq and Syria, and replacing the legitimately constituted governments in the territory it holds, this is precisely what it has done. The mere fact that one can refer to “it” on a map and say that “it” governs in any

practical sense immediately distinguishes Daesh from traditionally defined terror groups like al-Qaeda, or the Provisional Irish Republican Army.

Counterterrorism and Counterinsurgency

Traditional counterterror strategies are not effective against insurgencies. Although counterterror and counterinsurgency strategies are often employed together, they are very different approaches with different assumptions about the application of lethal force and the role of the local population. Counterinsurgency strategies involve a long-term commitment and the goal is to drive a wedge between insurgent forces and the population. Ultimately counterinsurgent forces need to win popular support and legitimacy for local political leadership. Tactically, counterinsurgency means applying the least amount of force necessary, trading short term force protection and security for long-term cooperation and trust. Counterinsurgency operations would be problematic, at best, in the Syria-Iraq theatre. Close coordination among coalition forces, far beyond battle-space de-confliction, is required; such coordination is a great distance off, witness the Turkish shoot-down of a Russian aircraft.

Counter-terror operations, militarily speaking, are often conducted at a distance, relying on intelligence-driven precision application of munitions. Even a well-planned counter-terror missile strike that causes collateral damage can ruin counterinsurgency operations designed to build trust and cooperation. “Rather than being mutually reinforcing, they may impose tradeoffs on each other, as counterterrorism activities may blunt the effectiveness of counterinsurgency approaches and vice versa.” Yet, this conclusion is largely ignored among political elites,

“At the political level, however, the effects of the conflation of counterterrorism and counterinsurgency are perhaps more serious...To treat every terrorist threat through the lens of counterinsurgency is to commit the US to undertaking countless state-building missions abroad, often with limited prospects of success. To treat every insurgency as the potential incubator of a future terrorist threat is a recipe for overextension, distraction and exhaustion.” (Boyle, 2010, p. 353)

The decision to implement a counter-insurgency or counter-terrorism strategy faced President Obama in his first year in office. The new commander of US Forces in Afghanistan and the International Stability Force Afghanistan (ISAF), General Stanley McChrystal, advised the President to surge a large ground force to defeat the insurgency, driving a wedge between the Taliban and the population. “The conflict will be won by persuading the population, not destroying the enemy,” McChrystal advised. Others, notably Vice President Biden, advised, reduce the number of forces in Afghanistan and pursue a counter-terror campaign focused on al-Qaeda leadership, relying on airstrikes by remotely piloted aircraft. President Obama would choose a middle way, a smaller surge with a defined end-date and intensified counter-terror airstrikes (Antal, 2009; Schneider, 2009; Malkasian & Weston, 2012).

Hunting and killing key leaders in terrorist organizations and insurgencies has been an important element of US counter-terror and counter-insurgency operations. The effectiveness of these “decapitating blows” is not a settled issue. Robert Pape argues that these sorts of campaigns are rarely successful (2003). Criticizing the limited scope and strict definitions of “success” found in previous studies of “decapitation” effectiveness, Johnston, concludes that that leadership decapitation, “1.) increases the chances of war termination; 2.) increases the

probability of government victory; 3.) reduces the intensity of militant violence; and 4.) reduces the frequency of insurgent attacks.” These “High Value Targets” (HVTs) are routinely killed through a variety of means; working through a target deck can provide convenient metrics and a sense of progress, but these operations do not always lead to strategic gains over the long run.

Counterterrorism policy is more than simply the prevention of future violence and the elimination of potential terrorist actors

“Too often, HVT campaigns are plagued by poor intelligence, cause unnecessary collateral damage, spur retaliatory attacks, and in many cases, yield little to no positive effects on the insurgent or terrorist group being targeted.” (Frankel, 2011, pg. 18).

These HVT campaigns are most successful when carried out by local forces, and least successful when led by occupying or colonial powers; they are best against highly centralized organization, and when they are but one part of a much larger strategy (Frankel, 2011).

Counterterrorism policy is more than simply the prevention of future violence and the elimination of potential terrorist actors, which clearly must be at the heart of any successful strategy. The strategy must also consider the appropriate communicative response to acts that do occur and to both prepare the public for the occurrence of such attacks and respond to the reactions of the audience to the acts when they occur. Terrorists use their violence to communicate fear to the target audience and also wish to convince them that the authorities can no longer protect those who are targeted. The authorities’ tasks are not limited to the prevention of attacks but also the apprehension of the terrorists and taking actions that make it less likely

that a future attack will succeed. At the same time, they must also make the public subjectively believe that they are more secure and create confidence and trust that they are not only making them more secure but also that they are doing so in a manner consistent with societal expectations. Failing to make the public more secure, or failing to make the public perceive that they are secure, amounts to a victory for the terrorist. As a process, failing to make the public believe they are safe and that the political authorities are doing all that they should in a manner that is consistent with societal norms, often presents more of a threat to the political system than particular security lapses. Moving beyond a particular state border to the regional or global level immediately increases the number of audiences that the terrorist and the state address and thus increases the difficulty of the communications necessary to engender trust and the perception of security as well as that the actions taken are both legitimate and necessary.

