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ISIL AND AL QAEDA: LETHAL ONE-UPMANSHIP

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LETHAL ONE-UPMANSHIP

(4:00 p.m.)

MR. CROWLEY: Could we take our seats, please? We're trying to stay on schedule. This is a wild and crazy audience. Not following instructions very well, David.

MR. SANGER: What do you expect? Think about where you are.

MR. CROWLEY: Yeah. Yeah. Okay. I'm P.J. Crowley, a member of the Aspen Homeland Security Group, and a former this and that at the Pentagon, White House, and State Department. I'm pleased to introduce this next panel. On the campaign trail earlier this year, some candidates attempted to create a single bucket to describe the violent extremist threat to the United States. Their one-size-fits-all label was Radical Islamic Terrorism. But various violent players may have common roots and overlapping ideologies, but there are crucial differences that must be understood if we are to degrade and ultimately defeat them. You know, 15 years into the struggle the conflict has changed in fundamental ways. Osama Bin Laden's war was against the far enemy, the United States. Baghdadi's war is far more about an array of near enemies, even as he has directed and inspired attacks against targets in the West.

You know, today it is far more about how they want to live in the Middle East than what we do in the region. The conflict shows signs of changing yet again as the Al-Nusra Front which chose to maintain its allegiance to Al Qaeda in opposition to the Islamic State, has now declared its independence.

So to help us understand this challenge, leading the discussion will be David Sanger of *The New York Times*. David is a reporter, author, professor. But two of the most powerful accounts of the national security challenges of the 21st century are David's Books, *The Inheritance* and *Confront and Conceal*. I'm putting the finishing touches

on a book, and many times I've gone to his work, either those books or his reporting, for key details. Through the years, almost like constructing a jigsaw puzzle without the rectangular shape, David has diligently and detailed reporting, occasionally disarmingly accurate, you know, have nonetheless helped the American public better understand what is happening in places like Iran, North Korea, China, Russia, and, of course, the struggles in the Middle East. It promises to be a rich and timely discussion. David, over to you.

MR. SANGER: Well, thank you very much. Thank you all --

(Applause)

MR. SANGER: Thank you all for being here. You can tell who the hardy few are at the end. Seeing P.J. up at a podium, I feel this, like, natural inclination to just start shouting questions at him after all these years.

MR. CROWLEY: I'm happy to just (inaudible) that somebody else is handling it.

MR. SANGER: That's right. Yes. So we've got a terrific panel here for you. Brett McGurk, to my immediate right, is the Special Presidential Envoy for the Global Coalition to Counter ISIL. He's had that job since October 2015. If you think about thankless jobs in the U.S. Government, I would have to say that would rank in the top four or five --

(Laughter)

MR. SANGER: -- that would come up. He's been a Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Iraq and Iran. He led some of the negotiations to release the four Americans from Evin Prison. When I first met Brett he was working for President Bush as Special Assistant to the President's Senior Director for Iraq and Afghanistan. And so, you know, one day on a different panel we'll get him to talk about what it's like to work for President Bush for that long, and then to work for President Obama. There's a

movie in there someplace.

Nick Rasmussen, well known to many here from his past appearances here. Director, of course, of the National Counterterrorism Center. He started off, I love this, as a presidential management intern, right, in 1991, has been at the State Department, the National Security Council. He was director at Regional Affairs in the Office of Combatting Terrorism at the NSC. And Nick sits in one of those jobs where if anything goes wrong you get to be the first one to get blamed, which is a pretty high bar to pass.

So Nick, let me start with you. So a year ago you were up on this stage in a really fascinating discussion about ISIL. At the time, we had not yet seen the kind of terror attacks around Europe and those attributed to ISIL in the United States or at least to adherence of ISIL in the United States. ISIL also, at that time, had a significant amount more territory than they do today.

So just walk us through a little bit the evolution of just our understanding of ISIL's operations, whether you think a year later they're in a better position or worse position or just a radically different position?

