Contemporary 'Duck & Cover'?

Terror Challenges in the 21st Century

Dr David Kilcullen

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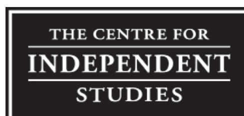

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Contemporary ‘Duck & Cover’? Terror Challenges in the 21st Century

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Trump versus ISIS: How the next president may deal with terrorism

Donald Trump's victory over Hillary Clinton in the 2016 U.S. presidential election brings to power a candidate whose rhetoric on terrorism was far more extreme than his opponent's. From promising to "bomb the shit out of ISIS" to advocating the killing of terrorists' families, levelling ISIS-controlled cities, bringing back waterboarding, banning Muslim immigration (or, in a later iteration, "extreme vetting" of migrants from terror-affected countries) Mr Trump was heavy on aggressive language during the campaign, but light on detail. He made a virtue of vagueness, suggesting he had a secret plan to defeat ISIS, would be "smarter than the generals," but would keep quiet to avoid tipping off the enemy. Few national security experts believed he had the faintest idea what he was talking about.

Thus, unsurprisingly, during the campaign Mr Trump alienated the bulk of the American foreign policy and security establishment on both sides of politics. Republican national security experts repudiated him in their dozens, while Democrats and their tame media seemed unable to decide whether to lampoon him as a joke—an orange-hued, toupee-wearing buffoon—or caricature him as a monster, the second coming of Hitler or a Manchurian Candidate for Vladimir Putin.

By contrast, Hillary Clinton ran as a safe pair of hands, a continuity candidate, someone who would offer a third term of the Obama administration, perhaps with a somewhat more martial approach, a little more interventionist, more competent in applying military power, but essentially in the mainstream of existing U.S. policy: steady as she goes.

As a former Secretary of State, Senator and First Lady, with a vast network of policy committees and working groups generating position papers, Secretary Clinton personified inside-the-beltway received wisdom. Not everyone was happy with this—as I wrote last year in

Blood Year, a major problem with continuing the existing approach is that it manifestly hasn't worked, indeed has arguably made the problem worse, so continuity may not be the answer.

Still, people in the national security establishment felt far more comfortable with Secretary Clinton's competence and experience, especially compared to the rabble-rousing rhetoric of Mr Trump, who was seen as shockingly ill informed, but who luckily would never be in a position to implement his laughable policies.

Nobody's laughing now.

Rather, as we begin the seventy days of transition between President Obama's administration and that of President-elect Trump, the questions of how Mr. Trump will approach the threat of the Islamic State, and how effective that approach might be, are real and urgent.

To frame those questions, let's first survey the ISIS threat, as it exists in late 2016.

Caliphate, Wilayat and Internationale

Understanding what an appropriate strategy against ISIS looks like (for President-elect Trump or anyone else) begins with recognising that the Islamic State is not a monolithic threat but a multifaceted entity that exists at three distinct levels, each of which demands different responses.

At the central level—in a region that once stretched across much of northwestern Iraq and northeast Syria—is a state-like entity that ISIS calls the "Caliphate." At its peak, in May 2015, this pseudo-state covered a territory about the size of the United Kingdom, governed a population somewhere between that of Denmark and Singapore, and controlled a network of a dozen cities, the jewel of which was Mosul, second city of Iraq, with more than 1.2 million people.

It had a functioning (albeit rudimentary and horrifically oppressive) government, and an economy that generated between USD$1.5 and 3 million per day—small for a state, but unheard-of for a terrorist group. Appropriately enough, the central ISIS structure thought of itself as a state, fought like a state, adopted state-like methods and sought to expand itself into a major territorial entity through conventional

military conquest. It had a relatively conventional (that is, state-like) military force comprising hundreds of tanks and other armoured vehicles, dozens of artillery pieces, thousands of light vehicles, mortars and rockets, and as many as 40,000 active combat troops in the field, with many more in training. It applied straightforward conventional combat tactics derived from a standard nation-state playbook, though often using non-conventional means.

But as of November 2016, much of this central state-like entity has been stripped away, in a series of defeats inflicted on ISIS in Iraq by western- and Iranian-backed Iraqi and Kurdish forces, and in Syria by Russian- and Iranian-backed Syrian forces, along with anti-ISIS rebel groups. Russian and western aircraft in Syria, and western aircraft in Iraq, have torn huge gaps in the ISIS structure, launching thousands of strikes against leaders or strongpoints, and supporting local ground forces. Those ground forces have now rolled back ISIS control, recapturing almost 30 per cent of Islamic State's territory since 2015, reducing its hold over population, and leaving it with just a handful of cities.

