

CARNEGIE COUNCIL *for Ethics in International Affairs*

Blood Year: The Unraveling of Western Counterterrorism

Public Affairs, Global Ethics Forum TV Series

David Kilcullen, David Shipley, Joanne J. Myers

Transcript

Introduction

JOANNE MYERS: Good afternoon, everybody. I'm Joanne Myers, and on behalf of the Carnegie Council I'd like to thank you all for joining us. Our guests today are David Kilcullen and David Shipley.

Mr. Kilcullen is the author of *Blood Year: The Unraveling of Western Counterterrorism*, in which he questions the effectiveness of our approach to fighting the [war on terror](#) and talks about what a cogent strategy should look like. Mr. Kilcullen writes that this is not a book about [ISIS](#) (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria) per se; rather, it is about what the emergence of ISIS tells us about the broader war on terrorism since [9/11](#). Mr. Kilcullen's book originated as a long-form feature [essay](#) in *Quarterly Essay*, which is Australia's leading journal of politics, culture, and ideas, and won Australia's most prestigious journalism award, the [Walkley Award](#).

Engaging Mr. Kilcullen in conversation will be David Shipley, who is currently the senior executive editor of [Bloomberg View](#). He has also worked in the [Clinton administration](#) and has held various positions at *The New York Times*, as a reading of his bio indicates. Together, they bring a wealth of experience and a tremendous amount of knowledge about global affairs and the challenges that our country is facing.

Having a discussion about foreign policy in an [election year](#) is not always a first-and-foremost issue on voters' minds. Even so, 2016 is shaping up to be an exception. As the race for the White House swings into high gear, this time around, Americans, in addition to the economy, are becoming more concerned with national security and terrorism than in years past. And after [today's events in Brussels](#), I'm sure we're all a little bit more anxious than we were yesterday.

That being the case, it may be helpful for us to be reminded how we got into this mess in the first place and how Western strategy has failed us. As recent events indicate, today's crises are reflected not only in massacres and fallen cities, collapsed and collapsing states, the rise of ISIS, the [splintering of government in Iraq](#), but it is also, as Mr. Kilcullen writes, about the resurgence of confrontation with Russia, the [Iranian nuclear deal](#), and the [European refugee crisis](#).

At this time I ask that you please join me in welcoming our two guests, who will engage in a conversation for about 25 or 30 minutes. Then we will open up the floor to you to ask any questions that weren't addressed during their interchange. Thank you both for joining us.

Discussion

DAVID SHIPLEY: Well, thank you very much, everyone. I'm absolutely honored to be here to talk with Dave about *Blood Year*.

I think we all know that tonight, hours after the [horrific events in Brussels](#), this book has taken on added relevance and force. Before we begin, I have to say what an absolutely remarkable book this is. It's a short book about a [long war](#), one that still stretches out before us. For anyone trying to make sense of the world since [9/11](#), anyone disoriented by the rush of events, dispirited by the losses, mindful of the enormous sacrifices, frustrated by the pileup of failed strategies, yearning for someone to put it together in a coherent way, I recommend them this book. I know I will be returning to it. There is a lot for us to pick up on.

Given what happened today, I wanted to start at the end, though I hope we'll have plenty of time to get into the history of the last 16 or so years.

You characterize [ISIS](#), which has claimed responsibility for the Brussels attacks, as a conventional military foe: ISIS cares about territory; they provide services; they wear uniforms from time to time; it operates in an organized fashion. How do these attacks, which seem unconventional and atomized, fit with that strategy? And does ISIS care about the far enemy?

DAVID KILCULLEN: That's a great question.

First, thanks to everybody for coming out. I know you obviously have other things going on, so I appreciate the opportunity to have a conversation.

In the book I try to lay out a way of thinking about ISIS that makes sense. I describe it as being a kind of three-layered entity.

At the top layer is something that looks a lot like a state, as you mentioned, and it currently occupies about a third of Iraq and about the same size area within Syria. It thinks it's a state. It fights like a state. It has tanks. It controls cities. It runs the electricity systems. It's trying to be a territorial state.

At the next layer are, what are called *wilayat*, or territories or provinces of the Islamic State. There are now 11 of those—soon to be 12—and they run all the way from Nigeria, through North Africa, across the Middle East, into Afghanistan, and soon in Southeast Asia.

DAVID SHIPLEY: Are they cities, provinces?

DAVID KILCULLEN: In concept they are provinces, but they range from groups like [Boko Haram](#), which is actually a mobile insurgency in the Lake Chad area in Nigeria and Cameroon; through a [group](#) in Sirte, which is [Qaddafi's](#) hometown in Libya, which is actually trying to carve out and govern a piece of territory; through, in Afghanistan, a [group](#) that broke off from the [Pakistani Taliban](#) and formed an ISIS group a couple of years ago; and then down to something [much more atomized](#) in Southeast Asia. So quite varied, but organized and structured in a similar way to al-Qaeda. What we're dealing with in Belgium is an example of this.

Then there's another whole layer, which I refer to as the "Internationale"—I'm obviously harking back to an earlier era of international terrorism. Nobody really knows exactly how many people there are in that layer of the organization. But as one indication, a few weeks ago Twitter [suspended](#) 125,000 Twitter accounts that are believed to be linked to ISIS. So it's certainly a substantial number of people.

The average age of [al-Qaeda recruits](#) to [Osama bin Laden's](#) organization after 9/11 was between about 15 and 25. The average age of recruits that are in that atomized ad hoc kind of structure in the West seems to be something between about 12 and 19. So we're looking at a much younger set of people, much more connected on social media, and able to carry out a much more organized kind of strategy.

Now what we're seeing in Belgium is, I think, the emergence of a new thing. It's a sort of organized paramilitary underground in Europe. I write about that towards the end of the book in some detail around the [Paris attacks](#), and we can get into Brussels in much more detail if you want to.

The way that I like to think about ISIS is as these three interlocked threats, and while everywhere we're only addressing one of those, we're not going to get at the overall phenomenon.