MR. RASMUSSEN: Sure. I guess I'll start by saying that the biggest change that I see in the way we think about ISIL, as compared to, say, a year ago, is that we are much more today focused on ISIL's ability and capacity to carry out external operations beyond the boundaries of Iraq and Syria, and even, as is obviously the case, beyond the Middle East region, reaching into Europe, and seeking to reach even beyond Europe, and into other, including into the homeland. And I guess as a matter of analytics, this was a project we knew ISIL was embarked upon certainly at the time last year when the security forum convened, and we were building our understanding of that ISIL capacity to gather the resources, to develop the plans, to deploy the operatives, all of the necessary ingredients to carrying out external operations. We knew all that was a building phenomenon.

And I would argue a year later what we've seen is a lot of that work come to fruition. ISIL clearly now has a capacity and a capability to carry out those kinds of attacks, and we've seen that most painfully with some of the attacks on our European partners.

What has been difficult analytically to separate, though, from that development is the progress we are incontrovertibly making on the ground in Iraq and Syria at taking away territory from ISIL. And there's a logical tendency to want to link two developments together and say, 'Ah, this is the causal relationship between them, if A, then B, for the following reason.' And I've tried to think about it and talk about it when I talk about --

MR. SANGER: That logical one being because their shrinking territory, they are striking out elsewhere.

MR. RASMUSSEN: Right.

MR. SANGER: Something we've heard from many senior members of the Administration, Secretary Kerry and others.

MR. RASMUSSEN: And I guess -- well, I wouldn't want to argue with any of my administration colleagues on the way we're expressing our views on this. I've tended to view these two ISIL-related developments as being relatively unlinked rather than linked, and I'll tell you why. I guess the bottom line of what we've come up with is that the territorial takeback that we've seen across Iraq and Syria is a necessary but not sufficient condition to defeating ISIL over the long term, and to containing and ultimately destroying that external operations capability. It is certainly true that ISIL has lost territory over the last year, but what I'm arguing is that there is not a one-for-one correlation between that good news story, that progress. There's not one-for-one correlation between that and progress on the equally important project of constraining and ultimately defeating their ability to carry out attacks around the world.

And it shouldn't be surprising that that is so. There are sound definable reasons for why that is so. The resources, the capacity, the tools, the ingredients, the things ISIL needs to do to carry out external operations beyond the borders of Iraq and Syria are not necessarily tied solely to territorial resources. And as we shrink territory even further with ISIL, what I would argue is that we will probably see some kind of lag effect. We will see some gap in time between the time when we achieve success on the battlefield and the time when we achieve ultimate success at containing that external operations capacity.

And that's not something that's going to be intuitively obvious to people as they look at the conflict, and as they look at the coalition effort. And it's going to require that we explain why that is so and why that is not necessarily a sign that the campaign is not succeeding or the campaign is failing in some regard. So when I think about this I try to separate those two separate factors in my own mind and look for ways to explain them on their own terms because I think the linkages are sometimes overdrawn.

MR. SANGER: Even if they lose territory, why does that lead you to the conclusion that striking outside their boundaries would necessarily burn out over time, other than the fact that eventually all such things do?

MR. RASMUSSEN: And linked to that is the observation I made that this is a necessary but not sufficient condition. There is no doubt that to defeat ISIL's ability to carry out external operations taking away territory is necessary, because at some point the safe haven that ISIL enjoys needs to be shrunken and ultimately removed. My argument, though, is that it is still possible, even with a significantly shrunken safe haven, even with a significantly reduced territorial footprint, the ingredients are still there and within reach of ISIL to be able to carry out those kinds of operations globally.

MR. SANGER: So Brett, let me ask you sort of the equivalent question, but in your territory. So a year

ago we had no negotiations under way, the kind that Secretary Kerry has been leading with the Russians, the Iranians, Europeans, the Gulf States, to try to bring about a ceasefire, and then the focus on ISIL. We also did not have the Iraqi troops up and running the way they are today. Tell us what you think were sort of the biggest landmarks for the past year and also what you had hoped to achieve that you didn't.

MR. MCGURK: So a year ago, if you think about where we were, the Iraqis had just lost Ramadi, the Iraqi forces pulled out of Ramadi. That happened in late May. So if I was here a year ago I'd be saying, you know, we're trying to organize the Iraqi security forces to be able to maneuver and retake a major city. And we had just deployed our special forces to a small airbase just east of Ramadi, but that looked like a very daunting proposition. In fact, they ended up succeeding in that with a very difficult military operation. They liberated Ramadi.

