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## 2014-2015 Mid-Year Report

March 2015



In this digital age, the term “going to press” seems dated, if not antiquated. Ideas are born and change happens—and is shared with others—almost instantaneously. Armed with devices at our fingertips and powered by a new sharing sensibility, information is outdated and updated constantly.

As our team here at the Aspen Institute prepares for this summer’s Aspen Security Forum, we find ourselves slowing our pace and reflecting on last summer—on all of the conversations onstage and off that punctuated the tranquility of that tiny mountaintop town. They were insightful and they were prescient. They were productive and essential. They were remarkable.

So, despite the speed that defines our days in Washington, D.C., and likely yours wherever you are, I invite you to press “pause” for a moment. The start of a new calendar year—this midpoint between the 2014 Forum and the 2015 Forum—is the perfect time to consider some of the highlights and lessons learned from last summer. *Hint:* there are many that endure, have come to pass as predicted, or will be with us again in July!

At this midpoint between ASF 2014 and ASF 2015, we have taken a moment to pen a dozen or so pages of the most salient highlights from last year. They will provide you with a moment of reflection, and may encourage you to keep the conversation going in some way, minus the sound of the afternoon wind in the Aspen trees. We are grateful to Intel Security for its continued support of the Forum and for underwriting this mid-year report.

So, to close where I began, we replaced “going to press” with a swift press of a button to share this digital version. We encourage you to do the same—please feel free to pass along via email, social media, etc.

We will look forward to seeing you again in a few months and, until then, we wish you all best.



Clark K. Ervin  
Executive Director  
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## GLOBAL INSTABILITY IS AT AN ALL TIME HIGH

In the opening session of the 2014 Aspen Security Forum, the Chief of Staff of the United States Army General **Ray Odierno** framed what would be a three-day discussion of the way connectivity, information proliferation, and cyber security are making an already complex set of national security challenges more difficult and more dangerous.

The proliferation of information is both revolutionizing the world and contributing to its instability, he said, a theme that permeated Forum sessions throughout the week on topics ranging from counterterrorism, to the Arab Spring, to the Snowden revelations, to China's role in the world.

"The change in the movement of information, how quickly information can now move, how quickly people can be informed, has changed dramatically in the last five to ten years, and that is creating instability in many nations around the world," Odierno told **David Sanger**, chief Washington correspondent for *The New York Times*. "This is clearly the most uncertain time in the 38 years that I've been here...and that makes it dangerous in itself, the unpredictability and the uncertainty that we face."

Setting the stage for the sessions to come, Odierno also fielded questions about the crises in Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria, global terrorism, the rise of regional competitors, and the fate of the US Army facing budget cuts and force structure reductions that Odierno said would, if implemented, render the Army unable to meet its commitment to fulfill its mission.

He and other military leaders at the Forum argued that the proliferation of world crises called for a national investment in a range of national security tools that exceeded the mandatory spending levels provided for under the Budget Control Act of 2011, known as "sequestration," which would lead to a reduced ground force for the US Army among other force structure reductions.

"If full sequestration returns as scheduled [in 2016], we're going to go to 420,000 [troops]. And, I've been clear that at 420,000 we can't execute the current strategy. We will not have the capacity or capability to do it. The national defense strategy will have to be rewritten. For me, that is somewhat concerning because since 2012 the world has not become a safer place," Odierno said. "The Army must remain a balanced force as it downsizes. Drones and Special Operations forces provide the capability to go after just one kind of threat—terrorists. If you believe that's the only threat we have, that's the way to build your force. I personally believe that we're going to face much more diverse threats."

In a separate session, Adm. **Jonathan Greenert**, the chief of Naval operations, decried the reductions in naval forces that would be needed to meet the spending limits if Congress does not reverse course on the policy. He admitted that the Navy would have to go down to ten aircraft carriers at least, and possibly as low as eight.

"That's not enough to meet the presence and the requirements of the world today as defined by the geographic combatant commanders," Greenert said.

Based on the current budget course, the United States Navy would have to build fewer ships in the future than planned and retire other ships early, he warned. Moreover, the erosion of the naval fleets could lead to an erosion of the defense industrial base that supports it, he said.

