

THE CTAP INTERVIEW

Bruce Hoffman, Georgetown University

*Interviewed by Dr. Michael Freeman,
US Naval Postgraduate School*

THIS INTERVIEW IS TAKEN FROM THE COLLECTION OF THE COMBATING Terrorism Archive Project (CTAP).¹ On 3 February 2017, noted terrorism expert Dr. Bruce Hoffman, director of the Center for Security Studies at Georgetown University, visited the US Naval Postgraduate School (NPS) in Monterey, California. Dr. Michael Freeman of the Defense Analysis Department at NPS spoke with Dr. Hoffman about the lessons on counterterrorism in Dr. Hoffman's history of the founding of Israel, *Anonymous Soldiers: The Struggle for Israel, 1917–1947* (Knopf, 2015), and about the West's strategies to defeat ISIS and Salafist terrorism.² Global ECCO's Amina Kator-Mubarez and CTX editor Elizabeth Skinner sat in on their discussion.

MICHAEL FREEMAN: Why did you decide to devote 600 pages to the history of the founding of Israel?

BRUCE HOFFMAN: The book is a detailed study of how terrorism affects government policy and decision making. It looks at how both Arab and Jewish terrorism influenced British policies and decisions during the time that Britain ruled Palestine, from 1917 until they decided to leave in 1948. It came from my frustration with a lot of the political science studies of whether or not terrorism works. Governments and political leaders always say it doesn't work—the victims of terrorism say it doesn't work. But there is this fundamental paradox: if it doesn't work, then why has terrorism existed for two millennia, and even more, why has it become so entrenched and dominant as a strategic threat, in addition to the tactical threat that it always has been? In other words, if terrorism is such a failed strategy, then why does it persist? I thought that the only way to really know this was to take a very detailed look at the archives on how governments frame policies and also, on a day to day basis, how the police, the military, and the intelligence services react and respond to terrorism.

Palestine-Israel was such a good case study because, first, the events described in the book happened over 70 years ago, which means that there is a particularly rich body of archival information available in multiple countries, in Britain certainly, but also in Israel and the United States. It's only by going to the archives that we really begin to understand how terrorism factors into governments' decisions and policy making and how they react to it. It's very rare that you can get as complete a picture as is captured in *Anonymous Soldiers*.

FREEMAN: So you have seen evidence that officials changed policies based on terror attacks, showing that, to some degree, these attacks worked to change policy?

HOFFMAN: Yes. Part of the argument of the book [*Anonymous Soldiers*] also is that history is rarely mono-causal. Where I think terrorism does play a big part is when it speeds up events, but it may not have the effect that terrorists claim because, historically, there are very few instances where terrorism actually

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succeeded at achieving its users' goal. But the catalytic effect that terrorism has can narrow a government's opportunities to make decisions, or really flesh out policy, by goading governments to respond emotionally rather than soberly. That's what terrorism is all about, and I think it's been used more successfully than we give terrorists credit for.

Now that's not to praise or encourage terrorism, but it's rather to say that defeating terrorism is much more critical than we imagine, and much more time-intensive. The dangers of ignoring terrorism's second- and third-order effects, or indeed, of precipitously declaring victory, are enormous because all terrorists seek to enmesh their adversaries in protracted wars of attrition to help to undermine confidence in government leadership. We saw that happen in Palestine and also back in Britain during the formation of Israel. Terrorism imposes profound economic pressures on government, something that was very clearly true when 100,000 British troops were tied up in Palestine during and after World War II. Some of them had been drafted in January 1944 and were still in the military, but now fighting in Palestine three years later. Terrorism also attempts to compel liberal democratic governments to embrace illiberal solutions in pursuit of their security, which is also exactly what happened in the Palestine case. Terrorism helps to deepen fissures in societies and polarize political opinion. All those outcomes were present in Britain after World War II in the context of the Palestine issue, and in recent months, we have seen those same factors at play in the United States and Western Europe.

