The Situation in Syria and its Implications for the Terrorist Threat

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If I may, thank you for the opportunity to address this important, prestigious forum. I think I may be one of the youngest people to have spoken during this forum since its inception. So I imagine that, in the very least, what I have to say will make my fellow panelist, Aaron David Miller, and other speakers and moderators appear wiser than we already know most of them to be.

Before I begin, I must acknowledge feedback on earlier drafts of these remarks provided by former CIA Director General David H. Petraeus, my boss in Johns Hopkins University's Global Security Studies program, Dr. Mark Stout, and former CIA senior counterterrorism analyst Cindy Storer.

I also wanted to ask: Does anyone else feel a bit *cold*?

Last week, via tweet, the United Kingdom Foreign Office noted that "NATO Allies work together every day to prevent conflict and preserve peace for nearly 1 billion people." Since September 11, 2001—when al-Qa'ida exceeded the expectations set by its founding leader's rhetoric, and brought the fighting to America by following on the example of an attack targeting the World Trade Center in New York in 1993—NATO-member states have invested previously unimaginable resources in counterterrorism initiatives. In the face of these initiatives, Salafi-Jihadist groups like al-Qa'ida and Islamic State have defied expectations about their futures set by many politicians and certain prominent terrorism experts. As highlighted by Seth Jones, who will speak later today: Although many political leaders in the West assumed Usama bin Ladin's death in 2011, and sweeping changes taking place in the Arab Spring would have a cumulative effect of diminishing threats posed by Salafi-Jihadist groups, membership in groups like al-Qa'ida and the group we now know as Islamic State doubled by 2014. The sweeping changes taking place in Syria in particular factored prominently among the reasons why. Indeed, both al-Qa'ida and Islamic State have converted conflict in Syria into a powerful tool used to build and reinforce support. These groups have meanwhile demonstrated unwavering intentions to channel that support into global terrorism campaigns, and civilians from NATO-member states are among their priority targets.

I have been asked to briefly discuss how the situation in Syria is affecting the phenomenon of international terrorism. With these opening remarks, I will focus on the increasingly dynamic, enduring threats posed by al-Qa'ida and Islamic State. The latter of which converted opportunities to control large population centers and territory in Iraq and Syria into tools used to achieve an unparalleled power of persuasion with respect to recruiting

and inciting violence within NATO-member states. I look forward to discussing opportunities to improve our efforts managing threats posed by these groups later in this session, as well as in any future meetings that any of you may wish to hold.

The bottom line up front: While al-Qa'ida and Islamic State presently appear less focused on using the conflict in Syria to build support than they were three years ago, Salafi-Jihadist elements based in Syria and proximate environs continue to pose significant threats to both regional and global security. If certain NATO-member states—particularly the US, UK and France—reduce investments in discreet intelligence programs targeting terrorists in Syria, threats they pose to civilian populaces in the West will almost certainly increase during the next three years. During this period, if NATO-member states do not impose uniform regulations on social media and other tech companies that could help to more impactfully erode the online influence capacities of terrorist groups, we will effectively enable terrorists based in Syria to continue waging online recruitment-cum-incitement campaigns. If they do, it is very likely this will result in additional mass-casualty terrorist attacks occurring within NATO-member states. In addition, if NATO-member states do not employ stronger measures to deter governments from serving as either active, or passive state sponsors of Salafi-Jihadist elements, it is very likely terrorists based in Syria will realize increased opportunities to undermine global security. Indeed, the manners in which the Erdogan regime accommodated terrorist groups active in Syria highlights the issue of passive sponsorship of terrorism—particularly in the form of witting accommodation—requires more attention.

Before proceeding further, as I teach about intelligence at one of the world's leading universities, I believe it is important to acknowledge biases that have influenced my assessments. Therefore, I will acknowledge that I am an optimist. As an optimist, I believe things can get much worse.

Indeed, I assess Baghdadi's death—like the death of bin Ladin before him—will prove to be an underwhelming development for anyone who may have assumed this would have a dramatic, positive impact on global security. And when I look at the situation in Syria, and think about how it may impact the phenomenon of international terrorism—especially the Global Jihad movement, in which al-Qa'ida and Islamic State have been competing for leadership status for nearly six years—I assess it is very likely that things will get much worse. Here, I would be remiss in not noting that we may reasonably assume the Putin regime's ever-widening influence in the Middle East will render NATO-member states less capable of defining the futures of terrorist groups active in this region.