The two cities at the caliphate's geographical extremities—Mosul in the east, and Raqqa in the west—are now under heavy pressure. A major offensive was launched in mid-October 2016 to recapture Mosul, with a similar operation against Raqqa beginning in early November. In Mosul the operation includes Iraqi Army and Federal Police, Iraq's Counterterrorism Service, Kurdish peshmerga, Christian and Sunni tribal fighters, and a collection of Iranian-backed militias known as Popular Mobilisation Units (PMU). Each has its own axis of advance and is backed by advisers, air controllers and artillery firing from large firebases outside the city.

The PMU have advisers from the Iranian special operations organisation, the Quds Force, and logistic and other support from Iran, while a Turkish Army brigade is based near the city but is so far taking a limited role in the offensive. By the time President Trump is inaugurated, the battle to break into Mosul and capture ISIS strongpoints within the city will most likely have succeeded, even though that battle is currently proving extremely difficult, and progress has been slow and costly.

President Obama is quite likely, for political reasons to do with protecting his personal legacy, to declare Mosul recaptured before stepping down in January. But in reality the operation will continue through at least the first half of 2017, with combat in and around the city, ISIS counterattacks, a humanitarian crisis as aid agencies struggle to deal with the roughly one million civilians in Mosul, and a contest for political control. ISIS is likely to mount aggressive operations all over Iraq to prevent Iraqi forces massing against it, and will immediately attempt to reconstitute itself elsewhere, even after losing the city.

Four hundred kilometres to the west of Mosul, outside Raqqa, U.S. advisers, Syrian rebels and Kurdish militias of the Syrian Democratic Forces are moving to surround the ISIS capital and preparing for a similar offensive, planned to start in the next few weeks. This, too, will almost certainly still be going when Mr Trump takes office, and although smaller in scale than the Mosul battle, it is likely to be even more hard-fought. Both Raqqa and Mosul will eventually fall, but this will not destroy the Islamic State at the "Caliphate" level—ISIS will certainly continue to exist throughout Mr Trump's presidency, though it may respond to its conventional defeats by dropping back from its overt war of manoeuvre into guerrilla warfare and terrorism.

In particular, crushing the Caliphate at the central level is highly unlikely to result in a reduction in terrorism threat at the other levels: on the contrary, if recent patterns hold, ISIS will respond to loss of territory at the central level by striking externally, resulting in increased terrorism threat elsewhere—including in western countries such as France, the United States and Australia—in the short and medium term.

The threat will be particularly acute at the second layer of the ISIS structure, the provinces (wilayat) that have pledged allegiance to ISIS central leadership and consider themselves external territories of the Islamic State. Multiple wilayat currently exist in Iraq and Syria, as well as in nine other countries including Libya (with three separate wilayat, one in each of the country's regions of Cyrenaica, Tripolitania and Fezzan), Algeria, Egypt, Yemen, Saudi Arabia, Afghanistan-Pakistan (which ISIS calls Khorasan), Nigeria (based on ISIS affiliate

Boko Haram), and the North Caucasus region of Russia. Unlike the Al Qaeda affiliates of an earlier era of global terrorism, which were independent movements loosely affiliated with a global insurgency led by Osama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri, ISIS wilayat are more territorial. They seek to control terrain, govern population, and establish provincial governments that owe allegiance to the ISIS caliphate while expanding their territorial control. They must meet certain criteria in order to be accepted by Islamic State leaders, and in some cases (as in the Philippines) local groups have offered allegiance to ISIS but not been approved as wilayat.

The Philippines, indeed Southeast Asia more broadly, along with Europe and Afghanistan, will be key areas to watch during the first year of Donald Trump's presidency. Three brigades of the Abu Sayyaf Group, an AQ-aligned terrorist organisation in the southern Philippines, have defected to ISIS in the past nine months. The beginnings of a wilayat structure are already evident, despite ISIS reluctance to recognise the group—which may simply be a tactical move to avoid drawing attention to it.

