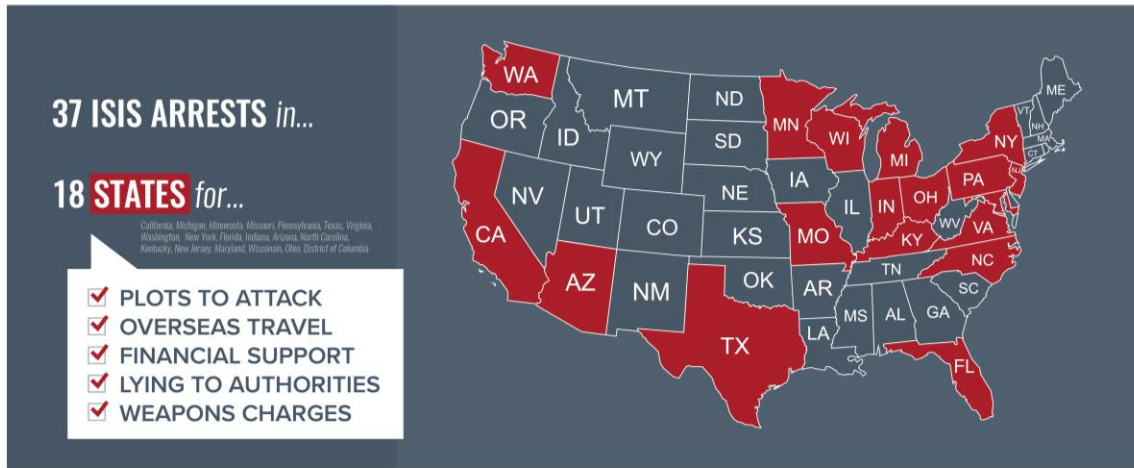




## 2016: "YEAR OF TERROR"



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*This document is produced by the Majority Staff of the House Homeland Security Committee. It is based on information culled from open source materials, including media reports, publicly available government statements, and nongovernmental assessments.*



## KEY POINTS

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The terror threat environment worsened in 2016. Jihadist groups continued to successfully direct and inspire acts of terror worldwide, even as law enforcement stepped up efforts to thwart attackers.

- ◆ Overall terror activity in the West spiked in 2016. For instance, ISIS plots against Western countries and their interests totaled 74, a figure greater than 2015 and 2014 combined. The United States remains the group's most targeted country. Additionally, at least 37 ISIS suspects were arrested in 18 U.S. States.
- ◆ December's truck attack on a Berlin Christmas market and the New Year shooting at a popular Istanbul nightclub are proof that ISIS followers are heeding calls to strike wherever they are, using any means necessary. The group's messages have far-reaching influence, inspiring followers to carry out independent attacks or to engage hardened jihadists for direction and assistance.
- ◆ While efforts to expel ISIS from their so-called caliphate in Syria and Iraq continue, the group is proving more malleable and unpredictable than expected. In December, ISIS regained control of Syria's ancient city of Palmyra and showed resilience on other fronts.
- ◆ Other Islamist terror groups, especially al Qaeda, maintained and in some cases expanded their influence in 2016 and continue plotting attacks against Western interests.

## HOMEGROWN ISLAMIST EXTREMISM

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In 2016, the United States continued to battle Islamist extremism within its borders.

- ◆ There have been a total of 229 homegrown jihadist plots in the United States since 9/11, 45 of which occurred in 2016.<sup>1</sup>
- ◆ Since the 2014 rise of ISIS, 117 individuals have been arrested by authorities in the U.S. and four others charged in absentia in ISIS-linked cases, including 37 in 2016 alone.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> These plots include attempts to join terrorist groups overseas and execute attacks at home.

<sup>2</sup> This figure is based on open-source data compiled and analyzed by the Majority Staff of the Homeland Security Committee. These individuals had, among other acts: plotted attacks, attempted to join ISIS in Iraq and Syria (or facilitated others' travel), provided money, equipment, and weapons to ISIS, and falsified statements to federal authorities.



