



True North in
Canadian public policy

GLOBAL SECURITY LOOK AHEAD

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Defeating ISIS is Just the Beginning

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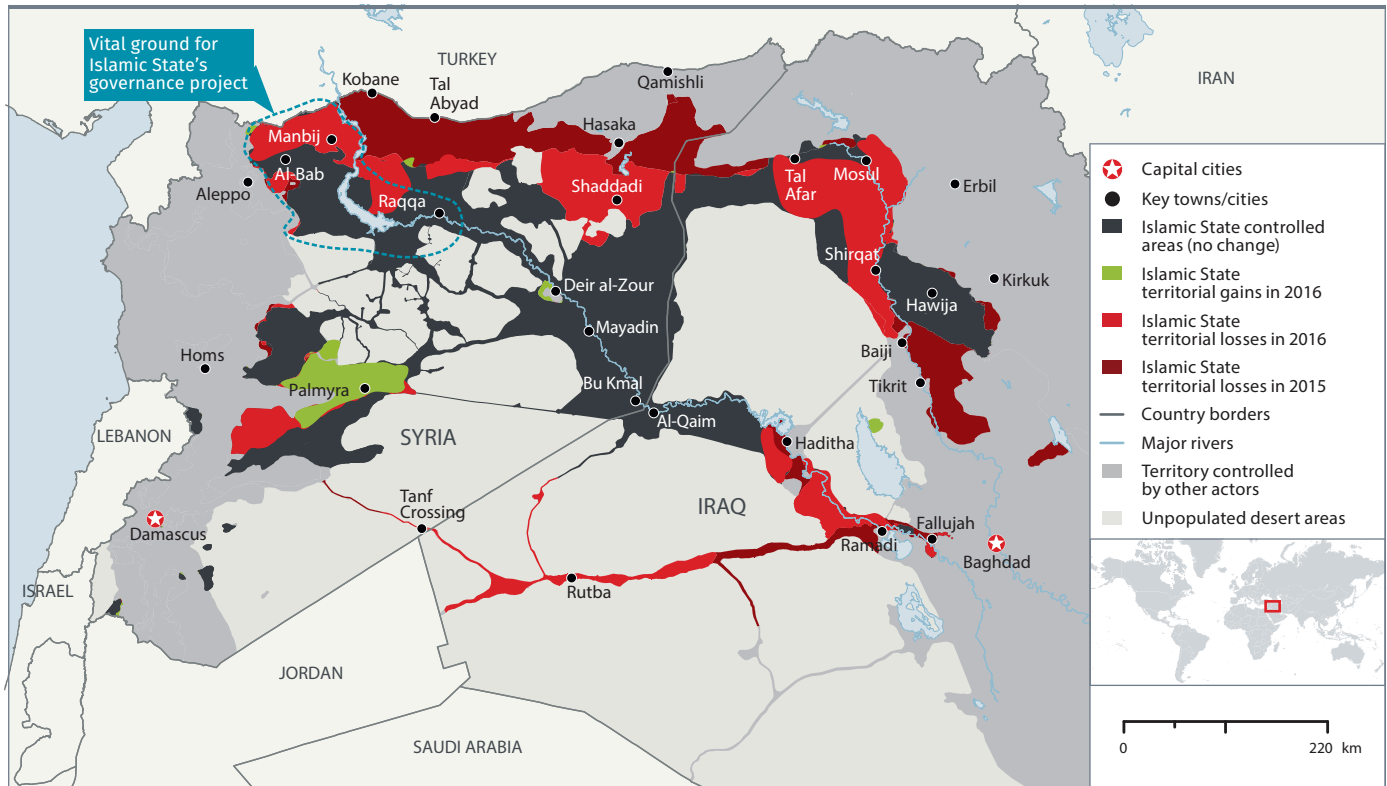
On September 10, 2014, US President Barack Obama unveiled his long-awaited strategy for countering the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), also known as the Islamic State, ISIL, or *Daesh*. “Our objective is clear,” [Obama noted](#), “We will degrade, and ultimately destroy, ISIL through a comprehensive and sustained counter-terrorism strategy.” Two years later, following the horrifying attacks in Nice, France, in which an aspiring ISIS militant rammed a cargo truck into crowds celebrating Bastille Day, killing 86 people and injuring hundreds more, President [Obama reiterated](#): “We will not be deterred. We will not relent... [W]e are going to destroy this vile terrorist organization.”