We then not only liberated Ramadi, but by really mobilizing the tribes of Anbar Province we've cleared out the entire Euphrates Valley, which was ISIL's heartland in Western Iraq, and all the way -- way out, many of you here know this terrain, but Enripas (phonetic), the main highway from Baghdad to Amman. We've done that because we've had good cooperation from the local tribes of Anbar. A year ago, we were just getting that moving, and that's now kind of becoming a self-sustaining cycle, but we have to keep it moving, which I can talk about.

Mosul was obviously the key prize in Iraq. That was way down the road. The Iraqi security forces just completed a very difficult operation. Their main armor division, going about 100 kilometers north directly up the main defensive line of ISIL, and retook an airbase south of Mosul, then crossed a river, created a bridge across the Tigris River. We helped a little bit. But the Iraqi security forces now have this base south of Mosul, so Mosul is now, we think, an achievable proposition. There's an awful lot we have to do to put it together, militarily, humanitarian, stabilization, politically, it's very difficult, but it's now in sight. A year ago that

was not the case.

The Iraqi security forces have not lost a battle in the last year. I could not have said that if I was here a year ago. So I think overall we have that on the right trajectory, although, not to underestimate the challenges here. I just have to say upfront, this is an unprecedented challenge which we are facing. And 40,000 foreign fighters that have poured into Syria over the last four years, that's about twice as many that went into Afghanistan in the '80s, and we know where that led to. So this is something that will be with us for a long time. We have to take away the territory. That's Iraq.

In Syria, a year ago we were working with a coalition of primarily Syrian Kurds basically to retake east of the Euphrates River the entire border area between Syria and Turkey, because that is the main entre point into Syria, and out. That is now no longer accessible to ISIL. And we have, most importantly, worked very hard, and we have Special Forces on the ground, this is their primary mission, to build an inclusive force, which includes a significant number of Arab fighters as we move into the heartland of ISIL in these Arab territories.

So there's a battle going on right now in the City of Manbij, which is just west of the Euphrates River. That's important, because that is where these foreign fighters who would come in from all around the world would congregate, would organize, and it was one of the route lines on which they would send some external operative. So that battle is ongoing now. This is to cut off their main access routes from Raqqa out to the outside world. And we are putting the pieces in place ultimately for a pushdown to Raqqa. So these things are now coming into place. They were not in place a year ago. But that's the core, and Iraq and Syria area taking away territory.

The second, we analyzed ISIL in terms of the core. Then the networks. Global networks. Foreign fighters. Is it easier for them to travel around the world than it was a year ago? I think it's much harder for them to travel a year ago. Our coalition has become much stronger. We have better information sharing amongst

our partners. This is still something extraordinarily difficult, but it's much harder for them to travel.

Another network is the messaging and financing. Messaging, we're countering them 24/7 online. That is something that a year ago we were really just getting running. And finally, the affiliates. And ISIL, when you think about it, how do you understand this unprecedented threat, the core in Iraq and Syria, the global networks, the affiliates? They have eight self-declared affiliates. We can't get too distracted every time a preexisting terrorist group flies the flag of ISIL, because these are preexisting problems. We've a number of tools to deal with them. A year ago we were very concerned about Libya. This trajectory of ISIL in Libya we thought this could be like hockey stick-like growth, in terms of the overall acceleration of ISIL in Libya.

Since then we have a government formed in Libya, recognized by the U.N. It's on the ground in Tripoli. We're working with local forces to root out the ISIL presence in Libya, and they're actually making some real gain. So I think that trajectory we're very concerned about, and Libya has at least plateaued, and is now going down. So I think we have a lot more traction now than we had a year ago, but that is not to underestimate how far we have to go.

MR. SANGER: And you mentioned before cutting of Raqqa. One of the other things that President Obama has announced, Secretary Carter has announced since then, is the beginning of cyber operations against ISIL, which obviously you guys have not given many details of it. But one element of that is that's one way that you could go about cutting off their communications. But it's always been described to me as much more subtle than that because you have this need, obviously, to be able to monitor the intelligence versus the desire to cut them off from everyone else around. Tell us a little bit, take us a little bit into the debate about what are the different factors on either side of doing that, as you try to move ahead to the next part of the operation.

