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Hillary Clinton's plan to stop Isis: hunt down leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi

Democratic nominee's campaign for the first time elaborates on policies behind the intelligence surge at center of her national security agenda

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A key priority of Hillary Clinton's proposed intelligence surge will be to kill or capture Islamic State leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, her campaign has told the Guardian.

During the past year, Clinton, the former secretary of state and Democratic presidential nominee, has placed bolstering the vast US intelligence apparatus at the center of her national security agenda.

Days before the first presidential debate – and after the New York area escaped without mass casualties from multiple bombings – her campaign has for the first time expanded on how her policies would work.

Since its 2015 inception, the "intelligence surge" has evolved from an idea of expanding intelligence assets directed against the Islamic State and its adjuncts to a broader initiative with a significant domestic component, aimed at uncovering and preventing attacks directed or inspired by terrorist groups.

Much of it remains undefined. Its challenge, say Clinton campaign advisers, is to match and thwart the way terrorism has transitioned from large-scale attacks directed by established terrorist groups to small-scale assaults by unconnected, self-radicalized perpetrators that are comparatively difficult to detect.

Overseas, the Clinton campaign discusses the intelligence surge in terms of accelerating a focus on the Middle East.

It seeks to expand intelligence sharing, particularly across European governments hindered by the lack of a continental intelligence infrastructure, concerning flows of jihadists, money and weapons.

And it will support an intensified hunt for Baghdadi expending "significant resources", reminiscent of Barack Obama's successful push to find and kill al-Qaida leader Osama bin Laden.

"She really would put a concerted focus on that, really going after him in particular," said Laura Rosenberger, a senior Clinton foreign policy adviser and former state department and National Security Council official.

Domestically, the "principles" of Clinton's intelligence surge, according to senior campaign advisers, indicate a preference for targeted spying over bulk data collection, expanding local law enforcement's access to intelligence and enlisting tech companies to aid in thwarting extremism.

The campaign speaks of "balancing acts" between civil liberties and security, a departure from both liberal and conservative arguments that tend to diminish conflict between the two priorities. Asked to illustrate what Clinton means by "appropriate safeguards" that need to apply to intelligence collection in the US, the campaign holds out a 2015 reform that split the civil liberties community as a model for any new constraints on intelligence authorities.

The USA Freedom Act, a compromise that constrained but did not entirely end bulk phone records collection, "strikes the right balance", Rosenberger said. "So those kinds of principles and protections offer something of a guideline for where any new proposals she put forth would be likely to fall."

Many aspects of the intelligence surge, with major implications for the privacy-security debate, remain unsettled and subject to internal discussion. Among them is a thorny issue arising out of the recent waves of domestic attacks.

Both the Orlando nightclub gunman and the accused New York-New Jersey bomber had initially come under FBI scrutiny. Both assessments ultimately stopped for lack of evidence of imminent action.

Now, Clinton and her advisers are studying whether and how law enforcement agencies ought to balance the privacy and security questions which arise: should agencies share information with each other on those preliminarily under terrorism suspicion, while attempting to avoid keeping such people under permanent investigation or alienating Muslim and other communities.

The campaign said Clinton, who discussed the issue with her counter-terrorism advisers this week, has yet to reach any conclusions.

Clinton's campaign is also examining expanding or reforming intelligence so-called fusion centers which gather, share and analyze information between federal, state and local law enforcement, which have been long criticized as both ineffective and dangerous to privacy.

On encryption, Clinton wants Silicon Valley to move beyond its post-Snowden suspicion of US intelligence – a move dealt a big setback by the FBI's abandoned fight with Apple – but she does not yet have a plan for doing so beyond consistent nonadversarial engagement.

More fundamentally, the Clinton campaign has yet to decide whether the intelligence surge includes or prioritizes adding spies, collecting more data, analyzing more data, expanding legal authorities or giving more money to the approximately $67bn intelligence apparatus. Advisers say those decisions will await the transition team should Clinton win the presidency.

The campaign did not identify the architects of the intelligence surge, but it pointed to prominent counter-terrorism advisers who have been contributing ideas.

Hillary Clinton begins a working session with national security advisers and experts at the New York Historical Society. Photograph: Brendan Smialowski/AFP/Getty Images

They include former acting CIA director Michael Morell – who has come under recent criticism for his attacks on the Senate torture report – ex-National Counterterrorism Center director Matt Olsen; Clinton's state department counter-terrorism chief Dan Benjamin; former National Security Council legal adviser Mary DeRosa; ex-acting Homeland Security secretary Rand Beers; Mike Vickers, a retired CIA operative who became Pentagon undersecretary for intelligence; and Jeremy Bash, Leon Panetta's chief of staff at the CIA and Pentagon.

"They're all involved in the conversation," Rosenberger said.

Pat Eddington, an intelligence aide to former US representative Rush Holt, said Clinton's intelligence surge sounded like a set of marginal adjustments to a US counter-terrorism apparatus in need of vast structural overhaul.

"In essence, they want to do more of the same and tweak it around edges instead of taking a step back and asking: 'What are you getting for your money and can we be doing things ultimately differently and better?,'" said Eddington, now a civil liberties and national security analyst at the Cato Institute.

Karen Greenberg, the director of Fordham Law School's Center on National Security, called an expanded emphasis on intelligence sharing in the age of small-scale terrorism inspired "a logical evolution", and said that Clinton's approach seemed to be to avoid "overreacting" to threats.

"Pushing the surveillance issue off to a future time is the elephant in the room," Greenberg said.

Malcolm Nance, a former counterterrorism intelligence author and author of "Defeating Isis", approved of the intelligence surge's broad outlines, anticipating a forthcoming phase of the US war against Isis that will be more shadowy than the daily bombardment in Iraq, Syria and Libya.

"The most critical thing to remember is in the next year Isis's caliphate will most likely collapse. They will transition from my physical state into what I call a ghost caliphate. The ideology will go underground and be spread almost exclusively through the Internet," Nance said.

Beyond the hunt for Baghdadi – who already has survived one US attempt on his life – the campaign indicated rapid transitions in terrorist patterns would inform the shape of its intelligence surge.

"The post-9/11 architecture was designed largely for identifying complex plots. We're in a different world now, where the lone wolf attackers may not even be directed by or coordinated with a terrorist group, they may simply be inspired by them. We need to adapt for that reality, while still not taking our eye off the ball of identifying potential complex attacks," Rosenberger said.