

Terrorism in Perspective: A Review for the Next American President

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The next American president will encounter a landscape with regard to terrorism, and specifically violent Islamist extremism, that is challenging and also much changed from eight years ago, when President Obama took office. The changes relate to failed and failing states in the Middle East and surrounding region, the terrorist organizations themselves, how the United States has dealt with the problem of terrorism, and how the problem has manifested in Europe. Even if the United States and its allies continue to retake territory from Daesh (or ISIS) and are able to disrupt other terrorist organizations, the problems of violent Islamist extremism and the societal and demographic conditions that enable it will persist. This volume seeks to define the problem and set it in context, and to offer some paths and priorities for the next president and her or his administration, including in the emerging and promising field of countering violent extremism (CVE).

Keywords: terrorism; countering violent extremism; Middle East; Daesh; ISIS; president; security

Eight years ago, as Senators Barack Obama and John McCain prepared for their campaigns against each other and for the American presidency, *The ANNALS* commissioned us to prepare the volume, “Terrorism: What the Next

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President Will Face.” That 2008 volume of *The ANNALS* brought together leading academic experts and practitioners to examine the multifaceted problem of terrorism. Many of the recommendations in the volume were implemented in whole or in significant part, in some cases by the authors themselves, many of whom were appointed by President Obama to positions in his administration. Some of the recommendations stand today and will be repeated in this volume because, in our opinion, they have not been implemented to the necessary degree. The analysis eight years ago also failed to anticipate many of the significant shifts that would occur—changes that have altered in fundamental ways the nature of the problem.

We are honored to be asked again by *The ANNALS* to oversee a special volume of analyses and recommendations, which may help the new American president and his or her administration to place the seemingly familiar problem of terrorism into perspective and suggest some paths and priorities at the outset of the new presidency. We are especially grateful that two distinguished experts agreed to assist us in recruiting expert authors, working with them, and editing the two halves of this volume. We think of the volume in two halves because we conceive the terrorism problem as two closely related sets of concerns. First, terrorism is one of the forces riling the nation-states of the Middle East. Second, terrorism is an issue of domestic security for the United States and its Western allies, particularly in Europe.

Paul Salem directs the analysis of terrorism in the Middle East in section one of the volume. Salem is the vice president for policy and research at the oldest think tank in the United States dedicated to the study of the Arab world, the 70-year-old Middle East Institute (MEI). Prior to joining MEI, Salem was the founding director of the Carnegie Middle East Center in Beirut, Lebanon.

Leading our analysis of terrorism as a domestic security concern was Rand Beers, who has 40 years of experience in U.S. national security and, uniquely, served on the White House’s National Security Council staff, where he focused on terrorism for Ronald Reagan and Barack Obama and every president in between. In addition, he served in senior confirmation positions in the Department of State and the Department of Homeland Security.

Again, as eight years ago, we have gathered leading scholars and practitioners to explore different aspects of terrorism. We are very grateful for their participation. Before we begin our review of their work, there are two important framing questions to consider. First, what is the definition of terrorism as we conceive of it in this volume? Second, how is the issue of terrorism different from that in *The ANNALS* volume prepared for the new American president eight years ago?

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Defining Terror

Eight years ago, we began our volume of *The ANNALS* by noting that terrorism (organized violence designed to change a government, its policies, or societal values) had been used for centuries but that “the problem for the new President is that terrorism is now widely being used, among other tactics, by extremist groups claiming affiliation with one of the world’s main religions, Islam” (Clarke and Papadopoulos 2008, 7). That remains the problem.

In 2008 we noted, “rather than call them terrorists, it is best to think about them as violent Islamist extremists” (Clarke and Papadopoulos 2008, 7). We used the word *Islamist*, not *Islamic*, to denote a deviant current that claims to adhere to the Muslim religion, while actually violating many of its key tenets and attempting to create or gain control of the instruments of state governance.

