

Narco-Corruption, ISIS 3.0, and the Terror Drone Attack That Never Happened

Pentagon Documents Detail Dystopian Dangers

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For almost 20 years, U.S. drone warfare was largely one-sided. Unlike Afghans and Yemenis, Iraqis and Somalis, Americans never had to worry about lethal robots hovering overhead and raining down missiles. Until, that is, one appeared in the skies above Florida.

But that's a story for later. For now, let's focus on a 2017 executive order [issued](#) by President Trump, part of his [second attempt](#) at a travel ban directed primarily at citizens of Muslim-majority nations. It begins: "It is the policy of the United States to protect its citizens from terrorist attacks."

That sentence would be repeated in a January [report](#) from the Department of Justice (DOJ) and the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), "Protecting the Nation from Foreign Terrorist Entry into the United States." Meant to strengthen the president's case for the travel ban, it was panned for its [methodological flaws](#), pilloried for its [inaccuracies](#), and would even spur a lawsuit by the civil rights organization, Muslim Advocates, and the watchdog group, Democracy Forward Foundation. In their complaint, those groups contend that the report was "biased, misleading, and incomplete" and "manipulates information to support its anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim conclusions."

To bolster the president's arguments for restricting the entry of foreigners into the United States, the DOJ/DHS analysis contained a collection of case summaries. Examples included: the Sudanese national who, in 2016, "pleaded guilty to attempting to provide material support to ISIS"; the Uzbek who "posted a threat on an Uzbek-language website to kill President Obama in an act of martyrdom on behalf of ISIS"; the Syrian who, in a plea agreement, "admitted that he knew a member of ISIS and that while in Syria he participated in a battle against the Syrian regime, including shooting at others, in coordination with Al Nusra," an al-Qaeda offshoot.

Such cases cited in the report, hardly spectacular terror incidents, were evidently calculated to sow fears by offering a list of convicted suspects with Muslim-sounding names. But the authors of the report simply looked in the wrong places. They could have found startling summaries of truly audacious attacks against the homeland in a collection of U.S. military documents from 2016 obtained by TomDispatch via the Freedom of Information Act. Those files detail a plethora of shocking acts of terrorism across the United States including mass poisonings, the use of improvised explosive devices (IEDs), and that "People's Armed Liberation (PAL) attack on U.S. Central Command (USCENTCOM) headquarters in Tampa, Florida, [by] a drone-launched missile."

That's right! A drone-launched missile attack! On CENTCOM's Florida headquarters! By a terrorist group known as PAL!

Wondering how you missed the resulting 24/7 media bonanza, the screaming front page headlines in the New York Times, the hysterics on [Fox & Friends](#), the president's hurricane of tweets?

Well, there's a simple explanation. That attack doesn't actually happen until May 2020. Or so says the summary of the 33rd annual Joint Land, Air, and Sea Strategic Special Program (JLASS-SP), an elaborate war game carried out in 2016 by students and faculty from the U.S. military's war colleges, the training grounds for its future generals and admirals.

PALing Around with Terrorists

The 2016 edition of JLASS-SP was played out remotely for weeks before culminating in a five-day on-site exercise at the Air Force Wargaming Institute at Maxwell Air Force Base in Alabama. It involved 148 students from the Air Force's Air War College, the Army War College, the Marine Corps War College, the Naval War College, the Eisenhower School for National Security and Resource Strategy, the National War College, and the National Defense University's Information Resources Management College. Those up-and-coming officers — some of whom will likely play significant roles in running America's actual wars in the 2020s — confronted a future in which, as the script for the war game put it, “lingering jealousy and distrust of American power and national interests have made it politically and culturally difficult for the United States to act unilaterally.”

Here's the scene as set in JLASS-SP: while the U.S. is still economically and militarily powerful into the next decade, anxieties abound about increasing constraints on the country's ability to control, dictate, and dominate world affairs. “Even in the military realm... advances by others in science and technology, expanded adoption of irregular warfare tactics by both state and non-state actors, proliferation of nuclear weapons and long-range precision weapons, and growing use of cyber warfare attacks have increasingly constricted U.S. freedom of action,” reads the war game's summary.