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FREEMAN: One of the things I have always thought was odd is when people say terrorism doesn't work, but we have to ask, then why do terrorists do it? Terrorism could actually be the most rational strategy for an insurgent group, even if it never works, as long as it's the *most likely* course of action to work. The probability of success can be a fraction of one percent, but if every other option is zero percent, it still might actually be a completely rational decision, even if it has always failed in the course of history. So when you have some of these cases of success, like in the Algerian war for independence, the use of terrorism actually becomes more rational because the insurgents can say, well, it might only work in two or five or 10 percent of the cases, but that's enough because we can model our plans on that. This is why I think the contention that terrorism doesn't work seems to be a false debate, because it simply has to work better than the alternatives, in the calculations of its users.

HOFFMAN: You are absolutely right. At a very minimum, simply attracting attention to themselves and their cause means that the use of violence succeeds. But you have also fastened on another important point. People will say there are only a handful of well-known examples when terrorism was effective, but that's exactly the point. That handful of well-known examples has served to subsequently motivate and inspire similarly aggrieved peoples to believe that, if they turn to violence, they too can thrust their cause onto the world's agenda. That's what is so important about the Palestine example. I argue in *Anonymous Soldiers* and—in a more condensed fashion—in *Inside Terrorism*³ that modern terrorism—this belief in violence as a means of communication to mobilize support, to pressure government, and to attract attention to oneself and one's cause—really crystallized with the campaign of the Irgun Zvai Le'umi, the National Military Organization, led by a future prime minister of Israel, Menachem Begin. Begin himself, in an earlier incarnation, had been in charge of information

operations—what was then called propaganda, a word that’s just as negative these days as terrorism is. More clearly than anyone else at the time, I believe, Begin understood the fusion between violence and communication, and how daring and dramatic acts of violence could focus the world’s attention on the terrorists and their cause and transform a local problem into an international cause.

FREEMAN: Terrorism was thought of by the anarchists as “propaganda by deed.”

HOFFMAN: Yes, exactly. Begin and the Irgun were taking advantage of what was modern media then—radio, in particular, but also simply the ability to transmit news quickly to a wide audience—not visual news, but first-hand immediate accounts of events. So Begin definitely took advantage of that, and also of the creation of the United Nations. He was the first real terrorist leader who directly appealed to the United Nations to intervene. We have seen that since then, of course, until arguably, al Qaeda, because al Qaeda sees the United Nations as a manifestation of Western world dominance as much as anything else. But whether it was the PLO, the IRA, or any other insurgent or terrorist group, these underground movements have often sought the recognition that they could obtain through an important international body like the UN.

FREEMAN: One of the things that I have always been interested in is the historical roots of terrorism versus what’s new about modern terrorism. It seems that how terrorists see the strategic utility of terrorism and how they think about the impact on democracy or an audience of policy makers are fairly consistent through time, right? If Begin were put in charge of some terrorist group today, he wouldn’t be out of place thinking about the use of violence in a strategic sense, maybe even in a tactical sense. Terrorists still essentially do just two things: shootings and bombings. So what are the similarities and consistencies across space and time among terrorist groups and terrorist campaigns—and counterterrorism campaigns? Also, what is new, what is different or modern about al Qaeda or ISIS? I am reluctant to buy into this “new terrorism” notion—since 9/11 everything is “new.” But al Qaeda didn’t use anything new. Mass shootings in Paris and Belgium—the FLN [National Liberation Front] was doing that in the Battle of Algiers. I think people get caught up in the idea of newness, but I wonder what exactly you think has been

consistent and what might be new about some of the threats we see today?

HOFFMAN: Well, I think the one thing that will always be consistent is that, as politically radical or religiously fanatical as terrorists might be, historically, they are operationally conservative—that is, they go with what works and what they believe will facilitate the success of an operation. This is why guns and bombs have been the stock-in-trade of terrorism for over a century. Terrorists today focus much more on mass casualty operations because they see that as the essential ingredient for a successful terrorist operation, not least to get publicity and attention. For that reason, I think Brian Jenkins’s famous aphorism from 1975, that terrorists want a lot of people watching and listening but not a lot of people dead, has unfortunately become anachronistic. Terrorists still want people watching and listening, but they also want a lot of people dead because they think that’s the vehicle that will ensure them attention and publicity. Also, as I have often

written, I think the religious element became salient after 9/11, but this was certainly already changing at the end of the twentieth century. Religion has made mass casualty terrorism much more legitimate and justifiable for some groups because their conception of a constituency is different. Their motivation became divinely ordained—they wanted not so much a role at the United Nations as to completely eliminate their enemy. This shift is behind the ethnic cleansing and sectarianism that we see driving so many conflicts in the Middle East.