Philippine president Rodrigo Duterte's crackdown on criminals and drug addicts, which has killed thousands since his election earlier this year, has led to a cooling of U.S.-Philippines relations and calls to suspend U.S. anti-terrorism assistance. In Indonesia, a growing movement of sectarian vigilantes is engaging in street violence and calling for persecution of Christian and Chinese minorities, while a generation of jihadists sentenced for terrorism attacks in the early 2000s is being released from prison with little sign of repentance. Given all this, it's possible we may see a formal ISIS wilayat in Southeast Asia in 2017.

In Europe the situation is, if anything, more dangerous. Europe is easy to access by land, via Turkey, from conflict zones in Iraq and Syria, and is a short boat or plane ride from Libya, Algeria, Egypt, Morocco and Tunisia—all areas with either a full-blown ISIS wilayat or a substantial but informal jihadist threat. Thousands of European citizens have travelled to fight in Iraq and Syria, many but not all of them from Muslim minority populations in Western Europe, and hence holding European passports. Another small but significant

minority are European citizens by birth, of European ethnicity, adult or adolescent converts to Islam, without previous terrorism convictions or police records—these so-called "cleanskins" are culturally and ethnically suited to blend in and operate in any western country without arousing attention, while traveling openly on their own genuine travel documents.

Germany's Bundeskriminalamt and France's Direction Générale de la Sécurité Intérieure (those countries' equivalent of Australia's ASIO, or of the FBI in the United States) estimated in mid-2016 that somewhere between 450 and 600 Syria-trained ISIS operatives are at large in Western Europe alone. For context, that's the size of the whole Irish Republican Army's combat component in the 1990s, or more than twice the size of the Cold War-era Red Brigades, representing an extremely serious and large-scale terrorist threat.

That threat is being exacerbated by the tsunami of refugees from Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan and Africa that has swamped Europe over the past three years, surging dramatically (from already record highs) in summer 2015, as a result of the near-collapse of Bashar al-Assad's regime in Syria and ISIS victories in Palmyra and Ramadi, which convinced millions to flee and created a knock-on effect in refugee camps around the region that were already full to overflowing.

Between one and four million asylum seekers and refugees have flooded into Europe since then—only an imprecise range can be given, since official figures count only registered refugees, while European agencies acknowledge that a wave of undocumented migrants entered the continent along with the formally registered asylum seekers.

Accusations of assault and violent theft against migrants (at least some of which appear justified) along with concerns about the rapidly changing identity of European society and the impact on the European welfare system of millions of unemployed new arrivals, have contributed to a backlash against the flow of asylum-seekers. This has sometimes been characterised as a "right-wing" or "neo-fascist" reaction, and right wing groups have certainly been involved in it. But over the past year, in the wake of terrorist attacks in France, Belgium and Germany and mass assaults on women during the 2015 New Year's Eve celebrations in Germany, the reaction has become more

mainstream. Understanding it is, in some ways, as simple as noting the numbers: some towns and urban districts in Germany and France have doubled or tripled in population over the last twelve months, with every new arrival coming from one or two districts in Iraq or Syria. It's hard to imagine any society in the world experiencing such a pace and scale of change without serious instability, and European societies are no exception.

Of course, the overwhelming majority of migrants reaching Europe are families and individuals fleeing extremism, or economic migrants looking for a better life, and don't in themselves pose a terrorism threat. But when the three key elements we've already noted (a trained cadre familiar with guerrilla warfare and blooded in Syria, a large population within which that cadre can hide and recruit, and a mainstream backlash against that population) are present, all the ingredients exist for a sustained campaign of terrorism, and potentially for a widespread guerrilla campaign or the establishment of a wilayat.

One ISIS-linked group has called for a wilayat in Spain, another for one in the former Yugoslavia, and other indications suggest Albania and parts of France, Germany and Scandinavia may also be primed for increased ISIS presence. This, of course, would further complicate existing European disunity resulting from the after-effects of the global financial crisis, the impact of Brexit, and the effect of Russian subversion and information warfare in the Baltic and eastern/central Europe, making Europe a potential source of problems early in the new administration.

The European situation provides the backdrop—and part of the explanation—for President Trump's controversial "Muslim ban," and his rejection of plans to increase the flow of Middle Eastern refugees into the United States. Some have criticised this approach as irrational and impractical, while others have condemned it as illiberal and out of touch with American values.

One common critique points out that Europeans, presumably including recently arrived Middle Eastern asylum seekers with European passports or temporary protection visas issued by EU nations, will be able to enter the United States without background checks as part of the existing visa waiver program—would President

Trump seriously consider banning arrivals from Europe absent extreme vetting? The Trump campaign's answer, to the extent that a clear one can be deduced from the rhetoric, seems to be "Yes", precisely because the visa-waiver program would otherwise make it so easy for European passport-carrying foreign fighters to enter.

