

Interview - Nick Pratt

Written by E-International Relations

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Andrew Nichols “Nick” Pratt, Colonel, USMC (Ret.) is an expert on terrorism and counter-insurgency, with a regional interest in Central Asia and the Caucasus. He has been professor of strategy and international politics at the George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies since 1996, where he is the director of Leaders for the 21st Century, a security studies program for young leaders. He took a brief leave to serve as the U.S. Special Envoy for Middle East Regional Security in Jerusalem and the West Bank in 2008, supporting U.S. efforts to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Prior to his position at the Marshall Center, he served as an officer in the U.S. Marine Corps, commanding extensively and at every level, from a CIA Special Operations Group team that conducted cover operations in denied areas, to a battalion landing team deployed in the Persian Gulf. He has participated in active operations in the Near East, Africa, and Southeast Asia. In addition, he served with the U.S. Military Observation Group, supporting the United Nations Truce Supervision Organization in Southern Lebanon in 1978-1979, and in the White House at the close of the Nixon administration and the transition to the Ford administration.

Colonel Pratt discusses successful counter-insurgency practices, the Obama administration's drone program, women terrorists, and future security threats.

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Disclaimer: The responses to these questions do not reflect the official position of the United States Department of Defense or the George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies. These responses reflect my personal opinion based upon my experience and research.

Conceptually and operationally, are organized crime groups and terrorist organizations evolving in such a way that there no longer exists a meaningful distinction between them? If so, what are the implications of this.

The precise answer to this question is a resounding “in some cases.” In the world of organized crime groups and terrorist organizations, issues are rarely black and white. Each case has to be examined on its own merit. That said, once improbable relationships are now the ‘new normal.’ For example, the Afghan Taliban is responsible for about 80% of the civilian casualties in Afghanistan. They are also simultaneously the lynchpin for the global opium trade. Today the insurgency is earning upward of \$200 million or more annually from the drug trade.

For years, the Taliban relied partly on donations from sympathetic citizens in the Gulf States to fund their military operations. Recently a lot of that Gulf money has dried up, as rich residents have turned their attention to other Sunni Islamic causes such as Palestine, Egypt, and Syria. This may have spurred the Taliban to look for other sources of funding.

But the biggest factor in the rise of the Taliban's drug involvement may simply be that the group's central leadership decided it wanted a slice of what its local commanders had. Already most of the country's opium was being produced in the largely Taliban-controlled areas of the south and southwest—98 percent. The leadership realized that since it couldn't stop the opium trade, then why not get involved and seize control of the trade systematically.

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Insurgents in many Afghan villages today behave more like Mafiosi than Mujahideen. More than 80 percent of those surveyed for a UN project in the Pakistan-Afghan border region believe Taliban commanders in the south now fight for profit rather than religion or ideology. The sale and use of narcotics while forbidden by the Koran is sanctioned as long as the consumers are infidels.

All armed groups along the Pakistan-Afghan border are involved in some criminal business and not just the drug trafficking. The worst of the worst is the Haqqani clan operating out of Miranshah having set up a “mini-state” with courts, tax offices and madrasas. They have diversified their portfolio and control a network that runs a series of front companies selling automobiles and real estate. They also receive funds from extortion, kidnappings and smuggling operations throughout eastern Afghanistan. Precursor chemicals for opium refiners are actually more valuable than the drugs themselves whose market value fluctuates. Extortion is perhaps the most important source of funding for the Haqqani clan. They are also the most efficient “guns for hire.” The Haqqani clan as well as the rest of the local armed groups to include Al Qa’ida are at once greedy and aggrieved. The end of the Cold War curtailed most state support to terrorists and insurgents driving these actors to criminality.