“Sequestration limits strategic options,” said Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General **Martin Dempsey**. “The Budget Control Act will have the following effect on the security of the United States: we will no longer be immune from coercion.”

**Mid-year update: On February 2, 2015, President Obama unveiled his request for a fiscal 2016 budget that would fund defense at \$32 billion above the level provided under the “sequester.” The President’s proposal sets up a debate in the newly Republican-led Congress whether to stick with the limits on defense spending as mandated under the Budget Control Act or increase defense spending by taking money from other accounts. This summer, lawmakers in both parties will have to choose between their desire to shrink debt and deficits and the need to bolster the military in a time of war.**

## ASPEN MOMENT

### General Dempsey on Russia: Back to 1939

When General Martin Dempsey was pressed to comment on Russia’s incursion into Ukraine and its annexation of Crimea, he didn’t mince words.

“You’ve got a Russian government that has made the conscious decision to use military force inside of another sovereign nation to achieve its objectives—first, time, I think probably since 1939 or so that that’s been the case,” he said. “I think this is very clearly Putin, the man himself, with a vision for Europe of what he considers to be an effort to redress grievances that were burdened upon Russia after the fall of the Soviet Union. He can also appeal to ethnic Russian enclaves across Eastern Europe with a foreign policy objective. And he’s very aggressive about it.”

Dempsey told “60 Minutes” Lesley Stahl that Ukraine was just the beginning and Russia could be expected to push further if the West allowed it.

“[Putin] has a playbook that has worked for him two or three times. And he will continue to use it,” he said. Citing Putin’s appeal to nationalism in Russia and ethnic solidarity with Russian minorities across Eastern Europe, Dempsey added, “If I have a fear about this, it’s that Putin may actually light a fire that he loses control of.”

**Mid-Year Update: Over the last six months, Russian incursion into Eastern Ukraine has increased greatly and the fighting between the Ukrainian military and Russian backed separatists has intensified, resulting in thousands of deaths. The Obama administration is considering providing lethal aid to the Ukrainian government, but that plan is opposed by German and French leaders, who have been engaged in frantic shuttle diplomacy with Kiev and Moscow. The Minsk Agreement, signed last September, has been continually violated by the Russian side and new efforts to achieve a ceasefire on the ground have yet to show success. President Obama said in February that Vladimir Putin continues to view the world with a Cold War mentality.**

## CYBER SECURITY IS THE NEW COUNTERTERRORISM

Senior White House officials, top military and intelligence officers, and tech industry leaders at the Forum all agreed that the nation needs to drastically ramp up the effort to protect America's military, domestic critical infrastructure, and corporate intellectual property from the cyber threat from abroad.

"Al Qaeda, nation states, and criminals are preparing for major cyber attacks against US infrastructure that could be comparable to the devastating September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks on New York and Washington. We're in a pre-9/11 moment, in some respects, with cyber," said **John Carlin**, assistant attorney general for national security. "It's clear that terrorists want to use cyber-enabled means to cause the maximum amount of destruction to our infrastructure. It's clear because they have said it."

**Lisa Monaco**, President Obama's top advisor for homeland security and counterterrorism, spoke about the need for a whole-of-government approach to cyber security that was modeled on the counterterrorism effort and was of a similar scale. She also said the US has to hold foreign entities accountable for crimes in cyberspace.

"There has to be a multi-pronged strategic approach where at the end of the day, we say this is a red line, we will continue to increase the cost to you of committing this type of activity on American soil, which is where it is occurring, until it stops. And we need to maintain that commitment," she said. "This is one of the foremost threats that we face today. It is real, it is present, and most importantly it is growing."

For military leaders like Odierno, cyber is a tool like any other. It can be used tactically or strategically, defensively or offensively, but cannot be ignored. "In our minds, cyber is another form of maneuver," he said. "It's an integral part of operations moving forward."

**Dawn Meyerriecks**, deputy director of the CIA's Science and Technology Directorate, highlighted the role that public-private partnership needs to play in the rapidly evolving world of cyber security, noting that industry "needs to challenge the government to keep up. The fact that we're still dealing with legislation that's been on the books since the late 1800s...in order to figure out what we should be doing" is unacceptable. "You get the results you deserve if you leave it to the government. I mean that as a 'govy.'"

