



POLICY ROUNDTABLE: 17 Years After September 11

September 11, 2018

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Summary

To understand what has gone both right and wrong since the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, we have convened a roundtable of some of this country's foremost experts on terrorism, insurgency, and strategy.

1. A Most Infamous Day: Marking the 17th Anniversary of the 9/11 Attacks

Ryan Evans

The 9/11 attacks and Pearl Harbor have often been compared. Not long after the towers fell, then-Sen. Chuck Hagel, a future secretary of defense, said, “This is the second Pearl Harbor. I don’t think that I overstate it.”¹ A senior E.U. official said that same day, “It is the worst attack on the United States since Pearl Harbor. This is one of those few days in life that one can say will actually change everything.” Around the world and especially in the United States, these comparisons are being repeated today.

But marking the anniversary of the 9/11 attacks is fundamentally unlike observing that of the Dec. 7, 1941 attack on Pearl Harbor, a day that President Franklin D. Roosevelt said would “live in infamy.” Less than four years after Japanese imperialist forces struck at America’s Pacific Fleet as it sat in Pearl Harbor, Japan surrendered unconditionally, submitting itself to a military occupation by its adversary. Seventeen years after the 9/11 attacks, however, the kindest thing that can be said of the American record against the jihadist movement is that it is mixed. While the United States has succeeded in preventing another mass casualty attack on its soil, its terrorist enemies continue to wreak havoc in Africa, the Middle East, as well as South and Southeast Asia, and have repeatedly attacked Europe.

¹ “Twin Towers Demolished, Pentagon Hit in Terrorist Attacks,” *Fox News*, Sept. 12, 2001,

<http://www.foxnews.com/story/2001/09/12/twin-towers-demolished-pentagon-hit-in-terrorist-attacks.html>

Sept. 11 is a day that, like Dec. 7, lives in infamy, but it is an infamy that today is largely defined by America's strategic incompetence and confusion, which have played no small role in transforming a vicious tragedy into an expensive — and often fruitless — geopolitical preoccupation that has seen the United States and its allies pay dearly with both blood and treasure without making the world any safer. With the benefit of 17 years of hindsight, one would be hard pressed to imagine a worse way to have honored and avenged the lives of the 3,000 people who perished on this day in 2001.

To understand what has gone both right and wrong, we have convened a roundtable of some of this country's foremost experts on terrorism, insurgency, and strategy.

The Contributions

Without the durable alliance between al-Qaeda and the Taliban, the attacks might not have taken place and the last 17 years surely would have played out quite differently. Tricia Bacon of American University helps us understand this remarkable alliance and why it has proven so resilient in the face of an all-out assault by some of the world's most advanced military powers. As Bacon observes, there is a considerable asymmetry in this relationship. For the Taliban, there have been great costs and marginal benefits. For al-Qaeda, great benefits and marginal costs. This case is perhaps the foremost example of America's "larger failure to prevent or disrupt alliances between militant groups."

These jihadist alignments, however, are often not as stable as the alliance between the Taliban and al-Qaeda, which has posed other problems for America's global counter-terrorism campaign. Focusing on Syria and the Sahel, Martha Crenshaw of Stanford University assesses the regularly shifting, and often "bewildering," ties between various

militant groups arrayed against the West. As she explains, “These complicated and often obscure interactions among jihadist militants make it hard for governments or international institutions to understand the adversary or predict what will happen.” Even after suffering undeniable military defeats, these groups are able to reconstitute themselves elsewhere with remarkable consistency, calling into question the sustained special operations missions and interventions meant to crush them.

America, of course, is not fighting jihadist groups alone. Cooperation and coordination with the governments of Muslim-majority states has been a critical, yet frustrating, part of the war on terrorism. Drawing on his recent book, Stephen Tankel of American University explains how these partners “both help and hinder U.S. counterterrorism efforts.”² Even when Washington and a partner state find their interests closely aligned and see a jihadist group as a foe that must be fiercely fought, many Americans find themselves troubled by often repressive methods employed by the partner. And often, America has different priorities than a partner state, either because the local authorities see a jihadist group as useful or simply because they don’t see defeating it as especially important compared to other goals.

It is undeniable that there have been some major successes in the global war on terrorism. Speaking as an intelligence professional, Michael Dempsey — formerly the acting director of national intelligence, the deputy director of national intelligence, and President Barack Obama’s primary intelligence briefer — walks us through these victories as well as some notable failures. The U.S. intelligence and law enforcement agencies have protected the homeland from another mass casualty plot and U.S. military forces, with

² Stephen Tankel, *With Us and Against Us: How America’s Partners Help and Hinder the War on Terror* (New York: Columbia, 2018).

the support of coalition partners, have more recently regained the battlefield initiative against jihadists in the Middle East. At the same time, however, jihadist groups remain adaptive, the socio-political drivers that sustain their ranks are unresolved, and Washington is prone to “unforced errors” that, in the end, are gifts to America’s enemies.

How have American thinking and counter-terrorism efforts evolved in the last 17 years? David A. Brown, Tim Hoyt, and Craig Whiteside, all of the U.S. Naval War College, join forces to answer this question and others in a wide-ranging and creative article that draws on everything from the great naval strategist Alfred Thayer Mahan to Burmese pythons on the loose in Florida to Washington’s alleged reorientation toward great-power competition. “Much like the futility of trying to stop the growth of the python population,” they write, “our failure to reduce the scale of global jihadism is more obvious than ever.” Brown, Hoyt, and Whiteside call for a “shared understanding and more realistic appraisal of the nature of the conflict,” but are decidedly skeptical of Washington’s ability to get there.

This roundtable ends where it all began: Afghanistan. Trevor Thrall of George Mason University and Erik Goepner of the Cato Institute examine how the “safe haven fallacy” has sustained poor decision-making on Afghanistan across three presidencies. Thrall and Goepner disassemble the assumptions of the safe haven fallacy — describing it as “an argument for endless war based on unwarranted worst-case scenario assumptions” — and call for Washington to finally end its involvement in the conflict. The Trump administration, they correctly argue, are guilty of relying on shoddy logic if its officials truly believe that with far fewer troops on the ground they can get any closer to something resembling victory than previous administrations have. “Nothing the United

States is doing,” they write, “will encourage the Taliban to change its course, regardless of how much resolve Trump and his generals have.”

