

CIA Director: We're Not Exactly Defeating ISIS

Thursday, CIA Director John Brennan gave a declassified briefing to the Senate Intelligence Committee on the U.S. efforts to defeat ISIS.

He didn't have a lot of good news for the senators on the committee. In fact, he said the terrorist group remains a "formidable threat" and probably will be for quite some time.

First, the good news: The "caliphate" led by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi has lost "large stretches of territory" in both Syria and Iraq, its finance and media operations have been squeezed, and its military ranks are becoming depleted because fewer foreign fighters are traveling to Syria. Brennan also noted there is growing evidence that some fighters are becoming disillusioned and are ready to defect.

"[ISIS], however, is a formidable, resilient and largely cohesive enemy, and we anticipate that the group will adjust its strategy and tactics in an effort to regain momentum," he said. "In the coming months, we can expect [ISIS] to probe the front lines of its adversaries for weaknesses, to harass the forces that are holding the cities it previously controlled, and to conduct terror attacks against its enemies in Iraq and Syria."

Brennan said this will include "guerrilla tactics," including highly visible attacks outside territory it holds, noting the "steady stream" of attacks in Baghdad and Damascus that he said show ISIS is able to "penetrate deep inside enemy strongholds." It continues to generate "at least tens of millions of dollars" in monthly revenue through taxation and the sale of crude oil.

And that leads to the bad news: despite progress against ISIS

on the battlefield and in the financial realm, the group's terrorism capability and global reach haven't been dented at all, and to get to that point, it would have to suffer much heavier losses. And, due to its "foreign branches" and global network, it can "preserve its capacity for terrorism regardless of events in Iraq and Syria."

"In fact, as the pressure mounts on [ISIS], we judge that it will intensify its global terror campaign to maintain its dominance of the global terrorism agenda," Brennan said. "Since at least 2014, [ISIS] has been working to build an apparatus to direct and inspire attacks against its foreign enemies, resulting in hundreds of casualties. The most prominent examples are the attacks in Paris and Brussels, which we assess were directed by [ISIS's] leadership."

He said ISIS is preparing its operatives for further attacks, and has a "large cadre" of Westerners who could launch them. Pointing to the attacks in Orlando and San Bernardino as examples, he added that ISIS is attempting to inspire attacks from "sympathizers who have no direct links to the group."

Brennan said ISIS is trying to connect all of its various global network branches into a more cohesive organization. He said the Libya group is the "most developed and the most dangerous"—which will likely be brought up frequently on the presidential campaign trail—while its Sinai group is the "most active and capable terrorist group in Egypt."

He said the U.S. and its allies are trying to counter ISIS's "expansive propaganda machine," which it uses to share its "carefully crafted image" to the outside world. It releases a "multitude of media products on a variety of platforms"—including social media, mobile applications, radio, and print mediums—to disseminate its official propaganda.

Brennan did close on a slightly brighter note, suggesting the U.S. and its allies have put ISIS on the defensive.

“In sum, [ISIS] remains a formidable adversary,” he said. “And though this will be a long and difficult fight, there is broad agreement in the international community on the seriousness of the threat, and on the need to meet it collectively and decisively.”