Of course, there are many non-Islamist terrorist groups throughout the world. Indeed, most terrorist acts in the world are carried out by groups having nothing to do with Islam (RAND Corporation 2009). The same is true within the United States, where terrorists motivated by a cause having nothing to do with religion commit the majority of violent acts of terror (Kurzman and Schanzer 2015). They, however, are not within the scope of this volume, though notably many of the solutions emerging to counter violent Islamist extremism may apply as well to countering violent extremism writ large, and vice versa.

We focus only on violent Islamist extremism because it has posed and will likely continue for some time to pose the greatest threat of disruption to the greatest number of nation-states. It is a problem in a region of the Arab world from Morocco to Iraq and the Arabian Peninsula, into the non-Arab nations of Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India. *The region*, as we use the term in this volume, describes those nations and the Muslim nations in Africa from Somalia on the Indian Ocean, across the Sahel and Central Africa, to Nigeria on the Atlantic. (We do not focus here on Southeast Asia—an area that we considered in *The ANNALS* volume eight years ago—because the problem has been relatively contained there, and terrorism from this region has not affected Europe or the United States to the same degree as terrorism from “the region,” as discussed in this volume.) Violent Islamist extremists have also brought their conflict outside the region to the streets of Western Europe, the United States, Australia, Canada, and elsewhere.

In the region of the Middle East and Africa, these violent extremists are essentially fighting a civil war within Islam, attempting to stage a coup d’état with only a small minority of the population supporting them. They are seeking to replace existing states and governments, putting themselves in power, under the guise of creating theocracies, or one large “Caliphate.” They see Western nations as a roadblock to their plans, “propping up” what they label “apostate regimes” in majority Muslim nations. Attacking those Western countries and their values; and portraying the Western governments as oppressing Muslims at home and abroad, and as being “at war with Islam” are essential elements in the ideological appeal of the violent Islamist extremists. Violence against Western countries is part of

the campaign of the terrorists, designed chiefly to convince Western governments to withdraw from what they see as “their region.” Thus, the problem of terrorism by these violent extremists is primarily a struggle to determine who governs majority Muslim nations in this region, and how they do so. It is, however, a problem that has violent spillover effects outside that region, as well.

Eight Years of Change

We cannot simply refer the new American administration to the recommendations we made eight years ago because much about this problem has changed in that time. The changes have come in four categories: in states in the region, in the terrorist organizations themselves, in the way in which the United States has dealt with the problem, and in the manner in which the problem has manifested itself in Europe. These four factors have also interacted and shaped each other in important ways. It is valuable, before launching into an analysis of where we are today, to recall how we got here.

States in the region

Eight years ago there was one fully failed state in the region, Somalia. Afghanistan and Iraq had gone through the ravage of invasion and regime change, and were both being ripped by civil wars. Another, Lebanon, had failed in the mid-1970s but then achieved a precarious kind of stasis of factional control. What appeared to be strong, autocratic governments ruled elsewhere across these majority-Muslim nations. Then, beginning in 2011, a wave of revolts hit six existing regimes, rippling from the Maghreb in the Mediterranean to the Arab Gulf and Indian Ocean. This wave resulted in the greatest series of leadership changes since the rise of the “strong man” Arab nationalist regimes in the 1960s that swept out the last vestiges of colonialism and its leftover royals. That tectonic movement that began in 2011 was, in a bit of a misnomer, called the “Arab Spring.”

Uprisings occurred in Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, Syria, Bahrain, and Yemen. It is important to understand that they were not, however, Islamist revolts, at least not initially. Instead, most were explosions of frustration at the ineffectiveness of the authoritarian regimes, which had been unsuccessful in dealing with the socioeconomic challenges of population growth or the rising political and social justice demands of an increasingly informed and empowered youth generation. The rebellions were about serious unemployment and a lack of government services, corruption, and gross economic inequalities, rather than interpretations of the Koran or the desire for a Caliphate (Anderson 2011).