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2. Al-Qaeda and the Taliban: The Alliance that Started the Forever War

Tricia Bacon

Today marks 17 years since 9/11 and nearly the same since America’s war in Afghanistan started. Launched on October 7, 2001, the U.S.-led invasion of Afghanistan quickly overthrew the Taliban regime after their leader, Mullah Omar, refused to hand over Osama bin Laden.³ While America’s strategic objective in Afghanistan has often been unclear,⁴ the Taliban’s refusal to give up al-Qaeda — and by extension the fear that an Afghanistan dominated by the Taliban would remain a safe haven for international terrorists⁵ — has been one of the primary motives for the “[forever war](#).”⁶

The alliance between al-Qaeda and the Taliban has endured for over 20 years. Between a crushing military campaign by the world’s foremost military alliance and the realpolitik considerations that seemingly should have led the Taliban to break ties long ago, the fact

³ “A Timeline of the U.S. War in Afghanistan,” Council on Foreign Relations, <https://www.cfr.org/timeline/us-war-afghanistan>.

⁴ Steve Coll, “We Can’t Win in Afghanistan Because We Don’t Know Why We’re There,” *New York Times*, Jan. 26, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/26/opinion/sunday/united-states-afghanistan-win.html>.

⁵ Michael P. Dempsey, “No Longer a Haven for International Terrorists,” *New York Times*, Dec. 3, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/03/opinion/no-longer-a-haven-for-international-terrorists.html>.

⁶ Dexter Filkins, *The Forever War*, (New York: Penguin Random House, 2009).

that they haven't is remarkable. As in other alliances,⁷ the two groups remain engaged in cooperation with mutual expectations about consultation and cooperation in the future. An alliance does not mean that partners have merged, operate in lockstep, or even always adhere to one another's input. In this case, they certainly have not, do not, [and they sometimes ignore one another's counsel](#).⁸ Allies can have areas of major divergence. And the Taliban and al-Qaeda certainly do. Since the inception of their relationship, the two groups have differed on their strategic objectives, priorities, and tactics. The Taliban continues to be staunchly focused on Afghanistan and has never embraced al-Qaeda's global jihadist ambitions. For its part, al-Qaeda has consistently pursued its agenda with a disregard for how doing so has affected the Taliban.

Yet they cooperate in Afghanistan and expect future cooperation and consultation in that realm. They share a desire to expel U.S. forces from Afghanistan and re-instate Taliban rule. And they now have a mutual rival in the Islamic State. But even these common interests do not fully capture what binds these two groups into their long-standing, but difficult, partnership.

Their relationship has evolved over time. Though Bin Laden had pledged *bayat* to Mullah Omar, al-Qaeda was "an organization supporting a state" during the 1990s.⁹ Now the Taliban does not rely on al-Qaeda nor does it need al-Qaeda's support for its insurgency.

⁷ Tricia Bacon, "Is the Enemy of My Enemy My Friend?," *Security Studies* 27, no. 3 (2018), <https://doi.org/10.1080/09636412.2017.1416813>.

⁸ Alex Strick van Linschoten and Felix Kuehn, *An Enemy We Created: The Myth of the Taliban / Al-Qaeda Merger in Afghanistan, 1970–2010* (London: Hurst, 2012).

⁹ Daniel Benjamin and Steven Simon, *The Age of Sacred Terror: Radical Islam's War Against America* (New York: Penguin Random House, 2002).

Al-Qaeda gains more from the relationship, not least of all a role in the insurgency in Afghanistan and an alternative to the Islamic State that it can promote to discredit its former ally.¹⁰ Al-Qaeda also gets the prospect of a future safe haven should the Taliban return to power, though the Taliban's willingness to provide such sanctuary is uncertain.¹¹ The alliance has proven resilient and thus poses a hurdle to efforts to find a negotiated settlement to end the war.¹²

Heavy Costs for Limited Benefits for the Taliban

The Taliban has incurred tremendous costs for its alliance with al-Qaeda over more than two decades. The relationship contributed to the Taliban's international isolation while it was in power, including a rupture with Saudi Arabia: one of only three states to recognize the Taliban government.¹³ Al-Qaeda's presence was a source of internal strife within the

¹⁰ Atiyah abd al-Rahman (aka Mahmud), "Government Exhibit 421," June 19, 2010, Letter retrieved from Osama bin Laden's compound in Abbottabad, <https://www.longwarjournal.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/EXHIBIT-421-ENG-TRANS-EX-420-76C5764D-1.pdf>; Thomas Joscelyn, "Zawahiri Calls on Muslims to Support Taliban, Reject Islamic State," *FDD's Long War Journal*, Aug. 21, 2016, <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2016/08/zawahiri-calls-on-muslims-to-support-taliban-reject-islamic-state.php>.

¹¹ "Undated letter re Afghanistan," Letter retrieved from Osama bin Laden's compound in Abbottabad, declassified May 15, 2015, <https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/ubl/english/Undated%20letter%20re%20Afghanistan.pdf>.

¹² "Twenty-second report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team submitted pursuant to resolution 2368 (2017) concerning ISIL (Da'esh), Al-Qaida and associated individuals and entities," United Nations, July 27, 2018, <http://undocs.org/S/2018/705>.

¹³ Steve Coll, *Ghost Wars: The Secret History of the CIA, Afghanistan, and Bin Laden, from the Soviet Invasion to September 10, 2001* (New York: Penguin, 2004); "Cable from U.S. Embassy Islamabad to Secretary of State," U.S. Department of State, Dec. 22, 1998,

Taliban,¹⁴ with some urging Mullah Omar to oust the group.¹⁵ Some in the Taliban were particularly frustrated by Bin Laden's declarations of war and al-Qaeda's acts of terrorism against the United States in the years prior to 2001.¹⁶ But Washington's responses actually increased the [Taliban's](#) support for al-Qaeda.¹⁷ Of course, most notably, Mullah Omar's refusal to handover Bin Laden after 9/11 led to the United States' invasion and the downfall of the Taliban regime.

The persistence of their alliance is all the more remarkable when you consider how little the Taliban needs al-Qaeda now. However, it does accrue some benefits.

<https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB253/19981222.pdf>; Zachary Laub, "The Taliban in Afghanistan," Council on Foreign Relations, July 4, 2014, <https://www.cfr.org/background/taliban-afghanistan>.

¹⁴ "Cable from U.S. Embassy Islamabad to Secretary of State," U.S. Department of State, Sept. 24, 1998, <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB97/tal26.pdf>.

¹⁵ "Cable from U.S. Embassy Islamabad to Secretary of State," U.S. Department of State, Sept. 14, 1998, <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB134/Doc 6.pdf>; "Strains Surface Between Taliban and Bin Laden," Central Intelligence Agency, January 1999, <https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/368942-1999-01-strains-surface-between-taliban-and-bin.html>.

¹⁶ "Cable from U.S. Embassy Islamabad to Secretary of State," U.S. Department of State, Dec. 30, 1998, <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB134/Doc 6.pdf>; Osama Bin Laden, "Jihad Against Jews and Crusaders," World Islamic Front Statement, Feb. 23, 1998, <https://fas.org/irp/world/para/docs/980223-fatwa.htm>; van Linschoten and Kuehn, *An Enemy We Created*.

