



One-pager: Al Qaeda and ISIS: Existential threats to the US and Europe

Terrorist attacks in Paris, France, and San Bernardino, California, have focused the West on the threat that militant Salafi-jihadist groups, such as the Islamic State of Iraq and al Sham (ISIS) and al Qaeda, pose to its security and way of life. However, current strategies to address the threat are inadequate.

AEI's [Critical Threats Project](#) and the [Institute for the Study of War](#) engaged in a joint planning effort to develop and evaluate possible courses of action that the United States could pursue to defeat the threat from ISIS and al Qaeda in Iraq and Syria. The findings are part of a series of reports; the first report, "Al Qaeda and ISIS: Existential Threats to the US and Europe" examines America's grand strategic objectives as they relate to global threats from ISIS and al Qaeda.

1. Salafi-jihadi military organizations, particularly ISIS and al Qaeda, are today's greatest threat to the security and values of American and European citizens. ISIS and al Qaeda pose an existential threat even though they cannot destroy the West militarily. Their attacks deliberately provoke Western responses that undermine such core values of our societies as tolerance, respect for diversity, and individual liberty. The two groups are also accelerating the collapse of the world order on which the American way of life depends.

2. American and Western security requires the elimination of ISIS and al Qaeda regional bases and safe havens. ISIS and al Qaeda use the extensive safe havens and infrastructure of locally focused Salafi-jihadi groups to help plan, train, and equip fighters for attacks against the West. Destroying specific cells or nodes actively preparing attacks against the West is not sufficient. Al Qaeda and ISIS will be able to reconstitute the threat as long as Salafi-jihadi military organizations that can support them exist.

3. Syrian al Qaeda affiliate Jabhat al Nusra poses one of the most significant long-term threats of any Salafi-jihadi group, and its destruction must be one of the highest priorities of any strategy to defend the US and Europe. Jabhat al Nusra has established an expansive network of partnerships with local opposition groups that have grown either dependent on or loyal to the organization.

4. ISIS and al Qaeda are insurgent military organizations, not terrorist groups. They are insurgencies that aim first to overthrow all existing governments in the Muslim world, replacing them with their own, and later, to attack the West from a position of power to spread their ideology across the globe.

5. Current counter-ISIS and –al Qaeda policies do not ensure the safety of the American homeland. ISIS and al Qaeda activities interact with Russian and Iranian policies to endanger the international systems on which American safety and freedom depend. Any successful strategy to counter ISIS and al Qaeda will require coalition partners, but there is no natural coalition of states with common goals that can readily work together. Therefore, the US must lead its partners to ensure international security.

"Drifting along the current path in order to avoid dangerous and unpleasant action will almost certainly fail to achieve vital American national security interests and will put the safety of the American people and their allies in greater danger. The US must choose a new course."

To learn more, read "Al Qaeda and ISIS: Existential Threats to the US and Europe."