Pablo Escobar and his Medellin Colombian drug cartel and the Taliban today are actually “hybrid” organizations. We associate the late Pablo Escobar with his command of the cocaine trade. We frequently forget that Escobar was responsible for a plethora of indiscriminate bombings as well as the crash of an Avianca flight in 1989 that killed 110 souls. He also destroyed the DAS HQ building that same year murdering 50 and maiming 600. The Cali cartel tried to eliminate Escobar by attacking one of his fortress-like villas with British mercenaries in helicopters. These examples are hardly the behavior of traditional drug traffickers. The implications of the growth of “hybrid” organizations are profound. The selection of appropriate strategies to contest these organizations is no longer a straightforward proposition. Nation states need to select whether a national security approach is warranted or a law enforcement approach. In some cases, a combination of the two is obligatory. In the long run, the most serious implication is a phenomenon described as “convergence.”

Former SACEUR, Admiral Jim Stavridis has introduced this term to our national security vocabulary. It describes the coming together of previously unrelated adversaries, who not only might combine in operations, but also share resources, know-how, weapons and technology and personnel. This is really the dark end of the spectrum of globalization as we assess rising national security risks. An example of convergence is Afghanistan. With corrupt government officials, police, former Northern Alliance warlords, and now the Taliban all coordinating their efforts, the country could, after the U.S. withdrawal, end up being effectively ruled by a drug mafia. Afghanistan’s future is depressing.

In the light of recent incidences of homegrown terrorism in Boston and London, should the US reconsider how it balances resources in terms of fighting terrorism overseas vs. on national soil? And what are the lessons that counter-terror officials should learn from these events more generally?

We should not be driven by fears of what might happen, but by things that have happened. Since Sept. 11, 2001, there have been 42 terrorist plots in the United States. All but four of them were halted by professional law enforcement agencies. Three plots succeeded and killed a total of 17 people. Not that this isn’t a tragedy; however, in a society that has 15–16,000 homicides every year, the death of 17 souls is not a lot. I see no valid reason to reallocate our resources in terms of preventing domestic terrorism and fighting terrorism overseas. A friend and one of the early original thinkers in combating terrorism, the late Professor Paul Wilkerson said in 1992, “Fighting terrorism is like being a goalkeeper. You can make a hundred brilliant saves but the only shot that people remember is the one that gets past you.” His comment is still appropriate today. We need to avoid ‘jitterbugging’ from one approach to another based upon the breathlessness of Fox News, the Washington Post or political pundits.

Domestically, the United States needs to continually improve upon its resilience capacity. Internationally, we need to constantly endeavor to develop the capability to “connect the dots” and compel states and international terrorist groups to desist in their criminal activities. If one examines the reactions of our citizens, local, state and federal government on 2/26 (the first attack on the World Trade Center), on 9/11, at the Boston Marathon attack and during Hurricane Sandy — later dubbed a “Super Storm,” improvement is visible. We have learned much from our

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overseas partners and we have learned with each terrorist incident. Domestically success begins with robust intelligence and ends with solid law enforcement activities. Public awareness accelerates for both.

Combating terrorism abroad requires the United States to use all of its national security “tools.” The approach required must be multi-pronged, multi-dimensional, as well as multi-national. The elements of national power are: diplomacy, intelligence, information, public diplomacy, economic, financial, law enforcement, military, and homeland security. We cannot simply declare international terrorism threats to be over and retire into isolation. This is a sure course of action for attacks from outside our borders.

My greatest concern today is that we lose our ability to “connect the dots.” After 9/11 and during the 9/11 Commission hearings, we heard and read volumes about our intelligence agencies’ inability or failure to correctly analyze information and predict or foil the attacks on our homeland. Our ability to “connect the dots” has improved and much is due to the NSA’s PRISM program. If PRISM produced no intelligence at all, the threat of such a program retards our terrorist adversaries’ ability to communicate and operate. Bin Laden feared our capabilities and had to rely on couriers that in the end uncovered him. The threat from terrorism remains very real and lawful intelligence activities such as PRISM must continue with the careful oversight of the executive, legislative and judicial branches of our government. In sum, terrorists today are too dangerous to allow them to attack first and then to find and to prosecute them afterwards. With today’s communications technology, the prevention of terrorism requires some degree of intrusion. Before asking how much intrusion is acceptable, you must first ask how safe do you want to be.