DAVID SHIPLEY: And we do characterize the Brussels threat as remote radicalization?

DAVID KILCULLEN: If we had been talking about this a few days ago, I would have said that there's a general remote radicalization threat across Europe. I think what we're seeing here, though, is, again, something much more structured. [Salah Abdeslam](#), who is the logistics planner for the Paris attacks last November, was [captured](#) last week. In his interrogation a number of things have come out, and the French police have revealed some of those.

When he was on the run after the Paris attack, he told a contact that he and 90 other people had come back from Syria; having been trained in Syria by the Islamic State, they had returned to create a structure to carry out a number of attacks across Europe. When he was captured, he was captured with a number of cell phones and bomb-making equipment and other things in Molenbeek, which is a suburb in Brussels. When the other attackers who were involved in the Paris attacks were eventually [killed](#) in an apartment in Saint-Denis in Paris, they found dozens of cell phones and standardized equipment, the sort of thing you would need if you wanted to run a fairly large-scale, organized underground.

So I think what we're looking at is something that's more organized than what we've seen in the past in Europe. It is probably not on the same scale as what we're seeing in Africa or South Asia, but it's getting there.

DAVID SHIPLEY: And just since we're on this, where would you put [San Bernadino](#)?

DAVID KILCULLEN: What's interesting to me—and this is partly what I mean by how politicized the discussion has become—is in the immediate aftermath of San Bernadino, we had a very significant argument domestically about gun control. Republicans and Democrats backed into their respective corners, and we engaged in the debate that we always have about gun control.

Since then we've gotten into a discussion about the [cracking of the iPhone](#) and the FBI (Federal Bureau of Investigation) seeking assistance from Apple to do that—the iPhone that was captured from one of the [shooters](#) in the incident. And again Democrats and Republicans have backed into our respective corners and are arguing about civil liberties versus surveillance.

But, guys, there was an ISIS cell in Los Angeles, and our debate has sort of missed that point, right? We actually have seen the emergence of something that is nowhere near as developed as what we've seen in Europe or in, say, parts of Africa. But we're certainly seeing something that's more than al-Qaeda ever managed to achieve.

I think we're looking at a different order of threat. It's more organized. It's more pervasive. That's partly because they're a better class of terrorist, to be honest. But it's also because of tools, like the iPhone and the Internet and social media, that allow them to do things which just weren't even available to a group like al-Qaeda at the time of 9/11.

DAVID SHIPLEY: Yes. I'll tell you one other element that makes the book so powerful is that it's an apolitical document, essentially, or it reads as a purely disinterested work, which stands out in remarkably stark contrast to the sound and the noise that we've been hearing for the last year and a half.

DAVID KILCULLEN: And that's partly why I wrote it. I felt like a lot of what has happened has become very politicized, and unless you remember what actually took place, it's hard to have a sensible conversation about what to do next.

DAVID SHIPLEY: Talking about what took place, why don't we go back to the beginning? Why don't we go back to 9/11 and al-Qaeda? How is al-Qaeda different from ISIS and what strategy grew out of its existence and how did that evolve?

DAVID KILCULLEN: Al-Qaeda was a much more structured organization than ISIS is. It had committees, it had organizations that held territory and had specific organizational responsibility, and it was very structured.

The attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on 9/11 essentially threw that organization into disarray. It wasn't just that we almost immediately [invaded Afghanistan](#). It was that actually it was a faction within al-Qaeda that prompted the 9/11 attacks. Not everybody agreed with the plan, and the organization began to sort of fall apart pretty quickly after 9/11.

In 2005, a group of us put together a strategy that we called "disaggregation." The idea was that al-Qaeda central, which at that time was in Pakistan, was manipulating and mobilizing different franchise groups globally and aggregating their effects and using them to carry out a sort of global struggle. The idea was that we could defeat the threat by putting enough pressure on core al-Qaeda in Pakistan to make it impossible for them to coordinate all these other groups, by cutting off the money and so on, and then by providing assistance regionally to all of these regional partners to help them stand up and deal with the threat locally. That was the idea, and it failed, really, for two reasons.

One—and one that I spend a lot of time in the book talking about—was [Iraq](#). I described the [invasion of Iraq](#) as the greatest strategic screw-up since [Hitler's invasion of Russia](#). We can get into more detail on that, but it's in no way a hyperbole. I lay out in the book exactly why it is basically exactly the same decision.

The other big reason was because, in 2005 when we were coming together to come up with a strategy, we had what seemed like a great idea, which was: Let's disaggregate these guys, let's make it hard for them to communicate, let's break up the organization. In 2006 there was the iPhone. It was also the beginning of Twitter. Around that year was the beginning of YouTube and the emergence of social media. So right when we disaggregated the group and made them kind of disembodied and scattered, a whole series of new tools emerged that allowed them to run that disaggregated structure in a different way.

It was also the period when we saw a massive explosion of Internet connectivity and cell phone connectivity in the developing world, which made it possible to sit in Somalia and talk to somebody in

Minneapolis and connect with a cousin in Rotterdam—things that just weren't even physically or technologically possible a few years before. If al-Qaeda had access to these tools, it wouldn't have had to do 9/11 the way that it did.

I think that was a huge problem with our strategy.

DAVID SHIPLEY: Was there a period of time when disaggregation would have worked?

DAVID KILCULLEN: There was a period of time where it did actually work, and we saw a pretty significant reduction of the effectiveness of core al-Qaeda and we did see a little bit of progress against the different al-Qaeda franchises globally. But we just were not able to recover from that mother error of invading Iraq. That sort of became a hole in heart of the strategy that we were trying to put together.

DAVID SHIPLEY: There are plenty of political errors that we can talk about. But was the failure to shift from disaggregation more of a military and strategic error? I mean, because we saw these technologies emerging—you must have been more aware than anyone—then these lines of connection that hadn't been able to be forged, all of a sudden, were lighting up. Was there talk about how to respond to it?