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FREEMAN: Does this make these terrorists harder to negotiate with?

HOFFMAN: I think they were easier to negotiate with in the past because they saw themselves as changing a system of government and replacing it with an alternative system, or with achieving some goal of political independence or self-determination. Whereas now, I think that when religion gets mixed into the motivation, eliminating a rival people whom they disdain is often an end in itself. It’s all about getting power, of course, as terrorism has always been, but now they also want to overturn the current world system. They see the United Nations not as providing them with a voice in the way that terrorists of the twentieth century did, but rather as part of the repressive status quo machinery.

Operationally, I don't think a lot has changed. Bombs are smaller and much more powerful than they used to be, and so are handguns and automatic weapons, but terrorists still use these two basic weapons systems. What's changed is that the most effective terrorist organization is the one that lasts the longest or is a true learning organization. These organizations consciously study other groups, so you see successive terrorist generations that generally are more difficult to eliminate and more operationally competent than their predecessors because they are learning how to survive from the remnants of previous groups. The power we once had to intercept and interdict and therefore prevent terrorist attacks has been rendered considerably less useful by off-the-shelf commercially available or even free communications apps like WhatsApp or Telegram. We know that these things played an enormous role, for instance, in planning the 2015 Paris attacks.

FREEMAN: You're talking about how terrorists, the smart ones, learn from history and become more resilient, smarter, better. That's one side of the fight. Are states doing the same thing? If we do a net assessment, history might overall be neutral or favor one side or the other, depending on whether one side is better or worse at learning from it. You say terrorists, or at least the good ones, are like the bugs that don't get killed by antibiotics but instead become superbugs—bigger, stronger, better—right? We're academics; we're trying to get smarter about this—but are policy makers and states wiser now than they were 60 years ago? Are we learning from history equally, or less, or more than terrorist groups?

“ THE PHRASE “THE LONG WAR” WAS BANISHED FROM THE PENTAGON. HOW COULD YOU DESCRIBE THIS AS ANYTHING ELSE? ”

HOFFMAN: The simple answer is no. We are dismal at it, in fact. We constantly reinvent the wheel because we forget General [James] Mattis's admonition that “the enemy gets a vote.” I don't think we fully realize that our enemies, whether ISIS or al Qaeda, have locked us into wars of attrition. We don't realize that we are up against enemies who, because of their divine inspiration, see this as a successive, generational struggle. The other problem is that, although on an individual basis within agencies there is continuity, generally speaking, we are always reinventing the wheel. We certainly saw this in the past decade with the revival of counterinsurgency: much like after the Vietnam War, the conventional military sought to completely eschew any involvement in this messy type of warfare. With the drawdowns in Iraq and then Afghanistan, we saw a very similar mindset emerge, a belief

that the *next* war is going to be a conventional one against a nation state. It might well be, but it's not an either-or prospect. We see that there are more and more terrorist groups forming. There are also more branches and affiliates that are attaching themselves to existing terrorist groups, which multiplies the problem.

Terrorist groups have to learn, or they don't survive. National survival is rarely at stake because of terrorism, which is why we have this very odd attitude. We tend to overreact in the immediate aftermath of a terrorist attack, but then, as time proceeds, we become much more complacent until we are once again spun up by a new terrorist incident. Unfortunately, that's part of the terrorist strategy: to constantly take us on that rollercoaster in order to diminish our will. That's what we always have to guard against, but as you know, in 2005, the phrase “the long war” was banished from the Pentagon. How could you describe this as anything else? In 2005, we really faced only one adversary, and that was al Qaeda. Now we face al Qaeda and ISIS and also a multiplicity of terrorist branches and affiliates of both.