**Mid-Year Update: Following high-profile cyber attacks on Sony Pictures Entertainment and the social media accounts of US Central Command, efforts in Congress for new legislation to streamline the government's ability to prevent and respond to cyber attacks have gained new life. President Obama called for new legislation to close government and corporate cyber vulnerabilities in his State of the Union address in January, but there's no agreement in Congress as to the way forward. Meanwhile, privacy advocates remain concerned that the legislation could give government and corporations more access to personal information and communications without proper oversight.**

## THE SEARCH FOR A PARTNER IN SYRIA GOES ON

In May 2014, President Obama announced at West Point a new plan to arm and train the moderate Syrian rebels. By the time the Forum commenced, Congress had yet to act on that plan. Even among top US officials, there was no consensus on who the moderate rebels were, whether they could be trusted, and whether arming them earlier would have done any good. What everyone agreed was that the Syria problem cannot be ignored.

Undersecretary of Defense for Intelligence **Michael Vickers** said that arming the rebels in 2012, as top officials argued for at the time, would not necessarily have prevented the current escalation of the conflict and the proliferation of armed groups supported by mysterious foreign interests that have anti-democratic and anti-secular aims.

“Syria is probably the number one threat...to the American homeland right now,” Vickers said. “When we look at how we do counterterrorism operations, we always want to have a partner: is that partner capable; is that partner willing? In Syria, we don’t have that.”

That argument was vigorously disputed by the former US Ambassador to Syria **Robert Ford**, who said that not only did America fail by not supporting the moderate rebels earlier on in the conflict, but America continues to fail to support them sufficiently now.

“The moderate elements of the armed opposition are still there and they still very much represent the people who organized the peaceful demonstrations in 2011. They are still in the fight,” Ford said. “The battle is not finished but they absolutely do need help because they have been under attack by the regime and the Islamic State for the last year.”

At the time of the Forum, the moderate Free Syrian Army was engaged in pitched battles with both the Assad regime and ISIS, and was begging the West for more assistance. The plan to train and equip the rebels was not enough, Ford said. “Helping moderate armed elements has risks. But doing nothing also has risks.”

Monaco said that there was no use “Monday morning quarterbacking” the past Administration decisions on Syria, but for her, the problem had a uniquely domestic component: the rise of extremist fighters in Syria coming from Western countries and holding Western passports.

“What is clear is that the brutality of the Assad regime has become a magnet to extremists,” she said. “And what I’m most concerned about is the unprecedented number of foreign fighters flowing into that space. Off the charts.”

Vickers said the number of foreign fighters who are Western passport holders—including Americans—was in the four digits and the foreign fighter flow going into Syria is much larger than it was at the height of the Iraq war.

Homeland Security Secretary **Jeh Johnson** said that the numbers of foreign fighters entering Syria from other Western countries was higher than the number of Americans, but that that should not be a comfort.

“They are countries that are visa waiver countries or countries where somebody determined to commit an extremist act could easily come to the United States,” he said.

**Mid-Year Update: In December 2014, Congress approved President Obama’s request for \$500 million to train and equip about 5,000 moderate Syrian rebels in countries such as Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar. As the US military worked to set up the program, moderate rebels in northern Syria suffered heavy losses to extremist groups and the Assad regime, resulting in a partial cut off of Western support. A US-led coalition continues to strike ISIS and Al Nusra targets on the ground in Syria, partnering with Kurdish forces. Meanwhile, the administration has struggled to articulate its strategy to deal with the Assad regime, which continues to commit atrocities against civilians on the ground.**

#### ASPEN MOMENT

#### General Flynn: Al Qaeda Is Not On The Run

On the terrorism threat in general and the evolution of al Qaeda, Defense Intelligence Agency Director General Michael Flynn contradicted the Administration’s earlier rosy assertions of progress, lamenting to CNN’s Evan Perez, “We have a whole gang of new actors out there that are far more extreme than Al Qaeda...It’s *not* on the run, and the ideology is actually, it’s sadly, it feels like it’s exponentially growing...various jihadi organizations that are out there are well-organized, they are well-funded, they reach into these young people and they pull them in. And, there seem to be more and more of them today than there were when I first started this thing, in post-9/11.” When questioned, “Are we safer after so much blood and treasure?” General Flynn immediately replied, “My quick answer is that we’re not.”

