The Comparative Threat from Terrorism Compared to Drug Poisoning, Suicide, Traffic Accidents, and Murder: 1999-2016

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Every year, the Director of National Intelligence issues a global annual threat analysis as part of their testimony to Congress, providing a *Worldwide Threat Assessment of the U.S. Intelligence Community*. This year, Director Daniel R. Coats followed up his testimony by issuing a formal statement for the record on March 6, 2018.

**Drug Deaths and the Other Four Leading Causes of Premature American Deaths**

As might be expected, he raised threats like China, Russia, Iran and North Korea. However, Director Coats also focused on drug poisoning and deaths as a critical new threat to the U.S. His statement warned that,

> Americans in 2016 died in record numbers from drug overdoses, 21 percent more than in 2015...Worldwide production of cocaine, heroin, and methamphetamine is at record levels. US mortality from potent synthetic opioids doubled in 2016, and synthetic opioids have become a key cause of US drug deaths...Mexican criminal groups will continue to supply much of the heroin, methamphetamine, cocaine, and marijuana that cross the US-Mexico border, while China-based suppliers ship fentanlys and fentanyl precursors to Mexico-Canada-, and US-based distributors or sell directly to consumers via the Internet.

To illustrate his points, Coats also included a striking graph on the major causes of premature death in the United States shown in **Figure One**. To show trends based on hard data, he covered the period from 1999 to 2016. He also focused on the four leading causes.

The trends by cause show very clearly why he focused on the threat from drug deaths:

- **Homicide or murder** – with levels nearly constant at around 22,000-24,000 a year.
- **Motor vehicle crashes** – with deaths fluctuating between some 38,000 and 45,000 a year.
- **Suicide** – with a sharply rising rate going from around 27,000 in 1996 to some 46,000 in 2016.
- **Drug deaths** – with a zooming increase in deaths going from some 23,000 to 71,000.

**The American Death Rate from Terrorism**

Director Coats did not ignore the threat from terrorism. His statement made this clear:

Sunni violent extremists—most notably ISIS and al-Qa’ida—pose continuing terrorist threats to US interests and partners worldwide, while US-based homegrown violent extremists (HVEs) will remain the most prevalent Sunni violent extremist threat in the United States. Iran and its strategic partner Lebanese Hizballah also pose a persistent threat to the United States and its partners worldwide.

- ...Sunni violent extremists are still intent on attacking the US homeland and US interests overseas, but their attacks will be most frequent in or near conflict zones or against enemies that are more easily accessible.
- Sunni violent extremist groups are geographically diverse; they are likely to exploit conflict zones in the Middle East, Africa, and Asia, where they can co-mingle terrorism and insurgency.
- ISIS and al-Qa’ida and their respective networks will be persistent threats, as will groups not subordinate to them, such as the Haqqani Taliban Network.
• ISIS almost certainly will continue to give priority to transnational terrorist attacks. Its leadership probably assesses that, if ISIS-linked attacks continue to dominate public discourse, the group’s narrative will be buoyed, it will be difficult for the counter-ISIS coalition to portray the group as defeated, and the coalition’s will to fight will ultimately weaken.

• Outside Iraq and Syria, ISIS’s goal of fostering interconnectivity and resiliency among its global branches and networks probably will result in local and, in some cases, regional attack plans...

• Al-Qa’ida almost certainly will remain a major actor in global terrorism because of the combined staying power of its five affiliates. The primary threat to US and Western interests from al-Qa’ida’s global network through 2018 will be in or near affiliates’ operating areas. Not all affiliates will have the intent and capability to pursue or inspire attacks in the US homeland or elsewhere in the West.

• Homegrown violent extremists (HVEs) will remain the most prevalent and difficult-to-detect Sunni terrorist threat at home, despite a drop in the number of attacks in 2017. HVE attacks are likely to continue to occur with little or no warning because the perpetrators often strike soft targets and use simple tactics that do not require advanced skills or outside training.