ELIZABETH SKINNER: Along those lines, there are all the terrorists groups in India, such as Lashkar-e-Taiba [LeT], Indian Mujahedeen, and others that seem to be bandwagoning with ISIS. Are these groups really going to follow along and adopt ISIS's agenda, or do you think they are going to end up fighting for supremacy at some point? Or do you think they have completely different agendas?

HOFFMAN: Well, all these groups are opportunists, and they will hitch their fortunes to whatever rising star they see because they believe that simply associating themselves with a violent and powerful terrorist organization enhances their own credibility. And they certainly hope that it enhances the threat they pose in the eyes of their enemies. I think what's interesting about terrorists in the twenty-first century as opposed to the twentieth century is that in the past many of them had mostly local or perhaps regional agendas, but the newer groups have become progressively internationalized—at least in their rhetoric.

I remember years ago you could actually go to the web pages of terrorist groups like LeT, before they were all taken down, and even though its agenda is primarily about the liberation of Kashmir, its home page showed three flags dripping in blood: India's, as one might expect,

because India is in possession of Kashmir, but also the United States' and Israel's. So even back then, they had already internationalized their agenda. Terrorist groups, because of their opportunism, seek whatever sources of support and sustenance they can get. They understand that if they can broaden their appeal and gain new constituencies through alliances or popular support beyond their birthplace or their own narrow locus of operation, that will be a force multiplier and enhance both their power, and they hope, their longevity. So they form alliances of convenience that are constantly shifting depending on the popularity of the group they might associate with. But it doesn't mean that any of these affiliations is necessarily carved in stone. Of course, the fact that many of these groups receive state support, whether actively or clandestinely, or at least are tolerated by states makes the whole problem of terrorism much more difficult to counter today than it's been in the past.

FREEMAN: So, you see that, at least for as long as ISIS is ascendant, groups like LeT will continue to associate themselves with it, at a minimum?

HOFFMAN: I think their DNA is the same as al Qaeda's and that's really their most stable long-term relationship. I think there are elements within these groups who are impatient or who see the upstart terrorist group as the next best thing and are opportunistically taking advantage of it. But I don't see these associations with ISIS as being much of a long-term trend because most of these groups remain more in the al Qaeda mainstream. Where they fit together the most is probably in ideology. Their general ideologies aren't that different. The differences, most often, are in personalities—tone or style or certainly, leadership.

FREEMAN: Going back to what you were saying about states learning and the fact that states don't face the existential threats that terrorists do: if terrorist groups lose, they are dead and destroyed, while states can muddle through the aftermath and aren't forced to learn and remember the lessons very well. In your book [*Anonymous Soldiers*], I know you don't go past 1947, but the Israelis, probably more than anybody, have faced an existential threat for the last 60 years. Do you think that they have learned lessons about counterterrorism and terrorism better than other countries because they have had to deal with it so much—at least more so than the United States or others? Also, Britain, right? Britain hasn't faced an existential threat to the same degree as Israel, but more so than most from their experiences in Palestine, Oman, Yemen, Malaysia, and Kenya, and then Northern Ireland. But they are still trying to figure this out, even with all the advantages of history and with many of the same people. The United States has a fleeting historical relationship with terrorism on its soil, in the 1970s and 1980s, a little bit in the late 1990s, and then with 9/11. But there are other countries that have a more consistent history with terrorism. Do you think that they are any better at learning better lessons than the rest of us?

HOFFMAN: No, I don't think so. Israel in one sense sees terrorism as a perpetual state of regional politics, of international relations—the nature of conflict. I think they are also very attuned to its dynamic and evolutionary nature. A decade ago, suicide terrorism was the main threat, but then both the 2006 war with Hezbollah and especially the 2014 summer war with Hamas were not fought with suicide terrorists; they were fought with stand-off weapons, by rockets fired by both adversaries. So I think Israel in general has been better at learning.