DAVID KILCULLEN: There was some talk about it, but I think it was already very politicized by then.

Two-thousand-and-three was a critical year. That's the year that we invaded Iraq.

The other really critical year was 2011; the year that we [killed bin Laden](#), it was the year of the [Arab Spring](#), it was the year of the beginning of the [Syrian Civil War](#), and it was the year that we [withdrew completely](#) from Iraq. All those things together allowed the successor group to [al-Qaeda in Iraq](#) to recover and go into Syria and create a safe haven, where they rebuilt and came back.

Meanwhile, we were kind of distracted by the fact that we'd killed Osama bin Laden, right?

So the strategy had actually worked. The CIA (Central Intelligence Agency) created an organization called "[Alec Station](#)" in the middle of the 1990s, which was a special CIA station dedicated to tracking and finding Osama bin Laden. They shut that station down in 2006. The reason they did that was not because they lost interest in tracking bin Laden, but because our strategy, which was to render bin Laden irrelevant, had actually worked. So by the middle of the 2000s, bin Laden was no longer an operational control center. In fact, to the extent that he had any operational effect on al-Qaeda, it was actually to restrain a younger generation of more hot-headed leaders who were coming up.

The moving away from that was a recognition of the fact that there were the regional groups—like [al-Qaeda in Yemen](#) and [al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula](#) and [in North Africa](#)—that were more important by that point than core al-Qaeda. Then we killed bin Laden in May 2011, and we sort of spiked the football and said, "We killed bin Laden. It's all awesome."

DAVID SHIPLEY: Sort of "[Mission Accomplished](#)."

DAVID KILCULLEN: "Mission Accomplished," yes. It was President Obama's equivalent of President [Bush's](#) "[Mission Accomplished](#)."

That then made us think: "Well, obviously, the threat must be reducing because we killed bin Laden." And we got ourselves into this very soothing narrative that "the Arab Spring is happening; we killed

bin Laden; these regimes are falling—everything's going to be fine." And a lot of people very quickly lost interest in counterterrorism.

Of course, none of those things turned out to be true, right? The Arab Spring failed. The states collapsed and resulted in the emergence of these *wiliyats*, these groups that are part of ISIS.

DAVID SHIPLEY: Let's get back to the two presidents and then we'll get to some of the other stuff later. In the book, presidents Bush and Obama were essentially equally damaging inversions of each other. You use the terms "reckless" and "feckless," respectively. Perhaps we could talk about that.

And also it would be great if you could talk a little bit more about the comparison to Hitler's invasion of Russia and the beginning of a two-front war that set a lot of this in motion.

DAVID KILCULLEN: Let's talk about that first and then we can talk about the presidents.

Let me just say, too, this is not me patting myself on the back and saying that I got everything right and everybody else got things wrong. I actually am quite self-critical in the book, too.

DAVID SHIPLEY: I will vouch for that.

DAVID KILCULLEN: Yes. I was the chief of strategy at the U.S. State Department. So to the extent that we screwed up the strategy, you know, it's kind of my fault. I don't want to cast aspersions on everybody else, but we have to acknowledge where things went wrong. Obviously the biggest and most-difficult-to-recover-from error was this decision to invade Iraq.

I liken it to Hitler's decision to invade Russia. I know it's very problematic to start comparing people to the Nazis. I'm not in any way doing that. I'm in no way suggesting that we are in any fashion, or the [Bush administration](#) are in any way, like the Nazis at all. But strategically there are a lot of similarities.

If you look at Hitler's decision to invade Russia in [1941](#), he has almost defeated the United Kingdom and the Western Allies. He hasn't quite finished the job. Great Britain under [Churchill](#) was still unconquered; it's very attenuated; it only controls the British Isles basically. It's set back on its heels, but it's still a problem. He hasn't really dealt with that completely. He thinks, "Well, the time is right now to turn and deal with a long-standing adversary, the Soviet Union, that's actually contained by a [treaty](#) and doesn't pose an immediate threat; but now's a good time, because we're ahead of the game, to settle that score and put ourselves into a more dominant position generally."

He goes and invades Russia. It all goes very well for about six months, and then it starts to fall apart. And then the United Kingdom recovers, America joins the war, the Russians counterattack, and Hitler finds himself in a two-front war where he simply does not have the resources to deal with both those fronts simultaneously. It becomes—not just a matter of time—but a matter of time, political will, and resources for the Allies to overwhelm Hitler. At no point after December 1941 is the Nazi agenda really achievable. But it takes still several years to fall over.

So applying that to Iraq: We had invaded Afghanistan. It took us six and a half weeks to destroy the [Taliban](#) and throw that regime out—so half a week longer than it took Hitler to [conquer France](#). We hadn't dealt with the problem completely. Bin Laden, [Zawahiri](#), a number of the other al-Qaeda leaders, have gone into Pakistan. But Pakistan is a country with which we are technically at peace, and al-Qaeda is a non-state actor. So it's a very complicated issue to figure out: How do we deal with that threat that's inside Pakistan but isn't the Pakistanis? It's not a state.

Instead of doing that, we turn to Iraq, which likewise is a longstanding enemy that's contained by a [sanctions regime](#). It poses no direct immediate threat, but it's a regional adversary that's causing all kinds of damaging things in the region. And we think: "Now is a great opportunity while we're on the top of our game to deal with that threat and put ourselves in a strong position for the region."

And again we invade in an invasion of choice, and it all goes really well for about six months, and then it starts to fall apart. At that point the Taliban begins to recover, we start to see a big spike of activity in Afghanistan, and we're stuck in the same dynamic that we still are in today, which is we just don't have enough resources to deal with the threat in all these places. It's a counterfactual, but you can say that if we had not invaded Iraq but had instead focused on the problem in Afghanistan and trying to resolve that, we would potentially be in quite a different situation today than we are now.

Now, that all sounds like a Democratic critique of President Bush. I get into the Bush administration in great detail in the first part of the book and I talk about many of the problems. One of the big ones was President Bush's tendency to delegate.