Violent Islamist extremist groups, notably the new group Daesh, did, however, take advantage of the opening created by the revolts, notably in Syria, but subsequently in Libya, Egypt, and Yemen, as well. Except in Egypt, where an authoritarian regime was reestablished and a form of order re-created, the revolts in

those nations ravaged the infrastructure and created failed states without an effective central government, with factions ruling regions and continuing in armed conflict. (The conflict in Syria then interacted with the then-low-level civil war in Iraq in important ways that we examine further.) These failed states and their civil wars have acted as an accelerant to the growth of violent extremist groups, attracting fighters; providing a strong propaganda narrative; and delivering territory, funding, and materiel resources on a level never before attained by a terrorist group in the region.

Iran, a largely non-Arab Islamic nation, also played a role after the outbreak of the Arab Spring. Already heavily engaged in the low-level civil war in Iraq through support of the Shia-dominated regime in Baghdad, Iran became even more deeply involved in the revolt in Syria. Its role caused the revolt to take on aspects of a Sunni-Shia conflict. Iran stimulated the Shia revolt against the government in Bahrain, prompting Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) to intervene militarily. Iran supported the Houthi movement, which led the Zaidi Shiite community to revolt in Yemen, again provoking Saudi Arabia and the UAE to intervene militarily.

Saudi Arabia and the UAE, which have become increasingly involved militarily throughout the region, are among the states of the region where the governmental systems have not changed and revolt has not occurred. The monarchical regimes in Morocco, Jordan, Qatar, Oman, and Kuwait have also remained stable.

Thus, as the new American president takes office, as contrasted with 2008, there are new governments in Tunisia, where a form of democracy seems to be working; and in Egypt, where another authoritarian regime faces challenges in achieving security, stability, legitimacy, and growth. In Libya, Syria, Iraq, Yemen, Somalia, and Afghanistan, civil wars or significant rebellions continue. In all of those conflicts violent Islamist extremists—terrorist groups—are among the major combatants against the central government or what passes for one. This swath of active civil war, combat, and destruction is unprecedented in the modern history of the region. It has turned cities into rubble, created millions of refugees, and made much of the region a breeding ground and training field for terrorism.

The terrorist groups in the region

In 2008, we wrote extensively about al-Qaeda and about what we called its “franchise groups.” *The ANNALS* volume then described the need for attacking al-Qaeda’s leadership along the Afghan-Pakistan border. The Obama administration did just that, greatly expanding the use of armed drones and targeted killing of the leadership of “al-Qaeda Central” and to a lesser extent against the leaders of its franchise groups al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) in Yemen, al-Shabaab in Somalia, and al-Qaeda in Iraq. As a result, al-Qaeda Central appeared to decline significantly. The group the United States continued to fight in Afghanistan was the Taliban, not al-Qaeda. Al-Qaeda in Iraq was reduced after 2008 to a small group in hiding, at least until 2012.

Then, when the revolt against President Assad began in Syria at the tail end of the Arab Spring, al-Qaeda in Iraq moved many of its remaining assets to Syria to join the fight there. The success of their operations in Syria gave the group a new, larger life. They soon broke off from al-Qaeda Central, and under the name ISIS (or Daesh, as many of their Arab opponents and we derisively call them) returned to Iraq in a spectacular manner. Taking advantage of the Shia government in Baghdad's ill treatment of majority Sunni cities, Daesh, reinforced by foreign fighters from dozens of nations, swept into Iraq and seized major cities, ejecting the feckless Iraqi Army and seizing its American-supplied equipment.

Suddenly Daesh controlled large amounts of territory in both Syria and Iraq, including major cities. The Syrian-Iraqi border in effect disappeared. Daesh contended, not without some merit, that a new state—"the Islamic State"—was born. They declared the revival of the Caliphate a century after its abolition by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk in 1924. Unlike al-Qaeda, which vaguely promised a new caliphate some day, Daesh had created it in a year. Inspired by this phenomenal success, about thirty thousand disaffected Muslim youth from Europe, North America, and mainly from Muslim-majority nations around the world flocked to the Caliphate. Never before had a terrorist group in the region controlled a territory as immense or with as large a population.

