



In January this year, Afghan Special Security Forces destroy former ISIS-K fighting positions and weapon caches in Nangarhar Province. (U.S. Army/Jacob Krone)

# The Fight So Far...

By Michael K. Nagata

America has invested enormous treasure, exerted extraordinary effort and sent many of its best, brightest, and most courageous to combat terrorism in the past 17-plus years since 9/11.<sup>1</sup> As we pass another anniversary of that tragic day, this narrative seeks to take stock of where we have been, where we are, and where we should strive to go.

Achieving significantly greater strategic success against terrorism remains within America's grasp, but only if we are willing to be as adaptive and flexible—indeed more so—than our terrorist adversaries have proven to be. Achieving this will require us to make investments, adopt practices, and make choices we previously have not. The purpose of this narrative is to encourage a larger and more effective discussion about these investments, practices, and choices. Although the U.S. Government (USG) has frequently claimed to take a whole-of-government approach in utilizing all elements of national power to fight terrorism, our struggle against the Islamist State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) has demonstrated that we must strengthen our emphasis and resourcing of non-kinetic counterterrorism (CT) efforts to match the strengths that we and our allies have developed since 9/11 in kinetic efforts.

## Where We Have Been

According to a recent U.S. Army-sponsored RAND study, since 9/11 the United States has deployed more than 2.7 million military service members and government civilians to conduct or support dozens of CT campaigns and military operations; many of which endure to this day.<sup>2</sup> During these years, the United States has developed extraordinary capabilities and strengths for contesting terrorism, ranging from precise military actions to capture or kill terrorist leaders, to impressive law enforcement operations to bring terrorist perpetrators to justice, to sophisticated intelligence operations to enable both ourselves and our international partners to disrupt dangerous terrorist plots, and beyond.

Entire CT career fields have been created or have expanded. The “Find-Fix-Finish-Exploit-Analyze” formula for illuminating and attacking terrorist networks has become a permanent part of the CT lexicon. All Americans can and should be immensely proud of the progress we have made in creating the most impressive array of kinetic CT capabilities in our history. However, despite our best efforts and the efforts of our partners

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and allies around the world, terrorism today is more widespread and more complex than when we began.

Today, the Salafi Jihadist movement—as well as a multitude of other violent extremist movements—continues to grow globally. Outside our country, the problem of Salafi Jihadist terrorism has expanded from its original roots in locales such as Yemen, Sudan, Afghanistan, and Pakistan into dozens of countries and across every region. Terrorist movements across the political-religious spectrum are becoming increasingly effective in using the internet and inspiring radicalization and mobilization of individuals around the world, including inside our own country. Despite our efforts of the past 17 years, terrorists' ability to raise revenue and resources, sponsor and broadcast extremist ideologies, recruit fighters, and move terrorist operatives from country to country has significantly grown.

Said more simply, the United States is facing an upward strategic trajectory of global terrorism. According to the U.S. State Department's annual *Country Reports on Terrorism* publication, in the five years after 2012, worldwide terrorism-related attacks increased by 64 percent and associated fatalities by more than 130 percent although absolute numbers thankfully leveled off in 2015 and 2016.<sup>3</sup> This has occurred despite the otherwise effective action that the United States and our partners around the world have taken against our terrorist adversaries.

Here at home, the FBI is in some stage of investigating at least 1,000 homegrown violent extremists, inspired or connected in some way to international terrorist ideologies, in communities across all fifty states.<sup>4</sup> The homegrown violent extremist (HVE) population in the United States has expanded significantly since 2014, and an unprecedented number of people are radicalizing and mobilizing to violence in response to ISIS' rise. We are now seeing more and more minors—some as young as 12—becoming more radicalized and involved in active plotting.<sup>5</sup> Although we have seen a drop in actual HVE attacks

during the past two years, the scope, scale, and trajectory of this challenge should remain very worrisome for us all.<sup>6</sup>

## Where We are Now

Today, the United States finds itself simultaneously confronted with both a return to nation-state strategic competition (e.g. Russia, China and beyond) in addition to the large international and domestic terrorism challenge we have faced since 9/11.<sup>7</sup> Not surprisingly, this is forcing us toward choices over priorities, resources, and risks that are both complex and strategically consequential. America is increasingly challenged to effectively deal with terrorist threats without the luxury of having CT be our entire strategic focus.