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I don't think it necessarily comes from Israel's own historical background as much as from the nature of where Israel exists: its leaders have had to constantly monitor any changes and know if they might be susceptible or caught off balance. For example, in the First Intifada, when they dealt with suicide terror in the 1990s, they brought it under control, but then they saw a very different type of suicide terrorism that was demographically more diverse and more sustained, and that caught them completely off balance. In a short period of time, the Israelis were able to change strategies and come up to speed because the survival of the population was enormously important.

Britain is a very good case study in not learning from the past and making the same mistakes in serial conflicts. If you remember the Robb-Silberman commission that looked into the intelligence behind the Iraq WMD claims, one of its conclusions discussed the danger of inherited assumptions, and I think that was the case with both Britain and France.⁴ What they did learn were more often the wrong lessons or the most convenient lessons—in other words, they assumed that what worked in one place would automatically work in another, instead of understanding the very different cultures, very different socioeconomic conditions, very different political dynamics in each place.

You can't have a one-size-fits-all counterterrorism strategy. You have to customize it and tailor it. I think what's interesting about Britain is that it's really not until the 1980s, a decade and a half after the more recent iteration of the Troubles in Northern Ireland had manifested, that British leaders finally began to learn lessons and turn their policies around. The effect of that strategic shift was that, within about a decade of adopting it, they had the Good Friday Agreement, and the conflict was over. It took them from 1968 until the early 1980s to realize what they had to do, and then another decade to get it right, but they had the patience to see it through.

FREEMAN: Let's talk about ISIS, the Islamic State. What do you think of them as a threat? What do you think of them as a terrorist group? Where are they headed? If you were king for the day, and you got to coordinate all international CT policy against ISIS, what would your recommendations be? It's a small question. *[Laughter]*

HOFFMAN: Well, there are two things. In a short period of time, ISIS has gone very far, which means its influence and impact, and even its existence, need to be eliminated. But I think ISIS is here to stay for the foreseeable future, even as it has lost territory and lost fighters, even as we've killed its leaders. Its more "conventional" capabilities will be eroded, even its capacity for insurgency will be diminished, but its international terrorist capability is going to continue.

FREEMAN: Will it increase?

HOFFMAN: I certainly think that while we were fixated on the idea that ISIS was just interested in Syria, the Caliphate, and Iraq, and that the violence would remain confined to that region, ISIS was laying down roots in Europe and elsewhere—an external operations capability that I think functions somewhat independently from its battlefield operations. This means that whatever defeat is inflicted on ISIS on the ground, whether in Libya or Iraq or eventually Syria, it will still have an external terrorist operations capability. In addition to all the motivations and goals that exist today, layered on top of that will be revenge

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and retaliation for the destruction of the Caliphate. So I don't think we should be blinded by the assumption that anything that's going on now is more than the beginning of the end—it's not the end. I think the decapitation strategy that we have pursued is a very important and useful tactic in countering terrorism, but in and of itself, decapitation, historically, has never eliminated a terrorist group, and I think ISIS will be able to transition from the ISIS we see now to a terrorist entity that will continue to be threatening.

FREEMAN: As I understand it, there have been three leaders of ISIS, and the effectiveness of a leadership decapitation strategy depends on how good the leader is. The first leader, [Abu al-] Zarqawi was pretty effective in mobilizing this group of fighters. The next guy, Abu Omar al-Baghdadi, was not too effective, and we killed him. His replacement [Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi] is actually the one who has expanded the war. So sometimes the effectiveness of leadership targeting depends on whether the guy is actually doing a good job, because it might be better to leave him in place.

HOFFMAN: The key to understanding the strategic limitations of targeted assassination is understanding that it may have second- or third-order effects that we need to anticipate. There was an article in the *Washington Post* that talked about how we had gotten the six top leaders of ISIS, Abu Mohammad al Adnani being the main one. Fair enough, but we also have to understand that we have eliminated the hardcore people who were real Baghdadi loyalists and completely bought into ISIS's enmity with al Qaeda and its rivalry with [Ayman] al Zawahiri. Similarly, it's great to kill off the leaders, but we have to be prepared for what the long-term repercussions might be. One of them may be that we eliminated all of the ISIS leadership's most implacable opponents to a reamalgamation with al Qaeda. In terms of cohesion, leadership depth, and control over its branches, al Qaeda is much stronger than ISIS. The one thing it doesn't have is a very strong external operations capability in Europe, and that's partially because al Zawahiri, at least for the past three years, forbade those types of terrorist operations. I think this is because he has been intent on very quietly rebuilding al Qaeda while ISIS hogs the limelight, monopolizes our attention, and further exhausts and enervates us as part of this overall war-of-attrition strategy. But then that also means that if he doesn't exercise the capability to strike, he doesn't really have it.