## RECENT DEVELOPMENTS:

- ◆ December 20, 2016: Derrick Thompson of Phoenix, Arizona was arrested in an FBI terrorism investigation on suspicion of assisting and participating in a criminal syndicate and attempting weapons misconduct. According to court documents, Thompson is an “avowed jihadist” who frequently contacted ISIS websites, and posted support for “lone wolf” attacks.
- ◆ December 21, 2016: Lionel Nelson Williams of Suffolk, Virginia supposedly pledged allegiance to Islamist terrorists via Facebook. Court documents show in the days leading to his arrest, Williams expressed his will to carry out a “martyrdom operation” and was in possession of an AK-47 assault rifle.

## ISIS TERROR PLOTS AGAINST THE WEST

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In 2016, ISIS-linked plots against the West<sup>3</sup> totaled 74, more plots than 2015 and 2014 combined.<sup>4</sup>

- ◆ Since 2014, there have been at least 141 ISIS-linked plots to attack Western targets, including ten plots in December, seven of which were thwarted.<sup>5</sup>

## RECENT DEVELOPMENTS:

- ◆ January 1, 2017:<sup>6</sup> An attack claimed by ISIS left 39 people dead in a popular Istanbul nightclub amidst New Year’s celebrations. Shortly after midnight on New Year’s Day, a lone gunman shot at revelers in the Reina nightclub, filled with around 600 people. The victims included at least 27 foreigners hailing from 14 different countries, including one Canadian. One American was among the injured. The shooting occurred days after a pro-ISIS group, the Nashir Media Foundation, called for attacks on clubs, markets, and movie theatres. While Turkish authorities have identified the assailant, he is still at large and his name has not been made public. At least 36 people are currently being held in connection with the attack.

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<sup>3</sup> “The West” is defined as Europe and North America, as well as Australia, or targets affiliated with those countries outside of the conflict zone in Syria and Iraq.

<sup>4</sup> There were 49 ISIS-linked plots against the West in 2015 and 18 in 2014. The combined plots from 2015 and 2014 total 67. These figures are based on open-source data compiled and analyzed by the Majority Staff of the Homeland Security Committee.

<sup>5</sup> These figures are based on open-source data compiled and analyzed by the Majority Staff of the Homeland Security Committee.

<sup>6</sup> This attack is not counted in the listed total number of ISIS plots against the West in 2016. But as the attack occurred around 1:15 am on January 1, 2017 it is simply listed in this report due to its proximity in time to December 31, 2016.



- ◆ December 31, 2016: A Syrian asylum-seeker was arrested in Saarbrücken, a German city close to the French border, for requesting 180,000 euros from ISIS to buy and repaint vehicles that could be fitted with explosives with the aim of driving the vehicles into crowds. The 38-year-old arrived in Germany in late 2014 and acknowledged his contact with ISIS while in questioning.
- ◆ December 22, 2016: Seven suspects were arrested in Melbourne, Australia on suspicion of planting a series of bombs on Christmas Day in the city. According to Victoria state Police Chief Commissioner Graham Ashton, the suspects were inspired by ISIS. The Commissioner said the attacks were to be carried out on Flinders Street train station, Federal Square, and St. Paul's Cathedral. Two of the original seven that were arrested were released without being charged, and five were charged with preparing a terrorist attack. According to police, four were born in Australia and the fifth was born in Egypt but obtained both Egyptian and Australian citizenship.
- ◆ December 19, 2016: Anis Amri, a 24-year old Tunisian, drove a stolen truck through a Christmas market in Berlin, killing 12 people including the truck's original driver. Amri escaped the scene and made his way to Milan via France by train. In a suburb north of Milan, Amri pulled a gun when approached by police officers during a routine patrol and was subsequently killed in a shootout with them. Amri arrived in Italy by boat in 2011, and first entered Germany in 2015. Known to authorities as a potential threat, he was deported in 2016, but was unable to return to Tunisia due to his lack of a passport, which was still in the possession of the Tunisian government. The passport arrived in Germany two days after the attack.
- ◆ December 18, 2016: ISIS attacked a popular tourist attraction in Karak, Jordan, killing 10 people including seven members of Jordan's security forces, two Jordanian civilians, and one Canadian. The attack on an ancient castle marks the first civilian target hit by a terrorist attack in Jordan in over a decade.
- ◆ December 12, 2016: Munir Hassan Mohammed and Rowaida El-Hassan were arrested in the United Kingdom and face charges related to the acquisition and possession of chemicals that could be used as explosives. The pair has been jointly charged with preparing an act of terrorism between July 7 and December 12, 2016. Munir Hassan Mohammed was additionally charged with being a member of ISIS.
- ◆ December 9, 2016: A 30-year-old suspected of planning a terrorist attack was arrested in the Dutch city of Rotterdam. A large image of the Islamic State flag was found in his apartment along with a Kalashnikov AK-47.
- ◆ December 5, 2016: In Ludwigshafen in western Germany, a 12-year-old boy of dual German and Iraqi citizenship—supposedly guided by a member of ISIS—plotted a backpack with a homemade nail bomb outside the city hall. The police were notified and experts partially