DAVID SHIPLEY: And you talk about how he learned along the way.

DAVID KILCULLEN: He did. He initially delegated decision-making responsibility too much to people like [Donald Rumsfeld](#) and [Doug Feith](#) and a variety of other people that we can talk about in more detail, and didn't take a direct interest—that's not right—he was interested, but he didn't take a direct role in running the conflict until it really got bad in Iraq. Then, when he seized control of the problem at the end of 2006, he showed that he was actually able to learn, and he really turned things around significantly.

General [Petraeus](#) has rightly gotten a lot of the credit for what [happened](#) on the ground in Iraq. The person who was critical, who hasn't got enough credit, is actually President Bush. And I'm not a fan, but I'm just saying that based on having been there in Baghdad and watched what he did.

Of course, like every other country, when we elect a new president in the United States, we are generally electing someone who is the opposite of the person that we're voting out. And President Obama, in many ways, is the direct opposite of President Bush. Where President Bush was very inarticulate, President Obama is very articulate. Where President Bush lumped everything together into a global war on terrorism, President Obama said, "We're not going to do that anymore." He got rid of the concept of a war on terror, but he didn't replace it with anything. And, instead of a global structure, we ended up with this thing that we call "overseas contingency operations," which is, to extend the World War II analogy, like trying to fight North Africa and Italy and Burma like they're all different wars in their own right.

But the other thing is that where President Bush delegated authority too much, President Obama tends to hold authority much more tightly. He and a group of three or four other advisors in the White House make virtually all the important decisions with respect to everything, from targeting of drone strikes, to specific operations, to running events on the ground. The Principals Committee meeting, which is a meeting of people in the senior levels of the government, is being called together three or four times a week, not to make decisions but to brief staffers, who then go into a closed-door room and have a conversation with the president and out emerges a decision.

A great illustration of that is in [Jeffrey Goldberg's](#) recent [article](#) in *The Atlantic*, which is worth taking a look, if you haven't had the chance. One of the things that he talks about is President Obama's decision not to follow through on the [red line](#) after the [Ghouta chemical attack](#) in Syria. He made that decision in the course of a walk around the White House with [Ben Rhodes](#), who is a great guy but

not a national security guy.

I think it's the opposite error. It's the tendency to arrogate too much into your own hands in terms of decision making.

DAVID SHIPLEY: Did technology have an effect on that, too?

DAVID KILCULLEN: In what way?

DAVID SHIPLEY: Growth of drones.

DAVID KILCULLEN: Oh, yes, sort of. Drone strikes—I'm on record critiquing the policy of drone strikes; we could have a whole separate conversation about that—it's interesting looking at the data on drones.

The drone capability that we have now is better than what existed around 9/11, but the essentials of the capability were already in place before the World Trade Center and the Pentagon attack. So the Bush administration had access to roughly similar technology. Only about 10 to 15 percent of drone strikes that have happened since 9/11 happened in the eight years of the Bush administration. The other 80 to 90 percent happened in the [Obama administration](#). I think that's because of a number of reasons.

One of them is because President Obama has been trying very hard to disengage from this incredibly stupid series of wars that we started before he came to office. He has been very wary of putting troops on the ground and has been looking for technological solutions that allow a light footprint, standoff approach to dealing with a threat. I fully respect the motivation. I just struggle to see how you can solve these very complex social and political problems on the ground from 10,000 feet with a Hellfire missile. That's part of the problem.

One of the incidents I talk about in the book is the horrendous [attack](#) on the Kunduz Médecins Sans Frontières hospital, which happened last year in Afghanistan. And that's a great example of how the light-footprint approach just hasn't worked in generating the effect that we're looking for and has had a number of negative side effects.

DAVID SHIPLEY: The book, at least as I saw it, was built around a few pivot points where everything started to go wrong. This, of course, happened a couple of times.

We've talked about disaggregation and you mentioned the death of bin Laden, but two other factors that you bring up in 2011 is the failure of the Arab Spring and how that brought about the birth of ISIS. That wasn't a connection that I had put together. You put bin Laden, Arab Spring, and birth of ISIS together. Maybe you could talk about how those three things were a turning point in 2011.

DAVID KILCULLEN: If we remember, first of May or second of May, depending on where you were globally, the SEAL team and CIA guys kill Osama bin Laden in Abbottabad, which is an area in northeastern Pakistan, and that immediately throws al-Qaeda into disarray. It takes them six weeks to settle on who is going to be the successor to Osama bin Laden. Eventually, they settle on Ayman al-Zawahiri. He is an Egyptian, he is a co-founder of al-Qaeda with bin Laden, he is one of the most senior people in the organization, but he's not an inspiring leader. A lot of younger people in al-Qaeda had long seen him as kind of an old man with old ideas. So it takes six weeks for them to settle on who the successor is going to be. But then it takes the rest of 2011 for all the franchises globally to sign on to the agenda that it's going to be Ayman al-Zawahiri.

What that means is that al-Qaeda is kind of missing in action for most of 2011. It was turned inward, focused on its own succession challenge. That turns out to be a really critical time, because that's the peak of the Arab Spring. The Arab Spring was a huge threat to al-Qaeda's ideology. To understand that, I need to backtrack slightly.

Al-Qaeda is a mashup of different strains of Islamic extremism. But one of the common features is that there's this belief that there are a number of apostate regimes—Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, a number of other places—which are oppressing the rights of believing Muslims, and that the role of a group like al-Qaeda is to act as kind of a revolutionary vanguard to overthrow those regimes. Al-Qaeda's idea was: "These regimes are propped up by the West, so if we attack the West and we make the West withdraw, these regimes will fall over." For 20 years al-Qaeda had run that strategy and achieved basically nothing, right? They'd killed a few thousand Muslims. They'd killed a few thousand Americans. They hadn't succeeded in overthrowing any regime, and they hadn't brought any benefits to people who were oppressed by the apostate regimes in North Africa and the Middle East.