While the materials used are “not intended to be an actual prediction of events,” they are explicitly meant “to reflect a plausible depiction of major trends and influences in the world regions.” Indeed, what's striking about the exercise is how — though scripted before the election of Donald Trump — it anticipated many of the fears articulated in the president's December 2017 [National Security Strategy](#). That document, for instance, bemoans the potential dangers not only of regional powers like Russia, China, Iran, and North Korea, but also of “transnational threats from jihadist terrorists and transnational criminal organizations,” undocumented immigrants, “drug traffickers, and criminal cartels [which] exploit porous borders and threaten U.S. security and public safety.”

The JLASS-SP scenario also prefigured themes from that 2018 DOJ/DHS report supporting the travel ban in the way it stoked fears of, above all, a major “[foreign-born](#)” — especially Muslim — terror threat in the United States. A 2017 Government Accountability Office report would, however, [conclude that](#), of “the 85 violent extremist incidents that resulted in death since September 12, 2001, far right-wing violent extremist groups were responsible for 62 (73 percent) while radical Islamist violent extremists were responsible for 23 (27 percent).”

Two years after the war game was conducted, in a time of almost metronomic domestic

mass killings, President Trump continues to spotlight the supposedly singular danger posed by “[inadequately vetted people](#)” in the U.S., although [stovetops](#) and ovens, hot air balloons, and burning pajamas are far more deadly to Americans. Indeed, since 9/11, terrorism has been a distinctly low-level risk to the American public — at least when [compared to](#) heart disease, cancer, car crashes, fires, or heat waves — but has had an outsized effect on the perceptions and actions of the government, not to mention its visions of tomorrow.

Tomorrow’s Terror Today

An examination of the threats from international and domestic terror groups, as imagined in JCLASS-SP, offers unique clues to the Pentagon’s fears for the future. “Increasingly,” reads the war game’s summary, “transnational organizations, businesses, non-governmental organizations, and violent extremist organizations challenge the traditional notions of boundaries and sovereignty.”

That drone-launching terror group, PAL, for instance, is neither Islamist nor a right-wing terror group, but an organization supposedly formed in 2017 in hopes of defeating “globalism and capitalism throughout the world by rallying the proletariat to orchestrate the overthrow of capitalist governments and global conglomerates.” Its ideology, an amalgam of increasingly stale leftist social movements, belies its progressive ranks, a rainbow coalition consisting of “most of the globe’s ethnicities and cultures,” all of whom seem to be cyber-sophisticates skilled in fundraising, recruiting, as well as marketing their particular brand of radicalism.

As of 2020, the audacious drone strike on CENTCOM’s headquarters was PAL’s only terror attack in the tangible world. The rest of its actions have taken place in the digital realm, where the group is known for launching cyber-assaults and siphoning off “funds from large global corporations, banks, and capitalist governments around the world.”

Even though PAL went from a gleam in the eye of its founder, the Bond-villain-esquely named Otto Cyre, to terrorist power-player in just a few short years, the pace of its operations didn’t please its hardest core members who, the war game scenario says, broke away in late 2020 to form yet another organization devoted to even more rapidly eroding “confidence in governmental and institutional bodies by staging events that demonstrate the ‘impotency’ of the establishment.” That splinter group, United Patriots Against International Government (UPAIGO) — in this war game all terror groups have Pentagon-style acronyms — concentrates on “spectacular but deniable actions,” a scattershot campaign of often botched but sometimes lethal efforts that include:

- * November 2021: a cyber-attack on the Angarsk Refinery in the Russian Federation, which resulted in a two-week shutdown causing a sharp rise in the price of oil and gas just prior to the 2021-2022 winter heating season.
- * April 2022: a failed attempt to assassinate, by IED, the chief of U.S. Pacific Command. Two members of the commander’s security detail and the command’s political advisor were killed in the attack while others, including civilians, were injured.
- * January 2022: a failed plot to detonate a dirty [radioactive] bomb, employing medical waste and homemade explosives, at Philadelphia International Airport.
- * 2023 fire season: as fires raged in the western United States, UPAIGO established relief

efforts designed to compete with the U.S. government's response, in order to "undermine confidence in government agencies."

* June 2024: an attack, in coordination with members of the Irish National Liberation Army (INLA), on a U.S. flagged air carrier transporting U.S. military personnel at Shannon Airport in Ireland. Militants fired two surface-to-air missiles at the aircraft, which was damaged but managed to land successfully."

