

An American Strategy for Victory in the War Against Islamist Terror

The Honorable Michael McCaul

I'd like to thank Fred Kagan for the kind introduction and the American Enterprise Institute for welcoming me to speak here today.

In recent weeks, we have seen the true face of evil from our enemies. We saw it in the video of ISIS burning a young Jordanian pilot to death. We saw it in the taunts of terrorist operatives responsible for the death of Kayla Mueller, a 26-year-old American woman who devoted herself to helping those in need. We saw it in the actions of a would-be attacker who wanted to target our Capitol here in Washington D.C. And we saw it in the murderous rampage on the streets of Paris. The barbarians are at the gate...and it is time for this Nation to confront them.

Today, we are at war. We are at war with violent Islamist extremism—the perversion of a religion into a deeply insidious worldview. For six years, the President has denied it and has put our Nation on a path of retreat. This denial has allowed our enemies to surge, and it is the reason I stand before you.

This morning, I am going to discuss three areas:

- First, I will explain how a reluctance to lead has invited danger to our doorstep.
- Second, I will explain why we are entering the defining struggle of our time and will outline the extent of the alarming extremist threat facing the United States.
- Finally, I will share with you how I believe we can—and must—restore the path to victory in the War Against Islamist Terror.

First, the President's reluctance to lead—combined with a false narrative about the threat we face—has allowed radical Islamists to surge. We have known throughout history that world order deteriorates without clear leadership. Power vacuums tend to be filled by violent groups and repressive regimes, as we saw throughout the 20th century. We are learning this lesson again the hard way.

American leadership has waned in the past six years, under a foreign policy approach that put the United States on the sidelines. Condoleeza Rice recently said to me, “We can't expect every country to like us, but we can be either respected or feared.” Today we are neither.

We've been appeasing rather than opposing our adversaries, including Russia, China, Syria and especially Iran – the leading state sponsor of terror which the President is allowing to remain on the threshold of nuclear weapons and on the march across the region. Our enemies are working aggressively to shape a world order that is founded on values contrary to our own.

Nowhere is this more evident than with rise of Islamist terror groups, which have spread like a wildfire on this President's watch because of two glaring failures of American leadership. The first failure was the President's decision to ignore reality and downplay the threat. The White House spun a false narrative that the terror threat was receding. The President proclaimed that our fight

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was against “core” al Qaeda and that the group was “on its heels,” “on the path to defeat,” and had been “decimated.” In the meantime, the President refused to characterize everything from the Ft. Hood attack to the Boston Marathon Bombing for what they were—acts of Islamist terrorism. The Administration has been reluctant to recognize the threat because it defied the President’s narrative and the legacy he wanted. Ironically, just weeks after Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi announced the formation of ISIS in 2013, the President announced that the “Global War on Terrorism” was effectively over.

The second leadership failure was the President’s decision to dismantle America’s counterterrorism policies and return to a pre-9/11, law-enforcement posture. The President stopped calling the conflict a “war”...despite the fact that our enemies were waging war against us. The President sought to close Guantanamo Bay and to release hardcore terrorists...despite the fact that the intelligence community warned one-third of them were rejoining the fight. Indeed, at least one of the Taliban Five has already begun reviving terrorist ties. The President sought to give terrorists the same legal protections as U.S. citizens...despite the fact that they were unlawful enemy combatants. The President slashed military spending... despite the fact that his commanders warned him about America’s inability to address looming threats. And the President opened up negotiations with terrorists and agreed to swap hostages...despite America’s longstanding commitment against doing so.

Perhaps worst of all, the President’s inaction allowed terrorist safe havens to emerge or expand from the Middle East to West Africa...despite the 9/11 Commission’s recommendation to use all elements of national power to root out terrorist sanctuaries. The conclusion is inescapable: leading from behind has led us into danger.

Sadly, the President’s recent National Security Strategy doubles-down on the same policies of retreat that got us into this mess and still fails to identify the threat. In it, the President argues for “strategic patience,” when what we really need is urgent action. He highlights his defense “drawdown,” when we really need a defense plus-up. And he continues to propose we treat terrorism as a police problem—with one arm behind our back—instead of as a war.

The President’s Strategy also makes the stunning assertion that the risk of terrorist attacks against our Homeland “has diminished.” I stand before you as the Chairman of the House Committee on Homeland Security to tell you the threat has not diminished; it has sky rocketed. One year after the President called ISIS the “JV team,” the organization has inspired or directed more than 25 terrorist plots outside of Syria, and 15 of them have been successful. Yet in a recent interview, the President opined that terrorism is overhyped when compared to issues like climate change. His priorities are clear.