An important key to the understanding of terrorism is to recognize that although each of the component parts of the process is important, the emotional impact of the terrorist act and the social effects are more important than the particular action itself. In other words, the targets of the terror are far more important for the process than are the victims of the immediate act. The act or threat of violence is but the first step. This may be clearly seen in the French misunderstanding of the Algerian situation of the 1950s (Stohl, 1983, p. 4). The French thought that when the National Liberation Front (FLN) planted a bomb in a public bus, it was in order to blow up the bus; whereas the real FLN purpose in planting the bomb was not to blow up the bus, but to lure authorities into reacting by arresting all the non-Europeans in the area as suspects. (Fromkin, 1975, p. 694). The victims of the terrorist act were the relatively limited number of passengers and bystanders in the area of the bombing. The targets of the bombing were many

and varied. The French colons in Algeria perceived the attack as aimed at them, became fearful, and demanded greater protection and an increase in security measures. Many began to question the ability of the French government to provide that most basic of governmental services' security. Some formed vigilante groups to engage in activity that they perceived the government as unwilling to perform or incapable of performing. A campaign of terror aimed at the native Algerian population was initiated. The campaign, of course, only further undermined the legitimacy and authority of the French regime in Algeria.

The Algerian population, having been singled out by the regime as a group distinct from the "normal" French and having become the object of terror by the colons, began to question the legitimacy of the regime and became more receptive to the message of the FLN. In addition to these two primary targets, the population and government of Metropolitan France began to see the Algerian colony as an economic, military, and political liability and sought a way out of the dilemma. The initial reaction of increased force, while providing a temporary halt to the Algerian revolution, in the end created severe strains within Metropolitan France. In Algeria as a result of the campaign of terror and the reaction of the French government and the colons, victory came to the FLN "less through its own brave and desperate struggle during seven and one-half years of war than through the strain which the war had produced in the foundations of the French polity." (Wolf, 1969, p. 42)

The day after the US bombed targets in Libya in retaliation for that state's sponsorship of an attack on a Berlin nightclub, which killed two US service members, one Turkish woman and injured 229 others, on the floor of the US Senate, Senator Mark Hatfield's voiced a minority assessment of the previous day's military action,

“The vast moral gulf which once separated us from the terrorists was narrowed yesterday...Take another look at those bleeding children before you delight over the precision of the rockets, my colleagues. Tell them you are not sure the policy will work, but it sure did feel good.”

In spite of years of attack and counter-attack, there exists no coherent, long-term US policy on how to effectively counter terrorism. How bad does terrorism have to be before threats of retaliation will be carried out? When and whom should we attack? How will we know? How many innocent lives lost is an acceptable number? What will be gained by retaliation? Will we deter terrorism or will we simply “feel better” to have acted, however futilely? What possibility exists that our retaliation will, as in the Algerian case, fuel further resentment, which may incite future violence?

The concept of “blowback” was coined by the CIA in a report on its covert coup d’état that unseated Iranian Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadeq in 1953. The after-action review of that operation concluded in part that the, “possibilities of blowback against the United States should always be in the back of the minds of all CIA officers involved in this type of operation. Few, if any, operations are as explosive as this type.” Indeed, few operations have been as explosive as the coup in Iran, but perhaps the lessons from that operation could have been given greater appreciation as the CIA began to lead the US drone program.

Retired US Army General Stanley McChrystal, former commander, US Joint Special Operations Command and Special Forces officer, has plainly described the “blowback” problem of drone warfare.

“What scares me about drone strikes is how they are perceived around the world. The resentment created by American use of unmanned strikes...is much greater than the average American appreciates. They are hated on a visceral level, even by people who’ve never seen one or seen the effects of one.”

McChrystal concluded that the program exacerbates a “perception of American arrogance that says, ‘Well we can fly where we want, we can shoot where we want, because we can.’”²² There are clear long-term consequences for this element of the US counterterrorism program. Stephen Walt (2014) observed,

“Every time the United States goes and pummels another Muslim country—or sends a drone to conduct a ‘signature strike’—it reinforces the *jihadis*’ claim that the West has an insatiable desire to dominate the Arab and Islamic world and no respect for Muslim life. It doesn't matter if U.S. leaders have the best of intentions, if they genuinely want to help these societies, or if they are responding to a legitimate threat; the crude message that drones, cruise missiles, and targeted killings send is rather different.”