Daesh ran large cities, including Mosul, the second largest city in Iraq. It collected taxes and provided services. Daesh had a treasury of tens of millions of dollars, taken from banks and "earned" from the sale of hostages and oil from wells and refineries within its territory. Its military inventory included tanks and other armored vehicles. On the Internet, its propaganda machine achieved heights of sophistication never before seen from a terrorist group. Groups in Africa and Afghanistan announced that they were part of Daesh. A team from Syria-Iraq went to Libya and grabbed control of a city of ~100,000 people, Sirte, creating another "province" of the Caliphate.

Self-activated, radicalized individuals in the United States, Europe, Canada, Australia, and elsewhere committed terrorist acts in the name of Daesh. In addition to these "lone wolves," organized terrorist cells staged major attacks in Europe and attempted other attacks elsewhere. The terrorists creating and attempting these attacks included both violent Islamist extremists who had grown up in Europe and refugees from the Middle East.

Daesh eclipsed other Islamist terrorist groups, even though AQAP grabbed territory in Yemen, al-Shabaab hung on in Somalia, the Taliban advanced in Afghanistan, and a mélange of terrorist groups plagued Pakistan. (In response, the residual leadership of al-Qaeda Central created al-Qaeda on the Indian subcontinent and began recruiting in the densely packed and lawless neighborhoods of Karachi.)

At one point Daesh, assisted by other factions, seemed to be on the verge of overthrowing the Baghdad and Damascus regimes, as well as the Kurdish autonomous government in Erbil. The United States, which had withdrawn militarily from Iraq, sent forces back to provide air support and active "advisors" to Kurdish militia and the Iraqi Army. Russia, in its largest military intervention in the region

in recent history, sent forces to Syria. Iran stepped up its military presence in both Iraq and Syria, including dispatching forces of its Lebanese ally, Hezbollah, to support the Damascus regime. European and Arab nations also employed their air forces in coordinated strikes by “the Coalition” against Daesh. Gradually, these interventions allowed the indigenous forces fighting Daesh to halt the group’s advances and then to regain some territory. Daesh’s oil revenues were reduced by Coalition bombing. High casualties among Daesh forces reduced the group’s appeal to foreign fighters, reducing the number of new recruits.

Daesh appeared to be contained and had lost control of cities in Syria, Iraq, and Libya. Those cities, however, are now in ruins, and many among their populations are still refugees. Those conditions may generate a new wave of violent extremism. The dramatic rise and the beginning of the fall of the group may have led many observers to think that Daesh was *the problem*. It was, however, only an extreme manifestation of the underlying resentment of the status quo and the yearning for an Islamic success story, one that promised to improve the condition of those with little hope in the slums of major cities in the region and in Europe. The leadership of Daesh was remarkably effective and accomplished much quickly, but even without the group, that resentment and those longings would still have existed, and a small minority of those affected would have found means of expression, sometimes extreme and possibly even violent. If and when Daesh is successfully suppressed, the environmental, social, and demographic conditions that allowed it to thrive and grow will continue. A bulging age cohort of Muslims under 30, in the region and in Europe, will continue to seek employment, improved living conditions, increased respect, greater equality, and meaning in their lives. Few of the existing governments can address those desires. Of the tens of millions who will be frustrated, most will continue to reject violent extremist groups like Daesh, as has been the case until now; but some will be sympathetic to such groups, and a slim minority may support them actively, creating once again the supporting conditions for another organized, capable terrorist movement.

