



Trump's Isis Plans: Empty Threats, False Facts And Confusion

Benjamin H. Friedman

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The big news from Donald Trump counterterrorism speech Monday is his proposal for an “ideological litmus test” to screen Muslim immigrants, which comes in lieu of his prior call to ban them outright.

The focus here is the rest of Trump's speech, which consists largely of shaky facts meant to exaggerate the terrorist threat to the United States, dubious arguments meant to blame President Obama and Hillary Clinton for that threat and self-congratulation for having taken smarter positions, which requires some invention, plus a touch of his special innuendo.

What's lacking, unsurprisingly, are new policy proposals. After all his criticism of current U.S. counterterrorism policy, Trump offers a vague rehash of it, plus a desire to be tougher on Muslim immigrants.

The speech begins with a recitation of recent terrorism meant to convey a sense of rising menace, with the Islamic State militant group (ISIS) leading the way. That doesn't require dishonesty. One can exaggerate danger by selecting scary facts and failing to put them in context.

For example, Trump doesn't say that ISIS has been losing territory, which costs it cachet and recruits. Unsurprisingly, he mentions neither the minuscule odds that an American will be killed by terrorists nor the absence of a major attack organized by ISIS in the United States.

The San Bernardino and Orlando shooters cited ISIS as an inspiration but, in its absence, might have acted in the name of Al-Qaeda or some other group.

Still, Trump can't help molding the facts to his story. First, he claims that “this summer, there has been an ISIS attack launched outside the war zones of the Middle East every 84 hours.”

That figure comes from a July 31 CNN article, which itself repeats a contractor's non-public data covering a period—June 8 until late July—when attacks were unusually frequent. The count

seems to include attacks, like the Orlando massacre, where the attacker had solely ideological links to ISIS.

Using that broad definition and public lists of ISIS attacks for the period from June 8 until Trump spoke, attacks have come every 136 hours. Counting Orlando, the United States has gone 1,560 hours without an ISIS attack.

Second, Trump contends that ISIS is “fully operational in 18 countries with aspiring branches in six more.” Trump doesn’t mention that he is directly quoting an NBC newsreport on a leaked White House briefing from the National Counterterrorism Center.

The story doesn’t define “fully operational,” but it can’t mean much. To get 18 nations, one has to count just about every entity that has endorsed ISIS, though the main outfit in Syria only slightly controls a few of them. Mostly they’re splinter groups that embraced ISIS’s brand once it eclipsed Al-Qaeda’s.

Third, Trump argues that a new congressional report shows that “the administration has downplayed the growth of ISIS, with 40 percent of analysts saying they had experienced efforts to manipulate their findings.”

As Politico notes, the report was about analysts at Central Command, not all U.S. intelligence analysts, as Trump implies. Nor do we know that the pressure came from higher administration officials, rather than CENTCOM leaders, or that their take was entirely misguided, given ISIS’s recent decline.

Trump also cites one seven-year-old murder to suggest honor killings are a growing problem in the United States. He exaggerates the number of U.S. immigrants annually arriving from the Middle East (it’s 70,000, not 100,000). He misquotes President Obama to make him seem un-American.

The speech next fixes the blame for ISIS’s rise on the Obama administration, especially Hillary Clinton. To show his superior judgment, Trump repeats his widely discredited claim that he opposed Iraq War “from the beginning.”

As evidence, he quotes himself questioning the invasion’s timing in early 2003 and an August 2003 interview where he mocked the goal of democratizing Iraq and suggested that the war accomplished nothing.

Trump’s pretension that these quotes show that he initially opposed the war is strangely desperate. What’s more relevant is his basis for turning on the war—the impossibility of making Iraq into a nice, stable place.

That stance and Trump’s opposition to “nation-building and regime change” contradict the speech’s criticism of Obama’s Iraq policy. Trump essentially blames the administration for giving up on nation-building there:

The failure to establish a new Status of Forces Agreement in Iraq, and the election-driven timetable for withdrawal, surrendered our gains in that country and led directly to the rise of ISIS.

That echoes the surge mythology, which sees the decline of violence as evidence that U.S. forces created a durable settlement between warring Iraqi factions—successful nation-building—rather than a temporary respite from a fight that was always likely to reignite once U.S. policing and bribes to sheikhs ceased.

There's a lot to say against that myth, but the point here is that it's an odd stance for Trump. A true critic of nation-building in Iraq would argue that once U.S. forces overthrew the government, it became nearly impossible, at least at reasonable cost, to rebuild a stable government, not that the effort failed because U.S. forces left too hastily.

Trump also brags that he would have prevented ISIS's rise by forcefully seizing Iraq's oil facilities. Left unexplained is how he can be against the invasion and for plundering Iraq's oil or how you permanently occupy oil-producing areas without some nation-building around them.

Trump is on more solid ground in criticizing the administration's push for regime change in Libya and Syria. Qaddafi's overthrow predictably produced political chaos, which allowed an ISIS affiliate to operate. Still, it's possible that the rebels would have survived without U.S. intervention and that ISIS might have arrived without U.S. help.

Likewise, regime change efforts in Syria threaten to help ISIS. Assad's forces are its main opponent. On the other hand, Syria's civil war and ISIS's participation in it preceded U.S. intervention.

And rhetoric notwithstanding, U.S. efforts have done little to unseat Assad, though Clintonsays she'll change that. In other words, it's sensible to criticize Obama's Syria policy, but not to blame his administration for Syria's collapse, as Trump does.

Trump's speech reveals little about how he'd change U.S. counterterrorism policy, beyond immigration. He'd continue the drone wars, keep the Guantánamo Bay prison open, use financial and cyber tools to disrupt terrorists, convene an international conference to coordinate efforts, ask a blue-ribbon commission to study radical Islam, work with NATO and Russia against ISIS, and avoid nation-building.

Nothing is new there, except maybe the effort made to engage Russia and the hope that another commission or summit will bring counterterrorism breakthroughs.

Trump claims to have something more up his sleeve. But great generals like MacArthur and Patton taught him not to “telegraph his plans,” so it's secret, we're told.

Let's pretend that's true. Maybe Trump is just keeping ISIS on its heels by being for and against nation-building in Iraq in the same speech.

But Trump isn't campaigning for a fourth star. Presidents have to suffer democracy, which entails debate about policy. In any case, Trump is in no danger of offering plans specific enough to help his enemies, let alone analysts.

Benjamin H. Friedman is a research fellow in defense and homeland security studies at the Cato Institute.