**Mid-Year Update: In the first months of 2015, Yemen was overtaken by Iranian-backed Houthi rebels, Libya slid deeper into a civil war between two rival governments amid increased extremist violence, Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula claimed responsibility for deadly terrorist attacks in Paris, and the Islamic State executed several hostages, including a Jordanian pilot and an American aid worker.**

## THE ISIS WAR IS JUST BEGINNING

At the time of the Forum, the US military mission against ISIS in Iraq was well underway, but the coalition airstrikes in Syria had not yet begun. ISIS had taken Mosul, Raqqa, and was threatening Baghdad. The group's social media savvy was exceeded only by its brutality.

For the assembled national security leadership in Aspen, the primary concern about ISIS was its aspiration to attack the US homeland. Officials painted the ISIS threat to America as a long-term concern that warranted near-term action. Nobody thought the extremist group was facing defeat any time soon.

“We are going to be dealing with [the threat from ISIS] for the next decade,” said US Representative **Michael McCaul**, chairman of the House Homeland Security Committee. “As the threat grows overseas, so too does the threat to the homeland.”

Johnson said that when it came to ISIS's plans to attack the United States, the question was not if, but when.

“When a terrorist organization acquires territory where they do training, they almost always try to attack the United States,” he said.

Vickers said that ISIS has “aspirations” to attack the homeland and that the only way to counter the ISIS threat to the United States was to take away the sanctuary it enjoys now, which could be the ground used to plan and stage a future attack. The attack could come from ISIS members who hold American passports, about 100 of whom have already joined ISIS in their fight to establish an Islamic caliphate on both sides of the disappearing Iraq-Syria border.

“ISIL also has aspirations,” he said. “It's focused on its area right now but it is in competition for the leadership of global jihad with Al Qaeda, who can be the baddest and the biggest, and they are a threat not to be discounted.”

Monaco warned that the only way to defeat ISIS was to methodically build a new network of partnerships and institutions with other countries and groups on the ground.

“What we need to create is in essence a counterterrorism platform, an architecture across that region,” she said. “That's going to take military, political, diplomatic, intelligence, law enforcement. That whole structure, frankly, needs to be constructed in a way that hasn't been done before.”

Echoing Monaco's sentiments on the need for a holistic and integrated strategy, former Representative Jane Harman emphasized the important role of the American—and global—public's views on American engagement in the Middle East. “The perception of US foreign policy in much of the Middle East is, ‘doesn't do stupid stuff, plus use drones,’ and I don't think that's winning many hearts and minds. The perception has to be that we stand for things, and not only stand for them, but live those values. We're just not making the ‘sale’ right now, for a lot of reasons.”

**Mid-Year Update: In February 2015, the White House formally submitted to Congress its proposal for a new Authorization for the Use of Military Force to give legal authority for the war against ISIS and its affiliated groups around the world. The Congressional debate over the President's bill centers around whether Congress should place restrictions on the President's authority to deploy ground troops against ISIS. There is also deep concern on Capitol Hill that the scale of the military mission is inadequate to degrade and destroy the terrorist group. Coalition strikes have produced tactical victories in places like the Syrian city of Kobane. But ISIS remains entrenched in large cities like Raqqa and Mosul, and continues to recruit fighters from all over the world. The terrorist group expanded its campaign of mayhem through mass killings of Arab tribesmen, forced slavery of Yazidi prisoners, the beheading of several Westerners, and the immolation of a Jordanian pilot.**

## ASPEN MOMENT

### Secretary Johnson On Visiting The Border

The Forum took place in the middle of the crisis on the Southern border, where for months tens of thousands of unaccompanied minors were seeking refuge after making a grueling and often abuse-filled journey from their homes in Latin America. The crisis was political for most, but became personal for Homeland Security Secretary Jeh Johnson, who stopped at a detention center for migrant children on Mother's Day 2014.