For example, the United States is approaching an inflection point in its struggle against ISIS. While the United States and The Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS have waged a highly successful military campaign against ISIS' geographic caliphate and its associated military arm in the Levant, large numbers of their fighters still remain there, and more importantly, ISIS' globally distributed network has become capable of planning, resourcing, coordinating, and/or inspiring terrorist attacks in every hemisphere.<sup>8</sup>

Meanwhile, ISIS is today a malign “innovator” among terrorists everywhere in demonstrating the significant advantages to be gained by incorporating technological advances. One example is ISIS' extraordinarily effective use of the internet to promote radicalization and mobilization-to-violence in ways that have added thousands of adherents to its global ranks. A second example has been ISIS' efforts to weaponize and effectively employ affordable and commercially available technology such as unmanned aircraft systems (UAS) into devices that can both enhance or even conduct terrorist attacks.<sup>9</sup> We should not be surprised that terrorists will seek to take advantage of the relentless pace of technological change.

## Where We Should Go

The United States has extraordinary strengths and capabilities in dealing with terrorism. However, in a rapidly accelerating world that increasingly provides more powerful tools for both good and bad actors alike, we should remain mindful of Abraham Lincoln's 1862 exhortation:

*The dogmas of the quiet past, are inadequate to the stormy present. The occasion is piled high with difficulty, and we must rise with the occasion. As our case is new, so we must think anew and act anew.*

This is not to suggest we should abandon the tools or techniques that have served us so well since 9/11; many of which were the fruits of experimentation, lessons learned, and great American courage over years of toil, investment, and even direct combat against terrorism in its various guises. However, we have already learned that these impressive strengths have not achieved a durable reduction in the international or domestic scope and scale of terrorism thus far.

Therefore, we should more seriously examine the question of what capabilities we should now invest in to achieve such durable outcomes; particularly as we must devote more of our strategic attention and resources to other national security challenges. The answers lie within what can be imperfectly described as “non-kinetic counterterrorism.” Examples are efforts to combat recruiting online, prevent the creation of more terrorists, or frustrate terrorists’ ability to travel or garner revenue.

While we should maintain our already formidable capability to attack and disrupt terrorist activities, terrorists have expanded their reach and networks into environments and locations, both internationally and domestically, where the use of kinetic CT approaches will be unwelcome, inappropriate, and/or counterproductive. Inevitably, we will have to increasingly rely on forms of CT that do not involve the use of physical force, kinetic action,

or even law enforcement arrest; though these will remain necessary to some degree.

Furthermore, if we can make ourselves stronger and more effective in non-kinetically contesting the “drivers” of terrorist movements, we would likely discover that we could both achieve the durable outcomes we seek, and that non-kinetic CT activities are far more economical than the large costs typically associated with kinetic CT action.

This is not to suggest we must lavish equivalent fiscal or manpower investment on non-kinetic forms of CT on the scale of what we have invested into kinetic efforts. The organizations, both governmental and non-governmental, that currently strive to prevent or contest terrorism through non-kinetic means possess neither the absorptive capacity nor, in some cases, the proven methodologies today that could justify such a massive investment approach. Furthermore, the United States and many partner governments have learned they must be very thoughtful in how they support or fund non-kinetic programs such as terrorism prevention or messaging/countermessaging, especially with respect to our obligations to ensure civil and human rights, personal privacy, political freedoms, and freedom of commerce.

Nonetheless, both within our own country and across the international community—we need a much more vibrant discussion about the degree to which we are willing and able to increase our investments in terms of fiscal resources, manpower, and genuine policy support for becoming more effective in at least five non-kinetic counterterrorism efforts:

1. Preventing terrorism—also referred as countering violent extremism (CVE)—by assisting local communities, schools, law enforcement, and families in identifying those most vulnerable to terrorist recruitment and enabling local actors to either prevent or “off-ramp” these individuals or groups by teaching them how to address their needs or grievances without resorting to violence.