What does the Obama administration’s decision to allow the Pentagon to take over some of CIA’s drone operations portend for the future of CIA covert operations and counterterrorism activities more broadly?

The ownership and operation of US drones goes back to the early days of drone development. A source of debate revolved around arming or maintaining the drones as merely reconnaissance platforms. This bureaucratic tussle resulted in the CIA taking the lead in drone operations. Today, who flies the drones is probably an argument overcome by events. CIA drone operations retain a ‘fig leaf’ of deniability while military drone operations will probably be more visible.

Who controls the drone fleet will have little or no effect on the future of CIA covert operations. The third option or “*tertia optio*” remains the domain of CIA and will remain there absent a change in the National Security Act of 1947. Under United States law, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) must lead covert operations unless the president ‘finds’ that another agency should do so and properly informs the Congress. Normally, the CIA is the US Government agency legally allowed to carry out covert action. The test for the use of covert operations has not changed either: Does the activity need to be secret or the source deniable; is the issue critical or life threatening; if made known to the American public, would it be acceptable; and does it reflect sound judgment. The CIA will continue to exercise covert operations overseas in support of US foreign policy with political and propaganda activities, as well as paramilitary actions.

Does the Obama administration’s drone program represent an instance of ‘just war’?

This question is rather opaque so let me place this in a context first. According to William V. O’Brien, my Georgetown law professor, *just-war doctrine* refers to the traditional scholastic doctrine as developed by the contemporary social teaching of the Catholic Church on war, scholarly commentaries, and the positive international law of war. Prior to the adoption of the U. N. Charter, which mandates the analysis for determining the legitimate use of force established under the self-defense provisions of Article 51, the concept of waging a just-war was known as *jus ad bellum*. *Jus ad bellum* encompassed several elements: The nation had a just cause; the nation was acting under the legitimate governing authority; the nation had just intentions; the nation issued a public declaration of the causes for the use of force and the intentions associated with the use of that force; the nation considered the proportionality in the results; the nation demonstrated that the use of force was only used as a last resort; and, there existed a reasonable hope of success. While international law no longer recognizes *Jus ad bellum* as a viable legal tool in determining when military force is lawful, it still carries great moral weight describing the validity of the use of

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force and ensuring the continuation of public support by a pluralistic society. In tandem with the concept of *Jus ad bellum*, *jus in bello* refers to the just conduct in war or simply, abiding by the law of war. This means that a nation that goes to war engages enemy targets under the concept of military necessity, proportionality and unnecessary suffering. *Jus ad bellum* is still recognized concept in international law.

With regard to military necessity, the unlawful enemy combatants confronting the Clinton, Bush and Obama administrations have repeatedly demonstrated the capability and the intention to conduct attacks against American targets. Proportionality limits defensive force to that required to defeat or deter armed attacks. Given these terrorist attacks are ongoing, the Obama administration has not used excessive force. To conclude, of all the lethal weapons in the US arsenal, armed drones cause the least unnecessary suffering.

Consider engaging a legitimate enemy target given three choices of weapons: a sniper, an attack aircraft with iron bombs and a drone carrying a precision munitions. A sniper must close on a target or wait in a hide for the target to appear. The sensor is a human being relying on his eyeball for target identification and a host of elements can cause a shot to be errant missing the target or striking a bystander. An aircraft with conventional bombs requires interaction with many agencies and controllers prior to attacking. One needs only to examine the content of a "nine line" brief for a combat air support mission to recognize the potential for error. But even if everything is correct, hitting the target depends upon a pilot's proficiency. The potential for collateral damage is high. President Obama's decision to strike Bin Laden using Seal Team Six vice an air strike underscores this point. On the other hand, a drone strike mission is built upon real time and analytic intelligence. The target can be surveilled theoretically indefinitely until conditions to reduce collateral damage are minimized. The weapons systems are remarkably accurate as well. This scenario underscores the compliance with the concept of military necessity, proportionality and unnecessary suffering as they relate to drone program and a representation of an instance of 'just war'?