Indeed, the Trump campaign appears to be wrestling with a paradox that has affected all refugee policy and all relationships with Muslim populations in the West since 9/11: on the one hand, the data clearly show that only a tiny proportion of Muslims (including Muslim asylum-seekers) are involved in violent extremism or terrorism; moreover, we need Muslim-majority countries and domestic Muslim communities as allies in the fight against jihadism, so alienating them by painting with too broad a brush is fraught with danger.

On the other hand, the data also clearly demonstrate that it only takes a tiny number of people to generate a sustained terror campaign—one or two dozen is a reasonable historical yardstick. Thus, blanket statements like Hillary Clinton's remark during a speech at the Council on Foreign Relations in 2015 that "Muslims are peaceful and tolerant people and have nothing whatsoever to do with terrorism" are at least as divorced from reality as President-elect Trump's blanket Muslim ban.

Finally, and another major source of asylum seekers, Afghanistan is on the brink of a crisis that will probably hit within a few months of President-elect Trump's inauguration. Despite barely being mentioned by either candidate on the campaign trail, Afghanistan has suffered a dramatic drop in security over the past two years, with a resurgent Taliban, the appearance of ISIS in Afghanistan and Pakistan, AQ re-emerging in its old strongholds in the country's east, and a political crisis within the National Unity Government (NUG).

The NUG, a compromise brokered by the international community after the disputed 2014 Afghan presidential election, made Ashraf Ghani President while giving his rival, Abdullah, the newly created post of Chief Executive. The deal averted a crisis in the run-up to western withdrawal in December 2014, but was only for two years, and expired in October. The NUG was intended as a transitional arrangement, under which Ghani committed to hold provincial

and local elections and convene a national assembly to vote on constitutional amendments that would render his presidency largely ceremonial while turning the country into a parliamentary democracy with Abdullah as Prime Minister. None of that happened, leaving Abdullah and his allies furious while Ghani's faction argued that the security situation in the countryside had become so dangerous that local-level elections were simply not practicable.

They're right about that: provincial capitals like Kunduz and Tarin Kowt (the former Australian base and capital of Uruzgan province) have been repeatedly attacked by a growing and increasingly unified Taliban that now threatens more than half the country and controls many rural districts. Columns of well-armed fighters, with modern weapons and vehicles, numbering in the hundreds, have attacked cities across the country.

Kunduz fell to the Taliban in October 2015 only to be recaptured after weeks of heavy fighting, while Tarin Kowt was briefly occupied by the insurgents in September and only recaptured after several coalition airstrikes and the emergency deployment of a police rapid-reaction force from Kandahar. Lashkar Gah, capital of Helmand province, is all but encircled, and both Taliban and Islamic State fighters are regularly attacking Afghanistan's largest cities.

President Trump will need to quickly consider whether to reinforce U.S. presence in Afghanistan (where there are currently about 10,000 American troops), delay their withdrawal, or continue with President Obama's scheduled 2017 drawdown. His decision may well be influenced by the actions of the ISIS wilayat in Afghanistan, as well as by the resurgent Taliban.

A final layer of the Islamic State structure, one that brings the threat much closer to home and has thus received significant attention on the campaign trail, is the atomised movement of individuals, ad hoc cells and underground groups of ISIS sympathisers, supporters and foreign fighters outside the territory controlled by the Islamic State. I call this layer of the ISIS structure the "Internationale," by reference to an earlier era of global revolution.

It's hard to know precisely how many people are involved in this level of the structure—by definition, it's hidden and constantly shifting—

but, as one indicator, in 2015 Twitter suspended 220,000 accounts it judged as linked to the Islamic State. Obviously enough, 220,000 Twitter accounts doesn’t equal 220,000 people, since individuals often have multiple accounts. But it’s a rough indicator of how large the iceberg is, under the surface. The internationale is present in roughly 80 countries worldwide, and consists of self-radicalised (or remotely-radicalised) individuals and small cells, sympathisers and support networks for ISIS who engage in acts of sabotage, subversion, terrorism and propaganda to support the Islamic State’s objectives or further the interests of a particular wilayat. Its members recruit, raise funds, proselytise, organise and carry out terror attacks. Individuals communicate on social media and via secure messaging, sharing propaganda, learning specific techniques from each other, grooming and radicalising recruits and receiving general targeting guidance from the central ISIS state, which they then act upon on their own initiative.