MR. MCGURK: There's always a debate, whether

it's ISIL or any military campaign between targeting someone in which you might lose some intelligence value, but you have to remove the threat. So that's something I think that is always ongoing amongst those involved in that part of the campaign.

I think you're getting at the counter -- the thing about ISIL that is so different, the numbers of foreign fighters, and then you combine that with social media and the technology today. I know Lisa Monaco is here. She gave a speech the other day and mentioned that when Obama came into office there was about two-and-a-half million tweets a day. Now there's 500 million tweets a day. So the ability of these radical organizations to inspire and to organize just individuals who are in their basement is something that's off the charts. So we have to do everything we possibly can to combat that threat, so we're doing a lot of that through cyber command. These are new tools, in which there's obviously a lot of debate before we use those tools.

But I think we have to do everything we possibly can, and it's not just within the Pentagon, or within the Department of Defense, or within the U.S. Government. We're working with Twitter, with Facebook, with YouTube. Twitter's taken down over 125,000 of these pro-ISIL handles. That's something that's ongoing every day. But critically, and to get to your first question, a year ago what we were seeing was ISIL's core narrative and their primary propaganda message. The gore gets a lot of the attention, the kind of gory videos. Their primary message, when they would recruit, it's the bulk of their recruiting propaganda, is we are a historic expanding caliphate.

Their catchphrase is retain and expand, retain and expand the caliphate. Their videos would show flags, and those black masks extending through the Middle East, extending into Southern Europe. And so come join this historic movement. Bring your family. These sundrenched scenes of children eating the ice cream cones. And I've been all around the world, and the common denominator we hear what is driving so many of your young people to this organization was this notion of this caliphate. So that's

one reason we've worked so hard to shrink it.

Their narrative now, their message now is quite different. You know, Muhammad al-Adnani, who is their chief spokesman and a deputy to Abu Bakr al Baghdadi, his statement on Ramadan this year was not "We're an expanding movement. We're growing." It was actually, "We might lose Raqqa, we might lose Mosul, we might lose Cert (phonetic)," which they ultimately will, "but, you know, we're still going to be around, so come join us anyway. And, actually, if you can't join us stay home and carry out a terrorist attack at home." So it's a very different message. So as we are using kind of tools that we might have to actually directly impact their ability to communicate, we also have to work to combat their primary narrative and their propaganda to campaign.

MR. SANGER: Nick, as you look at countering specific acts of terror, you've had a much telescoped warning set, because you get people, we saw this in Nice, other places, who say they are inspired by the ISIL message. They may be. They may not be. They have only been inspired for 48 hours before they actually committed the act. How has this changed the way you go about trying to both detect and warn?

MR. RASMUSSEN: You know, it doesn't seem appropriate to think about the good old days of dealing with terrorism in another form, and particularly when thinking about Al Qaeda. No one would like to talk about it as the good old days. But there was certainly a period when we were dealing with Al Qaeda plotting where you could, in the main, count on the ability to collect intelligence over a long period of time to try to disrupt a potential plot.

The kinds of plots that Al Qaeda adversaries were most intent on carrying out were long maturing, slow developing ambitious aim high type plots. And that, while, because of the potential high consequence of such a plot being carried out, gave us great concern, it also gave us multiple opportunities along the way, a fairly long timeline to collect intelligence, to develop strategies, to get the right person into the right place,

to disrupt the threat.

That has changed quite significantly in the current ISIL-dominated environment. And David, you've put your finger on it. In the first instance, when you're thinking about individuals inspired by ISIL, in many cases they may have had little or even no contact with anybody that you could've labeled as a terrorism subjective interest. And so trying to find what indicators might exist that would give local law enforcement or intelligence services in either a partner country or here in the United States some kind of indication, some kind of warning that something may be afoot, that's proving to be a particularly difficult challenge.

And there are a couple of different approaches you can take to this. One is to try to find new and better ways to exploit the data you have to try to develop information on non-obvious connections between people, so that maybe you can unearth something that would not have previously grabbed your attention. But a big part of the conversation about disrupting these kinds of threats in the future, and particularly when talking about the lone actors, a big part of that conversation is turning to what one of the panels earlier today talked about, and that is the effort to develop more effective CBE, counter violent extremism strategies here at home.