By most accounts the US strategy seems to be working. From a high point in early 2015, in which ISIS consolidated large swaths of Iraq and Syria under its so-called caliphate, ISIS territory has shrunk dramatically (see figure 1). In the past months, the group has retreated from the Iraqi cities of Ramadi, Tikrit, Abu Ghraib, and Falluja. An allied offensive against its last major urban stronghold in and around the city of Mosul, Iraq’s second largest city, began in October 2016. And in Syria, ISIS lost control over Kobane, Manbij, Palmyra, and a strategic trading and smuggling corridor linking northern Syria and Turkey. Allied operations against Raqqa, ISIS’s Syrian capital, are expected to begin in the coming months. And further afield, ISIS has been largely pushed out of the coastal city of Sirte, Libya, its most prominent enclave outside Syria and Iraq.

ISIS’s territorial defeat is an absolute necessity. But the caliphate’s collapse will create new counterterrorism challenges in the months and years to come. One challenge stands out: ISIS foreign fighters and recruits, uprooted from their caliphate, may be especially motivated and prepared to spread mayhem abroad.

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Figure 1: Islamic State Territorial losses between January 2015 and December 2016



Source: Adapted from IHS Conflict Monitor with additional information from BBC

By all measures ISIS's recruitment has been phenomenal. Since 2011, American intelligence agencies estimate that 40,000 foreigners from over 100 countries have travelled to Syria and Iraq. Many have joined ISIS. By nationality, half of these foreigners have originated from within the region, with Tunisians (3,000 recruits), Saudis (2,500), Jordanians (2,200), and Moroccans (2,000) topping the list. But western [European nationals](#) account for over 20 percent of the group's foreign recruits, with France (1,800), the United Kingdom (800), Germany (750), and Belgium (450) producing the highest number. Several thousand recruits have likewise originated from Russia, the former Soviet Republics, and the Balkans, and a few hundred more have stemmed from Canada, the United States, and Australia.

These figures are not static of course. US estimates suggest that anywhere between 10,000 and 30,000 foreign fighters remain in the war zone. Travel to ISIS-held territory has likewise slowed significantly in 2016. US estimates suggest the number of foreign fighters entering Syria and Iraq [dropped](#) from roughly 1,500 per month in mid-2015 to less than 200 a month by mid-2016. And obviously some foreign recruits will die in battle: roughly [15 percent](#) of European foreign fighters, for example, have perished fighting with ISIS.

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With ISIS facing near certain strategic defeat in the coming year, attention must now be paid to anticipating what the caliphate's territorial collapse will mean to the remaining surviving foreign fighters and recruits. Five different scenarios could play out.

The most optimistic of all possible assessments is that some foreign recruits will leave the battle altogether once the caliphate falls, turning their backs on ISIS and turning away from terrorism for good. [European intelligence reports](#) note, for instance, that disillusionment with ISIS, along with battlefield trauma and regret, have motivated some European recruits to return home fully pacified. Reversions of this kind matter if only to counter the perception that all foreign “returnees” pose an inherent and immediate national security threat. Some returnees might rather provide a counter-terrorism boon. They may provide intelligence on ISIS recruitment processes, motivations, and ambitions, on the group’s ideological narratives and propaganda machine, and on militant alliances, operations, training, and leadership. All of this will help in defeating the group militarily and in better understanding and countering violent radicalization more broadly.