Europe and violent Islamist extremism

France had dealt with Algerian-related terrorism for decades, since the 1950s. Other European nations had been a stage for Palestinian terrorist groups, particularly in the 1970s. England and Spain had both seen major al-Qaeda terrorist attacks early in the century. Daesh, however, managed to inspire some Muslims born or raised in Western Europe to go to the Middle East to fight for the new Caliphate. It inspired others to stage “lone-wolf” attacks in Europe and elsewhere. Daesh also infiltrated a handful of terrorists into Europe. Major Daesh-related terrorist incidents rocked Paris in 2015 and Brussels in 2016. Others in Europe were prevented, including in England and Germany (Troianovski and Turner 2016).

The civil wars in the region triggered an unprecedented mass migration of refugees into Europe, creating political crises throughout the European Union and challenging its “borderless” system of internal national boundaries. The

combination of the refugee deluge and the Daesh terrorist attacks in Europe prompted anti-immigrant and anti-Islamic political reactions, which heightened the sense among many Muslims that they were being discriminated against, that they were hated by many Europeans. For European Muslims who lived in predominantly Islamic neighborhoods with high unemployment and lower living standards than the rest of their nations, this backlash added to a sense of resentment and discontent. What had been true for decades became more obvious to the media and political figures: many Western European nations had done a poor job of integrating Muslim immigrants into the mainstream of their societies. Violent Islamist extremist groups could find some supporters in the ranks of the discontented in the isolated Muslim communities. Political groups on the Right sought to take advantage of fears of terrorism and Muslims for electoral gain, creating a feedback effect and exacerbating relations among religious groups and communities in Europe.

The United States and terrorism

The fevered American reaction to the terrorist attacks of 9/11 had begun to dissipate at the outset of the Obama presidency. Although he increased attacks against al-Qaeda, President Obama sought to withdraw the U.S. military from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. In Iraq, all U.S. forces were eventually withdrawn. The predominantly Shia government in Baghdad subsequently ceased support for the U.S.-created Sunni militias and engaged in a campaign to marginalize Sunni leaders. That anti-Sunni effort led directly to the success of Daesh in Iraq, which, in turn, caused the return of U.S. forces (the U.S. Air Force in close air support missions and U.S. Army Special Forces and other combat “advisors”). After a surge of thirty thousand additional troops early in his administration, President Obama later withdrew the bulk of U.S. forces in Afghanistan and turned the combat mission over to the Afghan National Army. However, the United States was unable to pull out all its forces as planned because of the growing pressure of the Taliban.

Despite the continuing presence of some U.S. forces in Iraq and Afghanistan, American casualties dwindled and U.S. combat-related fatalities became a rare event (Defense Manpower Data Center 2011). Although U.S. drone strikes also declined significantly, they continued to occur occasionally against several terrorist targets in Somalia, Libya, Yemen, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria. U.S. fighter aircraft closely supported air strikes against Daesh, which continued on a regular basis in both Iraq and Syria. Among the American people, nonetheless, the sense that their country was actively engaged in war against terrorist groups diminished. So too did the potential for popular support of any new, large-scale American military involvement in the region. “War fatigue” and a sense that such large-scale U.S. military interventions produced few positive outcomes were much more widespread in 2016 than they had been earlier in the century.

While the terrorist attacks at Fort Hood, the Boston Marathon, San Bernardino, and Orlando were tragedies and heavily covered in the news, terrorist events in the United States were relatively few and far between and were

self-actuated, largely “lone-wolf” incidents. While any death or injury from terrorism is unacceptable, and governments should engage in vigorous mitigation and prevention efforts, the actual number of Islamist terrorism-related fatalities in the United States over the last eight years has been low. At the time of writing, there have been nine Islamist-related incidents in the United States since Barack Obama took office in 2009, resulting in ninety-one total casualties. The average of about twelve fatalities a year in the United States from terrorist threats contrasts with more than eleven thousand gun homicides a year in the United States and more than thirty-five thousand fatal vehicular accidental deaths in the United States per year (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 2013). The media and political reaction to the terrorist-related fatalities is, however, far greater than the number of deaths would suggest. These attacks and the images of terrorism in Europe stimulated some anti-Islamic political rhetoric in the United States, particularly in 2016.