So this is where I think ISIS is ahead of al Qaeda and has something al Qaeda covets—this external operations network in Europe—which I would argue also makes some reamalgamation quite possible. Only a few years ago, the conventional wisdom was that this split was completely irreparable, that because of infighting both groups would consume and ultimately neutralize one another. To me, that was a fundamental misreading of terrorist history because factions and splinters tend to be more violent than the parent organization. They have to be able to get recruits and support to demonstrate their relevance to the cause. That's exactly what we saw with ISIS and with al-Baghdadi declaring himself Caliph and reestablishing the Caliphate.

FREEMAN: You've talked about some missed opportunities with al Qaeda. In hindsight, would you have done something differently in the last 15 years? Or would you do something differently now?

“**WHATEVER DEFEAT IS INFLICTED ON ISIS, IT WILL STILL HAVE AN EXTERNAL TERRORIST OPERATIONS CAPABILITY.**”

HOFFMAN: The [George W. Bush administration's] aversion to putting sufficient US ground forces into Afghanistan when [Osama] bin Laden was fleeing, particularly when he was in Tora Bora—history would have been different had we killed bin Laden then. I think it was enormously important to kill bin Laden whenever we could get him. When we succeeded, it did knock the group off balance at a critical time, especially during the Arab Spring [2011–2012]. But after a decade in retreat, the group itself had developed a robust enough leadership cadre that it could carry on the struggle. Bin Laden had worked himself up to being an inspirational figure, which he might not have been if we had found and killed him sooner. After all, for a decade, he survived the greatest onslaught directed against a terrorist organization in history and probably the most extensive manhunt in history. That burnished his credentials and gave al Qaeda this appealing image that was much more difficult to dim.

I think that was the first mistake. Again, this is all in retrospect. But even looking back at it, I saw the diversion of assets from Afghanistan to Iraq in 2003 first hand—I was in both places. The invasion of Iraq played into al Qaeda's narrative that the United States and the West were waging a global war against Islam. Again, none of this is to second-guess those in authority at the time or say they should have made a different decision. What I mean to say is that we didn't fully take onboard the second- and

third-order effects or the long-term repercussions of groups that are determined to survive. We didn't assess ahead of time how they would likely intend to survive, so that when they did survive, we were often taken by surprise. How many times in the past five years have we heard that al Qaeda was on the verge of strategic collapse? Those exact words were used. Yet when General James Clapper, the director of national intelligence, testified before the Senate in February [2016], he talked about how al Qaeda was becoming increasingly resilient and was poised to make further gains in that year.⁵ So much for the strategic collapse.

We can debate until the end of time whether a status of forces agreement could have been agreed with in Iraq. Leaving even 10,000 troops in Iraq would have given us the influence over the government to prevent the resurgence of terrorism and the rise of ISIS. But I think what's incontestable is that the mistakes we made in 2010 and 2011 resulted in a far more perilous situation in Iraq today than would have otherwise existed. Again, these are indirect effects of allowing ISIS to revive—seeing Iraq now basically broken apart by ISIS's invasion. There were opportunities we missed that could have resulted in a different history today.

Right now, I think the most serious mistake we are making is not dealing decisively with the terrorist threat, in the sense that we have allowed ourselves to fall into the terrorists' trap of this war of attrition. I am not saying that it is a successful strategy or that it will prove so, but we see the terrorists' goal of undermining popular confidence in elected leadership materializing today—and this is a phenomenon not just in the United States, but in Europe—creating deep polarizations and political divisions within society, the economic pressures of maintaining a constant *op tempo* regarding domestic security, sustaining overseas military deployments, and maintenance of extensive intelligence capabilities. This pressing of liberal societies to increasingly embrace or at least to discuss illiberal solutions to security is the stock-in-trade that terrorists depend on. So, one way or the other, I think we are back in a position where we have to read ISIS and other extremist groups as a threat we have to deal with decisively and not in any protracted fashion.