At the same time, it is interesting to note just how low a threat terrorism has been in terms of its casualties over the same period. If Director Coats had attempted to include the number of deaths in the U.S. since 1998, they would have been so low that the only time they would have made even a slight visible impact on the graph would have been during "9/11," and the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon in 2001.

**Figure Two** shows the number of U.S. deaths from terrorism using the START data base – which is the unclassified data base issued by the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism maintained by the Homeland Security Department of the University of Maryland. The U.S. government Counter Terrorism Center no longer attempts to provide public estimates of the trends in terrorism but START is the data base the State Department uses in its annual country reports on terrorism.

The data in **Figure Two** shows that a total of 3,219 Americans and foreigners died in the U.S. and on Americans oil from terrorist attacks during 1998-2016. Almost all of this total – 2,902 or 90.2% – died during "9/11." If one looks at the period since "9/11," there were 179 deaths on American soil in the fifteen years between "9/11" and the end of 2016. As for American deaths from terrorism outside the U.S., there were 241 during the entire period from 1998 through the end of 2016.

There is no way to count the number of serious accidents, wounds, and major survivable medical problems from drug use and compare them directly with the impact of wounds from terrorist attacks. It is clear, however, that the ratio of serious violent attacks, crash wounds, suicide wounds, and drug-related medical problems to deaths is far greater in all four cases than the non-fatal wounds from terrorism.

**Putting Terrorism in Perspective**

It is tempting to preface the number of deaths from terrorism with the world "only" when comparing them to the other major sources of premature deaths. This is unfair and unrealistic for several reasons. Every death matters. Terrorism relies on fear and its political effects, not casualty numbers, for its effectiveness. And, the figures might be far, far higher if it were not for the massive counterterrorism efforts the U.S. has made inside and outside the United States since "9/11."

At the same time, it is striking that the United State government no longer even attempts to track the global trends in terrorism and does not make public any estimates of the relative effectiveness
of its counterterrorism efforts. Somewhat surprisingly, it has also ceased to make any estimates of
the cost of such efforts.

Neither any Administration or part of Congress has ever published an official estimate of the cost
of the U.S. wars on terrorism – which now approach 17 years in the case of Afghanistan and 15
years in the case of Iraq – or of its other counterterrorism activities overseas. It is clear, however,
that the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq/Syria have been fought largely as wars on terrorism as have
U.S. military actions in Africa, the Philippines and other parts of the world total at least two trillion
dollars since "9/11," and some estimates put the cost as high as $4 to $6 trillion.\(^1\) President Trump's
FY2019 request for only the war fighting part of the cost of Overseas Contingency Outlays –which
does not include many actual warfighting costs– was some $62 billion.

**The Trump Administration Has Ceased to Report on the Cost of Federal Efforts**

Even if one ignores the massive cost of America's "long wars" overseas, even the most limited
estimate of the cost of the fight against terrorism is remarkably high. The OMB did publish a very
rough partial estimate of the cost of homeland security through FY2017 as part of its annual
Analytic Perspectives on each Federal budget request. However, it ceased to do so when President
Trump came to office.

The last such report for FY2017 had many major gaps – and never linked the trillions of dollars
spent on wars and other counterterrorism efforts overseas to the domestic effort. It did, however,
show that even a limited amount of the Federal effort had a very high cost relative to the effort to
fight drug deaths, traffic deaths, and other efforts to protect American lives.

The OMB estimated that the total domestic cost of counterterrorism efforts by the Federal
departments and agencies contributing to "Homeland Security Funding" with unclassified budgets
had risen from $43.5 billion in FY2015 to $50.4 billion in FY2017. This did not include state and
local government costs or those of the private sector and NGOs. It does not seem to have included
the cost of efforts by the U.S. intelligence community.

OMB did estimate that only part of this funding actually went to fight terrorism. The cost of the
total Federal effort to "prevent and disrupt terrorist attacks." went from $35.4 billion actual in
FY2015 to a request for $35.6 billion in FY2017 – a drop in the percentage going to the domestic
fight against terrorism.