What lessons should the United States heed from the Russian experience fighting terrorist groups in the Caucasus?

The overarching lesson to be learned from examining the Chechen insurgency is that primordial hatreds can last a long time especially when the local customary law establishes blood-feud. Adat and Islam are a lethal mix. The Russians and the Chechens have killed each other from the very first *gazavat* in the 1780s to today's jihad. We can use the insurgency in Chechnya as a case study of how not to conduct successful COIN operations. Karl von Clausewitz once observed that "[e]very age has its own kind of war, its own limiting conditions and its own peculiar preconceptions." This is still sound advice as you start looking for lessons learned.

U.S. doctrine states that successful COIN forces must align their metrics more with the insurgents' metrics to learn what the population considers 'government legitimacy' to be and to make that the metric for success. To completely defeat an insurgency, COIN forces must not be socio-centric; they must get into the heads of the insurgents and use their metrics. A French COIN expert advised that to be successful, the side that eventually wins must become like the other side: insurgents have to get large at some point in time as Mao suggested as the 'war of movement' and governments must get small employing smaller units and at the lowest level of engagement. Marines in Vietnam successfully demonstrated this with their combined action program (CAP). This is what "Chechenization" of the Chechen conflict was supposed to be all about.

However, at the end of the day, the ability to exert control in the North Caucasus is not determined by who has the most guns or greater firepower, rather who has the biggest base of invisible sympathizers; the product of a successful 'hearts and minds' campaign. This is Russia's Achilles' heel given two endemic problems: The lack professionalism in its lower ranks and the corruption throughout all layers of government, but especially within the law enforcement bodies. Even the average Russian considers the police to be the most corrupt of all government organizations. If your car is stolen in Moscow, you don't go to the police, go to the local mafia, pay, and you get it back. The conflicts in the North Caucasus are slushy conflicts, not frozen or not raging; however, they are definitely not over as we shall see at the Sochi Olympics.

What do we learn from examining the Chechen insurgency? We learn how not to prosecute a counterinsurgency

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operation.

Outside of the Middle East, what region do you believe has the highest possibility of radicalization, and of the emergence of terrorist groups, over the next decade?

Central Asia could be the next epicenter of Islamic radicalization and Petri dish for new terrorist groups depending upon how well the Afghan government withstands the eventual onslaught by the Taliban and other armed elements currently in the FATA and the NWF. If Afghanistan once again becomes an Islamic republic or ends up being effectively ruled by a drug mafia, the next vector will be toward its border states. Turkmenistan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan are children of a Soviet mother. Their security forces have all the problems that the Russian military and security forces have in Chechnya. Corruption in Central Asia is endemic. I have been educating Central Asians for over 16 years and working in the region. If you examine the variables for a successful insurgency, Central Asia has them all.

However, while Central Asia looks like the most likely flash point, the 'dark horse' might be Europe. Demographics suggest a growth in Muslim communities. Immigration and migration from the Middle East and Africa continues unabated. Meaningful jobs are no longer available. With weak economies within the Eurozone and with one in four Europeans out of work, the right wing is radicalizing. As the right wing develops, so traditionally follows the dormant social revolutionaries of the left. Add to these groups some remaining national separatists such as splinter groups of the PIRA and what is left of ETA along with terrorism from religious extremists, Europe could easily become the global center for terrorism.

How do women in particular become radicalized? Should women terrorists be approached differently than men?

I will answer this question by focusing on radicalization to violent jihad within the Muslim population and of converts to Islam. While this is "politically incorrect," there are just fewer females radicalized into other terrorist groups. There are exceptions such as Beate Zschäpe of the National Socialist Underground or NSU. But for every Zschäpe there are dozens of women like Reem al-Rayashi, Sajida Mubark al-Rishawi, Houria Chentouf, Belgian Muriel Degauque, Chechen Hawa Barayev and Colleen LaRose or "GI Jane."

