

IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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PRESS RELEASE

REFLECTING ON 9/11, NATIONAL SECURITY EXPERTS PEN OPEN LETTER TO WESTERN GOVERNMENTS

As the world reflects on the 18th anniversary of the September 11 terrorist attacks, leading national security experts warn Western governments that present conditions in places like Iraq and Syria risk history repeating itself.

LINK TO REPORT

(New York, NY – September 10, 2019) Leading national security experts have joined together to sign an open letter to Western governments on the eve of the 18th anniversary of the September 11 attacks. The letter, co-signed by over a dozen former national security practitioners, warns that the conditions that gave rise to the September 11 attacks are resurfacing in places like Iraq, Syria and beyond, allowing groups like al-Qaeda and the so-called Islamic State to grow in strength.

Titled “Unless We Act Now, the Islamic State Will Rise Again: An Open Letter from National Security Professionals to Western Governments,” the letter calls attention to the growing foreign fighter concerns associated with the current situation in Iraq and Syria. The experts warn about the long-term security repercussions of leaving populations formerly affiliated with the Islamic State—men, women, and children—in legal and political limbo in camps and prisons in the region. The letter urges states to recognize that the way they treat these populations today will directly impact global security in the future.

Learning the lessons of the past

In the shadow of September 11, the letter underscores the concerning similarities between the present-day landscape and the conditions which brought the modern Salafi-jihadist movement into being in the first place. Today in Iraq and Syria, tens of thousands of fighters and their families remain in detention, including thousands of Westerners. The vast majority of detainees are not terrorists, they warn, but children. The international community should not underestimate the extreme danger posed by these conditions today.

Drawing on the terrorism landscape in the lead up to September 11, 2001 provides a stark warning to global leaders today. The core membership of the Taliban—a word that literally means “pupils”—were students at extremist madrassas in Pakistani refugee camps every bit as squalid as today’s al-Hol camp in Syria where shameful, yet avoidable, conditions allow for the indoctrination of the next generation of Salafi-jihadists. Another concerning parallel, a number of countries prevented the return of their citizens who had fought the Soviets in Afghanistan. Some, including perhaps the most infamous Salafi-jihadist of all time, Osama bin Laden, eventually had their citizenships revoked. These actions created a group of outcasts whose acts of terrorism—including the September 11, 2001 attacks—changed the world as we knew it.

In their open letter, leading national security experts warn that states today—including most Western governments—have pursued a “hands off” stance which amounts to nothing more than avoiding the tough, but necessary, responsibility of dealing with their own foreign fighter citizens and providing support to local

populations. A look back at the world before September 11, 2001, only demonstrates how inadequate responses to present-day threats can create greater danger in the future.

Western governments must act now

Addressing Western governments in particular, the open letter calls for North American and European governments to repatriate and prosecute militants and their enablers, revealing these people for the violent criminals they are—not the martyrs they claim to be. Such actions will show that democratic states are capable of delivering justice. By reintegrating innocent family members into society, the West will unmask the Salafi-jihadist lie that Western countries have no place for true Muslims.

The letter concludes with two choices for the future: Western governments can pay a smaller price now and address this challenge head on or potentially pay a huge price later by ignoring the warning signs of terrorism. Urging against the latter, the letter calls for the lessons of September 11 to keep the leaders of today from sleepwalking back into the mistakes of the past.

List of Signatories:

- **Javed Ali**, Former Senior Director for Counterterrorism at the National Security Council, USA
- **Richard Barrett**, Former Director of Global Counter-terrorism at MI6, UK
- **William J. Bratton**, Former NYPD Commissioner and LAPD Chief of Police, USA
- **Christopher P. Costa**, Former Special Assistant to the President and Senior Director for Counterterrorism on the National Security Council, USA
- **Jen Easterly**, Former Special Assistant to the President and Senior Director for Counterterrorism, USA
- **Carlos Fernandez**, Former FBI Special Agent in Charge of the New York Counterterrorism Division, USA
- **Joshua A. Geltzer**, Former Senior Director for Counterterrorism at the National Security Council staff, USA
- **Luke Hartig**, Former Senior Director for Counterterrorism at the National Security Council, USA
- **Kenneth Maxwell**, Former FBI Assistant Special Agent in Charge of the New York Counterterrorism Division on 9/11, USA
- **Brett H. McGurk**, Former Special Presidential Envoy to the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS, USA
- **Matthew G. Olsen**, Former Director of the National Counterterrorism Center, USA
- **Nicholas J. Rasmussen**, Former Director of the National Counterterrorism Center, USA
- **Ali H. Soufan**, Former FBI Supervisory Special Agent, USA

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