Returnees, however, introduce another series of challenges. The first involves identifying individuals who have truly and fully rejected violence from those who continue to retain a degree of sympathy for ISIS and militancy. The former group might conceivably be rehabilitated and reintegrated into society, as Denmark and other states

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have illustrated. But the latter group provides a latent threat, a population base that might again accept militancy if the right conditions present themselves in the future. That is a concern. The second quandary stems from the first: is a rejection of militancy and violence sufficient in cases where returnees continue to adhere to non-violent but fundamentalist ideologies and practices anathema to liberal democratic norms and ideals? In other words, is walking away from terrorism enough, or will states require and demand that returnees also de-radicalize? Achieving the latter may prove difficult and contentious. And then there is the dilemma of prosecution and incarceration. Criminal evidence that will hold up in court and prove a returnee’s previous support for a blacklisted terrorist organization, or involvement in murder, war crimes, and crimes against humanity, may be difficult to

acquire for many foreign fighters. But even where sentences are handed down, the insidious threat of prison radicalization looms. Here, jailed terrorists and radicals go on to preach hatred within prison, converting other inmates to the cause of militancy. All of these competing issues will need to be weighed and addressed.

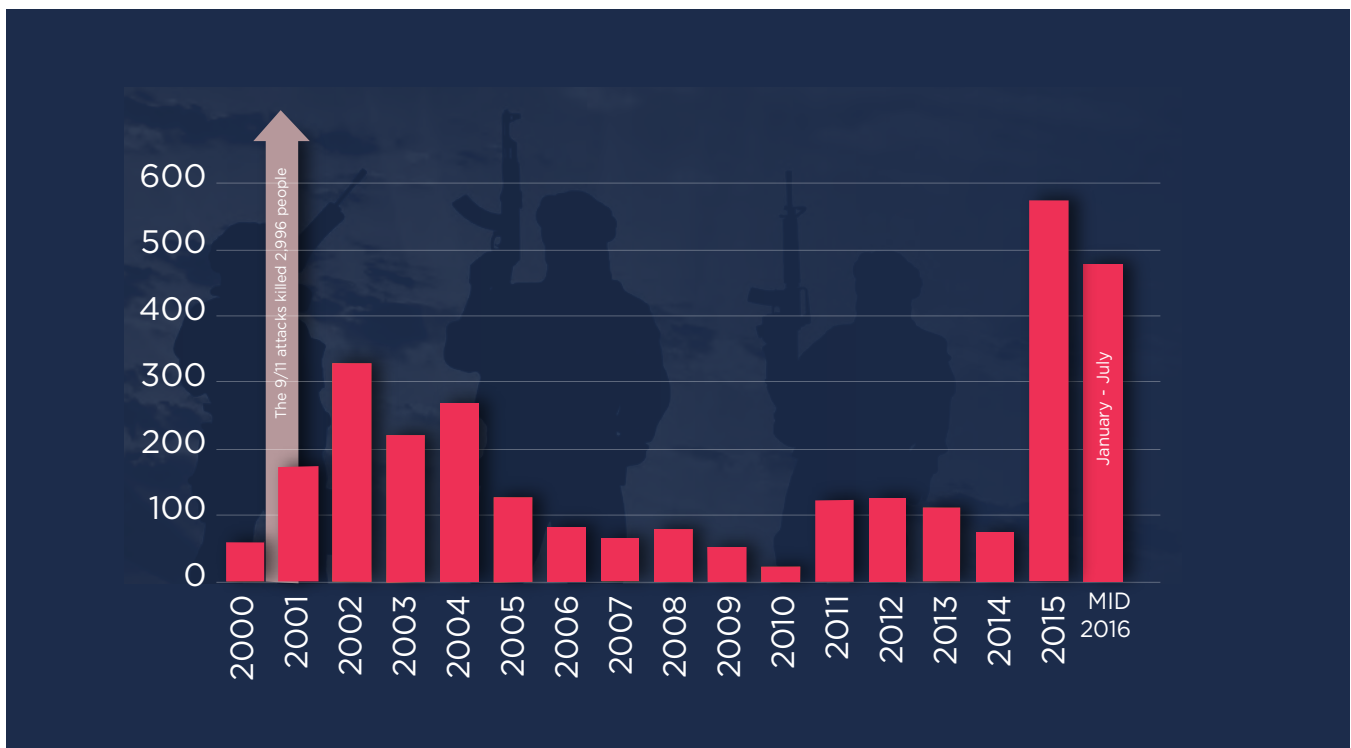
Turning to other scenarios, one potential outcome is that some foreign fighters may decide to stay put in Iraq and Syria, despite the caliphate’s defeat. Even if Mosul and Raqqa fall, ISIS will not simply disappear. Its ideology will survive. So, too, will some of its networks. And remnants of the caliphate may take advantage of Iraqi and Syrian political instability and sectarian divisions to re-establish themselves as another terrorist or insurgent organization. After all, this is precisely how ISIS itself was formed, out of the ashes of its predecessors, the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI), al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), and the Organization of Monotheism and Jihad. Before it declared itself a state in 2014, ISIS functioned particularly well as a traditional, non-state terrorist organization. It may return to its organizational roots now to re-establish itself as a leaner, flatter, and more nimble insurgency, biding its time for an eventual comeback.