¹⁷ "SITREP 6: Pakistan/Afghanistan Reaction to U.S. Strikes," U.S. Embassy (Islamabad), Aug. 25, 1998, <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB134/Doc%204.pdf>; "SITREP 7: Pakistan/Afghanistan Reaction to U.S. Strikes," U.S. Embassy (Islamabad), Aug. 26, 1998, <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB134/Doc%205.pdf>.

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<https://tnsr.org/roundtable/policy-roundtable-17-years-after-september-11/>

Though al-Qaeda was the cause of the U.S. invasion,¹⁸ it has steadfastly supported the Taliban's insurgency. The Taliban has benefited from al-Qaeda's expertise since the onset of the conflict,¹⁹ as it did against the Northern Alliance during the 1990s.²⁰ Al-Qaeda helped train local Taliban commanders to fabricate improvised explosives beginning in the early days of the insurgency.²¹ The terrorist group's personnel also offer other specialized and technological skills,²² leading one leading scholar on Afghanistan to refer to al-Qaeda operators as "subcontractors" for the Taliban.²³ Al-Qaeda has assisted the Taliban with special operations and terrorist attacks, offering experienced supplemental manpower.²⁴ The jihadist group rarely conducts or claims attacks in Afghanistan

¹⁸ "Taliban Commander Reveals Anger at Al Qaeda, Dim Hopes for Victory," *TOLONews*, July 11, 2012, <https://www.tolonews.com/afghanistan/taliban-commander-reveals-anger-al-qaeda-dim-hopes-victory>.

¹⁹ "GTD Search Results," Global Terrorism Database, accessed Sept. 9, 2018, https://www.start.umd.edu/gtd/search/Results.aspx?page=1&casualties_type=b&casualties_max=&dtp2=all&country=4&perpetrator=20029,40325&expanded=no&charttype=line&chart=overtime&ob=GTDID&od=desc-results-table.

²⁰ "Afghanistan Taliban Holding Firm on Bin Ladin for Now," Central Intelligence Agency, Mar. 23, 2001, <https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/368972-2001-03-23-afghanistan-taliban-holding-firm-on.html>.

²¹ Anand Gopal, *No Good Men Among the Living: America, the Taliban, and the War through Afghan Eyes* (New York: Henry Holt, 2014).

²² Michael Semple, "The Taliban Need Help to Break Their Al-Qaida Ties," *Guardian*, Apr. 30, 2012, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2012/apr/30/taliban-al-qaida-ties>.

²³ Michael Semple, Conversation with the author, Sept. 4, 2018, London.

²⁴ Jason Burke, "Bin Laden Files Show Al-Qaida and Taliban Leaders in Close Contact," *Guardian*, Apr. 29, 2012, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/apr/29/bin-laden-al-qaida-taliban-contact>; Atiyah abd al-Rahman (aka Mahmud), "Government Exhibit 421," June 19, 2010, Letter retrieved from Osama bin Laden's compound in Abbottabad, <https://www.longwarjournal.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/EXHIBIT-421-ENG-TRANS-EX-420-76C5764D-1.pdf>; Barbara Starr and Zachary Cohen, "US Official: High-Level Al Qaeda Commander Killed in Afghanistan," *CNN*, Dec. 5, 2017, <https://www.cnn.com/2017/12/05/politics/us-kills-high-level-al-qaeda-commander-omar-bin-khatab/index.html>.

independently; instead it contributes to attacks by the Taliban and its partner then decides how to claim responsibility.

But, by al-Qaeda's own admission, "the Taliban almost does not need us."²⁵ The Taliban's greatest strength is its ability to capitalize on widespread local grievances and the Afghan government's lack of legitimacy. It has ample Afghan personnel, and it controls or contests at least 44 percent of Afghanistan's districts.²⁶ Even those estimates vastly understate the Taliban's influence.²⁷

In addition, at times, especially during the 1990s, the Taliban needed funds from al-Qaeda.²⁸ That is no longer the case. The Taliban's coffers are well-stocked through its relations with various patrons, including Pakistan,²⁹ Iran, and Russia,³⁰ as well as through

²⁵ "Summary of the situation in Afghanistan and Pakistan," Author Unknown, Letter retrieved from Osama bin Laden's compound in Abbottabad, declassified May 20, 2015,

https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/ubl/english/Summary_on_situation_in_Afghanistan_and_Pakistan.pdf.

²⁶ Rod Nordland, Ash Ngu, and Fahim Abed, "How the U.S. Government Misleads the Public on Afghanistan," *New York Times*, Sept. 8, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2018/09/08/world/asia/us-misleads-on-afghanistan.html>; "Quarterly Report to the United States Congress," Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, July 30, 2018, <https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/quarterlyreports/2018-07-30qr.pdf>.

²⁷ Ashley Jackson, "Life under the Taliban Shadow Government," ODI, June 2018,

<https://www.odi.org/publications/11144-life-under-taliban-shadow-government>.

²⁸ "Afghanistan Taliban Holding Firm on Bin Ladin for Now."

²⁹ Steve Coll, *Directorate S: The C.I.A. and America's Secret Wars in Afghanistan and Pakistan* (New York: Penguin Random House, 2018).

³⁰ Aziz Amin Ahmadzai, "Iran's Support for the Taliban Brings It to a Crossroads With Afghanistan," *Diplomat*, May 21, 2018, <https://thediplomat.com/2018/05/irans-support-for-the-taliban-brings-it-to-a-crossroads-with-afghanistan/>.

its involvement in the drug trade in Afghanistan.³¹ It also garners funds locally from extortion and protection rackets.³² Furthermore, it enjoys substantial support from donor networks in the Gulf.³³ Thus, to the extent that al-Qaeda provides the Taliban with resources, they are not pivotal to the Taliban's financial health.

While al-Qaeda and the Taliban share antipathy towards the Islamic State, there are no indications that the Taliban has needed al-Qaeda's assistance in forcibly challenging the Islamic State's local affiliate, the Islamic State in the Khorasan.³⁴

Nonetheless, some in the Taliban still have a soft spot for al-Qaeda. As recently as 2015, al-Qaeda operated a massive training facility in Kandahar until it was destroyed by the United States.³⁵ Whether the facility was an anomaly or an indication that the Taliban remains willing to offer al-Qaeda operating space in its territory remains unclear. In

³¹ Mujib Mashal, "Afghan Taliban Awash in Heroin Cash, a Troubling Turn for War," *New York Times*, Oct. 29, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/29/world/asia/opium-heroin-afghanistan-taliban.html>.