Then, in the first half of 2011, shopkeepers and women's groups and students and trade unions succeeded in overthrowing [Tunisia](#), [Libya](#), [Egypt](#), came pretty close to overthrowing the regime in [Bahrain](#), in [Yemen](#). So we saw, basically, people power doing the job that al-Qaeda had claimed that it could do. For a while there in 2011, it looked like peaceful democratic process was going to be the solution. And so a lot of people turned away from the idea of the armed struggle and focused on the Arab Spring at that time.

By September it started to go bad, and we saw the rush to [elections](#) in Egypt, which meant that Egyptians were forced to choose between, essentially, the [old regime](#) and the [Brothers](#), [al-Ikhwan](#), [the Muslim Brotherhood](#). People didn't really like either choice, but they went with the Brothers basically because "anybody but the old regime."

By February-March of 2012, it was pretty clear that [Mohamed Morsi](#), the Brotherhood president, was acting in a fairly authoritarian way. He was overthrown in 2013 by a [military coup](#), and you're now back to where you were in Egypt before the Arab Spring.

Tunisia was a slightly better story. Libya was a slightly worse story, with the overthrow of [Qaddafi](#). Syria was a much worse story, where a peaceful protest turned into a full-on civil war within a few months.

So by the end of 2012, people are starting to realize, "Oh, actually we're not going to get there using peaceful protests," and they turn back to the idea of the armed struggle. But al-Qaeda has been disrupted by the death of bin Laden, and so, instead of turning back to al-Qaeda, they turn to this new organization, ISIS, which has grown out of our withdrawal from Iraq and the Syrian Civil War, and is now a much more appealing and capable organization than al-Qaeda.

Now, al-Qaeda actually recovered later, so it was a temporary eclipse of al-Qaeda. And now we're dealing with both al-Qaeda and ISIS as global threats. So that means we're in a much more dangerous situation now than we were at any time really since 9/11.

Questions

QUESTION: Don Simmons.

In the six or eight years following the World Trade Center collapse, there were a number of episodes

where the United States appeared to avoid other disasters by luck—I'm thinking of the [underwear bomber](#), the [shoe bomber](#), the [Times Square bomber](#), the [mailing from Yemen to Chicago](#) that was aborted by a Saudi tip, apparently. In the last five or six years, there have not been—or, at least, reports of such episodes have not reached public ears. It seems to me that at least American anti-terrorism forces are not unraveling, but upgrading. But would you agree with that?

DAVID KILCULLEN: I think the United States—I would put Australia, the United States, and the Canada in one bucket. I'd put the European counterterrorism forces in another. The British are somewhere in between. In the United States and Australia, there has actually been some fairly effective counterterrorism work done by local police and by groups like the FBI and so on. And in fact, I think we've been substantially successful in preventing large-scale, sort of European-style, attacks.

San Bernadino is an interesting hybrid situation, where the best guess right now is that it was probably designed to be something like Paris, but that the shooters got riled up at the last minute and switched the target, and so it ended up not working. So I would call that a near miss.

The other thing that's worth pointing out is, if you look at terrorism within the United States since 9/11, about two-thirds of terrorist events have been carried out by right-wing domestic groups, not by Islamic groups. So if we're interested in terrorism, as distinct from Islamic extremism, then the threat is from groups like the white supremacists and anti-government groups and so on. That's a really important thing to remember.

That's another issue with 9/11 and the invasion of Iraq, that it has taken us down, to some extent, a rabbit hole, where we're engaging in a lot of conflict overseas, and a lot of resources are being diverted into those kind of efforts, rather than to domestic counterterrorism.

QUESTION: Kevin McMullen.

Sir, I like your opinion about the original strategy in Afghanistan. As you probably know, this summer the U.S. Army War College published a [book](#) by Professor [Mason](#) arguing that not only is there no hope now, but that there was no hope in the beginning after key decisions of not allowing the [king](#) back into office, opting for strong central government, and trying to keep people with military experience out of the new military.

DAVID KILCULLEN: Are you talking about Iraq or Afghanistan?

QUESTIONER: Afghanistan.

DAVID KILCULLEN: I do put Afghanistan in a different category from Iraq in terms of the original decision to invade, right? I don't think we really had any choice but to go in there after 9/11. And I think—you can argue that back and forth—it wasn't in the same self-inflicted error category as Iraq.

But I think, when we did get on the ground, we made a significant series of errors very early in the peace. One of those was not even inviting the Taliban to participate in the [peace process](#) at the end of the invasion. Most people have a narrative in their minds that is, essentially: "The Taliban invited al-Qaeda in, they did 9/11, the Taliban refused to give up bin Laden after 9/11, so we invaded, they all fought us together, and then they just continued the war from Pakistan."

That's all wrong. None of those things are true, right? The Taliban didn't invite al-Qaeda in; they were already there when the Taliban came to power. Mullah [Omar](#) didn't know about 9/11; he was caught

by surprise when it happened. Mullah Omar offered to give bin Laden up to any foreign country that practices Sharia and suggested Saudi Arabia; we rejected that. When we invaded, Mullah Omar sent a number of his key leaders to offer to surrender to the new Afghan government, and he actually signed a surrender document saying, "We will acknowledge the authority of the new government, and all we ask is that we return to our homes in peace, and we'll cease the fight." Now you can believe or disbelieve that statement.

You know, when I was a kid in high school, the example they used to use in modern history for the worst ever peace process was the [Versailles Treaty](#). At least at Versailles, we eventually invited the Germans to be part of the meeting. In Afghanistan we just ignored the Taliban completely.

And there was no [Quetta Shura](#), the group running the Taliban now, until October of 2003.

So there was a two-year period where we had an opportunity to make peace in Afghanistan that we really missed. But again, that's because we weren't focused on Afghanistan; we were thinking about how to invade Iraq. If we'd kept our "eye on the ball," to quote President Obama, I think we'd be looking at a very different set of circumstances. I'd like to think that anyway.

