



Seeing around the corner is key to fighting terrorist threat

Matt A. Mayer

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Too often, we find ourselves immersed in today's fight, thereby preventing ourselves from spending resources thinking about tomorrow. That oversight can have disastrous consequences and leave us wholly unprepared to meet new threats. History provides us with some guidance on seeing around the corner.

From 1978 to 1991, several events in the Islamic world laid the foundation for the rise of al Qaeda. When the Soviets withdrew from Afghanistan, they left behind a power vacuum in which the Taliban established themselves. Later, they would play [host](https://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/terror/R41070.pdf) to Osama bin Laden and al Qaeda. In 1990, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, following the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, allowed US soldiers onto its territory and rejected bin Laden's offer to lead the fight against Iraq. This led to [outrage](http://www.theguardian.com/world/2008/jul/13/history.alqaida) from bin Laden and his followers at the presence of US troops in the Middle East. In subsequent years, al Qaeda would begin attacking the West, starting with the 1992 bombing of a Yemeni hotel housing US soldiers en route to Somalia.



(http://www.aei.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/RTX1WPTT_al_nusra-e1454610143215.jpg)

Al Qaeda-linked Nusra Front fighters carry weapons on the back of pick-up trucks during the release of Lebanese soldiers and policemen in Lebanon, December 1, 2015. REUTERS/Stringer.

America did not forcefully respond to that or five other al Qaeda attacks, until the September 11, 2001, attack put America at war.

From 2001 to today, several events have given rise to our new enemy, Daesh. From 2001–2011, we fought the Taliban in Afghanistan, forcing some al Qaeda fighters to [make their way](http://csis.org/files/publication/110614_Kirdar_AlQaedalraq_Web.pdf) (http://csis.org/files/publication/110614_Kirdar_AlQaedalraq_Web.pdf) to Iraq, where we had just defeated Saddam's regime. The result, an al Qaeda-led insurgency, was largely defeated with the help of [Sunnis](http://www.brookings.edu/research/opinions/2011/09/01-al-qaeda-history-byman) (<http://www.brookings.edu/research/opinions/2011/09/01-al-qaeda-history-byman>). Our withdrawal from Iraq then created another vacuum that remnants of the insurgency, now known as Daesh, filled. In parallel, the Syrian Civil War, beginning in 2011, brought instability in the Middle East to new heights, allowing Daesh to take control of large amounts of land, resources, and people, and spread their operations to Africa and Asia.

With the Daesh-planned and inspired attacks in Paris and San Bernardino, it is clear we've entered the second wave in our fight against radical jihadists. And it remains to be seen how we will defeat Daesh and restore some level of stability to the Middle East.

But before we embark on a military campaign, thought needs to be given on what will occur *after* we defeat or subdue Daesh, as it should influence *how* we respond militarily to this current threat. If we've learned anything from the last

35 years, it is that there is a critical mass of people in the Middle East who support jihad and terrorist activities against the West. Yesterday's al Qaeda that became today's Daesh *will become tomorrow's unnamed lightning rod for radical jihadists*. This whack-a-mole existence is no way to secure the future.

As my colleagues at The Institute for the Study of War (ISW) and AEI's Critical Threats Project (CTP) [note](http://www.criticalthreats.org/al-qaeda/isis-and-al-qaeda-existential-threats-january-21-2016) (<http://www.criticalthreats.org/al-qaeda/isis-and-al-qaeda-existential-threats-january-21-2016>), al Qaeda's Syrian branch Jabhat al Nusra (JN) remains one of the most significant long-term threats to the security and values of American and European citizens, especially after we defeat or subdue Daesh. Though they are laying low today, they are fast becoming tomorrow's enemy. But wouldn't it be easier if we addressed them today?

As we move against Daesh, we must ensure that our actions don't create space for new threats like JN to strengthen, and we must ensure that we remain attentive to other regions of the world where terrorist threats continue to develop: Nigeria, the Maghreb, Sinai, Yemen, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Afghanistan, Indonesia, and others.

There are several actions we can take now to minimize the known unknowns of tomorrow:

- Cull key lessons from our policies over the last fifteen years and ensure those lessons guide our next steps;
- Charge planners with the task of thinking critically about what could happen after Daesh has been taken out, and identify preemptive actions we can take to stay ahead of the next threat; and
- Prepare the American people for the harsh realities we face from terrorist groups.

President George W. Bush was right to warn us that this fight was going to be a long and difficult one. After fifteen years, history tells us we should get smarter on how we think about and fight it. It is time we invest in seeing what might be around the corner.

This article was found online at:

<http://www.aei.org/publication/seeing-around-the-corner-is-key-to-fighting-terrorist-threat/>