



# SMALL WARS

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## JOURNAL

## ISIS After Trump

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### ISIS After Trump

Joel Day

Where will ISIS be after Donald J. Trump? The President has forcefully asserted that he will destroy not only ISIS, but also vowed to “exterminate” all of Islamic extremism in his [inaugural speech](#). At the end of his first week in office, President Trump directed the Joint Chiefs of Staff to return to him within a month with a detailed plan to combat the Islamic State in the Levant (ISIS). Secretary Mattis has returned with a preliminary plan and indicators point to increased [boots on the ground in Syria](#) and Iraq, while simultaneously dismissing [diplomatic](#) and [multilateral](#) approaches to countering terror. This military-only strategy belies a basic, fundamental misunderstanding of how terrorism works and could result in rapid expansion of ISIS’ footprint throughout the world, the weakening of our allies, and the erosion of American global power. Taken together, this is why [ISIS was probably rooting for Trump to win](#).

### Trump’s Misunderstanding of ISIS

Trump’s belief that he can [bomb](#) his way into beating ISIS indicates a misunderstanding of how terrorism works. While the brutality of ISIS elicits rage and the desire for vengeance, we must remember that one of the goal of terrorism is not necessarily to vanquish the enemy, but to communicate and provoke.

[Terrorism is a strategy](#) designed to provoke vast over-reactions that are followed with a war of attrition. The United States should thus take seriously the notion that the beheadings, crucifixions, and other such provocations are intended provoke the United States into over-committing militarily while neglecting to see the next phase of terror on the horizon.

If terrorism is about communication, provocation, and attrition, then three central questions should emerge to guide Trump’s ISIS plan: What is ISIS trying to communicate? What is ISIS trying to provoke? How is ISIS planning a war of attrition?

First, ISIS is trying to communicate, not simply to the U.S., but to their followers around the world: ISIS is a global brand that communicates to franchises. The attacks in Brussels and Paris indicate that ISIS central has the capability of sending bomb-makers and tactical experts from the Levant around the world. Committing acts abroad communicates to sympathizers, from Mali to Malaysia, that ISIS is strong enough to succeed anywhere. And this communication is clearly getting through to [ISIS affiliates](#) around the world. Local terrorists using filmed executions, beheadings, and crucifixions in Algeria, Egypt, Tunisia, and the Caucasus suggests an alarming copycat phenomenon. ISIS’s communication is not just about Syria and Iraq, or even maintaining their fledgling state, but rather about transforming into a hydra network of mini-states or what they call [wilayats](#). Missing this communication means misunderstanding how to engage ISIS and proceeding without a plan to deal with ISIS allies around the globe.

Second, ISIS is trying to provoke a World War. Even as ISIS territory shrinks, their ambition grows. If the Caliphate in the Levant becomes untenable, ISIS has already indicated that **other locations are a plan B**, and recently wrote that they must **postpone the apocalyptic fight** they've been preparing for in the Levant. The World War they want to cause is not about their little patch of sand in the Middle East – their war is an apocalyptic one, of all Muslims versus everyone else. Their goal is to create a network of affiliates throughout the Muslim world to actively create this global war. Therefore, we don't need one plan to confront ISIS – we need a plan for each of the dozens of countries they operate in. They are a 50-headed hydra that must be dealt with by working with allies like NATO, the AU, ECOSOC, and bilaterally with vulnerable allies like Nigeria, the Philippines, Malaysia, Israel, Egypt, India,

Finally, ISIS trying to engage in a war of attrition by over-extending the U.S. military in Syria and Iraq. The trick is that ISIS no longer really needs Syria and Iraq since they have succeeded at planting mini-caliphates throughout the world as a long-term strategy. If the U.S. over-extends in Iraq and Syria by putting boots on the ground, it will be far costlier to change tactics to respond to the larger threat later. Failing to understand that ISIS is a global terror network, will lead the President down a perilous road of attrition in the Levant while missing the next wave of terrorism on the horizon.

### **Trump's ISIS Agenda**

Without responding to the heart of the ISIS problem, Trump assumes that overt force can beat the organization. This plays into the provocation/communication/attrition goals of ISIS. Force alone cannot “exterminate” radical Islam, much less the organization of ISIS. However, the actions currently pursued by the administration will transform and strengthen ISIS.