PAL and UPAIGO are, however, hardly the only terror threats facing the United States in the 2020s, according to JCLASS-SP 2016. PAL's fellow travelers, for example, include the fictional versions of the real Irish National Liberation Army and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC). There's also the Environmentalists Against Capitalists Organization, or EACO, "a lethal environmental anti-capitalist terrorist group with global connections." Formed in 2010 (though not in our actual world), EACO, according to the war gamers, evolved into an increasingly violent organization in the 2020s, carrying out not just cyberattacks on corporations but also a full-scale bombing campaign "targeting executive board meetings of large corporations, particularly in industries such as oil, coal, natural gas, and logging." The group even took to planting IEDs on logging roads and employing tainted food as a weapon. By 2025, EACO was implicated in more than 400 criminal acts in the U.S. resulting in 126 deaths and \$862 million in damages.

Then there's Anonymous. In the Pentagon's fictional war-game, this real-world hacktivist group is characterized as a "loose organization of malicious black-hat hackers" that employs its digital prowess to "distribute bomb-making instructions, and conduct targeting for options other than planes, trains, and automobiles." In the past created by the military's imagineers, Anonymous was declared a terrorist organization after it conducted an August 2015 digital attack on Louisiana's power grid with something akin to the Stuxnet worm that damaged nuclear centrifuges in Iran. That cyber-assault was meant to protest the state's restrictions on online gambling — an affront, according to the fictional Anonymous, to Internet freedom. (In the real world, Louisiana lawmakers actually just [deep-sixed](#) online gambling without an apparent terrorist response.) Taking down that power grid "resulted in the death of 15 elderly patients trapped in a facility denied air conditioning as a result of the power outage."

Also included among domestic terror groups is Mara Salvatrucha 13 or MS-13, the Los Angeles street gang, born of the American-fueled Central American civil wars of the 1980s, that was transplanted to El Salvador and has since returned to the United States. This [violent](#) American export — the product of deportations in the 1990s — has paradoxically become a key justification for President Trump's crackdown on immigration. "MS-13 recruits through our broken immigration system, violating our borders. And it just comes right through — whenever they want to come through, they come through," said Trump earlier this year during a White House roundtable focused on the gang. "We've really never seen anything quite like this — the level of ferocity, the level of violence, and the reforms we need from Congress to defeat it."

In the real world, the U.S. branch of [MS-13](#) operates in loose [local cliques](#) under a [franchised](#) name, dabbling in small-time drug dealing, gun-running, prostitution, and extortion (primarily of [recent immigrants](#)). Many of its crimes are [committed](#) against its own affiliates or members of other gangs. The president nonetheless baselessly [claimed](#) that MS-13 has "literally taken over towns and cities of the United States." He also continues to portray the gang, which reportedly makes up less than [1%](#) of the estimated 1.4 million gang

members in the U.S., as a sophisticated international cartel.

And that's precisely how MS-13 was also portrayed in the fantasy world of JCLASS-SP. In that war game, Mara Salvatrucha has developed "the resources to wage full-scale insurgent campaigns in Central America and the capability to cause serious disruption in the United States and Canada," while rumors swirl of contacts between its members and foreign militants. "If cooperation between foreign terrorist groups and MS-13 ever blossomed, the potential for terrorist attacks within the borders of the United States would increase significantly," the war game scenario warns.

President Trump has been accused of conflating members of MS-13 with undocumented immigrants (and referring to both groups as "[animals](#)"). Regardless, there's no question that he kicked off his presidential run in 2015 by disparaging Mexicans. "They're bringing drugs. They're bringing crime. They're rapists. And some, I assume, are good people," he infamously [declared](#). The JCLASS-SP documents reverse Trump's formula by first noting that "most illegal immigrants crossing into the United States are just trying to make a better life for themselves," only to suggest that the U.S.-Mexican border also "serves as an infiltration point for terrorists."

Unlike in the real world, where such fears circulate primarily as a [conspiracy theory](#), in the Pentagon's future fantasy there is "substantial evidence... that terrorists from the Middle East and North Africa transit the Mexican-U.S. border." Worse yet, radical Islamists even "camouflage themselves as Hispanics" to cross the border. The military's fantasists point to "a flood of name changes from Arabic to Hispanic and the reported linking of drug cartels along the Texas border with Middle East and North Africa terrorism."

That represents a Trumpian-style nightmare-cum-fantasy even the president hasn't yet dreamed up — a Hispanic-surnamed, cartel-supported group of Islamist terrorists. But by the 2020s, according to the Pentagon's futurists, such worries are well-founded. And this will occur at the same time that Mexican and South American drug gangs have grown so rich and powerful they can regularly buy protection from U.S. government officials.