For six years the President has ignored the words of our enemies, forgetting an important lesson of history. For instance, we didn’t take the words of Adolf Hitler seriously until the foot soldiers of the Third Reich marched across Europe. We didn’t take the words of Vladimir Lenin seriously until Communism spread across the globe. And unfortunately, the President didn’t take the words of groups like ISIS seriously until they established a sweeping, self-proclaimed Islamic caliphate.

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It was no secret that extremists were seeking to get to this point. They have been dead set on creating a caliphate—a totalitarian state ruled by the tenets of their hateful ideology. Ultimately they hope to undermine the secular, democratic governments of the Western world. For years, we have seen this goal spelled out in their propaganda and in their plans. And now they are closer to their goal with the formation of ISIS, tens of thousands of fighters, and a spider web of terrorist franchises across the globe.

I believe we are now entering the defining struggle of our generation and beyond. Violent Islamist extremists want nothing less than destruction of our way of life, and now their ability to match words with deeds is growing at an astonishing rate.

Studies have shown that between 2010 and 2013, the number of jihadist terror groups swelled 58 percent, and between 2012 and 2013 terrorism deaths spiked by 60 percent. I have no doubt the final numbers for last year were even worse. In recent months, terrorists have struck multiple Western cities, including Paris, Sydney, Ottawa, and Brussels—and an Ohio-based ISIS sympathizer was arrested for planning to detonate pipe bombs here in Washington on Capitol Hill.

In many ways, it is clear we are no longer talking about terrorist groups. We are talking about terrorist armies. For instance, ISIS now controls a territory the size of Belgium, governs millions of people, draws on billions of dollars in revenue, and commands tens of thousands of foot soldiers. They have also attracted more than 20,000 foreign fighters from over 90 countries, exceeding the flow to Afghanistan in the 1980s.

Make no mistake: in Syria and Iraq, we are witnessing the largest convergence of Islamist terrorists in world history. The momentum has compelled radical Islamists of all stripes to renew their calls to bring terror to the West. Last month, both ISIS and al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula urged their followers to attack the United States and its allies.

As a result, we face serious “dual threats” to the U.S. Homeland: foreign fighters and homegrown terrorism. More than 150 Americans have tried or succeeded in joining extremists in Syria and Iraq along with 3,000 – 5,000 others Westerners with visa-free access to the United States. Armed with military training, combat experience, and terrorist connections, these individuals are only a plane-flight away and capable of plotting deadly attacks. I also have concerns that Islamist extremists may exploit a State Department plan to resettle thousands of Syrian refugees in the United States and use it to deploy operatives into our country. At a hearing before my committee yesterday, the FBI expressed similar concerns.

But radicalized individuals do not need to sneak into terrorist sanctuaries to become a danger to us. Overseas terrorist groups aren't yesterday's extremists, moving messages between couriers and caves. They are tailoring their hateful ideology toward Western audiences on social media, recruiting homegrown fanatics, and fueling a “jihadi cool” subculture. Already, the easy transmission of extremist propaganda on the internet is leading to an uptick in homegrown terrorism. For example, there have been more than 90 homegrown terror plots or attacks in the United States since 9/11—and nearly three-fourths of them have taken place in the past five years. Many of the suspects were radicalized at least in part by online Islamist propaganda, including the Boston Marathon bombers.

The rise of radicalism we are witnessing today is not a passing phenomenon. Instead, I believe we are merely at the beginning. Today's armies of Islamist terrorists will radicalize new generations, and the networks they form will have a ripple effect well into our future. The War Against Islamist Terror will be the great struggle of this century, and I believe we have a moral and strategic obligation to fight it.

Through the course of history, there have been few forms of evil more sinister than that of violent Islamist extremism. We face an enemy whose ultimate goal is to conquer territory and impose its rule through fear, intimidation, rape, crucifixion, and murder. We have seen the images of child soldiers, of brutal beatings, and of public beheadings. And we have been stirred to action by the savagery against our own citizens.

While this enemy has no hope today of displacing Western governments in the West, it has proven capable of doing so elsewhere. Their sanctuaries give them the freedom to solicit recruits and plot attacks designed to intimidate our people, damage our economy, and erode the fabric of our open society. The free world—when confronted with such a persistent threat to its basic values—cannot retreat. It must act.

For these reasons, we must urgently restore American leadership and devise a path to victory in the War Against Islamist Terror. Defeating this spreading evil demands accepting the weighty responsibilities that belong to a great nation. Roosevelt and Churchill had the courage to confront fascism and defeat it. Similarly, Reagan and Thatcher relegated communism to the ash heap of history. Like them, I believe we must rally the world to decisively eliminate the threat posed by Islamist terrorism.

