



The Threat from Radical Islam: A Transition from Physical to Virtual Caliphate

Executive Summary: Collapse of the Caliphate

A comprehensive study recently completed by the Investigative Project on Terrorism (IPT) indicates that the next 24 months will be critical in defining the future threat from radical Islamic terror. ISIS and other violent Islamic groups are now entering a post-caliphate period. From 2014-2016 violent extremists reached their peak in global fatalities as they established, controlled, and administered a caliphate, a large geographic territory, in Syria and Iraq. This caliphate propelled the movement to kill an annual average of nearly 27,500 individuals globally. This represented an almost 189 percent increase from the period before ISIS established its caliphate. The caliphate, after three years, is finally coming to an end. The battle to defeat the terror threat is entering a new phase. It is transitioning. How the threat transitions and how the world community responds will shape the future threat.

The year 2017 has become a fundamental year in fighting the war against radical Islamic terrorism. There have been many successes on the battlefield in an effort to confront and contain the ISIS-established caliphate. But now that the physical caliphate has nearly been demolished, it is important to note that the ideology that drove the creation of the caliphate is still alive and well. The success of the “virtual” caliphate can be determined by the responses and the actions of the world community. This is an absolutely vital time.

The data on global fatalities resulting from radical Islamist terrorist attacks does not yet indicate that the efforts to confront, contain, and ultimately defeat radical Islamic terrorism have achieved significant results. But the in-depth analysis by the IPT reveals that the deadly caliphate is over. Radical Islamic groups are going to have to redefine their violent strategies as they lose their geographic safe havens from which they terrorized local populations, carried out regional attacks, and organized global attacks.

With the collapse of the caliphate, radical Islamists will start to develop new strategies. The anti-terrorism effort will respond by counter-developing new approaches to contain, confront, and ultimately defeat the threat.

Predictions:

- ✚ Global fatality numbers will decrease significantly. Without the caliphate, terrorist capabilities are significantly reduced.
- ✚ Radical Islamic groups will carry out attacks in areas with weak central government control; i.e. the Sahel and the Maghreb in Africa, parts of the Philippines and Indonesia in Southeast Asia, Pakistan in South Asia, and other similar areas.
- ✚ Afghanistan will become the new “ground zero” in this war.
- ✚ The West, including the U.S. and Western Europe, will remain primary targets for Islamist propaganda value.



Thus, the IPT has made four predictions on how the threat will evolve. These predictions outline the IPT's expectations for how terrorism will evolve, and what the international community should be prepared to respond to.

Methodology: Data-driven Methodical Analysis

The analyses completed by the IPT utilized global fatality statistics developed by the University of Maryland's National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START). The raw information can be located on their Global Terrorism Database (GTD). This database identifies global fatalities caused by terrorist activities. It further breaks down these fatalities to identify the terrorist groups that are responsible for them and the countries where the fatalities took place.