detonated the device. The same boy attempted to set off a bomb at a local Christmas market in Ludwigshafen at the end of November.

## **FOREIGN JIHADIST NETWORKS**

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- ◆ According to a recent report by the European Union Counter-Terrorism Coordinator, threat from foreign fighters to the West persists, and 30 – 35 percent of European foreign terrorist fighters have returned home to Europe.<sup>7</sup>
- ◆ Sir Stuart Peach, United Kingdom Chief of the Defense Staff, said in a lecture that ISIS terrorists were moving in migrant flows and “hiding in plain sight,” echoing fears that the group continues to use refugee routes as a Trojan Horse to attack the West.
- ◆ According to a report by Conflict Armament Research, ISIS was using products purchased in Turkey to produce weapons on an industrial scale. The manufacturing of tens of thousands of weapons was enabled by ISIS’ strong supply chain between Turkey and Iraq.
- ◆ In a December briefing, the U.S. commander in Afghanistan noted that the Af-Pak region is home to “the largest concentration of terrorist groups in the world,” housing 20 of the 98 U.S.-designated terrorist groups. Of these 20 groups, 13 are in Afghanistan and seven in Pakistan. From the Taliban to ISIS Khorasan, which has conducted a series of high-profile attacks this year in Afghanistan, members of various terrorist groups pose great challenges by combining and forming other terrorist organizations or collaborating.

## **THE CAMPAIGN AGAINST ISLAMIST TERROR**

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### ***ISIS***

#### **Operations Against ISIS Territory**

- ◆ U.S. Lieutenant-General Stephen Townsend, who commands coalition forces in Iraq, predicted two more years are needed to dispel ISIS from its capitals in Mosul and Raqqa. In a separate interview earlier this month, he noted a victory in Mosul does not signify ISIS’ defeat. He said, “I think we are not done when Mosul is over. We are still not done in Iraq. We are still about a third of the Euphrates River valley up to the Syrian border that has to be cleared.” While he said the group will lose the territory marking their physical caliphate, they will morph into a different organization and remain a threat.
- ◆ Recently, the number of American troops operating as advisors to Iraqi troops in Mosul has roughly doubled to around 450. Col. John Dorrian, spokesman for combined Joint Task

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<sup>7</sup> EU Counter-Terrorism Coordinator. “Foreign Terrorist Fighter Returnees: Policy Options.” Letter to Permanent Representatives Committee/Council. 29 Nov. 2016. Brussels: n.p., 2016. 1-16. Print.



Force-Operation Inherent Resolve, said the increase of American troops came as the battle moved into its second phase. Col. Dorrian noted the ongoing battle is “going to take some time.” The coalition has further aided the advance by embedding deeper within the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF). With ISIS having fortified the city, the Iraqi army must clear more than 200,000 buildings.

- ◆ According to Pentagon Press Secretary Peter Cook, the Syrian Democratic Forces have captured over 2,000 square kilometers on the outskirts of Raqqa since the beginning of their operation to retake the city from ISIS control.
- ◆ On December 10, 2016, ISIS militants reportedly re-entered Syria’s city of Palmyra after losing the city to Syrian government forces along with Iranian-backed militias and Russian Special Operations troops in March 2016. ISIS fighters arrived at Palmyra from Mosul to aid the offensive and ISIS has likely acquired some Syrian and Russian equipment left behind.
- ◆ ISIS has lost all territory in its Libyan stronghold of Sirte and has been driven out by U.S. airstrikes and Libyan forces aligned with the U.S.-backed government of national accord. Fears remain of a counter-attack by ISIS militants that escaped the city just before the battle commenced in May, or throughout the battle’s early stages.