Another subset of ISIS’s foreign recruits may otherwise join the ranks of other militant groups already active in the region. Al Qaeda’s most prominent franchise, Jabhat Fatah al-Sham (formerly known as Jabhat al-Nusra), controls territory in northern and western Syria, including large sections of Idlib province, and pockets in the south. Though ISIS and al Qaeda have had a violently strained relationship in the past, a [merger remains a possibility](#). Perhaps the destruction of the Islamic State, and subsequent death of its core leadership, including Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, could provide the very impetus for a joining of jihadist forces. An emboldened al Qaeda is a distinct possibility.

Still other foreign fighters may travel to neighbouring countries besides Syria and Iraq, to establish or strengthen militant offshoots further afield in Jordan, Egypt, Tunisia, Saudi Arabia, Libya, Yemen, and elsewhere. The analogy here draws from militant activity in the Sahel region of North Africa. We shouldn't forget that two years before ISIS declared the caliphate, a consortium of militants allied with al Qaeda and Ansar Dine did much the same in parts of Northern and Central Mali, ruling over and governing a territory roughly the size of France for nearly a year. Only international military intervention in 2013 – spearheaded by France with assistance from Canada and others – defeated this jihadi proto-state. But since then, surviving militants have regrouped both within and beyond Mali, spreading mayhem and death to Burkina Faso, Algeria, Niger, and Côte d'Ivoire. Sadly, six Canadians were among 30 killed in one such terrorist attack in Ouagadougou, the capital of Burkina Faso, in January 2016. As the caliphate dissolves, hardened fighters may find the prospect of spreading out beyond the contours of Syria and Iraq, and training their sites against their home soil, an attractive option. The number of people killed in terrorist attacks, which has only grown in recent years (see figures 2 and 3), is unlikely to decline any time soon.