FREEMAN: What would a more decisive strategy entail?

HOFFMAN: I think it starts with the realization that the three pillars of our counterterrorism strategy for the past eight years haven't worked. Leadership decapitation has kept our enemies off balance but has not delivered any kind of a crushing blow to them. By my count, al Qaeda now has a presence in at least three times as many places as it had in 2008. According to the National Counterterrorism Center, when we began the campaign against ISIS in 2014, it was present in five countries. In 2015, it was 15, and now it's 18 countries. Clearly, even while we had success decapitating both groups, they were seizing more territory and also polishing their brand. The second pillar was the training of host-nation militaries—which has failed abysmally, whether in Mali and Yemen or Iraq and Afghanistan. I am not saying these things aren't critical to a counterterrorism policy; I'm just saying they are not working in their current form and they have to be part of a broader strategy. No place where we have trained indigenous forces have we had a success against terrorism. Even in the current push against Mosul, if the Iraqi security forces could do it themselves, it would be a lot more positive, but they are dependent on both the Kurdish Peshmerga and even more problematically, the Shi'a popular mobilization forces. Just a few years ago, Yemen had been touted as a success story. So the way we are doing CT now isn't working.

ISIS HAS SOMETHING
AL QAEDA COVETS—
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The third pillar, the counter-messaging, counter-narrative strategy also failed, in my view. ISIS has over 40,000 foreign fighters from more than 100 countries, so clearly the message isn't getting out there.

So the first imperative for the new [Donald Trump] administration is to step back and ask why all these things that are central parts of a counterterrorism strategy are not working? What more needs to be done or what additional resources need to be brought to bear? A decade and a half ago, we believed there was a purely military solution to terrorism. We found out there wasn't, but that's because policy makers overemphasized reliance on the military. In the past eight years, we have swung in the opposite direction: having decided that there isn't a military solution, we've tried more specific types of targeting, training host nations, counter messaging, but that hasn't worked either. The answer is to find what is in the middle, and I think it's using military force to break the backs of the terrorist organizations. Once that's done, I believe the non-kinetic dimensions are invaluable in preventing the recrudescence or the reappearance of the terrorists. But without

kinetically diminishing the power of these groups, we can't diminish their allure. That's where I don't think we have been successful.

FREEMAN: On the counter messaging, I saw a story in the *New York Times* about a group called the Legion for ISIS, who were ISIS propagandists.⁶ The United States and its allies have gone after these guys pretty aggressively, and the ones who were killed have not yet been replaced. It was interesting to me because we don't usually think of counter messaging as kinetic. But this is a similar argument to leadership targeting: if there aren't any effective replacements for them, it might be effective to take out 10 or 20 of these guys who are doing the ideological outreach and propaganda.

HOFFMAN: Again, my point is that the answer is not one or the other; it's fusing both together, and the main lesson may be that the propaganda chief is the most important person to take out instead of the actual operational commanders. There is a problem in that, too, because many of the propagandists did become operational commanders, but that sort of targeting probably does have a greater impact: it enhances the non-kinetic counter messaging by removing these key voices. But, of course, we killed Anwar al-Awlaki, and his old sermons are still tremendously effective at motivating individuals.

AMINA KATOR-MUBAREZ: As far as Syria is concerned, how difficult is it for the United States to distinguish rebel groups versus ISIS? At this point, does it make more sense for the United States to allow Assad to try to defeat ISIS, because it's so difficult to distinguish groups?

HOFFMAN: Well, the trouble is that I think there were more legitimate rebel groups the United States could support two or three years ago than there are now. A lot of the more moderate groups have been eliminated by Assad, and by rival groups, too. What we don't realize is that for many of these groups it's a zero sum game. In all these conflicts, there has been a whittling away of all but the most extreme forces, especially as the conflicts have become more protracted and more violent, and extremists thereby gain greater cachet. You now have this proliferation of Salafi jihadi groups and the exclusion of the more secular, more moderate groups, which makes finding allies on the ground more difficult. This goes back to my point, that the longer you allow these things to play out, the more complicated they become and the more difficult they are to handle. So I think addressing the problem earlier on would have been more effective.