These assessments are bolstered by more than what I view as persistent deficient strategic analysis within policymaking spheres in many NATO-member states against Salafi-Jihadist groups and authoritarian regimes in the Middle East. In particular, this outlook is bolstered by events like the recent attack in London.

Perpetrated by a terrorist whose actions conformed to directives devolved in Islamic State's digital propaganda that has been proliferated online, this attack provides yet more evidence Islamic State remains capable of garnering support—including support furnished

in the form of terrorist attacks in the West—despite being denied capabilities to meet expectations set by its most inspirational of claims, as amplified in the group's very namesake. For Islamic State, this was yet another success that can produce toxic ripple effects throughout the West, such as building confidence among other Islamic State supporters in their capabilities to perpetrate impactful terrorist attacks here. Such attacks also help Baghdadi's successor demonstrate greater competency with threatening civilian populaces here in the West than al-Qa'ida's current leadership. That, in turn, has the potential to help Islamic State outbid al-Qa'ida for support among some inhabitants of so-called "historically Muslim lands" whose worldviews have been shaped by grievances concerning the influence of Western governments on Islamic societies. Of course, all of this may meanwhile serve to stimulate an increased sense of urgency among al-Qa'ida leaders to mobilize attacks in the West.

Certainly, attacks perpetrated in the West by sympathizers of Salafi-Jihadist groups can simultaneously bolster confidence among non-ideologically-aligned extremists that terrorism can be an effective tool used to build support for their agendas. This is a particularly pernicious problem for weaker governments in the West like the one in Bosnia and Herzegovina, an aspirant NATO-member state. Earlier this year, I worked with their ministry of security on a preventing and countering violent extremism project sponsored by the US government. Their state security services are unequipped to manage threats posed by right wing extremists whose militant aspirations are increasingly animated by wildly exaggerated characterizations of threats posed by Salafi-Jihadis, as seen in the rhetoric of far right political figures in the Balkans, and their media proxies—false narratives about the threat environment that have been amplified on popular social media platforms managed by American companies. This is particularly the case with right wing extremist, or ethnonationalist elements in Republika Srpska, including government officials. Their increasingly hostile rhetoric and militaristic posturing against both the country's Muslim citizens and Muslims displaced by the conflict in Syria who are seeking refuge in Europe increases the likelihood of violent conflicts occurring in the country. Like the conflict in Syria, another large-scale conflict in Bosnia and Herzegovina would animate a wide range of extremist actors around the world. Of course, it would almost certainly enhance the Putin regime's influence in the Balkans.

Here, I believe it is also important for me to acknowledge that, although prominent terrorism experts consider it fashionable to say things like "al-Qa'ida and other terrorist groups are learning from Islamic State's mistakes," I am a contrarian. I believe al-Qa'ida is more interested in capitalizing on Islamic State's successes. Notably, Islamic State's attainment of a capacity to accelerate the radicalization process, culminating in a resort to violence—especially while cultivating would-be terrorists based here in the West in the cyber domain.

Indeed, it is reasonable to assume that terrorist attacks targeting civilians here in the West will remain among the most valuable currencies used by Salafi-Jihadist groups to engineer the perceptibility of legitimacy, thus worthiness of support. Here, it is useful to consider that, unlike many terrorist groups, Islamic State has literally referred to its members as terrorists within its official propaganda. By fashioning theirs as a terrorist group that is

intent upon more aggressively waging a global jihad than al-Qa'ida under its current leadership, Islamic State has furnished an additional metric the group's acquired and prospective supporters can use to evaluate whether it remains a legitimate steward of their aspirations.

Meeting their expectations has been accomplished by expanding the group's terrorism operations far beyond Iraq and Syria, and persuading group sympathizers to perpetrate attacks in the West. In 2014, the group also began deploying terrorists trained in Syria into the West to establish sleeper cells that could help sustain group-linked attacks here. Islamic State even touted that it was doing this in a video released early in 2015 that features dramatizations of attack plots in Australia, France, the UK, and US. Therein, the group claimed sleeper cells were waiting in Germany. That claim was validated following the arrest of a bombmaker who deployed to Europe from Syria in October 2014. Indeed, Islamic State propagandists have used propaganda to set expectations about attacks occurring in NATO-members states *after* the group's external operations managers were confident these expectations could be met, or even exceeded. As leadership studies scholars would surely note, this is a potent strategy used to inspire confidence in the group among acquired and prospective supporters—one that can enhance Islamic State leaders' capabilities to persuade their followers to perpetrate attacks here. It also highlights that, despite what some counterterrorism officials like former FBI Director James Comey have told the public, credible threats against NATO-member states have indeed been issued within Islamic State propaganda.