³² Gabriel Dominguez, "How the Taliban Get Their Money" *Deutsche Welle*, Jan. 21, 2016, <https://www.dw.com/en/how-the-taliban-get-their-money/a-18995315>.

³³ Carlotta Gall, "Saudi Bankroll Taliban, Even as King Officially Supports Afghan Government," *New York Times*, Dec. 6, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/06/world/asia/saudi-arabia-afghanistan.html>.

³⁴ Ayaz Gul, "Taliban Says IS 'Purged' From Northern Afghan Province," *VOA News*, Aug. 1, 2018, <https://www.voanews.com/a/taliban-says-islamic-state-eliminated-from-northern-afghan-province/4508922.html>.

³⁵ Dan Lamothe, "'Probably the Largest' Al-Qaeda Training Camp Ever Destroyed in Afghanistan," *Washington Post*, Oct. 30, 2015, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/checkpoint/wp/2015/10/30/probably-the-largest-al-qaeda-training-camp-ever-destroyed-in-afghanistan/>.

addition, the Haqqani Network faction of the Taliban has [long been close to al-Qaeda](#).³⁶ They have conducted joint operations and al-Qaeda has benefited from Haqqani protection. The Haqqanis' support for al-Qaida is more important than ever since the faction's leader, [Sirajuddin Haqqani](#), ascended to the number two spot in the Taliban in 2015.

Mostly Benefits with Few Costs for al-Qaeda

Through its alliance with the Taliban, al-Qaeda participates in the insurgency in Afghanistan, thereby maintaining a foothold in a campaign against the United States with symbolic importance in the broader global jihadist movement as the site of the defeat of the Soviet Union in 1989. But, as discussed, its involvement is selective, and the Taliban does not rely on al-Qaeda, which limits its losses and the resources it must invest in the effort.

This arrangement works well for al-Qaeda because the insurgency in Afghanistan is not its top priority. In recent years, some of its skilled military and explosives experts have even left Afghanistan for Syria.³⁷ By Ayman al-Zawahiri's own admission, Afghanistan is on the periphery of the larger battle in which Iraq and Syria command more importance.³⁸

³⁶ Vahid Brown and Don Rassler, *Fountainhead of Jihad: The Haqqani Nexus, 1973–2012* (London: Hurst, 2013); Barbara Elias-Sanborn, ed., "The Haqqani History: Bin Ladin's Advocate Inside the Taliban," National Security Archive, Sept. 11, 2012, <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB389/>.

³⁷ "Twenty-second report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team"; Wesley Morgan, "Whatever Happened to Al Qaeda in Afghanistan?," *POLITICO*, Aug. 15, 2018, <https://politi.co/2Bl3t8u>.

³⁸ Ayman al-Zawahiri, "Letter to Abu Musab al-Zarqawi (translated)," July 9, 2005, <https://ctc.usma.edu/app/uploads/2013/10/Zawahiris-Letter-to-Zarqawi-Translation.pdf>.

Since the Islamic State's emergence, al-Qaeda has garnered additional benefits from its alliance with the Taliban. Al-Qaeda sought to discredit the Islamic State's claims to have formed a caliphate with Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi as the caliph. It did so by [touting the Taliban's leader](#) as the "true" leader of the faithful.³⁹ This effort initially backfired in the wake of humiliating revelations in 2015 that Mullah Omar had died in 2013.⁴⁰ Nonetheless, al-Qaeda stuck with the approach, hailing the Taliban as the only theologically legitimate alternative to the Islamic State.⁴¹

Prospects Going Forward

The alliance between these two movements has long defied the apparent cost-benefit calculation, suggesting that their ties run deeper,⁴² especially after 17 years of fighting together. Their bond was once attributed primarily to the personal relationship between

³⁹ Thomas Jocelyn, "Ayman al Zawahiri swears allegiance to the Taliban's new leader," *FDD's Long War Journal*, June 11, 2016, <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2016/06/ayman-al-zawahiri-swears-allegiance-to-the-talibans-new-leader.php>.

⁴⁰ Don Melvin, "Taliban Admit Mullah Omar Died in 2013," *CNN*, Aug. 31, 2015, <https://www.cnn.com/2015/08/31/asia/taliban-mullah-omar-death/index.html>.

⁴¹ Jack Moore, "Al-Qaeda's Zawahiri Calls on Supporters to Reject ISIS and Support Taliban," *Newsweek*, Aug. 22, 2016, <https://www.newsweek.com/al-qaedas-zawahiri-calls-supporters-reject-isis-and-support-taliban-492337>.

⁴² Barbara Elias, "Know Thine Enemy," *Foreign Affairs*, Nov. 2, 2009, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/pakistan/2009-11-02/know-thine-enemy>.

Mullah Omar and Bin Laden.⁴³ Thus, Bin Laden's death in 2011 and the revelation of Mullah Omar's 2013 death seemed to be as an opening for the Taliban to break with al-Qaeda.⁴⁴ Once again, in defiance of predictions, the alliance persisted.

However, Zawahiri does not enjoy the same standing as Bin Laden with the Taliban or even among al-Qaeda's other allies.⁴⁵ Mullah Omar's successors have suffered from their own legitimacy shortfalls. Consequently, they have sought to navigate Zawahiri's declarations of *bayat* carefully. Mullah Akhtar Mohammad Mansour publicly accepted Zawahiri's pledge,⁴⁶ only to subsequently remove the announcement from the Taliban's website. The Taliban's current leader Mullah Haibatullah Akhundzada has not publicly endorsed Zawahiri's most recent pledge.⁴⁷

⁴³ Douglas Frantz and David Rohde, "A NATION CHALLENGED: THE BOND; How Bin Laden and Taliban Forged Jihad Ties," *New York Times*, Nov. 22, 2001, <https://www.nytimes.com/2001/11/22/world/a-nation-challenged-the-bond-how-bin-laden-and-taliban-forged-jihad-ties.html>.

⁴⁴ Coll, *Directorate S*.

⁴⁵ "The Al-Qaeda-Taliban Nexus," Council on Foreign Relations, Nov. 24, 2009, <https://www.cfr.org/expert-roundup/al-qaeda-taliban-nexus>; Tricia Bacon and Elizabeth Grimm Arsenault, "Did Bin Laden's Death Help the Islamic State?" *Washington Post*, May 2, 2018, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2018/05/02/did-bin-ladens-death-help-the-islamic-state/>.

⁴⁶ Bill Roggio, "Full Statement of Mullah Mansour Accepting Al Qaeda's Oath of Allegiance," *FDD's Long War Journal*, Aug. 14, 2015, <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2015/08/full-statement-of-mullah-mansour-accepting-al-qaedas-oath-of-allegiance.php>.