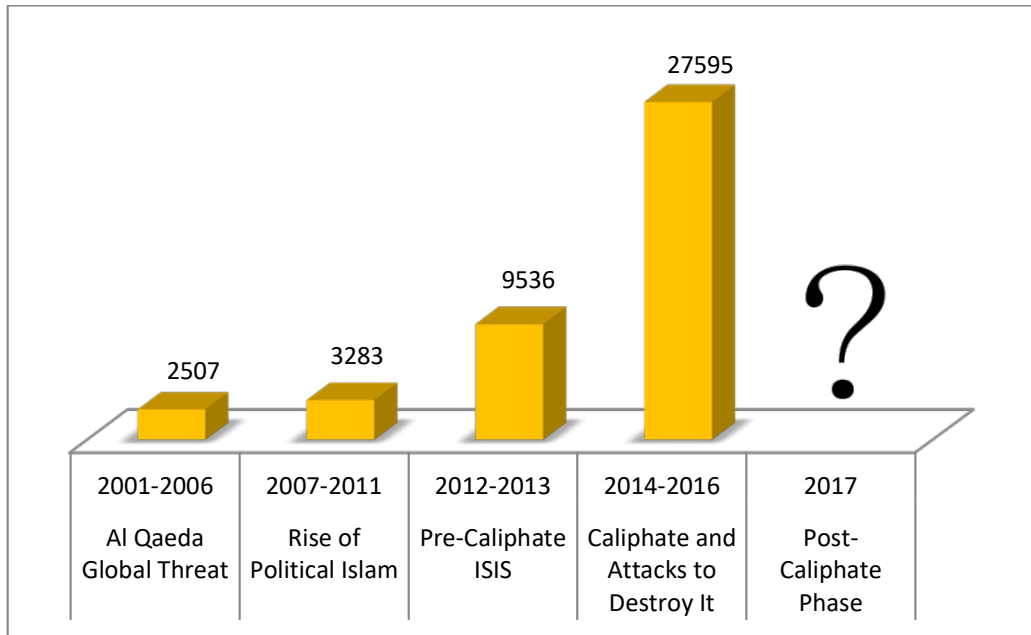
Terrorism experts at the IPT analyzed the data and worked diligently to identify the many groups responsible for terrorism around the globe. In addition, the IPT consolidated the information by region. The data was then interpreted to discover any underlying trends. Finally, the IPT merged the analysis of the database with its ongoing work of tracking terrorism on a global basis to identify potential trends in the War on Terror.

This 2017 report is the second of its kind. An earlier report [was completed](#) in March of 2016.

Background/Analysis:

The IPT has been tracking global fatality trends as a result of radical Islamic terror for the last few years. We have identified trends, completed extensive analyses, and made predictions as a result of our work. The IPT believes strongly that part of the analysis on the threat from radical Islamic should be data-based. This report is driven by the data on global fatalities. When combined with other information, it provides powerful insight into the global jihadist threat. Much of the media reporting on this threat is anecdotal, but the IPT analysis is data driven.

In its previous work, the IPT identified four different phases of the threat outlined in the chart below. This study establishes that the threat from radical Islamic terrorism is moving into a fifth phase, the post-caliphate phase.



Each prior phase depicts the rapid global fatality increase. And each increase was significant. Radical Islamists were winning. Fatalities were multiplying. This culminated with the phase of the caliphate where ISIS controlled large geographic areas of Iraq and Syria as well as significant portions of Libya. But the evidence shows that during the last year, the caliphate has been confronted, contained, and now in 2017, has ultimately been eliminated. The caliphate phase is over!

End of the Caliphate: What to Expect

The next challenge for those involved in confronting, containing, and ultimately defeating the threat posed by radical Islam is the inevitable evolution of terrorism post-caliphate.