DAVID SHIPLEY: You also make an interesting point that Afghanistan is a weak state and a strong society and Iraq was the exact opposite.

DAVID KILCULLEN: Yes. You know, that term is not mine; it's from [Joel Migdal](#), who is a political scientist.

The point that I make is: Afghanistan had very strong civil society elements and very strong elements of rule of law and of customary obligation. It was a strong society but with a very weak state.

Iraq, on the other hand, had this 40-year period of dictatorship under [Saddam](#), and Saddam had carefully weeded out anybody with any leadership and had carefully fragmented groups and turned them against each other. So when we went into Iraq, we were dealing with a population that was extraordinarily attuned to being very dependent on the government and they expected us to do absolutely everything for them. They had learned to not take the initiative and to not try to solve their own problems, because under Saddam that was one of the most dangerous things that you could do.

Now, many Iraqis have a huge amount of talent. I'm not talking about people there now; I'm talking about people who had come up under Saddam that we were dealing with early in the peace. So it was a totally different set of circumstances. It's a minor theme in the book, but one of our pathologies has been trying to copy things that worked in Afghanistan and do them in Iraq, and then later on trying to copy things that worked in Iraq and do them in Afghanistan. And, of course, the two countries are completely different.

QUESTION: Susan Gitelson.

Now that you have analyzed what the problems are so acutely, here we are—especially after a bad day of terrorism, but there have been other bad days of terrorism. So the question we really want to know is: What can we do about it, and how can we contain terrorism, and how can we get on with the prospects of developing countries, creating jobs, having reasons for people to be living decently in their own countries?

DAVID KILCULLEN: If I may summarize it—and I don't have a slide, but if I were in a military

environment, I probably would—if you imagine three layers: There's the central state—the *Dawlah al-Islāmiyah*, the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria—that is a state-like threat and is running a conventional war. The response to that has to be conventional military response.

We're talking about an enemy that controls cities and has tanks and runs heavy artillery. It's not a guerrilla organization or a terrorist threat. And the big damage that it's doing is not the state itself; it's the fact that it's tearing apart the Middle East—11 million displaced people; between 300,000 and 400,000 Syrians killed now; [1.1 million asylum seekers into Europe in 2015](#), the European Union a few weeks ago estimated another 3 million in the next two years. It's a huge conventional—it's of the nature of World War II. And that's a military response.

The second layer is these regional groupings, the *wilayat*. There we actually know what to do, which is basically providing assistance to partner governments that are confronting those local threats. If I have a critique on what we've done of that in the past, it's actually a technical one, which is we've spent too much time teaching corrupt cops to be better corrupt cops and teaching oppressive militaries to shoot straight. We haven't focused enough on political reform.

The country that I was closest involved with on this was Indonesia. Indonesia is a country that has had massive progress in the last 15 years in dealing with an internal terrorist threat that's still very real. We like to pat ourselves on the back and say, "Didn't we do a good job?" That's a complete misreading of what happened in Indonesia. In Indonesia there was a real and genuine transition to democracy that happened after 1998, and that's why it's different, because there was a real process of reform. And that's why there wasn't an equivalent of the Arab Spring in Indonesia, because they themselves were going through a process of political reform.

So we need to be working, I think, in a different way with partners. But we sort of know what we need to do.

Domestically, I think we need to rethink, because what we've got here is a system where we have an investigatory approach to terrorism. So when we identify a plot, we put a surveillance team and an investigative team on it, and we try to work that plot. It doesn't matter whether you're talking about two guys in a garage or 20 guys planning 9/11. You still need roughly the same number of people to run that kind of investigative and surveillance operation. So what we're doing is over-stressing our system. We don't have the resources to track this much larger number of smaller plots.

An [incident](#) that happened in Australia last year illustrates that. A kid went to mosque on a Friday afternoon, got riled up, went home and got his gun, went to a police station, began shooting, and killed a police employee. There's no way that our current counterterrorism investigation setup can detect that plot ahead of time, because the kid himself didn't even know he was going to do it until two hours before the shoot.

So I think we have to go in a different direction that focuses more on community resiliency, recognizing that these things are going to happen and that we need to be focused on how to minimize the damage when they do happen, and maximize the pace with which we recover. I don't need to tell a group of people in New York how important *that* element of it is in terms of dealing with a terrorist threat.

The other thing, I think—and you alluded to it—is dealing with what it is that's driving individuals within our own society to either try to go Syria and Iraq or to take up arms here and engage in conflict. That's largely about economic marginalization and social exclusion. But it's also about having a ready-made ideology that's ready-to-hand, that says to them: "It's not your fault. This is why

it's happening and here's an action program to deal with it."

There's a social and an economic and a community-based approach, but also there really is an extreme ideology out there, an Islamic ideology, that we need to be addressing as well.

So I would put it in those three levels and I'd say across each of those three levels there are a number of different actions that we need to be taking.

The biggest issue is one of coordination. We're doing most of those actions already, but they're just not coordinated into a coherent strategy. In part, that's because we're in this very partisan political argument about how we got here. So one of the things I'm suggesting in the book is, if we want to come up with a workable strategy going forward, we have to, to some extent, just set that aside and say, "Look, it's all of our fault. Most certainly it was President Bush's fault. It was certainly, a lot of it, also President Obama's fault. The Iraqis and the Afghans had a big part to play as well. All the Brits and Aussies, we all screwed up. But let's set that aside and think about how to move forward in a more logical fashion."

QUESTION: Craig Charney.

Does our decapitation strategy—or what seems to be our decapitation strategy—make that much sense? I mean whether it's been striking out at bin Laden, whether it's been getting Saddam Hussein, whether it's been killing [Baitullah Mehsud](#) with a drone—it seems to me, at least, that our focus on the key leaders tends to deemphasize the fact that we're dealing with a social movement and a social base. Or do you think that, in fact, the military effectiveness and that scrambling of the leadership that happens for a time is actually worth it?