⁴⁷ Thomas Joscelyn, "Ayman Al Zawahiri Swears Allegiance to the Taliban's New Leader," *FDD's Long War Journal*, June 11, 2016, <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2016/06/ayman-al-zawahiri-swears-allegiance-to-the-talibans-new-leader.php>.

The Taliban has also undertaken some rhetorical maneuvers to distance itself from al-Qaeda publicly. Most notably, the Taliban's current leader pledged that the group will not allow Afghanistan to be used for attacks on other countries.⁴⁸

While proponents of negotiations are encouraged by the move, al-Qaeda is probably relatively untroubled by such declarations. It does not and never has felt compelled to consult the Taliban about its operations outside of Afghanistan: It is beyond the scope of their alliance. Moreover, the Taliban's rhetorical steps have been uneven and contradictory; it has also issued statements in recent years seemingly touting ties with al-Qaeda.⁴⁹

With the obvious exception of the rupture with the Islamic State, al-Qaeda's other alliances have also proven resilient. Its affiliates remained loyal despite efforts by the Islamic State to entice them. Al-Qaeda has also sustained a web of relationships with other militant groups, such as the Pakistani Taliban and Lashkar-e-Jhangvi, in Afghanistan and Pakistan that have allowed it to survive the past 17 years.

Implications for Negotiations

⁴⁸ Abdulqahar Balkhi, "Message of Felicitation of the Esteemed Amir-Ul-Momineen, Shiekh-Ul-Hadith Hibatullah Akhundzada, (May Allah Protect Him), on the Occasion of Eid-Ul-Adha – Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan," Aug. 30, 2017, <https://alemarah-english.com/?p=19352>.

⁴⁹ Thomas Joscelyn and Bill Roggio, "Taliban Rejects Peace Talks, Emphasizes Alliance with Al Qaeda in New Video," *FDD's Long War Journal*, Dec. 9, 2016, <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2016/12/taliban-rejects-peace-talks-emphasizes-alliance-with-al-qaeda-in-new-video.php>.

There is renewed hope for negotiations since President Donald Trump announced a willingness to engage in direct talks with the Taliban.⁵⁰ However, it is hard to imagine the United States being satisfied with a negotiated settlement that does not include the Taliban abdicating al-Qaeda. How much of a stumbling block does this pose?

In my experience, officials working on Afghanistan tend to be more optimistic about the prospects of persuading the Taliban to sever ties with al-Qaeda than those working on counter-terrorism. While the cost-benefit analysis offered above seemingly favors the interpretation of former, history is with the latter.

Determining the Taliban's view is difficult because proponents of negotiations within the Taliban are likely the same individuals who would like to break ties with al-Qaeda anyway, so their views on the topic may not represent important factions within the Taliban. Conversely, at least some of those within the Taliban who oppose negotiations would probably also reject renouncing al-Qaeda. In other words, Taliban leadership will have to strike a difficult, perhaps impossible, balance between these two positions.⁵¹

At the same time, Taliban leaders have to be vigilant to avoid fragmentation; a major hurdle to serious negotiations and an eventual political settlement.⁵² Though the Taliban has shown remarkable unity to date, Mullah Omar's successors do not enjoy the same levels of loyalty and deference from Taliban members as he did. The Taliban lost power

⁵⁰ Mujib Mashal and Eric Schmitt, "White House Orders Direct Taliban Talks to Jump-Start Afghan Negotiations" *New York Times*, July 15, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/15/world/asia/afghanistan-taliban-direct-negotiations.html>.

⁵¹ Michael Semple, "Top Priorities for New Afghan Taliban Chief," *CNN*, May 25, 2016, <https://www.cnn.com/2016/05/24/opinions/challenges-for-next-taliban-leader/index.html>.

⁵² Theo Farrell and Michael Semple, "Making Peace with the Taliban," *Survival* 57, no. 6 (2015), <https://doi.org/10.1080/00396338.2015.1116157>.

because its revered founding leader refused to relinquish al-Qaeda. While the insurgency in Afghanistan is certainly not about protecting al-Qaeda, reversing Mullah Omar's 2001 position will not be a small feat for any Taliban leader, especially one whose grasp on the various factions within the organization is not fully secure.

One British official recently shared his view with me that the Taliban is holding on to severing ties with al-Qaeda as a bargaining chip, which it expects to exchange only for a major concession from the United States. If this is correct, the key question becomes: What is Washington is willing concede?

Unfortunately, America's inability to drive a wedge between al-Qaeda and the Taliban is not an anomaly. It is indicative of a larger failure to prevent or disrupt alliances between militant groups, despite the centrality of such relationships in the threat to the United States since 2001. In the case of al-Qaeda and the Taliban, this failure has been particularly costly.

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3. The Long Aftermath of 9/11: How Terrorism Doesn't End

Martha Crenshaw

When American leaders declared a global war on terror in 2001, they warned that victory was distant and elusive. But it is doubtful that any of them foresaw that 17 years later, American and allied troops would still be in Afghanistan facing a resurgent Taliban in the longest war in American history. Nor is it likely that they expected that American counterterrorism operations would be underway in 76 countries by 2017, or that through fiscal year 2018 the cost of the war on terror would be \$5.6 trillion.⁵³ Certainly no one would have thought that in 2014 an “Islamic State” would conquer sizable territory in Syria and Iraq and institute a caliphate governed by its own intolerant version of Islamic law. Indeed, it is clear that jihadist terrorism is lasting much longer than previous waves or cycles of terrorism.⁵⁴

Although the 9/11 attacks precipitated the “Global War on Terror,” the jihadist trend had started long before. Its origins lie in the 1980s resistance to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and Abdullah Azzam’s famous appeal to Sunni Muslims worldwide to join in jihad to expel the infidel occupiers. The organization behind the 9/11 attacks and the original target of the war on terrorism was al-Qaeda. Legally, the justification for

⁵³For figures on these costs, see Brown University Watson Institute Costs of War Project, <https://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/>.

⁵⁴ David Rapoport originated the idea of “waves” of terrorism. See his article “The Fourth Wave: September 11 in the History of Terrorism,” *Current History*, 100 (December 2001), <http://www.currenthistory.com/Article.php?ID=226>.

American military action in the war on terror is the threat from al-Qaeda. But al-Qaeda is no longer the unitary actor it was on 9/11, and it also has a major challenger for overall jihadist primacy in its former partner, the self-proclaimed Islamic State. Each has affiliates and followers around the world.⁵⁵ The threat has thus been dispersed. There is no single monolithic jihadist adversary. Yet it is the fragmented and shifting character of jihadism that makes it so persistent and so hard to combat.