Because it's increasingly clear to me that relying on FBI through traditional investigative work to get inside a cell or a plot is not necessarily going to prevent every active terrorist violence here inside the United States. And so we're going to have to look for other tools, and I think those other tools are going to involve a great deal more community involvement, a great deal more sharing of information with local law enforcement, so that they can become much more attune to the threat before it actually shows up in the form of an explosion or a shooting, and that's not easy.

Spreading that blanket of information across 50 United States, and all of the different municipalities, and sharing that kind of information is a big challenge. It's not as if we can simply hone in on a couple of big

cities that have a terrorism problem. Terrorism is potentially something that could show up in any place inside the United States. So I say this not because I have any kind of readymade solution, but because I think I want to create a little bit of a sense of understanding in people who watch the law enforcement and intelligence community as they deal with these problems. There's simply quite a bit more pressure on law enforcement, I would argue, in this environment, than in the previous environment.

MR. SANGER: One last question for Brett, and then we're going to go out to all of you. Brett, Secretary Kerry has said that within the next week or two we should have some kind of understanding with the Russians. It is essentially a deal under which they help keep the Syrian Air Force down, and we help targeting a little more precisely, particularly with the Al-Nusra problem. Can you tell us what we should expect, and if this doesn't work, where does that leave us in Syria?

MR. MCGURK: So the U.N. Security Council came together and passed this resolution at the end of last year to put in place a cessation of hostilities, the point being to try to bring down the levels of violence inside of Syria. That was then put into effect in late February. President Putin went to his people and made a big national address and to-do about this, that this was going to be a big success, and that, you know, this was going to help the trajectory in Syria in a positive way. And under that resolution, and under the agreements of the International Syria Support Group, which is a collection of about 26 countries, the Russians have an obligation to make sure that the regime fulfills its obligations. What's happened after an initial period, in which the violence came down quite significantly, I think more so than anybody anticipated, it that --

MR. SANGER: You're talking about after February.

MR. MCGURK: After February. Yeah. We had about a six-week period of where the violence really came down significantly. Inside Syria, humanitarian aid was

flowing. And then it has frayed, to say the least. And we have two main problems with it. Number one, and most prominently, is the Syrian regime. The Syrian regime, and in particular, the Syrian Air Force, which, you know, as far as I said before, as far as where there seems to be a criminal enterprise of indiscriminant targeting and killing civilians, and there's also a problem of Jabhat Al-Nusra, and Jabhat Al-Nusra is able to maneuver around the battlefield in Syria as a military force, kind of similar to what we used to see ISIL doing, and they are not part of the cessation of hostilities, and they are launching major attacks against the regime.

So we have these two problems. So obviously we've said to the Russians, you know, you have to fulfill your obligations, or this is obviously never going to work. And Putin is providing either to be unwilling or unable to deliver Bashar al-Assad. So I think that raises some very serious questions about the levels of Russia's influence inside Syria or Russian intentions. And we have some issues we have to work through with the opposition.

So where this eventually led is potentially an arrangement by which the Syrian regime would have some very serious restrictions placed upon it, and which we might be able to do some things in a very precise way against Jabhat Al-Nusra, which would be in our interest, because Nusra's a major increasing threat to us. It is directly linked to Al Qaeda. However, for this to happen, the onus is really on the Russians, and I think obviously the jury is still very much out.

And I think everybody questions their intentions, and there are discussions ongoing right now, in fact, on the situation in Aleppo that includes the Russians, includes us, to make sure that, you know, this proposal the Russians put out with great fanfare yesterday about people in Eastern Aleppo are allowed to leave to get humanitarian aid kind of violates all the basic fundamental principles of humanitarian aid. The point is to get humanitarian aid in to help the people there. And the U.N. has now said very clearly that this proposal that they put out is something that is not within the bounds of international humanitarian law.

So this is all being discussed right now, and we'll see. But the objective is to bring down the levels of violence in Syria, and to try to reign in some of the excesses of the Assad regime, which if that doesn't happen, the Russians, you know, they came in Syria, and they will be stuck in a seamless war, because so long as Bashar Assad is leading the regime in Damascus this war will never end. And the Russians have not been able to present a credible case for how the war will end. When Bashar Assad says he will retake every inch of his territory that's like science fiction. That's never, ever going to happen. So, you know, I think the Russians have some, they have some decisions to make.