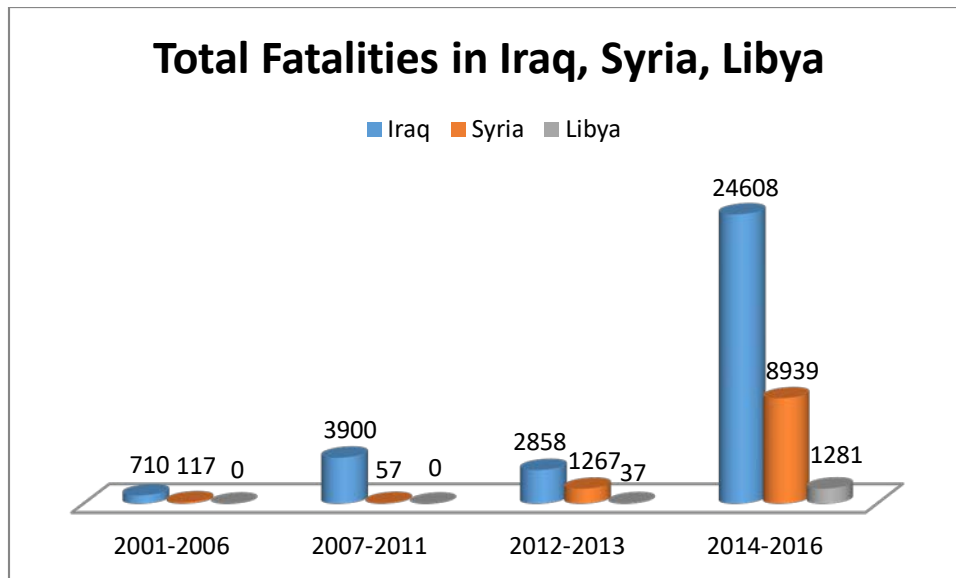


ISIS and other terrorist organizations used the caliphate to intimidate local populations, launch regional attacks, and prepare and organize global attacks. They used the caliphate to achieve unprecedented global fatality numbers. Now that the caliphate has been eliminated, the IPT presumes the terror threat will evolve.

Reuters: Capture of Mosul Mosque [marks](#) end of the ISIS caliphate



With the elimination of the caliphate, the IPT expects global fatality numbers to decrease. In 2016, nearly 50 percent of the total global fatalities occurred in three states which made up the caliphate: Iraq, Syria, and Libya. There has been a concerted effort to confront, contain, and defeat the threat in these countries. With the apparent successes recently seen in all three countries, the IPT expects fatality numbers to decrease in these countries. Terror groups will no longer be in control of the killing fields. In addition, their safe havens used to terrorize the region and plan global attacks have been abolished.



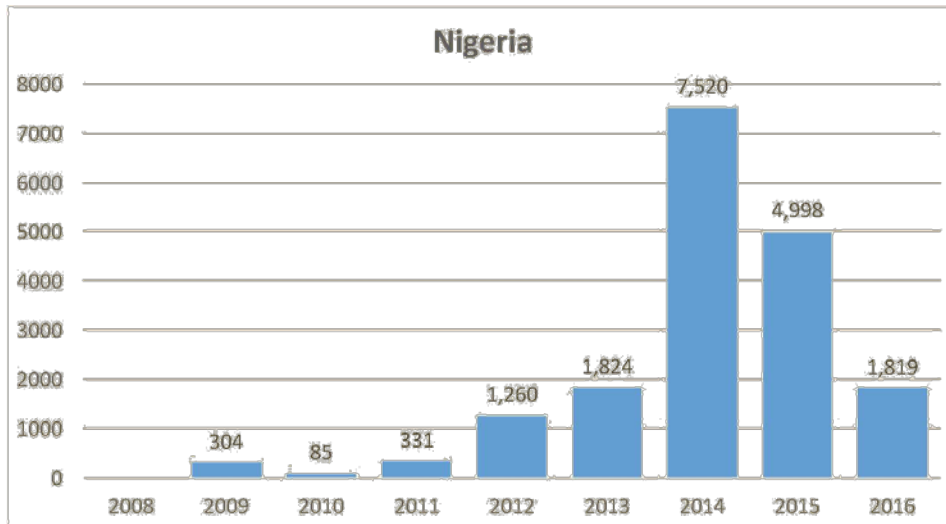
The IPT is confident in the above-stated prediction. The best comparable case study for what to expect in Syria, Iraq, and Libya is Nigeria.

The Case Study of Nigeria:

Nigeria demonstrates what is to be expected when the threat of radical Islam is confronted with a rigorous and stepped-up military campaign. Up until 2010, Nigeria was a relatively safe country that experienced low levels of fatalities as a result of radical Islamic terrorism. However, with the growth of Boko Haram and a military and/or central government either unwilling or unable to confront them, the threat increased exponentially. At its peak in 2014, terrorist activities resulted in the death of more than 7,500 people annually. And other than Iraq, Nigeria suffered the highest number of casualties in the world in 2014. It became an effective killing ground.

However, Nigeria is starting to show some hope. After a rigorous effort to confront and contain the terrorist threat, fatalities in Nigeria had decreased nearly 75 percent in 2016. This remarkable progress demonstrates that in at least one country, the threat can be contained when confronted. It is still too early to determine whether the threat will be defeated.

