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The Paris Attacks: Not a Strategic Change, but a “Natural” Development

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The terrorist attacks in Paris, which were carried out with determined, brutal efficiency and took the lives of 130 people and wounded hundreds more, physically and psychologically, were planned in Syria long in advance, with final preparations made in Belgium. The terrorist network involved in the multi-pronged strike consisted of at least nine members, seven of whom were suicide attackers. As far as is known, there was a logistics coordinator for the attacks, who perhaps was also the commander present. This terrorist, Abed al-Hamid Abaaoud, was later killed when a suicide belt exploded in a safe house where he was hiding before he and fellow terrorists managed to carry out another attack, which seems to have been planned for a financial district in the city.

Since the start of this year, Muslim citizens of Western countries who fought in the ranks of the Islamic State are known to have planned to attack targets in France, Germany, the United Kingdom, Turkey, and elsewhere, but these attacks were foiled. Therefore, the severity and immediacy of the terrorist threat failed to penetrate the consciousness of decision makers and the public. But the terrorists' intentions indicate that the Paris attacks – and attacks that were planned but not carried out – do not represent a radical or surprising departure from the Islamic State's strategy against Western nations, and that at work is a natural, calculated development that was planned and organized by the Islamic State. As such, this development does not necessarily stem from the failures the Islamic State endured on the battlefields of Syria or its lack of new conquests

The thousands of foreign volunteers from Europe, the United States, Canada, Australia, China, and elsewhere have been absorbed into the ranks of the Islamic State over the last three years were trained as fighters in general and suicide attackers in particular, to advance the military campaign that the Islamic State has been waging primarily, but not only, in Syria and Iraq. Clearly the governing idea was that when the time was right, it would be possible to have these operatives launch an international terrorism campaign. The notion that unlike al-Qaeda, which focused on showcase terrorism in the West as its main action strategy, the Islamic State would avoid international terrorism and

concentrate on encouraging sporadic acts of terrorism by lone perpetrators inspired by Islamic State ideology, while its main focus was on territorial conquests and entrenchment in the Arab sphere, was clearly unfounded. Video clips disseminated by Islamic State members and sympathizers, viewed countless times in the social media associated with the organization, included declarations by foreign volunteers serving in Syria and Iraq on their intention to undertake acts of terrorism in Western nations. Beyond the bravado and the demonstration of their willingness to sacrifice themselves in the name of Islam and the Islamic caliphate, and beyond the attempt to sow fear in the West, these clips were and remain a clear declaration of intent on the part of the Islamic State.

These messages must be viewed as a strategic warning, especially given the fairly recent experience with volunteers in al-Qaeda and its affiliates, all belonging to the same ideological stream as the Islamic State. It was obvious that the foreign volunteers, Arab and Western, gathered in Syria and Iraq represented the Islamic State reserves in a range of arenas throughout the world, including the West. The barbaric, ruthless conduct of Islamic State toward the residents of the conquered cities and villages, manifested in massacres of captives and civilians, created a jungle-like culture in the areas under Islamic State control. The Paris attacks were unequivocal evidence that the Islamic State is determined to impose the same culture on Western civilization.

In his own personal conduct and leadership style, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the leader of the Islamic State and its self-appointed caliph, embodies Islamic State conduct. Horror stories abound about his behavior, particularly with regard to captive women and girls. Likewise in the military and political sphere, al-Baghdadi has proven he is a gambler, willing to take big risks and incur high stakes against his many enemies to advance ambitious – if not megalomaniacal – goals, based on a profound conviction that he is capable of realizing them. By effecting his policy of wholesale murder of anyone who fails to obey him absolutely or deviates from his path, he has thrown down the gauntlet before the entire Sunni Muslim world, first and foremost Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey but also others – Shiite Iran, and even the leaders of the organizations comprising the al-Qaeda alliance, especially al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri.

Al-Baghdadi has directly challenged the leaders of Russia, Europe, and NATO by means of mass casualty terrorist attacks carried out recently by his proxies, including the downing of the Russian airplane in the Sinai Peninsula and the coordinated attacks in France. While one must assume that al-Baghdadi is aware of the severe reaction expected from Western nations, it is also possible that he is underestimating their determination and willingness to embark together on a high intensity, comprehensive, and decisive campaign to topple the Islamic State. Alternatively, he is perhaps actually interested in

drawing them into a ground campaign in Syria because he is convinced he can survive such a battle and wants to exploit it to recruit masses of Muslim volunteers, believing that they will sign up for what he intends to describe as a holy war in defense of Muslim lands against a Judeo-Christian crusade. The Islamic State declared worldview is one of Armageddon, which promises that the war of Judgment Day, destined, according to tradition, to take place in the city of Dabiq, Syria, will restore Islam to its proper supremacy.

The explicit and tragic evidence of the immediate threat to Western states by Islamic State operatives and proxies will presumably convince Western populations to demand that their leaders allocate the resources required to foil and protect effectively against the expected waves of terrorism at home. At the same time, the severity of the threat to the West as a result of the crisis in Syria and the Islamic State presence in Syria and Iraq require the leaders of the Western and Arab partners in the international coalition fighting the Islamic State to prepare *at once* for intensive and ongoing action against the caliphate's bases. Following the Paris attacks, the UN Security Council, in a unanimous decision, gave its backing to a global war against the Islamic State. This mandate should help the coalition step up actions against the Islamic State's command centers, such as Raqqa, Syria, the caliphate's capital, as well as Mosul and Ramadi in Iraq, and liberate them in order to deny the Islamic State its symbolic as well as fundamental ability to control.

In a campaign such as the one aimed at the Islamic State, which operates like an army of terrorilla embedded among and shielded by civilians, sophistication and innovation are a key. To ensure that the operations are effective and avoid harm to civilians as much as possible – harm that the Islamic State would exploit to recruit new supporters and fighters – it is necessary to make use of local forces in planning, operational activity, aerial assistance, targeted assassinations, and special forces based on high quality intelligence. The difficulty in enlisting a coalition of many nations, each with its own particular dominant and sometimes contradictory set of interests, is obvious. But it is fairly clear that the increase in the scope and impact of the Islamic State's showcase attacks in Western cities will motivate the coalition nations to bridge the gaps between them and work together to remove the threat. The process of consolidating the coalition to take forceful joint action may be expected to take time, although presumably it will accelerate if the Islamic State succeeds in eluding attempts to foil additional mass casualty attacks.

Foiling actions currently underway throughout Europe are marked by close and effective cooperation among various security forces and intelligence communities on the continent and elsewhere, such as that with several Arab states, including Morocco, as happened in the aftermath of the attack in Paris. Some is overt, but most of it is covert. Such

cooperation is critical, representing the foundation for success of the war against jihadist terrorism.

While cities in Europe were preparing for extensive action on the part of local intelligence and security agencies to stop Islamic State activists and supporters, events in Mali were a painful reminder that the jihadist terrorist campaign is not limited to Western nations or the Islamic State. The attack at the Radisson Blu in Bamako, the capital of Mali, by a cell of the al-Mourabitun, affiliated with al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, killed 20 guests at the hotel – seven locals and 13 foreign nationals, from Russia, China, the United States, Belgium, and Israel. The lesson of the attack is that the fight against jihadist terrorism at this time must involve a mortal blow both to the Islamic State and its affiliates and to al-Qaeda and its affiliates. Despite the current enmity between them over control of the global jihadist camp, they share an abhorrence of the West and the desire to destroy it. This is especially true given that they could, at any time, decide to cooperate once again in order to impose their Salafist jihadist ideology across the globe.

