Mr. John Mulligan
Deputy Director, National Counterterrorism Center

Rethinking Terrorism: Past, Present, and Future

Notes:
1. Below are informal notes of the speaker’s remarks as taken by a JHU/APL staff member.
2. Links to the video, audio, bulletized notes, and presentation files for this and past seminars can be found on www.jhuapl.edu/rethinking and the JHU/APL YouTube Playlist.

Mr. Mulligan began by noting the upcoming 15th anniversary of the 9/11 attacks. That date is important to his organization, the National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC), because the subsequent 9/11 Commission recommended that an organization such as NCTC be established.

NCTC Overview
- The organization has a modern construct with a single focus – defense of the US homeland
- A multi-agency organization with people from at least 18 agencies and centers from throughout the US government
- Personnel: 55% permanent staff / 45% detailees from other agencies for short term assignments
  - Having people who come from outside agencies and then return to those agencies with new expertise and contacts enhances the vital communications among agencies
  - Always good to have long term knowledge but it also helps to bring in new ideas

NCTC Mission Highlights
Fused Intelligence Analysis
- NCTC pulls together intel information from a large variety of collectors and with advice from these agencies and centers then forms intelligence products for senior government leadership
  - Primarily looking for strategic trends and what to anticipate next
- An outgrowth of the 9/11 Commission’s finding that there were pools of information at various levels of government that were not being adequately shared across the intel community
- NCTC crafts intelligence products that also include any divergent views supported by some members of the community to make sure these views reach the policy makers

Identification Intelligence
- Knowing about individuals has become especially important given the numbers of migrants coming from combat zones and crossing borders
- NCTC maintains the classified database on terrorist identities and shares that information with all relevant government entities
  - Information goes especially to the Terrorist Screening Center which coordinates with border entry points around the US
  - Some information also is shared with foreign partners
Often discuss with foreign partners the challenges of intelligence on individuals today
  - Much concern about the inadequacy of the info they have on individuals coming into their countries
  - Generally want to be welcoming to refugees while still being aware of national security concerns

- The US has robust coordination among its security related stakeholders but there are problems:
  - Must always remind leaders that intel is always imperfect since always looking at situations only through a soda straw – can’t see the whole picture
    - Even when there is extensive vetting there will be mistakes – in both directions
    - May not catch person who does have a nexus to terrorism and vice versa
    - Improvement efforts are on-going and very labor intensive
  - Demand for individual intelligence is increasing to meet the Administration’s objective of bringing in more immigrants
  - While US vetting is generally robust there are problems especially handling people from countries that have free access to the US

- NCTC is expending a great deal of energy and effort to ensure a strong capability to screen, vet, and manage people coming to the US

Support to Government Planning and Assessment of CT Missions and Operations
- NCTC helps various government entities take the collected intelligence and help plan active efforts against terrorist threats faced by US entities and foreign partners
  - Planning an operation is a specific science that has not often been practiced within the intelligence community
  - The military develops specific operational planning skill sets
    - Mulligan has taken a military planning course and has tried to expand use of the concept within the intelligence community
    - Brought planners into NCTC and NSA to assess operational risks and to develop metrics to identify when operations are meeting measurable, sustainable goals
      - If measurable goals are not met, then the operation would be stood down and recast with a strong commitment to sound management practices
- NCTC has a specific directorate to oversee and frequently review progress made in specific countries and may reallocate and readjust programs
  - The government does a lot of measuring and will recast efforts when standards aren’t met
  - May often need to make adjustments to expectations which are sometimes inflated about partners who may not have the resources needed to support proposed CT efforts
    - May then need to scale back assessments
    - Using measurements and recasting some efforts can then permit more productive discussion with partners

Information Sharing Beyond the Intelligence Community
- Element #1: In the US before 9/11, there were pools of intelligence that were not often shared; since then a structure for sharing information has been developed for the intel community
  - Twice daily NCTC holds secure video teleconferences to alert stakeholders about new developments in counterterrorism
  - Followed up with emails with more information designed to be shared
    - Concept is to help build a better situational picture for all entities involved
- Element #2: Before 9/11, intel sharing with local entities (police/fire/state homeland defense/etc.) was rare – often those up and down the chain didn’t get the info that was available at other levels
  - Now NCTC hosts with DHS, FBI and others Joint Counterterrorism Awareness Workshops for 200-300 representatives from relevant local entities
• Talk through current threats to the homeland
  • Example: The police chief of San Bernardino recently described what his force discovered about the attackers there
    o NCTC is committed to generating intelligence by:
      ▪ Finding cleared individuals at state/local levels with whom it can share classified info and declassifying as much material as possible
      ▪ Providing tours of federal facilities for state and local representatives to increase their understanding of how those agencies work
    o NCTC is also trying to provide lessons learned from 9/11 and since 9/11 to foreign partners much as it does with domestic partners
      ▪ Foreign partners often look to the US for leadership
      ▪ CT acts as a common currency for the US among various countries, even with some countries with which the US may generally disagree