The rapid rise and relatively quick containment of the threat in Nigeria is outlined in the graph below:



But is Nigeria an anomaly or is it an indicator of what is to be expected in other countries? The IPT believes that what happened in Nigeria gauges what should be anticipated in many other countries. Once challenged, radical Islam can be contained and diminished.

Another indicator of how the threat will evolve is by analyzing the primary killing fields of the last three years. It is important to determine where radical Islam has been most effective, what the responses were to radical Islam, and to determine how successful the actions have become.

The Killing Fields of the Last Three Years:

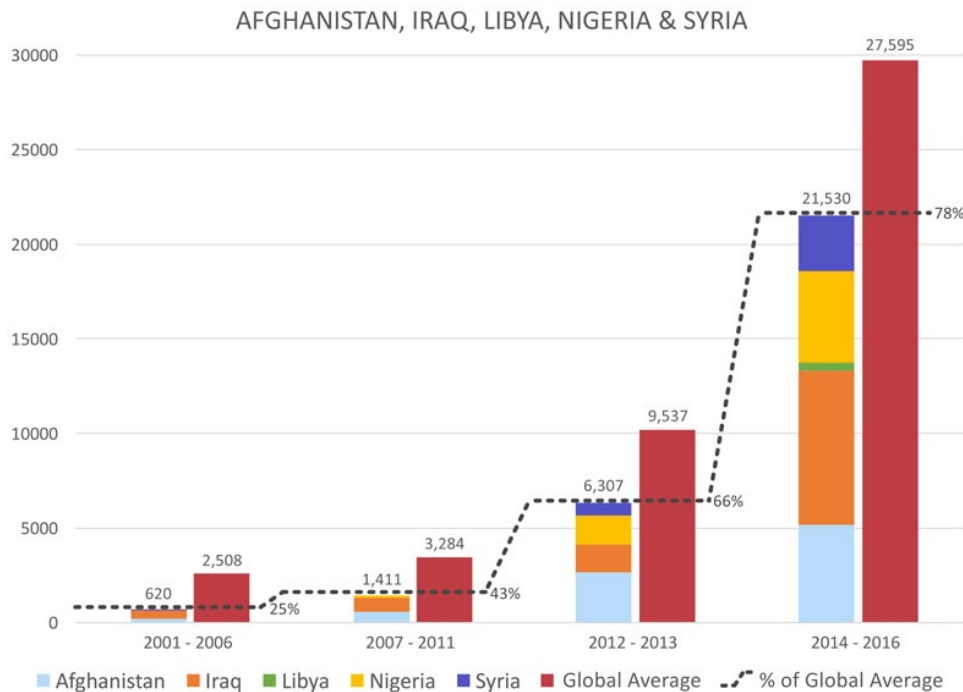
Data shows that the last three years have been among the deadliest in recent times. From 2012-2013 there had been an annual average of around 9,500 fatalities. But from 2014-2016, the number of fatalities rose by roughly 189 percent to an annual average of about 27,500 fatalities. The countries comprising the caliphate; Iraq, Syria, and parts of Libya, made up almost 42 percent of the global fatalities during the caliphate phase. Nigeria and Afghanistan also contributed heavily to global fatality numbers. The caliphate resulted in an increase in fatalities five times that of the previous period in the countries that comprised the caliphate, from 2,694 fatalities in 2013 to 13,052 fatalities in 2016.



ISIS beheading their prisoners in Iraq and Syria



However, there have been recent successful military operations in Iraq and Syria. With the end of the physical caliphate, the numbers for 2016 stabilized. And, as previously stated, the IPT expects to see a significant drop in the number of fatalities in those countries as well as on a global basis.