Relationships among the different actors behind global jihadism are fluid and variable. These actors include a bewildering variety of individuals acting on inspiration, social networks, underground conspiracies, foreign fighters, civil war rebels, dissident splinter factions, franchise operations, loose inter-group alliances, and organizational mergers.⁵⁶ Their connections flow easily across national borders. Groups constantly align and realign themselves as friends or rivals as they change their strategic expectations about the future of the conflict in which they are involved. They are often embedded in local struggles and compete or cooperate with nationalists or separatists. Jihadists may be united in an overall belief that violence is both necessary and justified to bring about the liberation of Muslim lands from foreign oppression and restore a just order founded on original principles of Islam. But they are divided along lines of what is permissible in the

⁵⁵ Barak Mendelsohn, *The Al-Qaeda Franchise: The Expansion of al-Qaeda and its Consequences* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016); Camille Tawil, *Brothers in Arms: The Story of Al-Qa'ida and the Arab Jihadists* (London: Saqi Books, 2010; translated from the 2007 Arabic edition).

⁵⁶ See the Stanford University Center for International Security and Cooperation Mapping Militants Project, mappingmilitants.stanford.edu. The website has detailed profiles of the militant groups mentioned in this analysis as well as diagrams of their relationships. The sources for the profiles are fully cited. For the most recent profile updates email crenshaw@stanford.edu. See also Martha Crenshaw, "Transnational Jihadism & Civil Wars," *Daedalus*, 146, no. 4 (Fall 2017), https://doi.org/10.1162/DAED_a_00459.

struggle, the appropriate targets, the best tactics and timing, and where to fight. Is the most dangerous opponent the local government — the “near enemy” — or the United States and its Western allies — the “far enemy”? Is it permissible to target fellow Muslims, especially Sunnis? Should civilians be attacked? How important is unity among jihadist groups?

These complicated and often obscure interactions among jihadist militants make it hard for governments or international institutions to understand the adversary or predict what will happen. Even with the best intelligence, governments operate under conditions of high uncertainty. Control of outcomes is impossible. Interventions to overthrow authoritarian governments, for example, result in the emergence of multiple contenders for power, among them diehard jihadists who are likely to gain ascendancy over other less experienced and less well-armed groups. The consequences of counterterrorist measures are often unexpected, unintended, and even counterproductive. Actions intended to defeat or undermine a single organization have “ricochet” effects on other groups, often upsetting the balance of power among them. Sometimes government repression stimulates cooperation that strengthens the jihadist movement. But governments most often seek to sow dissension in the ranks — causing splintering that leads to more violence and escalation of the conflict. Offers to negotiate might attract some relatively moderate groups but provoke the more extreme to heightened violence. Even if a group is defeated within the boundaries of one state, it may simply be displaced to a weaker neighbor, or the struggle can be globalized if losing civil war rebels turn to transnational terrorism.

The United States, Al Qaeda, and the Islamic State in Syria

There are numerous examples of how interactions among militant groups have impeded the effectiveness of counterterrorism efforts. Consider American policy toward al-Nusra Front and the Islamic State in Syria.⁵⁷ Al-Nusra was founded as an outpost of the Islamic State of Iraq, then nominally a branch of al-Qaeda central. Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State of Iraq recognized the Syrian civil war as a golden opportunity for jihadist expansion. Although the mainstream Syrian resistance to the Assad regime was ambivalent toward any group linked to al-Qaeda, its presence in the opposition in effect tainted the whole enterprise. At the least, it gave Assad and later his Russian patrons an excuse for condemning all opposition as jihadist extremism. At most, it was the decisive factor that ensured Western support to the rebels would be limited. When Assad responded to the initial popular uprisings with indiscriminate brutality, jihadists gained credibility. Their fighting prowess also helped. As the conflict intensified al-Nusra's military contribution became increasingly important. Thus, when in December 2012 the United States declared al-Nusra a "foreign terrorist organization," even committed secular nationalists came to its defense.⁵⁸

⁵⁷ For a comprehensive account upon which many of the following observations are based see Charles Lister, *The Syrian Jihad: Al-Qaeda, the Islamic State, and the Evolution of an Insurgency* (London: Hurst Publishers, 2015); and "Hayat Tahrir al-Sham: to Unite or to Divide the Ranks?" in *How Al-Qaeda Survived Drones, Uprisings, and the Islamic State: The Nature of the Current Threat*, ed. Aaron Y. Zelin (Washington, DC: The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2017).

⁵⁸ Michael R. Gordon and Anne Barnard, "U.S. Places Militant Syrian Rebel Group on List of Terrorist Organizations," *New York Times*, Dec. 10, 2012, <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/12/11/world/middleeast/us-designates-syrian-al-nusra-front-as-terrorist-group.html>.

U.S. efforts to provide covert assistance exclusively to non-jihadist forces were frequently stymied or diverted due to lack of knowledge of what was going on and inability to monitor the activities of sponsored groups. Congress approved nonlethal assistance in 2013 and a Department of Defense train-and-equip mission for vetted Syrian opposition groups in 2014. The Pentagon's effort was abandoned in 2015, and the CIA initiative was cancelled in the summer of 2017 after a cost of about \$1 billion.⁵⁹ The programs suffered from diversions of supplies, defections, and deadly losses to al-Nusra attacks.

Shortly after these aid programs got under way and al-Nusra was declared the enemy, al-Qaeda and the Islamic State parted ways, with al-Nusra remaining loyal to al-Qaeda. Over time American aid to its nationalist competitors probably made al-Nusra more extreme, but the Islamic State was much more ruthless and ambitious. It also exhibited remarkable military capability in seizing Fallujah and Ramadi in early 2014 and then Mosul in June. With this surprise victory, the Islamic State declared the establishment of a caliphate in the occupied parts of Syria and Iraq, thus becoming a global rival to al-Qaeda. The United States and its allies began airstrikes against the Islamic State, justifying them in terms of defending Iraq as requested. An impressive "Global Coalition to Defeat ISIL" assembled.

Shortly thereafter, the United States began airstrikes that reportedly hit al-Nusra bases in Idlib province, although the attacks were justified by reference to a mysterious Khorasan Group, described as an external operations branch of al-Qaeda engaged in planning

⁵⁹ Mark Mazzetti, Adam Goldman, and Michael S. Schmidt, "Behind the Sudden Death of a \$1 Billion Secret C.I.A. War in Syria," *New York Times*, Aug. 2, 2017,

<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/02/world/middleeast/cia-syria-rebel-arm-trump.html>.

attacks against the West and thus a direct threat to U.S. security.⁶⁰ The attacks may have weakened al-Nusra but they also apparently served to deepen loyalty among Syrian jihadists, including the Ahrar al-Sham group, an ally of Turkey as of 2015.⁶¹ The offensive also deepened al-Nusra's hostility toward the American-supported resistance (at the time the Free Syrian Army and the Kurds). Consequently, al-Nusra embarked on a military campaign against selected U.S.-backed groups, even those that had prudently restricted their attacks to the Islamic State.⁶² Paradoxically, the fact that U.S. air strikes targeted al-Nusra generated resentment among the general body of Syrian resistance fighters. At the same time, predictably, the damage inflicted by U.S. strikes on Islamic State command and control systems advantaged its rivals, both Ahrar al-Sham and al-Nusra. The offensive against the Islamic State was also a boon to the regime and its allies.

