



# Why We Shouldn't Be Scared of ISIS: Threat Inflation and Our Next Dumb War

[Nick Gillespie](#)

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Before we commit to a third Iraq War, can we at least get real about what we're actually up against?

More than a dozen years after the horrors of 9/11, we find ourselves in a *Groundhog Day*-style nightmare. We wake up yet again to find ourselves terrified of a radical Islamist group that shows no compunction about barbarically killing American civilians and gets off on issuing apocalyptic warnings about a coming age of *Allah uber Alles*. These days, ISIS is wired; al Qaeda is tired; and Saddam Hussein and Qaddafi expired.

"God willing," [proclaims an ISIS spokesman](#), "we will raise the flag of Allah in the White House." Administration officials are only too happy [to play along as well](#). ISIS, explains Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Brett McGurk, "is worse than al Qaeda," while a deputy secretary of defense warns that ISIS has proclaimed, "We're coming for you, Barack Obama."

And so we're being gulled into a new-and-improved crusade to fix a Middle East still utterly destabilized in large part due to our still-smoldering failure to reshape desert sand into a form more to our desires. As we prep for the next "smart war" engineered by Obama (he's against "dumb wars," remember, and lives by the credo "don't do stupid shit"), it's worth acknowledging that the signature characteristic of America's 21st-century war on terrorism and foreign policy has been massive threat inflation at every level. Until we fully grok that terrorism—whether state-sponsored or stateless—thrives on the overreaction of its targets *and* that we have overreacted so far at virtually every turn, we have no hope of enacting real solutions.

Domestically, we are finally beginning to understand that threat inflation has produced results like the petty, ineffective, and costly indignities that we experience each and every time we board an airplane. Even brass-balled, pro-security Republicans who are otherwise quick to redact the Constitution in the name of national security understand that the Transportation Security Administration exemplifies wasted time and money. Every time you raise your hands in the air and get irradiated in the name of national security, the terrorists have won another small victory.

On the 10th anniversary of the TSA's creation, Reps. Paul Broun (R-Ga.) and John Mica (R-Fla.) released a report that concluded (in Broun's words), "[Americans have spent nearly \\$60 billion, and they are no safer today than they were before 9/11.](#)" The simple act of reinforcing cockpit doors has guaranteed that an American airliner will not be hijacked and used as a missile again. The TSA, by contrast, exemplifies "security theater," or visible actions to make people feel comfortable while doing nothing to actually increase safety.

The sheen has also mostly worn off The Patriot Act, [that awful, Constitution-shredding piece of legislation](#) that, until the passage of Obamacare, held the record for being the least-read law that was rubber-stamped by a pliant Congress (at least our representatives debated The Affordable Care Act). Ongoing revelations about massive bipartisan government abuses of power and [the general ineffectiveness](#) of the Patriot Act have driven home the reality that government will use whatever powers it has to do pretty much whatever it can get away with.

But when it comes to foreign threats in foreign lands, we're still as gullible as the tourists Mark Twain chronicled in *Innocents Abroad*. As Ohio State University political scientist John Mueller [has written](#), at least since 9/11, our elected officials and policymakers have been quick to designate any number of states (Iraq, Iran, North Korea, for starters) and terrorist groups (the Taliban, al Qaeda, and now ISIS) as "existential threats" to the United States and our way of life. This is, to say the least, preposterous. Unlike, say, the old Soviet Union, which controlled a vast nuclear arsenal capable of blowing up the planet and a large number of vassal states, none of these enemies has the military or economic might to challenge the United States. "As a misguided Turkish proverb holds," explains Mueller, "If your enemy be an ant, imagine him to be an elephant."

The original sin of post-9/11 foreign policy stems from the intertwined and equally mistaken ideas that al Qaeda was a potent, ongoing "existential" threat to America and that the United States had a responsibility to "nation build" in the Islamic world rather than avenge monstrous acts against its citizens. As Mueller and Mark G. Stewart note in their 2012 survey of "Terrorism and Counter-Terrorism Since 9/11" ([PDF](#)), the 9/11 attacks were not the start of a new era of mass terroristic violence in the West. "Terrorists are not really all that capable a bunch, terrorism tends to be a counterproductive exercise, and 9/11 is increasingly standing out as an aberration, not a harbinger," they write in their survey of 50 Islamist terrorist acts since 2001.

The United States had every right and reason to destroy al Qaeda's capabilities and hunt down its leadership (which it eventually did do, after a long detour into Iraq). But apart from hawks who are always on the hunt for the next military engagement, who among us will argue that America's adventures in Afghanistan and Iraq have left those places and neighboring areas more stable?

As with al Qaeda back in the day, our fears of ISIS suffer from massive threat inflation at every possible level. [At the start of the summer](#), the number of ISIS fighters in Iraq was somewhere in the neighborhood of 7,000 to 10,000; those numbers have doubtless grown but they still face off against more than a quarter of a million Iraqi troops and somewhere between 80,000 and 240,000 Peshmerga soldiers. Even the much-maligned Free Syrian Army numbers 70,000 to 90,000. And,

it's worth pointing out, [ISIS is facing intense opposition](#) (and some cooperation) from other jihadist groups, including and especially al Qaeda.

If the Iraqi armed forces are in fact incapable of fighting successfully against ISIS after years of training and resources given them by the United States, there is in fact little we will be able to do to change things in Iraq (Obama has already ruled out “boots on the ground,” and it's unlikely he will change course between now and leaving office). At the same time, we're now in a position where we are de facto allies with at least two of our longtime enemies in the immediate vicinity: Iran and Bashar al-Assad in Syria, whose government Barack Obama was set to attack just a year ago. Indeed, the widely expected push to start bombing targets in Syria can only help Assad, who earlier this year was supposedly close to total defeat. The United States and other Western countries being hit up to form the next multinational coalition are now prepping their citizens to help keep Assad in power for the foreseeable future.

Add to this uncomfortable turn of events the fact that American arms given to Syrian opposition forces [are now being used](#) by ISIS against Iraqi (and eventually, one presumes, American) forces. If that is not enough to underscore shifting political alliances worthy of Orwell's *1984*, now comes news that Steven Sotloff, the American journalist just beheaded by ISIS, [was sold to the group](#) by “moderate Syrian rebels” of precisely the sort we were helping to take down Assad ([the White House disputes this](#)).

Given all this, it's easy to sympathize with why Barack Obama copped to not having a strategy on what to do in the Middle East. But given his past record—tripling troop strength in Afghanistan with [nothing to show for it](#), bombing Libya with [nothing to show for it](#), “resetting” relations with Russia with nothing to show for it—there's no reason to be hopeful that the president will finally come up with a workable plan. Especially if early reports that he's pursuing a three-year strategy that will, [according to \*The New York Times\*](#), outlast his second term, thus saddling the next president with an inherited war of choice.

At the very least, it's worth holding the president and his planners accountable for clarifying whether ISIS in fact poses any sort of threat to the United States homeland and narrowly defined American interests, the two things on which foreign policy and military action should be built. Rep. Ed Royce (R-Calif.), the House Foreign Affairs Committee chairman, has stated flatly that “We don't have any information about credible planning for an attack” by ISIS, [an assessment](#) that has been corroborated by both the FBI and the Department of Homeland Security.

A wise foreign policy—or at least one that doesn't constantly make the world worse off—would start by countering threat inflation here and abroad with a heavy dose of reality.