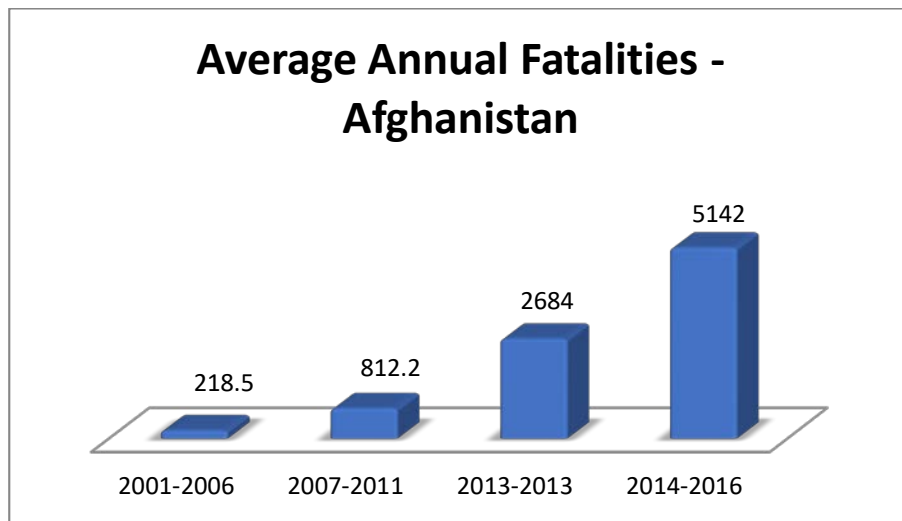


The IPT presumes that more effective central governments in Syria, Iraq, and Libya, along with the elimination of regions controlled by ISIS, will result in a notable decrease in casualty rates. The conditions that fostered the success of ISIS have been eliminated.

ISIS airstrikes down 60 to 70 percent as caliphate crumbles in Iraq and Syria

November 7, 2017 [Headline](#) on Fox News

On the other hand, the Afghanistan/Pakistan region, a region that has seen a consistent effort to confront and contain terrorism, is not experiencing the same results as Nigeria. The Taliban, and to a lesser extent ISIS and Al-Qaeda, in Afghanistan have [gained control](#) over large swaths of land reaching “an all-time high,” SIGAR points out in a press release, “[published](#) October 2017. SIGAR is the U.S. Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction. Afghanistan’s weak central government and difficult terrain have limited counterterrorism efforts. There is little evidence to show that an effective strategy has been identified to deal with terrorism in Afghanistan. In fact, Afghanistan experienced one of its deadliest years in 2016.



The triumphs recently seen in Iraq and Syria should be recognized as major progress against the enemy. Unfortunately, the same cannot be said for the efforts in the Afghanistan/Pakistan region. Afghanistan experienced the second highest death toll of all countries in 2016. Therefore, the successes in Iraq and Syria but the uncertainty in the Afghanistan/Pakistan region leads the IPT to predict that the death toll in Afghanistan will continue at high rates and it will become the deadliest country in the world.

In the near term, Afghanistan poses the most difficult challenge in the effort to combat global terrorism. After more than 15 years, it continues to be an effective killing field for radical jihadists. Fifteen years on the battlefield in Afghanistan have delivered minute success.

It is important to note that after the many achievements experienced in Iraq, Syria, Libya, and Nigeria, the focus on Afghanistan in order to combat the critical terrorist threat there is appropriate. It is the immediate focal point.

What Happens Next?

Since the primary battlefields, other than in the Afghanistan/Pakistan region, are being neutralized, it is important to then question where radical jihadists will relocate and refocus their efforts. The IPT has examined some of the factors that these groups have used in the past to identify possible areas of opportunities of radical Islam which include:

- ✚ Areas with majority Muslim populations. Whether it is northern Nigeria, Iraq, Syria, or the Afghanistan/Pakistan region, jihadists have seen areas with significant Muslim populations as areas of opportunities. It is important to affirm that the IPT does not believe Muslim populations are largely supportive of terrorism and terrorist movements. The IPT recognizes that Muslim populations, especially in these regions, have suffered immensely at the hands of radical Jihadists. We do, however, want to point out the

Jihadist Relocation to Places With:

- ✚ Significant Muslim populations
- ✚ Weak central governments



obvious. Terrorist groups have established themselves in areas of significant Muslim populations.

