



CELL Exhibit Lesson Plan: Post Lesson International Terrorism al-Qaeda and ISIS

Lesson Title: *Understanding the Threat of ISIS and al Qaeda to the U.S.*

Grade Level: *9th-12th grade is our target audience; occasionally 8th grade*

Duration: *58-63 minutes*

Content Area: *International Threats to the U.S.: ISIS and al-Qaeda Post Tour*

Standards Content Area: *Social Studies and Reading, Writing and Communicating*

Overview:

This lesson examines the threat ISIS and al-Qaeda pose to U.S. security, focusing on the tactics used by the FTO's and how the U.S. aims to counter them. Students will analyze how these groups recruit and spread propaganda, discuss current policies in place to deter the FTO's, and propose solutions that promote resilience while balancing civil liberties.

Learning Objectives:

In this lesson, students will:

- Analyze how al-Qaeda and ISIS continue to evolve and pose security threats.
- Evaluate U.S. and global counterterrorism strategies aimed at mitigating these threats.
- Analyze the impact of foreign terrorism (ISIS and al-Qaeda) inspired domestic radicalization in the U.S. and global communities.

Essential Questions:

- Factual:
 - What recent actions by al-Qaeda and ISIS demonstrate their ongoing threat to national and global security?
 - How have al-Qaeda and ISIS adapted their recruitment and communication tactics in response to counterterrorism efforts?
 - What strategies have been used by the U.S. and its allies, like NATO or regional partnerships, to disrupt the operations of al-Qaeda and ISIS?
- Conceptual:
 - Why do extremist groups like al-Qaeda and ISIS continue to pose a significant threat despite territorial defeats and leadership losses and what factors contribute to the resilience of extremist groups?
 - In what ways does online radicalization present new challenges in combating terrorism?
 - What role does misinformation and propaganda play in strengthening extremist narratives?

Key Terms:

- **Affiliate:** a group that supports and follows a larger terrorist network, like Al-Qaeda or ISIS. Affiliates often act independently but share the core group's beliefs, goals, and some guidance.
- **De-radicalization:** Programs aimed at rehabilitating individuals who have adopted extremist views, helping them disengage from violence.



- **Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO):** A group designated by the U.S. Department of State as a terrorist organization that poses a threat to national security.
- **Insurgency:** An organized rebellion aimed at overthrowing a government or gaining control of a territory, often involving guerilla warfare and terrorism.
- **Lone Wolf Attack:** A terrorist attack carried out by an individual who is not directly connected to an organized group but may be inspired by their ideology.
- **Propaganda:** Information, often biased or misleading, used to promote an ideology or cause, such as the recruitment materials used by ISIS and al-Qaeda.
- **Radicalization:** Radicalization is the process by which individuals adopt extreme beliefs and ideologies—often religious, political, or social—that justify the use of violence to achieve their goals.
- **State-Sponsored Terrorism:** When a government supports violence, directly or through groups it backs, to achieve political, military, or ideological goals. This support can include money, weapons, training, planning, or safe havens for terrorist groups.
- **Territorial Caliphate:** Refers to ISIS's former claim of an Islamic state across Iraq and Syria, where it governed territory at its peak.

Materials:

- Student Handout
- Whiteboard/Markers
- "Threat Response Table" (included in the handout)

Lesson Activities:

1. Warm- Up: Think, Pair, Share (10 minutes)

Prompt: Considering recent events and knowledge from your CELL Tour, summarize the ongoing threat of ISIS and al-Qaeda to national and global security.

- a. Students write down their thoughts and share with a partner before a brief class discussion.

Teacher Tip: Summarize key points from student responses on the whiteboard to identify common themes (e.g., use of propaganda, leadership changes, lone-wolf attacks, online recruitment, local and global impacts).

2. Group Discussion (15 minutes)

Directions: Break into five small groups. Each group will begin at a different question station (A–E), where a piece of butcher paper is posted with one of the guiding questions below. Conduct two rounds of discussions.