MR. SANGER: Okay. So we have a little less than ten minutes left. It's a little bit shorter than usual, because we have to make our way down to the Greenwald Pavilion for Director Brennan's conversation. So why don't I take sort of two questions at a time, and please keep them short. We'll do one here and one back here.

MR. FAILY: Lukman Faily, Iraqi Ambassador until two weeks ago. Let me first thank --

(Laughter)

MR. FAILY: -- Brett McGurk for all the hard work he's done on Iraq for the last 10 years. He's a true Iraqi, and I would say with full confidence, without his effort and focus the war against ISIS would not have picked up from the United States. So thank you again for all that work.

The question I have for you, and that is, to me, what has been discussed today in three or four sessions, I would say the elephant in the room was not discussed, and that is jihadist (inaudible) doctrine and the tech (inaudible) messaging that have been conveyed. I think that has to be, and the question to you, Brett, is: Do you think there has been enough focus in U.S. and in their Gulf allies to address the fatwa and to address the actual doctrine which has been legitimizing terrorism?

MR. SANGER: Okay. And the young lady who is right here, if you'd just bring the microphone, pass it down to her, and we'll take two at a time. Here we go. It's coming your way.

MS. VAJANI: Hi, I'm Fatma Vajani (phonetic), with Vice News. I was thinking, like, what are the implications on counterterrorism policies of the rivalry between Al Qaeda and Islamic State? Like, for example, if you were to dislodge the Islamic State from territory, are you afraid that it would create a vacuum that can be then filled by an Al Qaeda affiliate, or something?

MR. SANGER: Two good questions. So Brett, do you want to take the first one, the Ambassador's?

MR. MCGURK: Ambassador Faily is a close friend, and also he's done a terrific job in Washington over three very difficult years in working to represent Iraq's interest in Washington. So it's great to see you here.

It's a very important question. It's something that we work at in the counter-ideological part of the overall strategy. I was in Saudi Arabia last week, and met with His Royal Highness Prince Muhammad bin Nayef about the threats that are internally in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. They, of course, have suffered suicide bombers there. I mean they have a problem in their hands that we're helping them with. But this really is a two-way street, and it's this sectarian dimension of the region that I think is very dangerous. And in Syria, in particular, we're seeing young Sunni men pouring into Syria to fight the Civil War. And you see young Shia men from as far away from Afghanistan pouring into Syria to fight this, just as cannon fodder.

What is deeply troubling to anyone looking at this in terms of the overall threats to us and where this is going is the phenomenon of the suicide bombings. And we have seen sometimes now over 100 suicide bombers a month. We still assess most of the suicide bombings we see in Syria or Iraq are foreign fighters. So these are people coming from all around the world. And if you just

think about what it takes for one individual to get radicalized in his mosque or in his basement online, then decide to go to Syria, then come in the network, get into Syria, join the ISIL network, then be directed to an actual target, and then blow himself up, for just one individual for that to happen, that's a very sophisticated network. And when you start to see a hundred a month, it's something that is very troubling. And in Iraq, in particular, as Ambassador Faily knows, these suicide bombers, they are targeting -- and it's important for us to think about, put yourself in the shoes of the Iraqis a little bit of what they're dealing with. I mean they are targeting children's soccer games. I mean they targeted a children's soccer game in March, and then it's on YouTube, all these little kids getting trophies, and a suicide bomber comes, and kills all these kids. And then just last month, with families celebrating the Eid in Karada, one of the most horrific suicide bombings we've seen, in years. And this fuels this very dangerous cycle in the region.

So I think Lukman is right. There's a religious component to this and an ideological component to this, and it's really incumbent upon our Muslim partners in the coalition to really get after that and combat it, and I think they are, because this is a problem that threatens them as much as us. But this is also something we have to try to deescalate the overall tensions in the region, otherwise, this is something that can just continue to cycle on.

MR. RASMUSSEN: I can speak --

MR. SANGER: Nick?

MR. RASMUSSEN: -- a little bit to the Al Qaeda-ISIL sense of competition that's playing out in multiple theaters around the world. And, you know, at one level you look at it from our perspective, and you say if one terrorist adversary of ours is engaged in active competition with or conflict with another terrorist adversary of ours that must be working to our advantage. They will be either killing each other off or diverting each other's attention, or somehow creating enough churn

that it will prevent them from being as effective as they would like.