- ✚ Areas where central governments have been unable or unwilling to exert their control and influence. This has been true in Iraq, Syria, Nigeria, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Libya, Yemen and other areas. We can and should expect this trend to continue.

Areas that meet these criteria will most likely continue to be the emerging battlegrounds in the next few years. These areas include the Sahel and Maghreb regions in Africa which consist of countries such as Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Sudan, Cameroon, Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia. Yemen and Somalia are also especially vulnerable. These countries tend to have majority Muslim populations and weak central governments. There have already been increased military activities in many of these countries to confront and contain the threat. Mali and Niger are just two of the countries that have made the news recently because of ongoing terror threats and military activities.

A second area of concern is Southeast Asia, specifically Indonesia and the Philippines. There are areas in each country that meet the criteria outlined earlier.

Affirmatively, there are activities underway in all of these areas to confront and contain the threat. With the experience of lessons learned over the last decade, the IPT is optimistic that none of these areas will see the type of success



ISIS and Filipino forces clash leaving ruins behind.

that radical jihadists experienced in Iraq, Syria, and Libya during the caliphate period. With no caliphate, and always under pressure, jihadists will revert back to terrorist activities, or guerilla warfare.

So while the threat will remain deadly, it is unlikely that the fatality statistics will continue at the pace seen from 2014-2016.

The West, however, will start to become a crucial focal point in the evolution of radical Islamic terrorism.



Trends in Western Europe and the United States:

There are a few things we should expect to see unfold in the West pertaining to radical Islamic terrorism. Western Europe and North America should expect terror threats to continue at current or higher levels. Jihadists who joined ISIS forces in the caliphate will relocate to their home countries. Some will return with military training and combat experience. Some will be more committed to the cause than ever before. Continued homegrown radicalization will also be a threat.



ISIS propaganda [insists](#) Islamists execute Trump.

Over the last three years, there has been an uptick in attacks in Western Europe and in North America. Since the collapse of the caliphate, ISIS foreign fighters have begun to return home to their native countries. The persistent refugee flow and relatively open border policies will also continue to remain a vulnerability to the West. Historically speaking, radical Islamists view the West as a prime target of opportunity, offering significant propaganda value. With major losses experienced in other parts of the world, jihadist propaganda will remain a critical priority. The propaganda value of successful attacks in the West is well understood by the leadership of radical Islamist groups, and the West recognizes the threat.

Accordingly, a top-secret UK-based government strategy called Operation Constrain [could potentially allow](#) individuals returning from Iraq and Syria to reintegrate into their society by offering these extremists taxpayer funded homes, counseling, and job-hunting assistance. The goal of the operation is to hopefully turn these returning jihadists away from radicalism. But according to *The Daily Mail*, “Fanatics who had been under surveillance by MI5 in the past were among the perpetrators of the two terror attacks in London and one in Manchester this year that left 35 people dead.” Intelligence agencies should be skeptical of this operation.

Terror Threats:

- ✚ “Britain is facing its most severe ever terrorist threat and fresh attacks in the country are inevitable...” – *The Guardian*
- ✚ “German Police have been on high alert to the threat of Islamist attacks, particularly since December last year when a man hijacked a truck and ploughed into shoppers at a Christmas market in Berlin, killing 12 people.” – *The Telegraph*
- ✚ “Mr. Macron formally signed a sweeping counterterrorism law [in France] to replace the state of emergency, which is meant to give police more tools to fight violent extremism.” – *The Independent UK*
- ✚ “...The [FBI] also has about 1,000 open cases related to the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS)...” – *The Hill*
- ✚ “The terrorism threat level in the Netherlands has been substantial since 2013, according to the National Coordinator for Counterterrorism and Security.” – *NL Times*