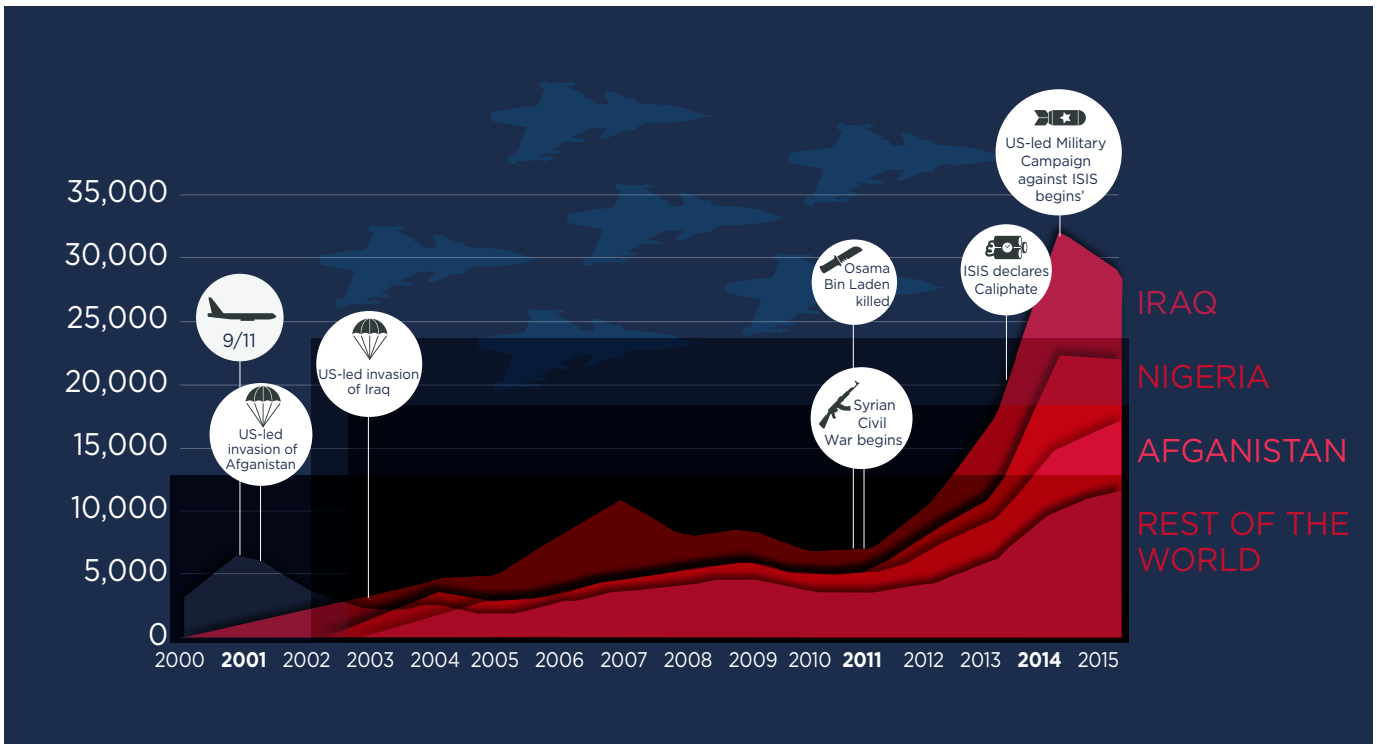
Finally, some foreign fighters will be purposefully dispatched abroad by ISIS to establish terrorist cells and networks within their home countries in order to conduct acts of international terrorism on behalf of and in ISIS's name. In this case, foreign recruits serve as ISIS's expeditionary force, its foreign legion. At least a few of ISIS's European recruits who joined the group in hopes of strengthening the caliphate – and were, towards that end, eager to live and work within it – will today, as a result of ISIS's collapse, be purposefully “weaponized” for attacks abroad. That Europe faces a migrant crisis stemming in part from the conflicts in the Middle East and North Africa has compounded the threat that ISIS may smuggle militants into Europe “[disguised as irregular migrants.](#)”

Figure 2: Deaths from Terrorism in OECD Countries, 2000–2016



Source: Adapted from Global Terrorism Index 2016

Figure 3: Worldwide Deaths from Terrorism, 2000-2015



Source: Adapted from Global Terrorism Index 2016

These recruits will be provided with specific training in encrypted communications, explosives manufacturing, counter-intelligence, and terrorism planning. Some of these groups and individuals may link up with pre-existing networks of militants already in place overseas. Some will attract and be joined by home-grown radicals, frustrated by the elimination of the caliphate – a destination they were ultimately unable to reach – and smarting for a taste of their own revenge. Others will remain below the radar until they are ready to strike. All of this is [already happening](#). The 2015 and 2016 attacks in Paris and Brussels, along with a string of other recent attacks across Europe, Turkey, and elsewhere, were orchestrated by foreign fighters purposefully sent by ISIS leaders in Syria and Iraq to conduct international acts of terrorism. More of the same should be expected.

The conflict with ISIS is entering a new and uncertain phase. As the caliphate collapses, the resulting shards may prove nettlesome to contain.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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