This model is known as “leaderless resistance” or “leaderless jihad,” and it’s extremely hard to counter using traditional police and intelligence methods, which rely on identifying and penetrating clandestine cells before an attack can occur. In an ad hoc, self-organised structure of this kind, people enter and leave the Internationale constantly, so that its membership is neither fixed nor known to its members, and many attacks are carried out on the spur of the moment by self-synchronised cells or self-starting individuals, so that there is no clandestine cell to detect, no secret plan to discover, before the attack starts.

As a historical aside, it’s worth mentioning that this three-layer ISIS structure is in no way original or unique. We’ve seen this before: the structure I have sketched here bears a remarkable resemblance to that of the early Soviet Union, circa 1923. You may recall that, before V.I. Lenin died and Joseph Stalin came to power with the idea of “socialism in one country”, the early Soviet Union had a global revolutionary agenda much as ISIS does. It had a three-layer structure: the central Bolshevik state in Russia and parts of eastern Europe, a series of fraternal Communist parties in other countries which sought to create miniature versions of that central state in their own territory, and an

internationale (the so-called Third or Communist Internationale or Comintern) supported and directed by agents of the central state but made up of individuals, small groups and ad hoc cells acting on their own initiative to carry out agitprop, subversion and localised terror in support of the broader enterprise. The central Soviet state, like that of ISIS, was initially unrecognised by the international community and seen as illegitimate, and was still fighting for its existence against a concert of intervening western powers and local opposition groups as late as 1921, though by 1923 it had gained the upper hand and was consolidating.

I mention this because, in part, it's a useful antidote to an attitude that sees ISIS as unique in history. Uniquely evil it may be (though in historic terms that's highly debatable); uniquely capable it is not—rather, ISIS thinks and act like a revolutionary state much like the early Soviet Union and suffers from many of the same internal contradictions and external pressures.

On the other hand, it's worth remembering that the Soviet project lasted more than seventy years, brought the planet to the verge of nuclear destruction more than once, and killed tens of millions of people in territories it controlled. So containment and rollback—measures like the Marshall Plan, engagement in "brushfire" wars to counter communism in the developing world, and the intelligence, counterintelligence and information warfare strategies eventually adopted by communism's Cold War opponents—are relevant, and highly necessary, as tools to defeat the Islamic State.

Other terrorism threats exist beyond ISIS, of course. These include the resurgent and increasingly capable core Al Qaeda in Pakistan (which has re-established itself in Afghanistan), AQ affiliates in Yemen, Somalia and North Africa, and—by far the most serious—Syria-based Jabhat Fatah al-Sham, the most capable AQ-linked terrorist group in the history of the movement.

Likewise, Iranian-sponsored terrorism (including what amounts to ethno-sectarian cleansing in Syria and Iraq) is an increasing concern since the 2015 nuclear deal. That deal, whatever its merits as a counter-proliferation measure (and these are debatable) has undeniably given greater freedom of movement to Iranian operatives

and enabled more active Iranian subversion and sponsorship of terror across the Middle East. This has spurred, in turn, a backlash from Sunni Arab states, Turkey, and even Israel, all of which see Iran as even more of a threat than ISIS. Indeed, looking at the overall picture, and taking into account both the state of the ISIS threat and the growth (or re-emergence) of these other groups, it's clear that the threat from terrorism—far from having been reduced since the 9/11 terrorism attacks—has actually become very substantially worse.

Beyond the received wisdom

This brings us back to President-elect Trump. As I mentioned earlier, Hillary Clinton ran as the continuity candidate, someone who would continue the broad outline of U.S. counterterrorism policy as it has existed for the last decade, since the end of he first term of President George W. Bush, but with more energy. (As I wrote in *Blood Year*, despite sharp differences in rhetoric, in substance the policies of the Obama administration have largely continued, and in some cases—such as drone strikes and domestic surveillance—deepened and broadened those adopted after 2005 in President Bush's second term.)

Secretary Clinton often used more hawkish language than President Obama, telegraphing that as president she would govern with a more robust attitude to the use of force or with greater willingness to intervene in hotspots around the world, but her policies sat comfortably in the mainstream of what had been done to date. There are three problems with this.