2. Countering or contesting terrorist ideologies, particularly in the arena of offering more attractive positive alternatives to their poisonous ideas, while retaining our efforts to critique and expose the terrorist narrative.
3. Countering or contesting terrorist use of the internet, both as a global and increasingly secure command-and-control system, and as an increasingly powerful radicalization and recruitment instrument.
4. Denying terrorists the resources they require to operate and conduct their malign activities. This goes beyond denying traditional terrorist financing, and should include frustrating their access to non-traditional forms of revenue (e.g. crypto-currency), rapidly evolving technology (e.g. UAS), and increasingly powerful fabrication technologies (e.g. 3-D printing).
5. Preventing terrorist travel, both domestically and internationally. ISIS alone has inspired the travel of tens of thousands of foreign terrorist fighters across several regions, and the ease and convenience of international travel continues to rise. Nonetheless, the United States and international community must find pathways toward more effectively denying terrorist travel without hindering the commercial prosperity or individual freedom that legitimate travel affords.<sup>10</sup>

It is important to acknowledge that many around the world strive to succeed in these arenas today. Both in the United States and around the world, thousands of extraordinary, dedicated people from across many agencies, across civil society, and within industry (e.g. the telecommunications and social media industry) are striving to contribute in various ways to all five of these areas today, and have achieved some significant successes. Unfortunately, the collective scope and scale of these are insufficient today, they almost universally suffer from significant resource shortfalls, and—perhaps most importantly—they would benefit

from the constant and durable policy support that kinetic CT approaches enjoy today.

Regarding policy support, it is important to recognize that during the past 17 years, kinetic CT actions against terrorists and their plots have experienced vivid and substantial policy support. Not everything we attempted to do in locating or attacking terrorists was successful, but we learned from every mistake. We were willing to absorb these setbacks, publicly defend them against both domestic and international criticism, and persevere because it was so important that we learn how to succeed kinetically.

## The Future

If we are to strategically succeed in these five non-kinetic efforts, it will take the same kind of sustained commitment, to include some additional resources, as we have been willing to provide our highly successful kinetic efforts. We do not yet know all of the prescriptions, approaches, skills, capabilities, or organizational models best suited to strategically succeed non-kinetically, and it will only be through the kind of ruthless experimentation and trial and error we were once willing to endure in our kinetic journey that we will learn how to be equally successful in preventing terrorism. This will ultimately determine if we learn to prevent the creation of new terrorists or prevent terrorist actions as well as we are able to kill, capture, or disrupt them today.

There will be many obstacles to taking such a course; it will likely prove daunting. Shifting our investments toward non-kinetic CT will, at a minimum, engender uncertainty and even skepticism about its wisdom and effectiveness. Just as important, building and sustaining this proposed shift in our CT approach toward non-kinetic methods will take years, in the same way building our proficiency in kinetic CT has required the past 17 years. Said more simply, all of this will require strategic patience and risk acceptance.

If we are willing to embark on such a journey, we could finally achieve the kind of strategically durable reductions in global and domestic terrorism that we have long sought, and that our citizens everywhere deserve. **PRISM**

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The views expressed in this publication are entirely those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views, policy, or position of the United States Government, Department of Defense, the Office of the Director of National Intelligence, or the National Counterterrorism Center.

<sup>2</sup> Jennie W. Wenger, Caolionn O’Connell, Linda Cottrell, “Examination of Recent Deployment Experiences Across the Services and Components,” (Washington, D.C.: The RAND Corporation, 2018), available at <[https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RR1928.html?adbsc=social\\_20180320\\_2212921&adbid=97592816763334272&adbpl=tw&adbpr=22545453](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR1928.html?adbsc=social_20180320_2212921&adbid=97592816763334272&adbpl=tw&adbpr=22545453)>.

<sup>3</sup> U.S. State Department, “Country Reports on Terrorism: 2012-16,” available at <<https://www.state.gov/j/ct/rls/crt/>>.