Radical Islamic Terror Attack Spikes in the West				
Year	Western Europe		United States	
	Attacks	Fatalities	Attacks	Fatalities
2012	1	1	0	0
2013	2	2	3	5
2014	1	4	4	5
2015	17	162	4	25
2016	15	149	4	53

There are high terror risk levels in the United States and countries in Western Europe such as the United Kingdom, France, Belgium, the Netherlands, and Spain. The terror threat levels in the United States and Western Europe indicate that a terror attack is likely to occur. And just because the physical caliphate has been dismantled, does not mean that the threat has also been eliminated. Just recently ISIS fanatics threatened Prince George [claiming](#), “Even the Royal Family will not be left alone.”

Radical jihadists are consistently focused on executing another large-scale attack, hoping for another attack as detrimental as 9-11. Thus, the West will see a continuous threat of attacks by ISIS and other Islamist extremist groups.



ISIS [claims](#) responsibility for New York terror attack 10-31-17.

But the raw statistics reveal two things. First, the number of attacks in both Western Europe and North America are on the upswing. Second, despite seeing an increase in the number of attacks, fatality numbers are small when compared to other areas around the world. In 2016, the combined number of fatalities in Western Europe and North America totaled 202. So while the numbers are increasing they

still are statistically insignificant. Fatalities in the West comprise less than 1 percent of the total casualties.

Summary:

This year has been a pivotal year. ISIS and the threat from violent, radical Islamic terrorism are transitioning from a physical caliphate to a “virtual” caliphate. For three years, ISIS controlled large geographic areas in Iraq, Syria, and Libya. ISIS used this land as a base to terrorize local populations, export terrorism to neighboring areas, and to plan global terror attacks. But the physical caliphate has nearly been destroyed. The rapid loss of geographic territory will force the threat to further evolve into



a “virtual” caliphate, using virtual measures to export ideology, command, and control in an effort to incite violence without a physical capital or territory. Additionally, the West will become an important pawn radical Islamists will use in their “virtual” caliphate. The West, however, has not yet become substantial battleground territory for the jihadists. This is the new emerging threat the global community faces in response to ISIS and the end of their physical caliphate.

The last three years have proven to be devastating for the world. The ISIS-established caliphate significantly increased annual fatalities by 189 percent, killing on average 27,500 individuals annually. Fatalities in Iraq, Syria, and Libya increased fivefold from 2013-2016. ISIS’ success was unprecedented.

The collapse of the physical caliphate in Iraq, Syria, and Libya shows the 15-year jihadist momentum is finally faltering. The caliphate may have been the peak in the Radical Islamist threat. Nigeria is also feeling the Islamist momentum shift. Fatalities as a result of violent Islamist extremism in Nigeria have decreased 75 percent in 2016 from its peak in 2014. The efforts to confront and contain the threat in all four countries have ultimately been successful. The Afghanistan/Pakistan region is the only region where concerted efforts to confront and contain the threat of radical Islam have to-date been unsuccessful.

With all of these activities and the emergence of a virtual caliphate, IPT predicts that:

- ✚ Global fatalities will start to decrease in the near future.
- ✚ Radical Islamic groups will utilize targets of opportunity: areas with significant Muslim populations and weak central governments
- ✚ The Afghanistan/Pakistan region will become the “ground zero” in this war
- ✚ The West will become a primary target because of the propaganda value gained by successful Islamist attacks with the potential of carrying out another attack as destructive as 9-11.

Despite the immense progress made against radical Islamic terrorism, the threat is still very real. The ideology that drove the physical caliphate still exists today, and efforts will need to be expended to ensure the “virtual” caliphate does not gain a foothold. Evidence from the last three years indicates that when confronted, the Physical caliphate can be contained and ultimately defeated. Those fighting the threat must work diligently in order to ensure future success. Evidently, recent history demonstrates that there are specific formulas that when implemented, can and will achieve a victory.

IPT research analyst Ariel Behar contributed to this report.