"We went there to the processing center at the McAllen station... It was flooded with people, kids," he said. I saw this little girl with this beautiful long black hair, she was about ten or twelve years old, sitting there being interviewed by the border agent. And I asked her, 'Where's your mother?' And she said, 'My mother is dead, I'm looking for my father in the United States, that's why I came here.' And the translator started to cry, the little girl started to cry, and I don't mind telling you, I started to cry. And I came back to Washington the next day realizing this was a big problem and we had to do something about it."

Johnson was so affected by the interaction he made it his personal mission to get the foreign governments, US agencies, and families of the unaccompanied minors all on the same page working toward the goal of lowering the tide and dealing with those who made it to America with respect and dignity. The numbers of child victims started to decline in June 2014.

"I do not know what happened to the little girl, and that's something I will wonder about for the rest of my life," he said.

**Mid-Year Update: Congress failed for months to pass a bill to fund the Department of Homeland Security through 2015 because Republicans refused to fund President Obama's executive action intended to stave off deportation for millions of undocumented immigrants. With funding set to run out for the Department by the end of February, a weeks-long stand-off ultimately resulted in capitulation by a number of House Republicans, which facilitated the passing of legislation that will fund the Department through September 2015 without reining in any of the President's executive orders. "Without a doubt, the path to get here was an 11<sup>th</sup>-hour roller coaster ride," wrote Johnson in an email to the Department's employees. "But, in the end, Congress provided a strong bipartisan vote of confidence in our department and your work."**

## TROUBLE IN THE SKIES ABOVE

Three major threats to international commercial air travel were raging when the Forum commenced: the MH-17 disaster over Ukraine; the rocket threats to Tel Aviv's Ben Gurion airport due to Israel's conflict with Hamas; and an unexplained increase in airport passenger security measures due to a concern about what was later revealed to be the "Khorasan Group."

White House counterterrorism official Lisa Monaco said that the administration believed another air disaster, the downing of an Air Algiers flight over Mali, was probably just due to bad weather. But the shoot-down of MH-17, a Malaysian commercial airliner flying high over a separatist-held region of Ukraine, was a harbinger of things to come.

"What it reinforces is the danger of weapons transiting borders to unstable actors," she said.

**John Pistole**, administrator of the Transportation Security Administration, didn't completely reveal why in July 2014 the US government increased screening procedures at major international airports for flights entering the United States, but he gave a clue.

"From a US aviation perspective, the non-metallic IED is our top threat," he said, adding that the increased security measures were in response to a specific and credible threat. In September 2014, President Obama authorized strikes against the Khorasan Group, a cell within the Al Nusra Front with ties to Al Qaeda. The group had been planning to create and use non-metal bombs on US-bound flights.

"The second [top threat] would be somebody being able to put explosives in a checked bag on a commercial airliner here in the US. The third would be cargo," he said.

The last time a terrorist got on a flight with a homemade non-metallic bomb, he almost succeeded. Nigerian Omar Abdulmutallab detonated his underwear bomb on the plane but it malfunctioned and damaged only him. Pistole confided that because the underwear bomber had the device on his person for two weeks before the flight, "its efficacy was degraded."

But whether it's threats of groups trying to commit terrorist acts on airplanes or the threat of weapons proliferation to airplanes in the sky, the danger to America's commercial air travel is one that is not tied to an organization and cannot ever be totally discounted.

"I would characterize it as an ongoing threat that ebbs and flows," Pistole said. "You could put whatever label on it, I'm not as concerned with the labels, and who is doing it, because it could be a new group that gets a terrorist on a flight."

**Mid-Year Update: The threat of terrorists using commercial aircraft to prosecute attacks has spurred a renewed debate in Washington over whether to tighten restrictions on American passport holders returning from war zones, especially in the Middle East. Following the deadly attacks in Paris on the magazine Charlie Hebdo, there are calls for revoking the citizenship of Americans who have joined extremist groups and may try to return to the United States.**

In partnership with *The New York Times* and CNN, the Aspen Security Forum brings to Aspen each summer senior present and former government officials from all relevant agencies—the White House; Congress; the Departments of Homeland Security, Defense, State, Treasury, and Justice, and the intelligence community; foreign officials; leading thinkers; and nationally-noted print and broadcast journalists to discuss and debate the issues of the day in the field of national and homeland security.

**We invite you to learn more at [www.aspensecurityforum.org](http://www.aspensecurityforum.org).**