Although Islamic State and al-Qa'ida are not as aggressively using persistent conflict in Syria as a tool to help them garner support as they were in 2014, this could soon change. If the recent behaviors of the Assad, Putin, and Iranian regimes in Syria serve as a useful guide for our assessments of their future operations, it is reasonable to assume they will create conditions favorable to the agendas of Salafi-Jihadist elements. Indeed, while the Erdogan government's accommodation of Salafi-Jihadis has been a key source of problems for global security, the Assad regime's crimes against humanity have factored more prominently among the issues that have energized support for groups like al-Qa'ida and Islamic State. For al-Qa'ida and Islamic State enthusiasts who are unable to travel to Syria to try to help defend Sunni civilians against the Assad regime's domestic terrorism campaigns, this, in turn, will very likely result in the orientations of their energies towards perpetrating terrorist attacks in other countries.

Of course, whether conditions in Syria during the next year will reinvigorate al-Qa'ida's or Islamic State's capabilities to recruit and incite violence here in the West is a "known unknown." Meanwhile, what is known is that thousands of people from NATO-member states who *might* remain dedicated to Islamic State's global jihadist agenda remain in Syria. When you consider the tensions arising from this situation among NATO-member states, it seems Islamic State has actually managed to score a big win while losing in Syria.

What is also known is that the specter of terrorist threats emanating from Syria has been seized upon by various political leaders in the Middle East to legitimize new "national security" policies and defense technology acquisition programs. In most cases, these tools

can enable them to further consolidate power. Indeed, the destabilizing impacts of the Syrian Jihad on regional security have shaped an environment that appears to be bolstering the durability of authoritarian regimes.

Threats posed by Islamic State in particular have been an excuse for governments across the region to resist accommodating structural reforms advocated by Western democracies. As if reading from a GCC talking points memo, diplomatic and security officials from various Arab states have told me their governments can more efficiently manage threats posed by Islamic State than would be the case if they resembled Western democracies.

Of course, the increasingly autocratic political leadership in Turkey can use the specter of a myriad of terrorist threats emanating from Syria to rationalize further consolidation of power by Erdogan.

Therefore, terrorism analysts should examine whether persistent conflict in Syria is a force multiplier for the phenomenon of terrorism writ large. Because, if we apply nomothetic causal analysis which holds that repressive authoritarian governments have a tendency to nurture anomie that manifests in terrorism to intelligence estimates aiming to calculate what may unfold in the Middle East during the next three years, an increase in terrorism-related activities should be on our list of future concerns. And as we all know, an increase in terrorism campaigns in the Middle East is likely to correspond with an increase in threats posed to NATO-member states by sympathetic onlookers residing here in the West.

If this occurs, we should be equally concerned about the responses from non-ideologically-aligned extremists in the West who may argue that our governments are incapable of defending civilians against threats posed by foreign terrorist groups active in conflict zones like the one in Syria. Painting our national security enterprises as incompetent can be a useful way for divisive fringe actors in the West who promote polarizing policy agendas to fashion themselves as credible players in political contests. As we all know, increased polarization within our nations will advantage regimes like Putin's.

Ultimately, the successes achieved by Salafi-Jihadist elements within Syria—especially current and former components of al-Qa'ida's global network that have retained control of large territories—have encouraged terrorists elsewhere to test whether barriers to undermining the Westphalian system are as great as bin Ladin assumed. To borrow a phrase from leadership studies scholarship, the achievements of Salafi-Jihadis in Syria who have more aggressively seized all immediate opportunities to overtly assert themselves while testing the collective resolve of the world's most powerful countries to counter their activities have "modeled the way" for extremist actors in many other regions. The specter of these threats is concurrently animating a spirit of authoritarianism that enhances the influence of the Putin regime and other governments hostile to NATO-member states.

It is therefore incumbent upon policymakers in NATO-member states to anticipate potential ripple effects like these when evaluating options to intervene to prevent emerging conflicts from evolving into jihad theaters like the one in Syria. It is also necessary to consider recalibrating the scope of NATO's mission to explicitly make note of the wider set

of threats to our interests. I propose the following: Protecting against the corrosive effects of authoritarianism on global security that are bolstered by not only communism and fascism, but also ideologies characterized by religious extremist and ethnonationalist aspirations that are anathema to the values enshrined in our democratic systems of government.

Again, thank you for the opportunity to discuss this set of problems. I look forward to discussing what can be done to more effectively address them.