## **ISIS Sanctions**

- ◆ On December 13, 2016, the first U.S. sanctions were specifically imposed against money services businesses affiliated with ISIS according to Adam J. Szubin, Acting Under Secretary for Terrorism and Financial Intelligence.

## **Notable ISIS Members Targeted**

- ◆ December 4, 2016: Three ISIS leaders were killed in a coalition airstrike in Raqqa. Two of the targeted ISIS leaders, Salah Gourmat and Sammy Djedou, were involved in facilitating the November 2015 Paris attacks and were close to Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, ISIS’ former external operations manager. The third, Walid Hamman, was a suicide attack planner convicted in absentia for a terror plot in Belgium in 2015.
- ◆ December 3, 2016: Russian Federal Security Service forces killed the leader of a North Caucasus ISIS branch, Rustam Magomedovich Aselderov, and four militants close to him. Security officials arrested four additional militants tied to ISIS who were planning a terrorist attack in Moscow. The suspects possessed weapons, ammunition, and explosives at the time of the arrest.





## **Recent Non-Western ISIS Attacks**

- ◆ December 18, 2016: In an attack claimed by ISIS, a suicide bomber detonated explosives at the entrance to a military base in Aden, Yemen. The attack killed at least 52 Yemeni soldiers and wounded 34 others as the troops were lining up to receive salaries.
- ◆ December 13, 2016: An ISIS suicide attack on Cairo's main Coptic Christian cathedral, the seat of the Egyptian Orthodox Church, killed 25 people. The bomb detonated in a section reserved for women, thus killing primarily women and children.
- ◆ December 11, 2016: Two young girls detonated suicide bombs near a market in Maiduguri, Nigeria, injuring 17. The attack was blamed on Boko Haram, the main perpetrator of attacks in the town.
- ◆ December 10, 2016: At least 48 soldiers were also killed while waiting in line to receive their salaries.
- ◆ December 7, 2016: In Somalia's Puntland, soldiers loyal to the Somali government retook the port town of Qandala that was captured by ISIS supporters in October 2016.

## ***AL QAEDA***

- ◆ December 25, 2016: Al Shabaab shot and killed a military prosecutor in the country's Puntland region. In claiming the attack, Al Shabaab spokesman Sheikh Abdiasis Abu Musab said, "Today, we killed a prosecutor who had sentenced many teenagers—many boys and girls—to their deaths for alleged links to al Shabaab." The group's insurgency in Somalia continues as the country struggles to restore order after over two decades of conflict.
- ◆ December 11, 2016: Al Shabaab carried out a bomb attack in Somalia's capital Mogadishu as an attacker slammed into the main entrance of a port in a vehicle filled with explosives. At least 20 were killed and 15 injured.

## ***THE TALIBAN***

- ◆ December 21, 2016: The Taliban released a video of American Caitlan Coleman, her Canadian husband Joshua Boyle and their two children, all of whom are being held hostage. The Taliban's series of demands includes the release of Taliban prisoners and that executions be discontinued for prisoners on death row in Afghan jails. The couple was captured in 2012 backpacking in Afghanistan's Wardak province, and both of their children were born in captivity.
- ◆ December 21, 2016: The Taliban claimed a suicide attack on the Kabul home of Mir Wali, an Afghan member of parliament from Helmand Province, in which eight people were killed and six others wounded. Among the wounded were the MP, his wife, and two of their

grandchildren. In a statement, the Taliban claimed the attack was carried out because the MP was hosting an “important gathering of security officials.” This attack marks another sign of Kabul’s declining security situation over the past year.

- ◆ Deepening ties between Russia and the Taliban in Afghanistan evoke concern from Afghan and American officials, who fear that Russia might outfit the terrorist group with weapons or funding.