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OPINION | COMMENTARY

## *Early Withdrawal Will Lead to More Terrorism*

A recent lull in attacks is welcome, but it seems to have made American leaders complacent.

By Bruce Hoffman and Seth G. Jones

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Demonstrators chant and wave al-Qaeda flags in Mosul, Iraq, June 16, 2014. PHOTO: AP

America  
has a  
new

counterterrorism policy: retrenchment. Declaring victory over ISIS, the Trump administration seeks to bring home the modest number of U.S. military personnel deployed to Syria, Somalia, Afghanistan and the Sahel region of Africa, and outsource what remains of the fight to others. This is a dangerous move that threatens to wipe out the administration's hard-won progress on counterterrorism.

Proponents of U.S. withdrawal cite the destruction of ISIS' caliphate and the loss of virtually all the territory it once controlled. Thousands of its fighters have been killed since 2014 by Iraqi and Kurdish security forces and the U.S.-led coalition in Syria and Iraq, and terrorist incidents are on the decline world-wide. The picture in the U.S. is even more sanguine. The last significant ISIS-inspired attack in America—in which an Uzbek man plowed his vehicle into pedestrians in New York City, killing eight and injuring a dozen—occurred more than a year ago.

But that doesn't mean the threat is gone. Surprise and shock are terrorists' age-old stock in trade. If terrorism were predictable, it would lose the power that makes it the preferred tactic of America's most intractable enemies.

And many indicators point in an ominous direction.

Start with ISIS. As the White House noted in its 2018 national counterterrorism strategy, ISIS leaders clearly anticipated battlefield defeats and prepared accordingly. Despite the loss of the caliphate, the terrorist group has established eight official branches and some two dozen networks in North and West Africa, the Middle East, and South and Southeast Asia. ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi instructed foreign fighters to avoid the Syrian maelstrom and instead migrate to one of these branches to continue the fight.

Moreover, most of the roughly 40,000 foreign fighters who had previously arrived in Iraq and Syria are still on the loose. Only about 10,000 were killed between 2014 and 2018. At least 7,500 returned home or have disappeared after being deported to third countries. An additional 6,000 have fled to the Sudan or relocated to other conflict zones.

This recalls the “wandering mujahideen” phenomenon following the 1989 Soviet defeat in Afghanistan. The threat from those jihadi fighters was also dismissed—and their numbers were far smaller. Today there are nearly four times as many Sunni Islamic extremists around the world as on Sept. 11, 2001. They are present in as many as 70 countries—roughly 10 times as many as 18 years ago.

Although recently overshadowed by ISIS, al Qaeda also remains a threat. Its affiliates in Syria, Yemen, Somalia, Afghanistan and the Sahel are focused on waging local wars rather than conducting external operations against the U.S. and Europe. But al Qaeda leaders have demonstrated a willingness to resume plotting attacks against the West when it suits them. Theo Padnos, an American journalist who was held hostage between 2012 and 2014 by an al Qaeda-linked group in Syria, observed that his captors were plotting such operations. Significant threats to commercial aviation from both ISIS and al Qaeda have recently resurfaced, as evidenced by the 2015 bombing of a Russian charter flight in Egypt, the 2016 bombing of a commercial airliner in Somalia, and the foiled 2017 plot to bomb an Etihad Airlines flight departing from Sydney.

It's not surprising that many U.S. allies don't share the administration's sanguine view of the global terror threat. Last June Britain concluded that the “threat from terrorism, globally and in the United Kingdom, is higher than . . . in 2011,” the date of the last such determination. Europe has experienced several recent attacks, including the New Year's Eve multiple stabbing at a railway station in Manchester, England, and the December 2018 attack at a Christmas market in Strasbourg, France.

The administration should not mistake the temporary lull in terrorist attacks on U.S. soil for a lack of capability or intent. Hezbollah has not conducted a major attack against Israel since 2012. But Israel still takes seriously Hezbollah's intent to strike it and employs a military and counterterrorism policy aimed at suppressing the terrorist group's capabilities.

In withdrawing U.S. military forces and intelligence capabilities from the Middle East, Africa and South Asia, the U.S. leaves behind conditions amenable to terrorism's resurgence. Countries like Iraq, Syria, Yemen, Afghanistan, Libya, Mali, Nigeria and Somalia have virtually no effective state apparatus to combat terrorist groups. One of the truisms of the past three decades of terrorism is that jihadist threats rarely remain local. Left unchecked, they spread.

Since 9/11, U.S. presidents have repeatedly declared victory against terrorists and sought to shift national-security policy toward different priorities. Each time, America's resilient adversaries exploit the quiet periods to regroup and reorganize to threaten us anew. If it follows through with its planned Middle East withdrawal, the Trump administration may learn this the hard way.

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