First, most obviously, what we've been doing for the last ten years has manifestly not been working. Between the growth of ISIS, the resurgence of AQ, the emergence of new AQ-linked groups like Jabhat Fatah al-Sham and the resurgence of the Taliban, we're now dealing with a much more dangerous international terrorism environment, while attacks inside the United States and in other western countries are at an all-time high.

This being the case, what's most urgently needed is actually not a steady-as-she-goes approach that focuses on more competently

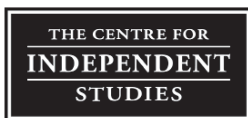
executing existing policy, but rather a complete rethink. Almost nobody in the national security establishment, on either side of U.S. politics, would have supposed that Donald Trump would be the one to offer that rethink—but in some ways, his very lack of baked-in knowledge, the maverick nature of his national security team and his willingness to trample beltway wisdom make it easier for him to do so than it would have been for a President Hillary Clinton.

Secondly, the approach taken since 2005 may be unsustainable in its current form. President Obama recognised this in seeking to withdraw U.S. troops from Afghanistan and Iraq; though he failed in the execution, the instinct—that from a political, resource and human life standpoint it might be simply unworkable to continue to occupy and stabilize Iraq and Afghanistan indefinitely—was correct. (It was of course one that President George W. Bush shared, which animated his second term and drove the Surge in Iraq.)

The tragedy of President Obama's administration was that a combination of complacency and inattention allowed the complete withdrawal from Iraq and the non-intervention in Syria that gave rise to ISIS. Likewise, the presumption (shared by Secretary Clinton) that killing Osama bin Laden had somehow been a major defeat for AQ—in fact it helped renew the organisation's appeal, after a brief eclipse in 2011—meant that the risks of the Libyan intervention and the failure of the Arab Spring appeared less severe than they were. And the withdrawal-by-timetable in Afghanistan, a timetable announced by President Obama as early as December 2009, allowed the Taliban to bide its time, regroup across the border in Pakistan, and surge back into Afghanistan in unprecedented strength in 2015.

Candidate Clinton offered little that was new in response to these threats: she talked of an intelligence surge, working closely with allies, and a no-fly zone in Syria. Aside from the vagueness of notions like an intelligence surge (domestic or international? preserving or moving away from the current CIA reorganisation? what role for the FBI in a Clinton administration, especially given poisonous relations between FBI Director Comey and the Clinton campaign?) initiatives like the no-fly zone were non-starters once Russia intervened in Syria in 2015 and moved air defence systems into the country.

President-elect Trump's approach to date, of course, has also been seriously flawed, if his comments on the campaign trail are taken as a straight description of what his policies might be. We need Muslim allies. Islam alone doesn't explain jihad. European allies matter. Carpet-bombing ISIS-held cities may make the problem much worse. Waterboarding is rightly consigned to the dark ages. But Trump is right to the extent that if you can't name the problem it's hard to fix it, and that the primary responsibility of an American president is to protect America and further its people's interests. So there's room for a rethink, and—at least on the surface—President-elect Trump may be better equipped to preside over that rethink than President Clinton would have been.



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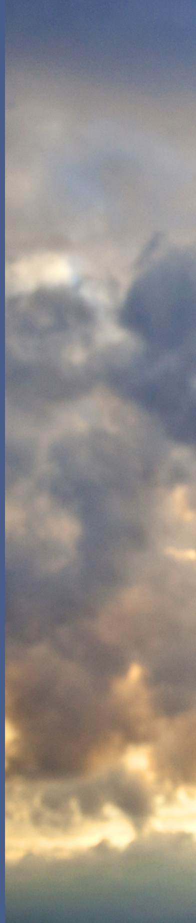

Counterinsurgency expert and military strategist Dr David Kilcullen delivers a timely Centre for Independent Studies Lighthouse Lecture on the alarming topic of increasing global terror, and provides both global and local comments on how we can adapt to the 'new normal'. He particularly looks at how the new President of the Unites States, Donald Trump, could respond to the threat of terrorism.

Dr David Kilcullen is Chief Operating Officer of Meta Aerospace Capital, an aviation investment firm, and Chairman of First Mile Geo, a geospatial firm providing humanitarian mapping for NGOs in Syria and Africa. A former Australian Army officer, David has worked with the Australian and US Governments including roles as senior counter-insurgency advisor to General David Petraeus, Chief Strategist in the Counterterrorism Bureau at the US State Department and special advisor for counter-insurgency to Secretary of State Condoleezza

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