*Increase of bombing and kinetic engagement.* The ISIS executive order was joined by **another**, investing in short term procurements of new weapons, vehicles, airplanes, and other equipment as a buildup of capability. Coupled together with his previous statements on **using nuclear weapons** against the group, this build-up and directive to the Joint Chiefs shows us that Trump is principally interested in military engagement. Whether this means boots on the ground or increases in air strikes, the problem remains ISIS has evolved far beyond theater containment.

*Decapitation strategy.* The rise of the ISIS network presents a serious challenge to the operating assumption in Washington that taking out high value targets and leadership does enough damage to cells to “decimate” them and hold them at bay. Such a view of global terrorism has led the U.S. to employ tactics of airstrikes and isolated offensives, a global game of Whack-A-Mole. The result of such a strategy unfortunately is more violence against civilians. **Research shows** that fractures within an organization from leadership take-outs result in less discipline and more indiscriminate killing as organization becomes less directed. Furthermore, taking out top cells in the Levant completely ignores the larger cancer spreading throughout the world that must be simultaneously addressed.

*Shut Down “CVE” and Global Engagement Center.* One of the leading recent initiatives in the federal government is known as Combatting Violent Extremism, or CVE. This interdisciplinary project links together rhetoric, psychology, social work, politics, and religion, to prevent and intervene against community based extremism. The Department of State has intensively recruited top talent to staff a “**Global Engagement Center**” to “lead the coordination, integration, and synchronization of Government-wide communications activities directed at foreign audiences abroad to counter the messaging and diminish the influence of international terrorist organizations.” Meanwhile the **Department of Homeland Security** has invested into cities and organizations across the U.S. with the same mission here at home. The challenge for initiative such as these remains the targeting of Muslims and image of the programs as thinly veiled intelligence gathering. Instead of seeking to build trust and deepen these important

initiatives, the Trump Administration is doubling down on the bad image by **renaming the programs** “Combating Violent Islamic Radicalism” and only funding programs aimed directly at Islam. Not only does this take focus away from **other dangerous extremist movements**, but it confirms the ISIS/AQ narrative that the U.S. is engaged in a Clash of Civilizations against all of Islam. This will result in unbridled resentment that breeds lone-wolves and foreign fighters joining the radical cause.

*Isolating Allies.* The dozens of groups outside of the Levant that have endorsed ISIS have spent years, and some decades, amassing the tools needed to take on local police and armies. One of the reasons ISIS-central grew so quickly was open access to a vast array of weapons, at times showing more firepower than the U.S.-supplied Iraqi army. Similarly, ISIS allies exist in environments with cadres of weapons from conflicts past. The key question is whether U.S. allies can withstand the military capacity of local ISIS allies as the organizations capture excess armaments and begin to follow the ISIS playbook of taking land, targeting religious and soft targets. The dramatic increases in violence in areas like the **Philippines** and **Turkey** may be the future norm around the world. Traditionally, these countries have turned to the United States for leadership and sponsorship, but the Trump administration seems to be rethinking the U.S.’s role and **moral leadership** throughout the world. When traditional allies like the Ukraine cannot count on U.S. support against aggression, how can they withstand **local ISIS branches** or **help coordinate** the attack on ISIS central?

*Defunding UN.* The global network of ISIS allies seems to have followed a similar pattern as their comrades in the Levant. In Africa, groups in Somalia, Sudan, Nigeria, Mali, Libya, and Egypt exist in gray areas of governance—the archipelagos across Africa where, due to terrain, revolution, and sectarian or tribal enclaves, state institutions don’t provide survival strategies to locals. ISIS and its allies exist as an alternative to the state, which makes the “caliphate narrative” more believable. The solution to such a problem is to build state-centered capabilities that provide for the needs and desires of locals. For years, the main source of such **governance capacity has come from the United Nations**. The U.N.’s programs to vulnerable populations bridge the gap in those gray-zones of governance. Within his first few days in office, **Donald Trump has stopped paying U.N. dues** and pulled the U.S. from supporting critical missions that **prevent terrorism**.

*Muslim Ban.* The War on Terror cannot be won if our leaders build walls keeping out the allies we need to combat violent extremism. Refugees from the Middle East are valuable assets that defy ISIS propaganda, show the world the cruelty of hate and extremism, and help the U.S. build resilience to radicalism here at home. President Trump’s **new order to ban refugees** actually confirms ISIS’ **recruitment narrative** that the U.S. is, at best, uninterested in the suffering of Muslims, and at worst, is directly complicit in their victimization. In the name of security, the new policy makes us far more vulnerable to global terrorism. Trump’s policy confirms the narrative that ISIS itself promotes: that America is against Muslims, confirming the group victimization narrative that motivates individuals joining terror groups. Targeting Muslim regions, shutting off aid to those fleeing terror and war, gives groups like ISIS and Al Qaeda exactly the narrative they seek. What could play into ISIS’ recruitment strategy more than the U.S. turning its back to the most desperate people on Earth?