- Round 1: Break into four small groups. Each group will begin at a different question station where a piece of butcher paper is posted with one of the following guiding questions. Read the question aloud, discuss as a group while referencing the examples from the tour and your previous knowledge, take notes directly on the butcher paper.
 - Round 2: Rotate to a new station, read the notes from the previous group and continue to add new insights, challenge prior ideas, make connections to current events and previous learning.
- a. How do ISIS and al-Qaeda differ in their goals and tactics today?
 - *al-Qaeda seeks to lead a global jihad through a network of regional affiliates. Its overarching aim is to overthrow corrupt regimes in Muslim-majority countries and replace them with Islamic governance, targeting the "far enemy" (e.g., the U.S.) that it believes props up those regimes.*



- *al-Qaeda has decentralized into regional affiliates, uses sustained insurgencies, and avoids mass-casualty attacks that alienate Muslim populations.*
- *In contrast, ISIS targets nearby Arab governments it sees as corrupt or unfaithful to Islam. Its goal is to create a global Sunni caliphate, and its violent, end-times beliefs drive much of its strategy. Through affiliate groups like ISIS-K, ISIS has begun to expand its influence beyond the Middle East into regions like South and Central Asia.*
- *ISIS employs extreme violence, including public executions and sexual slavery, and uses social media to recruit followers and promote leaderless jihad. Despite territorial losses, it inspires attacks globally via a robust online presence.*
- b. What counterterrorism policies have been implemented to reduce their influence?
 - *For ISIS:*
 - o *The U.S. and its allies dismantled ISIS's territorial caliphate in Iraq and Syria, killing its leaders (like al-Baghdadi) and destroying infrastructure.*
 - o *Western powers conduct ongoing counterterrorism operations and online interdiction programs to disrupt ISIS recruitment and propaganda.*
 - *For al-Qaeda:*
 - o *U.S.-led coalition efforts in Afghanistan and elsewhere have targeted al-Qaeda's leadership and support networks.*
 - o *Affiliates like AQAP and JNIM are countered through intelligence sharing, drone strikes, and regional military partnerships (e.g., the Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership).*
 - *Legal and Financial Tools:*
 - o *The U.S. has designated both groups and many of their affiliates as Foreign Terrorist Organizations (FTOs), allowing sanctions, financial freezes, and travel bans.*
 - o *International coordination (e.g., with the UN or EU) also supports sanctions and prosecutions.*
- c. How have these groups adapted to territorial losses and leadership setbacks?
 - *ISIS:*
 - o *Transitioned to a decentralized model emphasizing "leaderless jihad."*
 - o *Focuses on online radicalization, transnational affiliates, and lone-wolf attacks.*
 - o *Maintains affiliates in Africa, Southeast Asia, and Central Asia to preserve relevance.*
 - *al-Qaeda:*
 - o *Strengthened regional affiliates like JNIM in West Africa, AQAP in Yemen, and HTS in Syria.*
 - o *Avoids high-profile attacks that risk backlash and instead builds local legitimacy.*
 - o *Operates training camps and safe havens, especially in Taliban-controlled Afghanistan.*
- d. What current threats do these groups pose to U.S. security?
 - *ISIS continues to inspire lone-actor terrorism in the U.S. and Europe.*
 - o *The 2025 New Orleans attack, in which Shamsud-Din Bahar Jabbar — a U.S. citizen and Army veteran — drove a truck into a crowd on Bourbon Street, killing 14 and injuring dozens. Jabbar had pledged allegiance to ISIS and left behind propaganda materials, although he had no formal communication or direction from ISIS. The incident underscores the persistent threat of homegrown violent extremism inspired by jihadist ideologies.*



- A 2024 plot led by ISIS-K to attack a Taylor Swift concert in Vienna, which could have killed hundreds, was foiled by U.S. and Austrian intelligence.
 - ISIS's proxy groups, like ISIS-K (Islamic State Khorasan), expands its operational reach, particularly in South and Central Asia has demonstrated the capability to carry out high-casualty attacks, including those targeting Western personnel and infrastructure, such as the 2021 Kabul airport bombing that killed U.S. service members.
 - In October 2024, the U.S. Department of Justice charged an Afghan national with ties to ISIS-K for conspiring to conduct an Election Day terrorist attack in the United States. Additionally, in June 2024, eight Tajik nationals with ISIS-K affiliations were arrested in New York, Los Angeles, and Philadelphia.
 - al-Qaeda maintains ambitions to strike the U.S. again. It works alongside the Taliban and sustains training camps in Afghanistan.
 - Both groups use regional instability to grow influence and plot against Western targets.
 - U.S. officials warn of metastasizing threats in Africa, where AQ and ISIS affiliates are among the deadliest terrorist groups in the world.
- e. What role do policies, technology, and community-based efforts play in countering these threats?
- **Policies:**
 - Designating groups as FTOs enables sanctions and legal action.
 - Military interventions and drone strikes dismantle leadership and infrastructure.
 - International cooperation (e.g., NATO, TSCTP) strengthens global counterterrorism capabilities.
 - **Technology:**
 - Advanced surveillance tools, like drones and cyber monitoring, track terrorist movements and online propaganda.
 - AI and machine learning help detect radical content and prevent recruitment.
 - **Community-Based Efforts:**
 - Counter-radicalization initiatives and public education programs promote resilience against extremist ideologies.
 - Community policing, local partnerships, and reporting mechanisms help disrupt early-stage plots.