The portion of the previous Federal effort that could play some role in "protecting the American
people, our critical infrastructure, and key resources" – which does not seem to include much of
the effort dealing with cyberterrorism – went from $25.3 billion in FY2015 to $27.7 billion in
FY2017. The portion of the Federal effort that could play some role in "respond and recover from
terrorist incidents" – which also does not seem to include much of the effort dealing with
cyberterrorism – went from $11.0 billion in FY2015 to $6.2 billion in FY2017.

Interestingly enough, the Analytic Perspectives for the FY2019 Request may have ignored
terrorism but did make an effort to cost federal efforts in cybersecurity for the first time. These
costs rose from $5.9 billion in FY2017 to $6.2 billion in FY2018, and $6.5 billion in FY2019.

There are no meaningful estimates of the future costs of U.S. wars to fight terrorism – or even for
the small portion that goes to Overseas Contingency Outlays beyond 2019. The technical estimates
in the Analytic Perspectives for the FY2019 Request (Table 23-9, p. 301) project a major rise in
the total cost of the Department of Homeland Security from an actual total of $50.5 billion in FY2017 to a request for $64.5 billion in FY2019 and $69.3 billion in FY2013, to $85.5 billion in FY2028. Much of this cost, however, will have nothing to do with counterterrorism, and there is no way to determine what program – if any – the Administration has for either the present or the future.

**Providing a Meaningful Assessment of the U.S. Fight Against Terrorism**

The U.S. has often made "transparency" a critical priority in advising other governments. It is all too clear, however, that three Administrations and the U.S. Congress have made no real attempt to measure the cost of the U.S. fight against terrorism, assess the overall trends in the threat, measure the effectiveness of U.S. efforts, or assess the extent to which such spending represents the proper priorities compared to other uses of the money. If anything, the Trump Administration and the Congress have regressed sharply on the amount of data that is provided on counterterrorism and related wars over the last few years.

This is not a partisan issue. Administrations of both parties have failed to provide even the most basic costing and assessment of total domestic counterterrorism efforts and the cost of related wars. The one open-source data base on terrorism – once maintained by the Counter Terrorism Center – was cancelled years ago.

There have been no serious efforts to examine the effectiveness of what have become massive spending efforts, or of the trade-offs between such spending and other uses of the money by either the Congress or the Executive Branch. There have been no serious efforts to examine the effectiveness of such spending efforts or the trade-offs between such spending and other uses of the money by either the Congress or the Executive Branch.

A comparison of the premature deaths in Figure One with the deaths from Terrorism in Figure Two hardly tells the story. It is, however, a warning about a major failure to know either the cost of U.S. efforts or their value.
Figure One
Cause of U.S. Premature Deaths: 1999-2016

Figure Two
Comparable START Estimate of U.S. Deaths in Terrorist Attacks - Part One

At Scale of Figure One

At Normal Scale

Total Attacks in the US  30  53  32  41  33  32  9  20  6  9  18  10  17  10  19  20  26  39  61
Total Fatalities in the US  4  20  0  3005  4  0  0  1  0  2  18  4  0  7  23  19  44  68
U.S. Fatalities in the US  3  20  0  2908  0  0  0  0  1  0  2  18  4  0  6  21  19  43  59
U.S. Fatalities in the World  135  25  36  2910  30  17  5  3  4  1  4  19  6  3  12  29  34  58  79
### Figure Two

**Comparable START Estimate of U.S. Deaths in Terrorist Attacks - Part Two**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Total Attacks in the United States</th>
<th>Total Fatalities in the United States</th>
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Total 495  3,219  3,104  3,420


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1 Based on updating *Amy Belasco, The Cost of Iraq, Afghanistan, and Other Global War on Terror Operations Since 9/11, CRS RL33110, December 8, 2014, p.19 to include other wars.