Terrorists seek safe havens amongst supporters or within populations (or states) which are unwilling to confront them and have made the calculation to acquiesce to the presence of terrorists within their midst, either because they approve of the terrorists goals (if not their methods) or because they do not believe they can count on the state to protect them from the terrorists in their midst. One of the key elements of any counterterrorism strategy is the struggle to convince populations that the costs of offering safe haven—or simply allowing safe havens—are greater than the cost of assisting governments in eliminating such havens.

One important consequence of the drone strike program is the negative impact of civilian casualties. This has driven both the rise of anti-American sentiment and the reinforcement of preexisting attitudes informed by the past decade and a half. This increases the ability of extremist groups to exploit safe havens and decreases support among affected populations for the regimes that allow drone strikes. There have been several recent studies that demonstrate statistically that the United States' use of drones has both increased negative perceptions of the United States in the areas most affected by drone activity and changed the way terror groups advertise their positions and try to gather support (Williams, 2010; Powers, 2014). The United States is thus trading short-term tactical successes for long-term strategic costs.

Conclusion

Terrorism is not defined by the actor, but by the intent behind the action.

The complexity presented by the Syrian-Iraqi problem demands careful study. Daesh presents a multi-faceted terror threat that requires a multi-faceted response. Daesh has been constructed as a quasi-state with a conventional military capacity; an inspirational propaganda machine, recruiting fighters from around the world, and encouraging others to wage their jihad wherever they are; and as a clandestine threat, hidden among refugees, or as battle-tested soldiers returning from the frontlines in Syria and Iraq to carry on the fight at home. Consequently, bombing Daesh fighters in Raqqa will not make Parisians more secure, killing individual Daesh leaders is not likely to liberate Mosul, screening refugees more carefully will not correct the crisis that displaced them. The best planned aerial bombing campaign will

demonstrate resolve and is a highly visible retributive act, but is likely to inspire violent people far from the target of that campaign. Absent a coherent strategy that appropriately addresses each potential threat, uncoordinated efforts will very likely be counterproductive at best. When Cronin (2015) criticized President for mistaking Daesh for a “terrorist organization,” when it is, in her mind, clearly a quasi-state with a conventional military, she didn’t take that analysis far enough. If Daesh is a state, then it can employ terror as other states arguably have; terrorism is not defined by the actor, but by the intent behind the action. Thus “degrading and ultimately destroying” a state, as Daesh pretends to be in Syria and Iraq, is fundamentally separate from protecting people in far away places from a real, albeit remote, threat of violence posed by Daesh.

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¹ *Daesh* represents the Arabic acronym for the so-called “Islamic State.” We will use this name for the organization commonly referred to as the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) or the Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS).

² During an interview on CBS News, 13 November 2015. The CBS Online News Service, accessed 21 November, at: <http://abcnews.go.com/Politics/president-obama-vows-completely-decapitate-isis-operations/story?id=35173579>

³ For example see CNN Online News Service, 4 November 2015. Accessed at: <http://www.cnn.com/2015/11/04/africa/russian-plane-crash-egypt-sinai/index.html>

⁴ The full quote is: “The analogy we use around here sometimes, and I think is accurate, is if a jayvee team puts on Lakers uniforms that doesn’t make them Kobe Bryant. I think there is a distinction between the capacity and reach of a bin Laden and a network that is actively planning major terrorist plots against the homeland versus jihadists who are engaged in various local power struggles and disputes, often sectarian. As quoted in the New Yorker Magazine 27 January 2014. Online article accessed 21 November 2015 at: <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2014/01/27/going-the-distance-david-remnick>

⁵ See for example United Kingdom Prime Minister David Cameron in an interview 29 June 2015, BBC Channel 4, accessed at: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p02vw70k>;

⁶ Washington Post Online News Service, February 3, 2014. “Al-Qaeda disavows any ties with radical Islamist ISIS group in Syria, Iraq” accessed 22 November 2015 at: https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/al-qaeda-disavows-any-ties-with-radical-islamist-isis-group-in-syria-iraq/2014/02/03/2c9afc3a-8cef-11e3-98ab-fe5228217bd1_story.html

⁷ Daniel Byman (2015) counts nine different possible names, translations and other variants for this organization over its relatively short existence. Al-Qa’ida in Iraq (AQI) typically refers to the pre-2011 organization that operated largely in Iraq and ISIS/ISIL or the Arabic Daesh for the post 2011 organization that operates in Syria, Iraq and elsewhere.

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¹² White House Blog, “How We’re Welcoming Syrian Refugees While Ensuring Our Safety,” accessed 24 November at: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/blog/2015/11/17/how-were-welcoming-syrian-refugees>.

¹³ Der Spiegel Online International “Quiet Capitulation: Merkel Slowly Changes Tune on Refugees” Published 20 November 2015, accessed 24 November 2015 at: <http://www.spiegel.de/international/germany/angela-merkel-changes-her-stance-on-refugee-limits-a-1063773.html>

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