Teacher Tip: Encourage students to reference specific examples from recent events (e.g., cyber threats, domestic terrorism plots). Have small groups discussing one question and take notes on butcher paper that stays at that small group area, every 7 minutes move to another question to discuss in small groups and then share out answers new learning as a large group.

3. Group Activity: Threat Response Table (20-25 minutes)

- a. Divide students into small groups (3-4 students per group).
- b. Refer to the Threat Response Table section from the handout.
- c. Each group fills out the table by brainstorming specific examples and proposing realistic solutions.
 - i. Example Issue: *ISIS propaganda targeting youth online*
 - ii. Current Response: *Social media platform bans and reporting tools*



- iii. Proposed Solution: *Community-led digital literacy campaigns that empower youth to recognize disinformation*
- d. Groups present one key issue and their solution to the class.

Issue/Threat	Examples of Existing Responses	Evaluation of strength and weakness	Proposed Solutions
ISIS propaganda targeting youth and others online	Social media platform bans and reporting tools	Strength: Accessible avenue to report threatening activity	<i>Community-led digital literacy campaigns that empower youth to recognize disinformation</i>
		Weakness: First amendment protections may not remove all threatening activity	
Recruitment of U.S.-based individuals	Law enforcement investigations and de-radicalization programs	Strength	<i>Local partnerships to implement mental health and civic engagement programs</i>
		Weakness	
Potential large-scale attacks by al-Qaeda and ISIS	Increased airport security and monitoring of international travel	Strength	<i>Investment in intelligence-sharing and counterterrorism training for federal agencies</i>
		Weakness	
Radicalization through online platforms	Cybersecurity task forces and monitoring tools	Strength	<i>Collaborations with tech companies to develop secure yet transparent communication safeguards</i>
		Weakness	
Gaming platforms and chatrooms (Minecraft, Roblox, Fortnite, Black Ops)	Largely under-monitored by traditional counterterrorism frameworks	Strength	
		Weakness	

**Teacher Tip: Highlight connections between student proposals and existing counterterrorism efforts.*

4. Reflection Writing (10 minutes)

Prompt: What role does misinformation and propaganda play in strengthening terrorists' narratives? How can individuals contribute to safeguarding communities related to this issue of extremism?

Students write a reflection (250-600 words) using the prompts and space in the handout.

- a. Encourage students to include evidence-based insights and a personal "call to action."



5. Posting a Call to Action (3 minutes)

Students summarize their call to action in 10 words or less, write it on a post it note and post it in the classroom as a commitment of the class in an action of counterterrorism.

Standards:

- Academic
 - SS.HS.2.3-GLE.3: Investigate patterns of the interconnected nature of the world, its people, and places.
 - SS.HS.4.1-GLE.1: Research and formulate positions on government policies and on local, state, tribal, and national issues to be able to participate and engage in a civil society.
 - SS.HS.1.2-GLE.2: Analyze and evaluate key concepts of continuity and change, cause and effect, complexity, unity and diversity, and significant ideas in the United States from Reconstruction to the present.
 - SS.HS.1.3-GLE.3: Analyze and evaluate key concepts of continuity and change, cause and effect, complexity, unity and diversity, and significant ideas throughout the world from the Renaissance to the present.
 - RW20-GR.H1-S.2-GLE.2: Understand the logical progression of ideas in increasingly complex texts.
 - RW20-GR.HS2-S.2-GLE.2: Interpret and evaluate complex informational texts using various critical reading strategies.
- Skills
 - Critical Thinking and Problem Solving (Entrepreneurial Skills)
 - Collaboration and Teamwork (Civic/Interpersonal Skills)
 - Communication (Civic/Interpersonal)