DAVID KILCULLEN: You're actually talking about what I'm doing research on right now for my next book, which is about [Darwinian](#) adaptation and evolution processes in terrorist groups.

It is certainly true that—you used Baitullah Mehsud—I think he's a great example. For those who don't know, Baitullah Mehsud was the second leader of what's now the Pakistani Taliban.

The first guy to run the Pakistani Taliban, which wasn't even a thing then, was a guy called [Nek Muhammad Wazir](#), who was a tribal leader from the Tirah Valley in the tribal areas in Pakistan. Frankly, he was a bit of a hillbilly. He was a young guy. He didn't have a lot of military experience, didn't have a lot of tribal *wasta*, you know? We killed him.

Then Baitullah Mehsud took over. He was better. He had more years of experience fighting. He had more tribal base, because he'd demonstrated that he was a warrior. He ran for two or three years in charge of the organization. Then we killed him with a drone.

[Hakimullah Mehsud](#) took over, who was even better than Baitullah. He brought everybody together. He had four years of experience.

So what we were actually doing was having a Darwinian improving effect on the organization, by seeding out people. [Laughter] So I think you could argue that our targeting policies helped TTP—Pakistani Taliban—get better.

You could flip that around, though, and you could say, "That happened because we killed them once every two years. If we were killing them once every two days, then it wouldn't happen."

What you're actually seeing with ISIS in Iraq right now is that effect. We've killed so many of them so

quickly that their leadership structure is actually starting to crumble. I think the meta-point is that when we target an individual node in a network, targeters often get too focused on that one node, instead of saying, "How are we shaping the organization as a whole and how are we affecting its evolution into a different direction?" I think we need to take that meta-view as we think, particularly, about a very disaggregated terrorist threat like ISIS.

The Paris attack led to, eventually, the arrest of Salah Abdeslam last week. That certainly led to the attacks that we saw today in Brussels. But it's not a simple matter of "This is a revenge attack by a structured network." That's not how it works.

For those of us who have done it in the field, what a terrorist group worries about when someone like Salah Abdeslam gets taken out is what we used to call in Iraq the roll-up: You take one guy, you exploit his cell phone, you hit everybody on the cell phone, you hit everybody on their cell phones—it's like a knock-on effect, and you wrap up an entire group within a few days.

So they saw him go down and thought, "We've got to attack immediately so that we maintain the initiative and they can't start the roll-up." So that's a case of a network responding, almost like an autoimmune response, to the taking out of a particular node.

I think we've got to do a much better job. Some of it is mathematics, absolutely. But it's also policy, helping educate policymakers to say that, "Yeah, killing the individual guy is something that you can do, but it may not actually be strategically"—I mean, it might be; he might be the one guy, and you kill that one guy and the whole thing falls over; there have been examples of that. But you might also be killing Nek Muhammad Wazir and the guy that's waiting in the wings is Baitullah Mehsud, who's actually much better.

So I think we need to be more sophisticated in our thinking about targeting going forward.

QUESTION: Sondra Stein.

For dealing with ISIS and Syria, what do you think of what we're [doing](#)? Is there more that we should do? Do you think what we're doing is about what we should be doing?

The second question is about Pakistan. I've been reading how they are developing small nuclear weapons, and in many ways Pakistan is one of the most dangerous countries in the world. Is there anything else we can do in Pakistan to lessen the threat there?

DAVID KILCULLEN: These are both great questions.

In Syria I would say the most important thing to do is make peace. A lot of what we're seeing in the overflow of refugees into Turkey and in what's going on in Europe, and in particular in Jordan and in Lebanon, is a direct effect of just the continued open wound of the war in Syria. So I would be willing to make almost any deal at this point to end the conflict in Syria, just because it has such a massive negative effect elsewhere.

To the extent that U.S. military effort helps us get closer to making peace, I think it's a good thing. To the extent that it continues the war, I think it can be problematic. We have been careful to a fault about not targeting civilians in Syria. We have been very good at that, actually, and hardly have there been any incidents of Western air power targeting civilians.

The [Russians come in](#)—I'll give you one example: The Jordanians and the United States were

arguing for most of last year about ISIS oil trucks that were moving back and forward from ISIS-controlled oil fields and smuggling oil.

The Jordanians came in and said, "Can we bomb these trucks? We want to get rid of them."

The U.S. targeters said, "No, because we don't know that they're all ISIS, and there might be some guys that are not part of the organization."

So the Jordanians came back and said, "All right, well can we drop leaflets on them and tell them to not do it anymore and, if you keep doing it, we'll bomb you?"

We thought about it and said, "No."

Then they said, "Well, can we just take one out, as a warning?"

We were in the middle of thinking about that when the Russians came in and killed the lot of them in one night—and a lot of civilians, too, by the way.

So it has been a different, much blunter instrument that has come in under the Russians. It has certainly caused a significant change in the conditions of the conflict. Now you have the regime sitting down with the rebels and talking peace. But the positions are still very far apart. The [Assad](#) regime doesn't even want to talk about the possibility that somebody else might end up being the president of Syria. The rebels don't want to include some groups that the regime wants to include. So we're still a long way from there. I actually think Secretary [Kerry](#) is doing a great job of trying to pursue that peacemaking process.

Pakistan—there's a public narrative about Pakistan which is very negative, and if we were having this conversation 10 years ago, I think it would be quite a different conversation. What we're seeing now in Pakistan is that the Pakistani military and the Pakistani government have actually mounted a really significant [offensive](#) against the Taliban inside Pakistan. In fact, one of the reasons why there's now an ISIS in Afghanistan is because that's a splinter faction from the Pakistani Taliban that were pushed into Afghanistan by the big Pakistani military offensive at the end of 2014.

I think Pakistan—you could put this in a number of different ways, but the way I'm going to put it is I think they have woken up to the threat within and are really focusing on how to deal with that. But Pakistan is dealing with some really difficult circumstances, some of which are of its own creation—not Pakistan itself, but elements within the Pakistani government.