After Russia intervened in the fall of 2015, shifting patterns of military escalation and negotiation offers split the resistance and further divided Ahrar al-Sham from al-Nusra, which was excluded from the political process initiated late in 2016 with a ceasefire offer

⁶⁰ Karen DeYoung, Liz Sly, and Missy Ryan, "US airstrikes target Al-Qaeda faction in Syria," *Washington Post*, Nov. 6, 2014, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2014/11/06/d860ef47-40fa-4f85-8753-0d9de0a6830b_story.html?utm_term=.1d09add13f39.

⁶¹ See the profile of Ahrar Al-Sham on the website Mapping Militant Organizations, mappingmilitants.stanford.edu.

⁶² DeYoung, et al., "US airstrikes"; and Lister, *The Syrian Jihad*.

guaranteed by Russia and Turkey.⁶³ The United States did not participate directly in these initiatives, which were led by Russia, Iran, the Assad regime, and Turkey, but it supported a negotiated solution to the conflict, preferably through U.N. sponsorship.

For al-Nusra, its battlefield strength was no longer the strongest card on the table if negotiations and politics replaced fighting.⁶⁴ Organizational twists and turns followed. In July 2016, al-Nusra claimed to have repudiated its affiliation with al-Qaeda and renamed itself the Front for the Conquest of the Levant. In January 2017, it rebranded itself again as the Liberation of the Levant organization (Hayat Tahrir al-Sham), proclaimed as an entirely new entity constituted by the merger of smaller groups and breakaway factions with the dominant al-Nusra. Soon it was engaged in a public dispute with al-Qaeda over the break, as Zawahiri criticized the former al-Nusra's assumption that separating from al-Qaeda would reduce American pressure. Indeed, the United States continued to define the new rebranded Hayat Tahrir al-Sham as an al-Nusra alias and thus still a branch of al-Qaeda, although experts are divided as to whether the split is phony or genuine.⁶⁵ It is

⁶³ As the organization evolved and the military situation grew more desperate, the al-Nusra group, in its new form as HTS, agreed to cooperate with Turkey, thus leading to more internal disputes and splits. See Akil Hussein, "Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham's Deal with Turkey Further Alienates It from Other Jihadists," The Royal Institute of International Affairs, Chatham House, (November 2017), <https://syria.chathamhouse.org/research/hayat-tahrir-al-shams-deal-with-turkey-further-alienates-it-from-other-jihadists>.

⁶⁴ For an account of the evolution of al-Nusra, see the profile on the website Mapping Militant Organizations, mappingmilitants.stanford.edu. On its transformation into HTS, see also Tore Refslund Hamming and Pieter Van Ostaeyen, "The True Story of al-Qaeda's Demise and Resurgence in Syria," *Lawfare*, April 8, 2018, <https://www.lawfareblog.com/true-story-al-qaedas-demise-and-resurgence-syria>.

⁶⁵ Charles Lister, "How al-Qa`ida Lost Control of its Syrian Affiliate: The Inside Story," *CTC Sentinel* 11, no. 2 (February 2018), <https://ctc.usma.edu/al-qaida-lost-control-syrian-affiliate-inside-story/>.

hard to escape the conclusion that American decision-makers failed to understand why al-Nusra was valuable to the non-jihadist resistance, how the group's leaders might be ambivalent about the affiliation with al-Qaeda, or when tactical alliances could be sustained across ideological lines.

At the same time, the Islamic State was steadily disintegrating under military assault in Iraq and Syria. By the fall of 2017 it had lost almost all the territory it once held, although it was still capable of mounting terrorist attacks within Syria, controlling a small pocket of territory, and maintaining an estimated 20,000 to 30,000 fighters in Syria and Iraq as well as external branches, such as those in North Africa, Egypt, and Afghanistan. An unknown number of the many foreign fighters recruited to ISIL also relocated outside Syria and Iraq. The decline of the Islamic State advantaged other Islamists such as Hayat Tahrir al-Sham/al-Nusra (now concentrated in Idlib province, the last holdout of the armed opposition to Assad) and Ahrar al-Sham (now part of a Turkish-organized coalition of resistance groups). The erosion of the Islamic State also served the interests of the Syrian regime and its Iranian and Russian supporters, and by early 2018 the United States had admitted that the government and its allies were winning.

The Frustrations of Counterterrorism in North Africa and the Sahel

Counterterrorism in Africa has proved frustrating for the United States as well as others concerned with regional stability, not only because of difficulties in dealing with partner governments but also because of the complexity and volatility of the jihadist universe. In August 2018, the U.S. military announced plans to draw down its forces in Africa, where special operations forces have been deployed to aid local governments in combatting jihadist terrorists and insurgents in order to prevent their becoming a direct threat to U.S.

security. According to *The New York Times*, roughly 1,200 U.S. special operations troops are on missions in Africa, out of 7,300 worldwide.⁶⁶ The initiative began at much lower levels when a Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership led by Washington was first established in 2005.

The policy change followed the decision to focus on threats from states, rather than non-state terrorists. In announcing a new national security strategy in January 2018, Secretary of Defense Jim Mattis explained “We will continue to prosecute the campaign against terrorists, but great-power competition — not terrorism — is now the primary focus of U.S. national security.”⁶⁷ The shift also came in the wake of a deadly attack by the Islamic State of the Greater Sahara on American forces in Niger in the fall of 2017.

The history of jihadism in North Africa began well before 9/11. A network of Islamist and jihadist groups evolved from thwarted democratic participation and subsequent civil war in Algeria in the 1990s to cross-border expansion into the Sahel region, particularly into Mali.⁶⁸ The center is al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, or AQIM, which is loyal to al-Qaeda

⁶⁶ Helene Cooper and Eric Schmitt, “U.S. Prepares to Reduce Troops and Shed Missions in Africa,” *New York Times*, Aug. 1, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/08/01/world/africa/us-withdraw-troops-africa.html>.

⁶⁷ Speech at Johns Hopkins University’s Paul H. Nitze School of Advanced International Studies quoted in Dan Lamothe, “Mattis Unveils new Strategy Focused on Russia and China, Takes Congress to Task for Budget Impasse,” *Washington Post*, Jan. 19, 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/checkpoint/wp/2018/01/19/mattis-calls-for-urgent-change-to-counter-russia-and-china-in-new-pentagon-strategy/?utm_term=.bd234c8ccoe5.