### **Trump’s Impact on ISIS**

By pursuing these strategies without consideration of ISIS’ underlying strategy, the terror group with strengthen in three ways:

*Trump’s Actions will Globalize the ISIS Brand.* The tools that proved key to the spread of ISIS’s brand in the Levant await replication and refining in other theaters. The tighter the core is squeezed, the more likely training, fighters, money, and recruits will be diverted to the dozens of ISIS allies around the globe.

For example, the group formerly known as Jund al Khilafah has begun to crucify “cross worshipers,” creating GoPro style footage of the executions. The toolkit of social media and slick video is not isolated to ISIS central, but offers international allies the ability to look and sound like ISIS at the click of a button. The images that ISIS has become known for beheadings, crucifixions, and immolations, have not been contained to the Levant and will most likely continue to spread to the periphery as a statement of ISIS’ expansion. Local terror leaders will likely announce their alignment with ISIS and new focus on international terrorism by replicating these brutal attacks. A devastating example of this shift in violence recently occurred in Yemen, where the local ISIS affiliate **kidnapped, tortured and crucified** a Christian Priest on Good Friday.

The destruction of the Levant – from Raqqa to Mosul will give ISIS the exact content they want to promote their movement as communicating the historic, global victimization of Muslims. Content like pictures, videos, and social media content of U.S. troops in the Caliphate will give ISIS the recruitment tools they have been lacking up until this point. Trump’s strategy has no response to the vast **network of media** that ISIS has developed, and without a plan to take that out first, the images of brute force of airstrikes on largely civilian areas will go viral. Major impact will be the transformation from a quasi-state focused on fighting in the Caliphate into a network of disparate recruiters with the mission of fighting for the *idea* of the former caliphate, but now literally throughout the entire globe.

*Second, a military bombardment, without a political and diplomatic stopgap, will cause ISIS to spread through the international system like a cancer.* By pushing the ISIS core fighters and strategists out of the Levant, but without diplomatic coordination with NATO and the UN, they will slip across borders without a trace. It is possible that the Trump military campaign against the core of ISIS in the Levant will expand the map in which the groups operates.

The overnight exodus of thousands of seasoned fighters will create a new phase in the history of terrorism. If Al Qaeda was first generation of Islamic terror, and ISIS the second, then the actions of Trump set the stage for the next generation. This means that ISIS won’t be destroyed, but displaced. Mid-level elites will connect and compete for leadership in over 50 organizations in dozens of countries. Instead of containment strategies, like shutting off the spigot of foreign fighters, the Trump agenda will expand the footprint. These experienced fighters come with battle-ready knowledge, with skills ranging from IEDs to Photoshop that will then be diffused at lightning pace to proto-ISIS allies waiting in the wings. As **recent analysis** has indicated, alliances with peripheral terror organizations become especially deadly as wisdom and resources flow from the central node outwards. Trump’s one dimensional focus on **“bombing the hell”** out of the Levant will expedite this deadly diffusion.

This next wave of terror is not going to be regionally contained, which presents a serious challenge for preventing foreign fighters looking to travel, but face increasing hurdles going to the Levant. The ISIS network of affiliates expands the map of countries of concern beyond the Iraq and Syria. Particularly worrisome is the reality that as foreign fighters find it increasingly difficult to link up with ISIS in the Levant (as they are being bombed into submission), other organizational options are now very much on the table. Getting to the ISIS outpost in the Philippines or West Africa is not a difficult task, especially if officials in the U.S. are looking only towards people coming from **seven countries**. These allies present foreign fighters with a viable “plan-B,” one with far less risk, and potentially higher reward.

*Third, the globalization ISIS’s brand will permanently undermine global order.* Where al Qaeda centered on core personalities and confidants of Osama bin Laden, ISIS allies are preexisting, standalone organizations that have grown up fighting local governments, police, and armies. This organizational history means that the ISIS network has latent talents and capacities that, once motivated by the ISIS narrative and material resources, has the potential to disrupt the world in a way that al Qaeda could not. In

the Philippines, for instance, three domestic terrorist organizations—Katibat Ansar al Sharia, Katibat Marakah al Ansar, and Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG)—have pledged loyalty to ISIS. These three groups have existed for years, and came to ISIS with local knowledge, capital, and capabilities. Their pledge to ISIS may seem merely symbolic, but the concern remains that these local organizations will evolve into deadlier versions of themselves, operating in areas of critical global security interest.