What probably worries me most is that the longer the war is prolonged, the more appealing the Russians' stasis solution [keeping Assad in power] will be to other powers as well because they see no solution, whereas it was a very different situation some years ago.

FREEMAN: I see three alternative outcomes: ISIS winning all of Syria, Assad reestablishing control over all of Syria, or some negotiated amalgamation of rebel groups—but that's hard to imagine. If I were betting on any of those three, the Assad regime continuing in power and eventually establishing control over the vast majority of the country seems like the most probable outcome. It seems we're caught between a rock and a hard place. We want to defeat ISIS, but defeating ISIS is defeating one of the rebel groups that is fighting against Assad, and doing so would indirectly empower Assad. He's not fighting them directly, as I

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understand, but if he doesn't have to worry about fighting ISIS, he can go after the other rebel groups, and that helps him. Somebody is going to be in power, and we don't like all the other Salafist rebel groups. There aren't too many of the moderate rebel groups left. We have ISIS versus Assad.

HOFFMAN: You've left out the most pernicious effect, which is that al Qaeda seems to be increasingly legitimate and acceptable. You don't see the name al Qaeda used at all in Syria. It's either [Jabhat al-Nusra or now Jabhat Fateh al-Sham]. They avoid declaring themselves to be al Qaeda to achieve exactly what bin Laden wrote of before he died: he thought the al Qaeda brand had outlived its usefulness because it was always associated with violence and everyone completely neglected its political agenda. Now we see that al Qaeda has suddenly acquired this newfound mantle of moderation that I think is completely unjustified, but that people believe in. Because they don't use the name al Qaeda, these groups somehow become more tolerable in certain circles and more acceptable than they ever would have been before.

I don't think there are any quick solutions to terrorism. There's no one tactic or technique that's going to turn the tables. One of the things we always have to be thinking about is how our enemies may use what we do against us. At the end of the day, we have to break their power. That's the kinetic part, but there is also an enormously important nonkinetic element. I believe in both. The nonkinetic element is absolutely important in preventing a revitalization of these terrorist campaigns. Things that we do can play into their narratives, which they exploit very effectively to get new sources of support and new recruits. So part of a sound and solid counterterrorism strategy is to recognize that we need to avoid doing things that play into their narrative—that diminish our stature while enhancing theirs. ❖

NOTES

- 1 The Combating Terrorism Archive Project (CTAP) aims to collect and archive knowledge on strategy, operations, and tactics used by military and other security personnel from around the world in the twenty-first-century fight against global terrorism. Collectively, the individual interviews that CTAP conducts constitute an oral history archive of knowledge and experience in counterterrorism for the benefit of the CT community now and in the future.
- 2 This interview was edited for length and clarity. Every effort was made to ensure that the meaning and intention of the participants were not altered in any way. The ideas and opinions of all participants are theirs alone and do not represent the official positions of the US Naval Postgraduate School, the US Department of Defense, the US government, or any other official entity.
- 3 Bruce Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism*, 3rd ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, August 2017).
- 4 *Commission on the Intelligence Capabilities of the United States Regarding Weapons of Mass Destruction: Report to the President of the United States* (Washington, D.C.: Commission on the Intelligence Capabilities of the United States Regarding Weapons of Mass Destruction, 31 March 2005): <http://govinfo.library.unt.edu/wmd/report/>
- 5 James R. Clapper, *Statement for the Record: Worldwide Threat Assessment of the US Intelligence Community* (Washington, D.C.: Senate Armed Services Committee, 9 February 2016): https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Clapper_02-09-16.pdf
- 6 Adam Goldman and Eric Schmitt, "One by One, ISIS Social Media Experts Are Killed as Result of F.B.I. Program," *New York Times*, 24 November 2016: <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/24/world/middleeast/isis-recruiters-social-media.html>