<sup>4</sup> Mark Hosenball, “The U.S. Has More Than 2,000 Probes Into Potential or Suspected Terrorists: FBI Director,” *Reuters*, May 16, 2018, available at <<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-fbi-wray/us-has-more-than-2000-probes-into-potential-or-suspected-terrorists-fbi-director-idUSKCN1IH341>>.

<sup>5</sup> Leigh McManus, “Chilling Footage Shows Four Knife Wielding Boys ISIS Claim Carried Out Bomb Attacks in Syria,” *The Daily Mail*, August 22, 2018, available at <<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-6087513/Chilling-footage-shows-four-knife-wielding-boys-ISIS-claim-carried-bomb-attacks-Chechnya.html>>; Shireen Korkzan, “American ISIS Widow Charged in Hammond Federal Court with Lying to FBI,” *NWI.com*, July 24, 2018, available at <[https://www.nwitimes.com/news/local/american-isis-widow-charged-in-hammond-federal-court-with-lying/article\\_2d907599-56da-565d-aab9-3efa66c787cc.html](https://www.nwitimes.com/news/local/american-isis-widow-charged-in-hammond-federal-court-with-lying/article_2d907599-56da-565d-aab9-3efa66c787cc.html)>; Simon Veazy, “Foreign Women and Minors Who Joined ISIS ‘Significantly Underestimated,’ Says Report,” *Epoch Times*, July 24, 2018, available at <[https://www.theepochtimes.com/foreign-women-and-minors-who-joined-isis-significantly-underestimated-says-report\\_2602419.html](https://www.theepochtimes.com/foreign-women-and-minors-who-joined-isis-significantly-underestimated-says-report_2602419.html)>; 850 WFTL, “FBI: ISIS-Inspired Teen Allegedly Stabs Three During Sleepover in BallenIsles,” available at <<https://www.850wftl.com/>>.

fbi-isis-inspired-teen-allegedly-stabs-three-during-sleepover-in-ballenises>; Tiffany Caldwell, “A Utah Student Flew the ISIS Flag—and Then Brought a Bomb to School, Police Say,” *The Salt Lake Tribune*, March 9, 2018, available at <<https://www.sltrib.com/news/2018/03/08/fire-fizzled-out-before-igniting-a-handmade-explosive-device-hidden-in-a-utah-high-school-students-backpack/>>.

<sup>6</sup> Lora Shiao, Acting Director of Intelligence, National Counterterrorism Center, “Adapting to Defend the Homeland Against the Evolving International Terrorist Threat,” hearing before the U.S. Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, December 6, 2017, available at <[https://www.odni.gov/files/NCTC/documents/news\\_documents/FINAL\\_NCTC-Shiao\\_SHSGAC-SFR\\_6-December-HearingWEB.pdf](https://www.odni.gov/files/NCTC/documents/news_documents/FINAL_NCTC-Shiao_SHSGAC-SFR_6-December-HearingWEB.pdf)>.

<sup>7</sup> President Donald Trump, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (2017), the White House, available at <<https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/.../NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf>>; James Mattis, *National Defense Strategy of the United States of America* (2018): “Sharpening America’s Competitive Edge,” The Department of Defense, available at <<https://www.defense.gov/Portals/1/.../2018-National-Defense-Strategy-Summary.pdf>>.

<sup>8</sup> U.S. State Department, “The Global Coalition—Working to Defeat ISIS Fact Sheet,” March 22, 2017, available at <<https://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2017/03/268609.htm>>.

<sup>9</sup> Don Rassler, “The Islamic State and Drones: Supply, Scale, and Future Threats,” The Combatting Terrorism Center at Terrorism, July 11, 2018, available at <<https://ctc.usma.edu/islamic-state-drones-supply-scale-future-threats/>>.

<sup>10</sup> Russ Travers, Acting Director, National Counterterrorism Center, “National Counterterrorism Center Acting Director Russ Travers Speaks at DoDIIS Worldwide,” Wednesday, August 29 2018, available at <<https://www.dni.gov/index.php/nctc-newsroom/nctc-speeches-testimonies-and-interviews/item/1901-national-counterterrorism-center-acting-director-russ-travers-speaks-at-dodiis-worldwide>>.