



Why the ISIS Threat is Totally Overblown

John Mueller
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One of the most remarkable phenomena of the last year is the way ISIS, the vicious insurgent group in Iraq and Syria, has captured the imagination of the public in Western countries. And as usual, officials and the media have fallen over themselves to respond with urgency.

Americans had remained substantially unmoved by even worse human catastrophes in the past, such as genocide in Cambodia in the 1970s and in Rwanda in 1994, as well as sustained criminal predation in eastern Congo in the years after 1997. But following a set of web-cast beheadings of Americans in the late summer and fall of 2014, some 60 to 70 percent of the American public now says ISIS presents a major security threat to the United States. Only 17 percent had advocated sending American ground troops to fight ISIS after it surprisingly routed American-trained (and spectacularly ill-led) Iraqi forces in Mosul, Iraq, in June 2014. However, the beheadings abruptly boosted that support to over 40 percent. For a while in February 2015, after the death of an American captive, Kayla Mueller, support spiked even higher — to upwards of 60 percent. A similar phenomenon has taken place in Europe. In the Czech Republic, for example, the public has come to view Islamist terrorism to be the country's top security threat, even though it has never experienced a single such episode.

Outrage at the tactics of ISIS is certainly justified. But fears that it presents a worldwide security threat are not. Its numbers are small, and it has differentiated itself from al Qaeda in that it does not seek primarily to target the “far enemy,” preferring instead to carve out a state in the Middle East for itself, mostly killing fellow Muslims who stand in its way. In the process, it has alienated virtually all outside support and, by holding territory, presents an obvious and clear target to military opponents.

A year ago, the main fear was that foreign militants who had gone to fight with ISIS would be trained and then sent back to do damage in their own countries. However, there has been scarcely any of that. In part, this is because, as Daniel Byman and Jeremy Shapiro have detailed in a [Brookings Institution report](#), foreign fighters tend to be killed early (they are common picks for suicide missions); often become disillusioned, especially by in-fighting in the ranks; and do not receive much in the way of useful training for terrorist exercises back home. It might also be added that ISIS videos exultantly show foreign fighters burning their passports to demonstrate their terminal commitment to the cause — hardly a good idea if they want to return. In May 2015, an audio message apparently from the leader of ISIS exhorted Muslims either to join the ISIS ranks in the Middle East or to fight at home “wherever that may be.” There was nothing about training people to return home to wreak havoc.

More recently, the focus of fear has shifted from potential returnees to potential homegrown terrorists who might be inspired by ISIS's propaganda or example. However, ISIS could continue to be an inspiration even if it was weakened or destroyed. And, as terrorism specialist Max Abrahms notes, "lone wolves have carried out just two of the 1,900 most deadly terrorist incidents over the last four decades."

There has also been a trendy concern about the way ISIS uses social media. However, as Byman and Shapiro and others have pointed out, the foolish willingness of would-be terrorists to spill their aspirations and their often childish fantasies on social media has been, on balance, much to the advantage of the police seeking to track them. However, ISIS's savvy use of social media and its brutality have had a major impact on two important American groups: public officials and the media. Sen. Dianne Feinstein has insisted, "The threat ISIS poses cannot be overstated" — effectively proclaiming hyperbole on the subject to be impossible, as columnist Dan Froomkin observes. Equally inspired, Sen. Jim Inhofe, born before World War II, has extravagantly claimed that "we're in the most dangerous position we've ever been in" and that ISIS is "rapidly developing a method of blowing up a major U.S. city." And on Michael Smerconish's CNN program last weekend, former Homeland Security chief Tom Ridge issued the evidence-free suggestion that the recent tragic killings in Chattanooga followed a "directive" from ISIS.

The media have generally been more careful and responsible about such extrapolations, and sometimes articles appear noting that some American and foreign intelligence officials think that "the actual danger posed by ISIS has been distorted in hours of television punditry and alarmist statements by politicians." But the media remain canny about weaving audience-grabbing references about the arrestingly diabolical ISIS into any story about terrorism. And there is the revealing slip of the editors at *The Daily Beast*, which this summer published a thoughtful article entitled, "How ISIS's 'Attack America' Plan Is Working." The teaser for the article left out the word "how," inadvertently revealing precisely how ISIS has caused such unjustified alarm in this country.

All in all, we see a level of threat perception which both authorities and the media contribute heavily to. However, this level is not remotely related to ISIS' actual capabilities to be a security threat to western countries. The atrocities they commit create fear and attract attention. But by and large the fact that they can ravage areas far away from us does not mean they should be considered a grave threat to our societies.

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