"Popular opinion in the United States is beginning to believe the 'Narco-corruption' is affecting the 'rule of law' north of the border," according to their scenario, with the cartels spending \$20 billion in 2022 alone to buy off U.S. officials or get candidates of their choice elected. That same year, allegations of election tampering in mayoral races across the American South come to light and the number of corruption convictions of U.S. Border Patrol agents and law enforcement officials skyrockets. Perhaps most shocking is the discovery of a "vast irrigated grow site" (evidently a massive [marijuana](#) farm) tended by "a dozen Mexican farmers armed with AK-47's" in — wait for it! — "remote areas of Illinois."

Mexican farmers, El Salvadoran gang members, Islamists masquerading as Hispanics, eco-terrorists, and anti-globalization militants aren't the only threats foreseen by the military's futurists. Much-ballyhooed reports of the defeat of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, like the much-hyped defeat of its predecessor, al-Qaeda in Iraq, turn out to be [premature](#). In the 2020s, the re-re-branded group, now known as the Global Islamic Caliphate, or GIC, draws "support from Sunni-majority regions in Syria and Iraq; refugee camps in Lebanon, Jordan, and Turkey; and internally displaced persons in Syria and Iraq," while continuing to launch attacks in the region.

Meanwhile, al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) has grown in reach, size, and might. By

2021, the group has 38,000 members spread across Algeria, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger with bases reportedly located in Western Sahara. On May 23, 2023, AQIM carries out the [most lethal](#) terror attack in the U.S. since 9/11, detonating massive truck-bombs at both the New York and New Jersey ends of the Lincoln Tunnel, killing 435 people and injuring another 618. The bombing prompts President McGraw — you remember him, Karl Maxwell McGraw, the independent Arizona senator who rode his populist “America on the Move” campaign to victory in the 2020 election — to invade Mauritania and become mired in yet another American [forever war](#) that shows every indication of grinding on into the 2030s, if not beyond.

The Age of Terrorism

In the real world, the lifetime odds of an American dying from “walking” are one in 672. The chance of being killed by a [foreign terrorist](#)? One in 45,808. By an illegal immigrant terrorist? One in 138 million. And the odds of being killed by a “[chain migration](#)” immigrant sometime this year? One in 1.2 billion! In other words, you have a far greater chance of being killed by a dog, a shark, lightning, or the government via legal execution.

This is not to say terrorism isn’t a major threat to others around the world or that terror groups are not proliferating. Since 9/11, the number of [terrorist organizations](#) recognized by the U.S. State Department and battled by the Pentagon — from Africa to the Middle East to Asia — has grown markedly.

“States are the principal actors on the global stage, but non-state actors also threaten the security environment with increasingly sophisticated capabilities,” [reads](#) an unclassified synopsis of the Pentagon’s 2018 National Defense Strategy. “Terrorists, trans-national criminal organizations, cyber hackers and other malicious non-state actors have transformed global affairs with increased capabilities of mass disruption.”

In the fictional future of the Pentagon’s JCLASS-SP 2016, this menace only expands to include various hybrid threats and new homegrown groups with increasing capabilities for death and destruction.

While it may be “the policy of the United States to protect its citizens from terrorist attacks,” as President Trump’s 2017 executive order declares, the Pentagon envisions a future in which such policies are increasingly ineffective. In their dystopian war-game future, more than two decades of [fighting](#) “them over there so we do not have to face them in the United States of America” (as former President George W. Bush [put it](#) in 2007) proves unequivocally futile. In this sense, the Pentagon’s fantasies bear an eerie resemblance to the actual present. In the dystopian scenario used by the Pentagon to train its future leaders, today’s forever wars have proven ineffective and future threats are to be met with new, similarly ineffective, forever wars.

In his State of the Union address earlier this year, President Trump [declared](#) that we’re living in the “age of terrorism.” His solution: wielding “unmatched power,” loosening the rules of engagement, and establishing an unfettered ability to detain, question, and “annihilate” terrorists.

All of these tactics have, however, been part of the Pentagon’s playbook since 2001 and, according to the military’s best guess at the future, will lead to an increase in terror groups and terror attacks while terror networks and terrorist ideologies will grow in strength,

resilience, and appeal. Almost two decades in, it seems we're still only in the opening days of the "age of terrorism" and, if the Pentagon's war-gamers are to be believed, far worse is yet to come.

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