We can begin by coalescing around a grand strategy to wipe out these radicals and their twisted ideology. Our purpose should be clear: *It must be the policy of the United States to rollback and defeat Islamist terror groups and prevent their reemergence in order to ensure the long-term security of the free world.* And we should reserve the right to use every available means to do so.

Right now, violent extremists appear to be winning. And whether or not their victories are real, we know that perceived success can breed real success. We need to make them appear to be losing. This will deprive them of the momentum that has allowed their hateful ideology to proliferate.

I propose a Seven-Point Plan of Action to rollback and defeat Islamist terror groups.

First, we must define the threat in order to defeat it. The President has been unwilling to call the threat what it is. We are at war with violent Islamist extremism. We are not at war with a single group—but with an evolving network of militants.

Second, we must take the fight to the enemy. We cannot wait for Islamist terror to reach our shores before combating it, so we must go on the offensive. And our policy cannot be “containment.” It must be total “rollback.” The President's current strategy against ISIS merely contains the problem. Indeed, airstrikes have not dislodged them from their territory, and they continue to draw thousands

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of new foot soldiers. Now the Administration is seeking an Authorization for the Use of Military Force against ISIS, but the authorization takes options off the table and ties our hands.

We need a ground force to eradicate this cancer, and we should mobilize coalition partners to assemble one. But a coalition cannot be a substitute for American leadership. While we prefer not to deploy American ground troops into combat, we cannot rule out the possibility if we want to destroy ISIS. Taking options off the table telegraphs weakness to our enemies and emboldens them. Their territory fuels their narrative, and it must be recaptured. We didn't defeat communism until its biggest champion collapsed; similarly, you cannot have a strategy for defeating Islamist terror without visibly making its adherents lose. We must also counter all extremists across the spectrum, including the radical Iranian regime and its terror proxies.

Third, we must target the enemies' tools, including by targeting their financing and human capital flows. Islamist terror groups are pocketing everything from oil revenues to ransom payments. These financial arteries must be cut. Islamist terror groups also thrive on foreign fighters. We must work with our international partners to enhance their ability to deter, detect, and disrupt terrorist travel—and we must shutdown the “jihadi superhighway” in Europe. Yesterday, I announced that my Committee is creating a Task Force on Combating Terrorist and Foreign Fighter Travel. This team will work to identify gaps in our defenses and recommend ways to shut down terrorist pathways.

Fourth, we must deny terrorists safe haven overseas by confronting threats early. The President's dithering on Syria allowed ISIS and al Qaeda to surge and made the threat more costly to eliminate. Now we are seeing ISIS spread into other failed or under-governed states. In the future, we cannot afford to wait, and we cannot afford to play global whack-a-mole with terrorists. We must identify emerging extremist sanctuaries and implement strategies with our allies to keep them from becoming terrorism hotbeds.

Fifth, we must defend the Homeland against domestic radicalization. We are entering an era of “do-it-yourself” jihad, and terrorists are finding it easier to encourage individual attacks rather than sneak operatives into our country. But we are alarmingly unprepared to address the threat of homegrown terrorism. Our programs to combat it are only in their infancy, and the Administration has failed to appoint a lead agency to address the problem. It cannot even tell Congress how many people or how many dollars are devoted to it. In the latest DHS budget, the White House proposed spending more money on mitigating climate change than it did on countering violent extremism. My Committee has launched a full-scope investigation into the Administration's efforts in this space, and I hope we can quickly reconcile the deficiencies.

Sixth, we must counter the insidious ideology at the core of Islamist terrorism. Defeating fanatics requires more than just bullets and bombs. It requires the force of our ideas. We must empower moderate Muslims to speak out forcefully against those hijacking their religion to instill terror. And we must expose the naked hypocrisy and brutal rule of Islamist groups through effective counter-messaging campaigns.

Seventh and finally, we must promote liberty and human dignity as the great alternatives to repression and terror. Experience has taught us that repressive societies are the wellspring of

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fanaticism. Groups like al Qaeda and ISIS were not born in Western capitals. They were given life in societies where individual liberty is suppressed and citizens have no voice in their own governments or futures. We must work with our allies and partners over the long-run to open up closed societies and to limit the conditions which allow extremism to flourish.

This is a long-term struggle, but we can declare our Plan of Action as a first step. America must throw down the gauntlet on the doorsteps of the enemies of freedom—and put them on notice that their reign of terror will end. Radical Islamists may have fired the first shot in this struggle. But with the defense of our great nation and liberty as our guiding light, America will fire the last.

Thank you.