Unfortunately, potential male and female recruits who live in our highly charged media environment are vectorless energy looking for guidance and direction. They want to understand who they are, why they matter, and what their role in the world should be. They have an unfulfilled need to define themselves, which al-Qaeda, AQAM and Islamist terrorist groups offer to fill. Women, as with men, are all were looking for something. Terrorist recruiters' ability to turn them to violence is rooted in the fundamental nature of their search. Three years ago, the United States Institute for Peace produced a study looking at recruiting. Based on what they are seeking, recruits fall into one of four broad categories: *revenge seekers*, *status seekers*, *identity seekers*, and *thrill seekers*.

The revenge seeker perceives herself or himself as a victim in society. External forces are causing unhappiness and making it hard to succeed. Women frequently radicalize when their husbands are killed such as the Chechen "Black Widows." Madina Alieva blew herself up in Dagestan injuring at least 18. She was the widow of an Islamist who was killed in 2009. Belgique Muriel Degauque, 38, was 'more Muslim than Muslim' after her conversion. She and her husband traveled to Iraq and both died. Degauque committed suicide while her husband failed to detonate his explosive belt, but was killed in a separate incident by US troops.

Status seekers see a world that does not understand or appreciate them. Frustration stems from unrealized expectations that they will be successful in their new homes and recognized by the community. This is especially prevalent in recent immigrants looking for work and in international college students looking to assimilate in a foreign country. They know where they came from, but they are not there; they know where they are, but they don't belong. As one female terrorist said, "I was like a slave in France. I could work in the kitchen but was not welcome in the dining room. When I left my neighborhood, people avoided me on the street as if I were unclean." Terrorist groups present martyrs and operatives as glorious, heroic figures who have gained great respect in their communities.

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Unlike the status seeker, who wants to stand out from the masses, the identity seeker is more concerned with assimilating into a defining organization. Being part of something is the principal motivation for the identity seeker. The strength and stability of one's personality rests on the formation of a satisfying and functioning identity, and the motivation to define oneself by the group identity is strong and, indeed, almost universal among developing adolescents. It draws young people to street gangs and chess clubs, to marching bands as well as al-Qaeda. This springs from the innate need to internalize the behavior, mores, and attitudes of a social grouping. The identity seeker needs the structure, rules, and perspective that come from belonging to a group.

Thrill seekers represent the smallest percentage of those studied, accounting for less than 5 percent of the sample. They also represent a very distinct motivation from the other three. The thrill seeker is filled with energy and drive. When I was a serving Marine officer, we called these individuals "adrenaline junkies."

Unique to women is the notion of dying to preserving family honor. This is frequently seen in Palestinian suicide attacks involving women. In Iraq, Samira Ahmed Jassim, known as "the mother of the believers," confessed to sending 28 women on suicide missions. Jassim also admitted to planning the rapes of many of her recruits, then offering the bombing missions as a way to escape the shame and restore family honor. This behavior goes beyond appalling. Nevertheless, the fact that Ayman al-Zawahiri's wife issued a call to women to participate in jihad and "martyr" themselves suggests that Al-Qa'ida may change tactics and follow in the footsteps of such groups as HAMAS and AQI.

What do you predict will be the most important security threats in the medium- and long-term future? Are governments and militaries prepared to deal with these threats?

Not by priority:

- An opaque China
- A collapsing, destabilized Russia
- A miscalculation within the DPRK
- A global or regional recession
- Rising regionalism prompting frozen conflicts to boil
- More instability in the Arab world's monarchies
- Shortages in energy, water, food, and critical commodities
- A replay of the *Great Game* in CA
- Growing international terrorism

The only way one, some or all of these security threats can be managed is by cooperation among states and international organizations. Even the world's sole super power cannot deal with any one of these issues alone.

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This interview was conducted by Alex Stark. Alex is Features Editor and a director of e-IR's editorial board. She is currently studying for an MSc International Relations (Research) at the London School of Economics.