I think that the situation in Afghanistan and Pakistan is probably going to get a lot worse before it starts to get better.

QUESTION: My name is Nuriyeni Bintarsari. I'm from Indonesia. Now I'm working on my dissertation about counterterrorism measures in Indonesia.

I want to ask you about the prospect of Indonesian counterterrorism measures. We got a lot of training and aid from Australia to train our [Detachment 88](#) and to establish Indonesia's counterterrorism agency. Do you think in the long term it still works for Indonesia? And, if it doesn't work, then what are the implications for ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) and Australia?

QUESTION: Reed Bonadonna from the U.S. Merchant Marine Academy.

I was introduced to your writings on counterinsurgency as an instructor at the Marine Corps Command and Staff College. I have a counter-insurgency question, kind of a tactical one. I have a particular reason for asking it too, because we have some midshipmen going to the Naval Academy next month for an ethics competition and they have to talk about *bacha bazi* in Afghanistan and what should be the policy of the U.S. military commander toward *bacha bazi*. This is the question we're going to discuss when we go down there. So I was wondering what you thought about it.

DAVID KILCULLEN: Okay, so two very different questions. [Laughter]

Let me take the Indonesia question first. I think Indonesia is in a very interesting transitional period, where the original group of people that was arrested—guys like *Abu Bakar Bashir*, but others as well, who were arrested early after 9/11—have mostly served their prison terms and have been released back into the community. So we're seeing a sort of second wave of terrorism where people that were—actually there are two factors. One is people who were in jail are out now and are back and are organizing. So there's a bit of a resurgence based on that.

The other thing is that *Jemaah Islamiyah* (JI) has been seen by others as becoming soft and being co-opted a little bit. If we think about the origins of JI in *Negara Islam Indonesia* and the way that that splintered into different groups, you saw *Mujahidin Indonesia Timur* and you saw *Mujahidin KOMPAK* and other groups emerge that critiqued JI and said, "You guys are not real jihadists. We're the real thing." So you get this more extreme fringe emerging of the jihadist set in Indonesia.

I think the other big transition, of course, as we talked about, is we're now talking about a truly democratic society with different police and military institutions than we had even a decade ago, and a different *president* who has a different view and comes from being the mayor of Jakarta and has that kind of city-level view.

I have a lot of confidence that Indonesia is going to do well. The reason that I say that is because Indonesians have never sat back and expected other people to do things for them, they have always taken the lead themselves in thinking about how to respond to the threat; and also because we're talking about a society where the strongest predictor of non-involvement in Islamic terrorism in Indonesia is belonging to an Islamic mass movement, like *Nahdlatul Ulama* (NU). So there is a very strong civil society, community organizations that are a big resiliency factor in preventing terrorism.

I think that going forward, things like training advocates and training people in evidence preservation and forensics and those kinds of things—kind of non-sexy, behind-the-scenes kind of things—are going to be really important, because that's about standing up a viable structure for the law-and-order system in Indonesia.

So *bacha bazi*, for those who don't know what it is, is essentially institutionalized pedophilia in Afghan society, where men of a certain older status will take young boys, as young as 10 or 12, as sexual partners, and will often maintain what amounts to a harem of boys who are very close to them politically and often grow up to be very influential. It's often described as primarily Pashtun in origin, but actually you see it almost as commonly in some of the Northern ethnic groups. Without naming names, there's a fairly famous Northwestern warlord who has a long history of this as well. It has been a real problem from an ethical standpoint, and also from a cultural standpoint, for Americans and others working in Afghanistan trying to work with the Afghans.

I've confronted this myself many times over the years, where you're in an environment where you're trying to work with a local partner to establish a relationship with the community and build a more effective structure, and they're engaging in practices that are just abhorrent to us, either culturally or

ethically. *Bacha bazi* most definitely falls into that category.

I think you are left with a couple of choices. One of them is a tactical choice, and it's to say: "Is this practice"—and it could be that, or it could be corruption, it could be abuse of the population, it could be a particular targeting strategy that your partner is using—"Is this practice undermining our joint objective of suppressing this insurgency and standing the society back up on its feet?"

If that's the case, then I think you've got a really strong case to go to your partner and say, "You need to stop this, and here's why, and we'll bring all of our sanctions to bear to make it happen. But you need to stop it for your own good because it's actually undermining your objective."

If that's not the case, if people basically accept it and yet we still regard it as abhorrent, then I think you've got an ethical choice as an individual. If you can't support that behavior and you can't work with someone who's carrying it on, then you need to quit, and you need to say why. So don't quit quietly and just skulk off, but say, "Look, this is unacceptable, and we can have a conversation about why it's unacceptable, but while you continue to do this, I can't work with you."

I've had that experience in Iraq, not around pedophilia but around the killing of civilians, and have had to walk away from Iraqi partners and say, "We are not going to work with you guys, and more than that, we're going to shut you down, and if we ever see this kind of behavior again, we're going to shoot you in the head." Sometimes it has to get that extreme in a combat environment. Most times it doesn't. Most times you can say to people, "Guys, now what are you doing?" And you'll often find that the people, particularly around corruption and around abuse of the population, will say, "Yeah, okay, we see your point."

Bacha bazi is an example of something that you also see with the way that these cultures treat women, which is so ingrained in their view of the world that it's kind of hard for them to even see it as a problem. They are like, "How is this possibly an issue?"

There was an incident, I think, last year in Afghanistan where someone was disciplined for refusing to work with an Afghan partner that was engaging in that behavior. There was another incident where people beat up an Afghan partner who did it. I would say beating up your partner is probably going too far. I can understand where it comes from, but it's not acceptable under any circumstances. But walking away is absolutely acceptable.

So a very complex and difficult issue, but that, unfortunately, comes with the territory of what we've been doing in Iraq and Afghanistan for the last 15 years or so.

JOANNE MYERS: David Kilcullen and David Shipley, on behalf of all of us, I want to thank you for a very useful session.

Audio

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