Economically, the ISIS network is knocking on the doorstep of major trading hubs and financial centers. Attacks in Moscow, Beijing, Lagos, Tel Aviv, and Manila are no longer aspirational—they are within reach of the network that currently exists. There is the real potential that a global activation of the network could do permanent damage to natural resources, trade routes, travel centers, energy facilities, or symbols of global finance. On a diplomatic level, many of the countries home to ISIS cells are allies of the U.S., often housing forward operating bases and embassies.

Allies will continually face challenges from ISIS inspired Islamist groups seeking to topple domestic regimes. Worldwide, the next phase of terrorism will produce a drift of previously local, isolated terror groups with domestic aims (toppling regime, implementing sharia, etc.) beginning to emulate the model provided by ISIS such as taking land, and filming beheadings and crucifixions. Unfortunately, groups with more international connections, such as these, are likely to exist longer than isolated terror organizations. As such, the U.S. cannot simply bomb ISIS to oblivion since their global allies have already ensured **longevity far after the core in the Levant has been demolished.**

The networked expansion of ISIS will produce heightened violence against moderate regimes and position the local politics of allies such as Yemen and Saudi as a dichotomous choice between ISIS and the U.S. The strife will not be met with appropriate response from the global community. Cutting of UN funds and lack of willingness to lead internationally will leave U.S. without influence or allies in the most vulnerable places. At best, this results in a double-down on Whack-a-Mole approach. At worst, we will see the toppling of friendly regimes and the receding of democratic values the world, increased attacks against soft-western targets, and China and Russia stepping in to provide order though social, political and military foreign direct investment. The global war on terror is more global than ever and yet Mr. Trump's strategy provides very few tools to respond to this threat.

### **A Better Way Forward**

Instead of trying to “exterminate” ISIS, a better strategic position would be a global policing exercise. Such a strategy would increasingly focus on empowering local allies with military aid, technical support, and intelligence, so that allies from Malaysia to Mali can take on their ISIS franchises. Secretary Mattis and the DOD, along with State and the CIA should develop and train allies with locally specific strategies that are based on the particularities on the ground. Denying ISIS a foothold in periphery areas, while containing them within the Levant, will require reinvestment in human intelligence and local security service capacity-building. Defeating these groups should be about presenting local audiences with alternatives to the ISIS brand, which ultimately means building effective economic, social, and governance institutions.

To do this, Ambassador Haley must work hand in hand with the UN, NATO, and other international institutions, and establish direct political and diplomatic agreements to choke off ISIS's media and recruitment. Governments do not have the resources to address the threat posed by jihadi organizations that have interconnected other ISIS regional allies. The U.S. will need to invest in military and diplomatic personnel to both advise and build government and civil society defenses against recruitment. The U.S. Department of Justice should work with host governments to create legal frameworks to address terrorist recruitment in those countries. State Department may also wish to consider appointing an embassy-level



point person to coordinate these efforts in each of the relevant countries. There are also domestic legislative changes that could aid in providing resources to partner countries such as allowing the U.S. Department of Defense to transfer small amounts of funding to USAID to boost development in recruitment hotspots. These are the strategic options entirely lacking in Trump's ISIS plan.

Additionally, instead of shutting them down, countering violent extremism (CVE) programs should highlight the hell that ISIS creates for families, and **expose their lies and unfulfilled promises**. Comprehensive CVE would also focus on the competition and fratricidal rivalry between al Qaeda, ISIS allies, and local nationalist-jihadis. Exposing high levels of this discord could turn off potential foreign fighters interested in joining their ranks and decrease draw of a utopian unified caliphate. This process will be contingent on local dynamics and conditions, which again highlights the need for human intelligence and the importance of diplomatic area specialists. The fact that Trump Administration has no plan for exploiting the potential rivalries between ISIS and other groups shows how one dimensional their approach truly is.

## Conclusion

Trump's strategy on ISIS fundamentally misunderstands how terrorism works. Terrorism is about communication, provocation, and attrition. Trump's approach to ISIS will play directly into the group's strategy and result in overextension in the Middle East, isolation of allies, and the global spread of terrorism. ISIS, after Trump, will be stronger and more global. The next U.S. President may therefore inherit the most deadly and global terror movement to date. Preparations to fix the missteps of the current President should begin immediately.

## About the Author



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