Although a few American Muslims attempted to join Daesh or other terrorist groups, such as al-Shabaab in Somalia, the Islamic community in the United States continues overwhelmingly to reject violent extremism and to cooperate with law enforcement against potential terrorists. Federal law enforcement and intelligence agencies brought approximately seventy prosecutions for attempted support to Daesh over the eight years and had more than nine hundred suspects under some degree of surveillance in 2015 (Vidino and Hughes 2015). These numbers are considerably lower than similar data about Europe. The Islamic community in America has been better accepted and integrated into society than it has been in many European nations, but Daesh’s effective propaganda still appealed to some disaffected youth in the United States.

The tolerance of the American people for “homeland security” measures and expenditures has generally continued over the last eight years, although, as time has passed since 9/11 and government domestic intelligence activities have become clearer, there has been a growing sense of awareness and concern with government electronic espionage efforts and possible infringements on privacy and civil liberties in the name of counterterrorism. Media reports of NSA activities, as revealed by a former National Security Agency (NSA) contractor, contributed to a sense in some circles that there might be government overreach when it came to counterterrorism surveillance. Congress did amend the post-9/11 “Patriot Act” to curtail some types of electronic surveillance.

The U.S. software industry reacted to the reports of NSA surveillance by increasing the use of encryption for publicly available e-mail and chat programs. That trend touched off a debate between “Silicon Valley” and the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI). The FBI alleged the encryption made the FBI’s counterterrorism surveillance more difficult and justified its request for government-controlled access to decryption methods. Congress, which was split between those concerned chiefly with civil liberties protection and those more motivated by counterterrorism, seemed unlikely to act favorably on the FBI’s request.

Terrorism had not been an issue during the 2000 presidential cycle, despite the fact that al-Qaeda attacked the destroyer *USS Cole* during the final month of the campaign. In 2004, President George W. Bush made counterterrorism the

central focus of his successful reelection bid. By 2008 the issue had evolved, but it stayed central to the campaign. A nation weary of Americans fighting and dying in the Middle East elected a candidate in 2008 who promised to be strong on counterterrorism but also pledged to end the wars and certain ethically questionable practices such as torture and open-ended incarceration at Guantanamo. By 2012, after the financial crisis of 2007–2009, terrorism had diminished as a source of concern to voters, compared with economic issues. However, the rise of Daesh propelled terrorism back into the center of the 2016 election (Gallup 2015).

Day One in the West Wing

Thus, the American president elected in 2016 and the national security team that comes to office in 2017 will face a landscape transformed from what we wrote about eight years ago. The high water mark of Daesh's control of cities and lands will have passed, but the wellspring of ideology and discontent into which it taps will still be strong.

Six nations in the region lie in shambles, with millions of their people in refugee camps. Rebuilding and repairing the damage from the spasm of civil wars would cost hundreds of billions of dollars, if funds were available. Political settlements seem far off. Failed, factionalized states seem likely to continue for the foreseeable future. Other nations in the region face acute stability challenges, due in part to population growth outpacing economic development.

Europe faces twin problems of Islamic refugees from the wars and economic failures, and Islamic citizens who are not well integrated into European society. And in the United States, a large and costly bureaucracy seeks to prevent Islamist terrorism. For a variety of reasons, including the relatively few extremists in the United States; and the country's relatively welcoming approach to assimilation, support from Muslim communities, and effective intelligence and law enforcement, there have been few major incidents, but the risk remains and the tolerance of the American people for any Islamist terrorism in their country remains extremely low.

Thus, the new president should ask, (1) What is the nature of the problem or problems we call "terrorism?" (2) How much is enough in the way of effort and resources to deal with this set of issues? and (3) What are likely to be the most effective programs and policies to address the underlying problems, and to minimize the damage that can be done by Islamist terrorism? With those questions in mind, this volume of *The ANNALS* reviews the problem as it manifests itself in "the region" and then examines the spillover effects in Europe and the United States.

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