The Current Threat Environment
  • Approaching the 15th anniversary of 9/11 it is a very different world than we were in at the 10th anniversary
  • At the 10th anniversary…
    o Bin Laden had just been eliminated
    o Much of the Al Qaeda activity in Afghanistan and Pakistan was declining
    o Trends were generally positive
    o ISIL was not on anyone’s radar
  • Now in an era of acceleration largely often related to technological advances
    o Enemies are leveraging technology to level the playing field with the US
    o There is also a demographic shift in terrorism and counterterrorism
    o In 2012 if someone asked how foreign fighters going to fight in Iraq or Afghanistan chose their group, the answer would have been it was like joining a fraternity or sorority
      ▪ Contacts often came from people back home or from someone online
    o Over time ISIL has become more clearly aligned with the needs / desires / objectives of those heading to Iraq or Syria
      ▪ At the same time ISIL has been shaping the objects and principles of those searching for a greater meaning to life
      ▪ ISIL had a better understanding of modern technology / management / recruiting than did AQ and other groups
  • AQ was understood as a hierarchical organization where followers needed permission to carry out operations with specific objectives and was overall very bureaucratic
    o ISIL is a more flattened structure that gives only an outline of objectives to followers then allows them to go out on their own for operations, empowering their actions
    o Problem: The current threat is very different from those the US is prepared to handle
  • Now seeing that ISIL has become more hierarchical over time, which is the usual progression among organizations as they grow in size
    o Mulligan learned at NSA that the larger the network, the greater the network management
    o When ISIL boldly declared its caliphate in 2014 it was attractive to those tired of AQ’s slow pace and wanting action and a different, fresh approach
      ▪ Result: ISIL galvanized various organizations around the world
  • In 2014 ISIL established 5 branches and required little to make that happen – commit to the ISIL mission and acknowledge ISIL’s leadership
    o Branches got guidance about management, finances, media operations, etc.
  • In 2015 only 3 branches were established; none since June 2015 but not clear why the slow down
    o ISIL may be trying for more measured growth
o Combat in Iraq and Syria may be straining their resources

- ISIL is media savvy: recognizes the mutual reinforcement of media and aggressive operational activity
  o Uses social media to ramp up the power of its violent actions
  o Shows a high degree of flexibility in using social networks – ready to employ new tools when old networks or comms methods are compromised
  o In the past the US held the technological lead on battlefields but now digital natives are joining and they can quickly learn to use whatever is available to do what they need done

- Bottom line: ISIL is a learning organization and AQ has not kept pace with ISIL
  o AQ is currently only keeping their existing members and can’t manage to communicate quickly enough, taking 4-6 months to congratulate its followers for taking an action
  o ISIL has media operatives who troll social media and the internet to identify, claim, and highlight activities that fit in with its objectives
  o Today, the first to get out their narrative (their truth) wins

The Future

- ISIL is trying to do more directed actions such as have occurred in France recently
  o Trusted, trained agents are given resources, a plan, fallbacks and then allowed to operate
- ISIL is also trying to inspire more people who, if they can’t go to Iraq or Syria to fight, are urged to take actions at home
- ISIL is looking to attract those who are vulnerable to the ISIL message whose own philosophies or individual personal grievances converge with those of ISIL
  o San Bernardino police chief noted that the attackers there seemed only just before to search online for a way to proclaim their ISIL connection – not a plan but an afterthought
  o Self-radicalized attackers may use their own plans, even if they are not very good, but ISIL can still capitalize on their actions
  o ISIL has 20-30 groups that troll the news and social media for opportunities to use activities by others to empower their message