That's, at one level, appealing, but I'm not sure it tells the whole story. What I tend to look for more are kind of indicators to try to understand what is this telling us about the net pool of extremist actors in a region. Is that pool of actors growing? Is it shrinking? Are the competing narratives actually spurring innovation in the terrorist playbook? That's what worries us most, is when -- and obviously, if you're speaking broadly about it, Al Qaeda is considerably less effective than ISIL at manipulating tools of social media at speaking to a global audience. All you have to do is look at the kind of information that is put out by ISIL, and the information that is put out by Al Qaeda emanating from South Asia to understand that.

But it's also spurring Al Qaeda affiliates to try to pick things out of the ISIL playbook to try to do better, and to make sure that they're able to compete on a level playing field with ISIL in their region. So it's not as simple a story as competition, and infighting always works to our advantage.

MR. SANGER: We're just going to grab a young lady back there. Yes, with your hand up.

MS. BRIGGS: Rachel Briggs, from Hostage US (sic). A very narrow and specific question about ISIS propaganda. For the last 18 months ISIS have been using British hostage, John Cantlie, within their propaganda machine. As a roving reporter we saw the most recent video just under a fortnight ago, and in repeated articles in their online magazine. What is the analysis that's coming out of both of your machines about the value, in propaganda terms, for ISIS in doing this? What exactly do you think they are trying to achieve?

MR. SANGER: And one last question right here.

MS. HERRIDGE: Catherine Herridge, Fox News. Hamza bin Laden, earlier this month, said that he was going to avenge his father's death. What can we say about

his position to take the reins of the network, and to what degree is Ayman al-Zawahiri still directing the network from his hiding place in Pakistan?

MR. RASMUSSEN: I guess I'll start with the latter question. I think with Hamza bin Laden there's certainly been an effort by Al Qaeda to lift up this one individual as a spokesperson for the organization, and, therefore, try to posture him as someone who could pick up the reins of leadership within the organization. At the same time we can, as I mentioned a minute ago in addressing the other question, the kind of difficulty that Al Qaeda is having, when I'm speaking of Al Qaeda here, I'm talking about core Al Qaeda leadership resident in South Asia, the difficulty that they are having in keeping pace with the global conversation and the global shifting landscape on extremism, even inside their own community, suggests that that's going to be an uphill struggle.

In my view it's going to take more than a few taped video statements or taped audio statements from Hamza bin Laden to put him in a position to lead a global extremist or Jihadist network. So count me a little bit skeptical personally on efforts in that direction.

With regard to John Cantlie, I don't know that I have any amazing insights to offer, other than it's obviously painful to watch something as cynical and cruel as what ISIL is doing by keeping this individual in captivity, and then forcing him to participate in their propaganda machine. I don't know that I can judge how effective that is being in contributing to the global ISIL narrative. As Brett pointed out, some of the fundamental underpinnings of that narrative are being proven false just with events on the ground. But he's obviously -- and, again, speaking personally, I hope they continue to view him as an effective tool because that will keep him alive long enough to give ourselves and our British partners the chance to bring him back safely to his family.

MR. SANGER: Brett, any last word on that?

MR. MCGURK: Some good questions on Jabhat. I

think it was said in the very beginning that Nusra has kind of declared its independence from Al Qaeda. They really haven't. I mean this thing yesterday is like a total joke. And I mean Jolani, the head of Nusra, if you watch it, he's sitting next to legacy, very senior Al Qaeda terrorists who have been with Al-Suri for, you know, decades. So Nusra is still Al Qaeda, and we know exactly what they ultimately want to do. If you really want to study this stuff the original title of the panel was kind of split between ISIL and Nusra and how this resolves, (inaudible) and Al Qaeda interact, and they split, and Syria, because what we now know as ISIL wanted to establish a caliphate now, whereas Al Qaeda, main Al Qaeda, has a longer-term game plan, but they still have the same intentions, and they're not good ones, and we have to combat them both.

MR. SANGER: Well, thank you both. It's been a great conversation. We could go on with this all night, but --

(Applause)

MR. SANGER: -- we have yet another great conversation to come. So thank you, and thank all of you for your great questions.

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