What Is to Be Done in Different Domains to Counter ISIL

Physical Domain

- Must better understand how terrorists move and how they increase their operating space
  o How they are feeding their people, moving them around, and recruiting them
  o Need to look at the people carrying out these missions
- The US is good at tracking the people carrying out these missions and erecting physical barriers to entering the country
  o Overall the US government is good at controlling the physical space of the country and must keep doing it
- Problem: If rates of shutting down action in Iraq / Syria increase, can expect to see big outflows of fighters both back to their own countries and on to other areas with potential for trouble
- Need to be aware of other problems to consider in the physical domain
  o Example: Once ISIL lost control of its areas in Iraq a humanitarian crisis developed and more such situations can be expected
- In planning for the future, need to develop ways to empower people in newly liberated areas so that they can control their own areas and build a law and order society
Cyber Domain
- Not an ethereal concern – involves computer networks and other forms of telecommunications – all of which ISIL depends on very heavily
- Cyber networks in general allow ISIL to have the worldwide impact that it enjoys exploiting
  - Also how they can recruit worldwide and coordinate the movements of their people
  - ISIL leverages commercial networks for all their own purposes including handling logistics
- Problem: ISIL’s use of these commercial networks has largely gone uncontested
  - Cyber Command has been directed to do more to interrupt terrorists’ use of commercial networks

Ideological Domain
- Must take the approach that counterterrorism activities in this domain cannot be government led but can be government empowered
- Recognize that there are large numbers of populations in the world that are not well-integrated into the societies in which they live
  - These are the groups most open to the ISIL approach and are very vulnerable to the messages that ISIL produces
  - Many such individuals are looking for paths to greater meaning in their lives
  - ISIL has capitalized on their needs by providing a vision for some self-actualization – at least as a promise
  - Younger people are especially drawn to such messages
- Need a high degree of interaction at the community and even family levels
  - Representatives of the FBI/DHS/etc. won’t have much influence with a worried family of a potential terrorist
- Likely to be an enduring problem since the ISIL messages linger on in the media
  - Videos of an ISIL leader who died in 2011 are still being watched on the internet

Conclusion
- Can’t depend on CT success in only one domain
- NGOs and other government agencies can help in some of these fields
  - Example: One group in Nigeria targets their efforts at those with no other viable economic options beyond what ISIL has been offering
- Grassroots organizations along with local and state government entities are needed to plant the roots to build structures that can withstand terrorist efforts in their communities

QUESTION & ANSWER SESSION

Re: Working with Foreign Partners
- The US tells its partners that it does not want them to have to go through their own 9/11
  - 9/11 galvanized the US to increase its sharing of intelligence information among the various domestic entities
  - Others don’t need to go through that trauma to start the reorganizing for better sharing, which is not done well most places
- It helps for the US and its partners even to just talk about what is needed and this has become a part of NCTC’s mission
- Problem: Many foreign partners do not have the resources they need to make the sharing possible, so they will need to make some hard choices
- France is already stressing out its forces due to the last few months of heightened terrorist alerts
  - France is hiring more people but is having trouble absorbing all these new members
- In an ideal world, the US government could comingle everyone’s information and then do correlation analysis to get a full picture
  - Other countries have agencies with many different rules and even laws and policies about relations among their various security, intelligence, and police organizations
- Mulligan is generally optimistic for solutions because of his background of working for an agency that always finds a solution to problems by leveraging technology
- Discussions are now going on in Europe about increased intelligence sharing, but it may take 3 years before things can be worked out adequately – hopefully with the US involved
- Problem: Wide variances among the laws of different countries
  - After the attacks in Belgium, discussions indicated that they lacked the “material support to terrorists” tool that is available in the US to hold suspects
  - Many countries must release detainees after 24 or 48 hours even when they have a growing nexus of intel about terrorist activities that still fall short of chargeable offenses
- US must be respectful of other countries’ legal traditions – many of which are much older than are those of the US
- Problem: All are facing a new type of terrorism that they could not have imagined when the laws were written

**Re: Resiliency in Homeland Security**
- Resiliency has been an element involved in homeland security strategy since the issue began to be discussed
- One major question to start with: What is terrorism?
  - Answer: Violence or the threat of violence to achieve a specific objective
    - Some refer to the US as a terrorist nation – but Americans don’t see it that way
  - Impact of violence can outweigh the actual facts as in the Charlie Hebdo attack, which was very small but disproportionate media coverage then put all of France on lockdown
  - The media add to the impact without recognizing how much they empower the terrorists
    - Explains why ISIL puts so much effort into the media aspects of its operations
- Terrorism affects the collective psyche with the help of the media
  - Should be more rational but things like beheading videos create tremendous psychological impact – just the impact that the terrorist wants
    - No good solutions
  - Recently, have been seeing the identities of the terrorists being suppressed so that they don’t get the notoriety and enduring fame that they obviously want
    - Terrorists who murdered a French policeman and his partner live-streamed their actions because they were seeking some sort of celebrity out of their acts
    - Can expect to see more of this sort of activity and attempts to increase their media coverage

**Re: Al-Shabaab in Somalia**
- ISIL or its predecessor did act as an insurgency and originally did not focus on holding territory
  - Early on in their media reports they talked about the inevitability of their success and stressed their battlefield wins
  - Spokesmen also stressed their resiliency and ability to maintain focus and morale despite tremendous odds against them
  - ISIL is likely to go back to the insurgency mode when they are displaced
- Al-Shabaab was really the first of the terrorist organizations to make good use of social media
Even used Twitter during the attack on the Westgate Mall
ISIL became even more successful at using social media and the internet than did AQ

Re: Cultural Anthropology
- US has done a lot on human terrain analysis but the environment to do this now is very difficult, however, there should be more of it
- In the physical domain this should be better studied to include how people function under ISIL
- In Iraq the Sunni population saw that the current government of Iraq was not working and so there was little resistance to ISIL when it arrived
  - Resistance grew once the population understood that ISIL really is a very controlling organization
- Could also be used in relation to the ideological resonance that ISIL has had with disaffected populations
  - ISIL directs most of its media toward the people it controls and uses it to bolster its governance

Re: Violence as a Form of Communication
- ISIL has said that it would speak the language that the US would understand – violence
- ISIL sees America’s violent attacks against it as justification for its own violent activities

Re: History of Counterterrorism
- Operating environments differ greatly from those of the past but some rules still apply
  - The speed at which a terrorist plot can be planned and carried out is significantly faster
  - Impacts of the terrorist attacks are then increased by the speed that they are reported worldwide
- Must account for the new framework that differs significantly from the one the US learned about with AQ
  - Problem: What the US learned to do to handle AQ does not apply to handling ISIL
  - Some elements of AQ have adapted to changes but not as fast as ISIL does
- The US is facing a new environment in which its historic technological advantage has been leveled
  - Must now work on employing its organizational advantages – information sharing as embodied by NCTC
  - US now needs to apply this same concept to new, unforeseen terrorism threats globally

Re: Understanding ISIL Ideology for Use in Counterterrorism
- Textbooks are not needed to disseminate ISIL ideology – more cost effective to put important information to be shared online, which can be done rapidly and cheaply
- Must recognize that no entity can control the spread of this type of content
- To fight ISIL need creditable voices that will speak out against the ideas of ISIL
  - Needs to be at a lot of different levels
- Need more engagement with partners including empowering elites who speak with credibility inside their own spheres
  - Problem: ISIL has established an environment of violence or the threat of violence so strong that that many people may be reluctant to speak out
  - UK has done a good job finding creditable voices and giving them opportunities to speak out by helping with amplification support especially to speak against violence
- US could learn a great deal from some of its Middle Eastern partners who have had more experience reintegrating foreign fighters
Re: Levels of Government in Counterterrorism
- Must walk a fine line between ensuring that appropriate government entities are empowered to conduct effective CT operations without overstepping civil liberties
  - Going too far will cause problems at the other end of the political spectrum
- In talks with European partners on this subject, hear that the ISIL effect is generating more activism on the right side of the spectrum including protests and causing more problems
  - ISIL wants to see the rifts in societies
- So many different groups are involved that could be effected by any CT decisions, that it is hard to properly adjust the level of safety vs. civil liberties

Re: The CTIIC – Cyber Threat Intelligence Integration Center
- CTIIC modeled after NCTC’s framework and they work closely together
- CTIIC has a more expansive mission than does NCTC; CTIIC’s mission can be expected to grow
  - The problem is the ubiquity of vulnerability in the cyber domain
- ISIL leverages cyber technologies but it is also wary of them
  - When foreign fighters arrive at the ISIL training camps, they must turn in their cell phones for fear of the vulnerabilities brought in
  - Fighters must behave properly when using cyber technology including being limited to using only certain apps
  - Not all are given access to social media and may only have access for a limited time

Re: Attracting the Young to Work for NCTC
- NCTC recently got approval to increase hiring and bring in a digitally native workforce who would help the organization develop the efficiencies needed to improve operations
- Modern organizations need a robust IT infrastructure and data analytics
- There is a need for data scientists to be involved in order to help those with regional or other specialized expertise operate more efficiently
- A generational divide is apparent even within NCTC where the workforce stretches from the “Greatest Generation” to “Generation Z”
  - ISIL does the same sort of thing: brings in young fighters who are then paired with those who have a lot of operational experience to create a more effective dynamic