⁶⁸ For an overview see Christopher S. Chivvis and Andrew Liepman, *North Africa’s Menace: AQIM’s Evolution and the U.S. Policy Response* (Santa Monica: Rand, 2013) and Marc Mémier, “AQMI et Al-Mourabitoun: le djihad sahélien réuniifié?” *Etudes de l’Ifri*, 2017, http://base.afrique-gouvernance.net/docs/memier_aqmi_et_al-mourabitoun_fr_2017.compressed.pdf. See also Sergei Boeke, “Al

central. The much smaller Islamic State unit developed from a splinter of AQIM. Like al-Nusra in Syria, AQIM has rebranded itself as a more inclusive organization. Indeed, both groups appear to be trying to absorb themselves into larger more heterogeneous entities that are more acceptable to local populations. It is hard to know whether these structural adaptations are opportunistic attempts to disguise and conceal intentions and evade retaliation or whether they represent genuine ideological moderation and accommodation to circumstances.

AQIM started as a local Algerian rebel organization, although it was tied to global jihadism through the participation of returned Afghan war veterans. Its primary aim was to overthrow the Algerian government.⁶⁹ In 2006, it formally signed on as an al-Qaeda franchise, owing in part to its defeat by the Algerian state through a combination of repression and “national reconciliation” initiatives. In addition, the 2003 American invasion of Iraq had inspired a new generation of volunteers for the jihadist cause.

By 2011 a powerful AQIM faction in the south of Algeria, its aspirations blocked at home but enriched by lucrative smuggling and kidnapping operations, moved across the border into Mali and formed alliances with dissatisfied local separatists in the north.⁷⁰ It remains

Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb: Terrorism, insurgency, or organized crime?” *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 27, no. 5 (2016), <https://doi.org/10.1080/09592318.2016.1208280>.

⁶⁹ An analysis of the violent competition among the rebel groups in the Algerian civil war leading up to the 2006 merger is found in Mohammed M. Hafez, “Fratricidal Rebels: Ideological Extremity and Warring Factionalism in Civil Wars,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 29, no. 6 (2017), <https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2017.1389726>.

⁷⁰ See Chivvis and Liepman, *North Africa’s Menace*; and Mémier, “AQMI et Al-Mourabitoun,.” See also Samuel L. Aronson, “AQIM’s Threat to Western Interests in the Sahel,” *CTC Sentinel* 7, no. 4 (April 2014), <https://ctc.usma.edu/aqims-threat-to-western-interests-in-the-sahel/>.

unclear as to whether the southern faction broke off from the parent organization or acted as a recalcitrant subordinate, especially since the two later reunited. The shift to Mali was aided by the spillover of the Libyan civil war, which erupted following the 2011 overthrow of Qaddafi by NATO forces. State collapse and disorder provided an abundance of weaponry and fighters and offered the prospect of safe haven. The weakness of the Malian state also facilitated the displacement. The situation became so dire that in January 2013, France intervened at Mali's request. A U.N. peacekeeping mission was also deployed.⁷¹ Once its authority was more or less re-established, Mali entered into peace negotiations with the non-jihadist separatist groups.

These twin military and political pressures stimulated complex organizational realignments in the jihadist network.⁷² The renegade southern faction that led the incursion into Mali rejoined AQIM in 2015. The move probably reflected vulnerability to both American and French air strikes as well as disappointment over the fact that Al Qaeda central had not awarded the official recognition that the southern branch had sought. The reunification was also a response to the conclusion of a peace agreement in

⁷¹ See David J. Francis, "The regional impact of the armed conflict and French intervention in Mali," Norwegian Peacebuilding Resource Centre Report (April 2013), http://www.operationspaix.net/DATA/DOCUMENT/7911~v~The_regional_impact_of_the_armed_conflict_and_French_intervention_in_Mali.pdf.

⁷² For a theoretical account of how AQIM has survived through fragmentation, also well-informed by primary sources, see Adib Bencherif, "From Resilience to Fragmentation: Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb and Jihadist Group Modularity," *Terrorism and Political Violence* (2017), <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/09546553.2017.1351956>.

Mali that excluded jihadists.⁷³ Moreover, jihadists could maintain fighting capacity by retreating into the chaos of Libya. The organizational reintegration process was marked by a series of terrorist attacks on restaurants, hotels, and beaches frequented by foreigners and tourists. Targets were located in Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Ivory Coast. Tellingly, an attack on the Radisson Blu Hotel in Bamako in November 2015 was timed to coincide with the meeting of the official committee responsible for implementing the peace accord from which jihadists were excluded.

AQIM was now definitively a pan-Sahel problem, and in February 2016 the five Sahel countries formed a regional force to combat terrorism (Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso, Chad, and Mauritania).⁷⁴ Further jihadist reorganization followed. In March 2017, a video announced the establishment of a supposedly new organization with an anodyne name, the Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims (acronym JNIM). It was supposedly led not by AQIM, the major player, but by the former leader of the Ansar Dine group, an AQIM ally composed largely of Tuareg separatists from Mali. Al-Qaeda officially approved the new cooperative venture. In September 2018 JNIM became the latest addition to the American FTO roster.⁷⁵ Its immediate predecessor, designated in May, was the rival Islamic State in the Greater Sahara.

⁷³ See commentary by the International Crisis Group, “The Sahel: Mali’s Crumbling Peace Process and the Spreading Jihadist Threat,” March 1, 2017, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/west-africa/mali/sahel-malis-crumbling-peace-process-and-spreading-jihadist-threat>.

⁷⁴ On the difficulties faced by the task force see, “Finding the Right Role for the G5 Sahel Joint Force,” International Crisis Group Report No. 258, Dec. 12, 2017, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/west-africa/burkina-faso/258-force-du-g5-sahel-trouver-sa-place-dans-lemboutillage-securitaire>.

⁷⁵ “State Department Terrorist Designation of Jama’at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM),” State Department, Sept. 5, 2018, <https://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2018/09/285705.htm>.

The Saharan Islamic State branch had split from AQIM in spring 2015. The main Islamic State organization had already established a major base in Libya, attracting the defection of senior leaders from local Al Qaeda linked groups. After a protracted struggle, the Government of National Accord significantly assisted by United States air support drove the Islamic State out of its stronghold in Sirte in late 2016. The expulsion reduced the Islamic State presence in Libya but in turn may have allowed more space for AQIM. In March 2018, the first U.S. attack on Al Qaeda targets in Libya killed yet another high-ranking commander, while drone strikes continued to target the Islamic State.⁷⁶

Conclusion

The convoluted inter-organizational dynamics that help perpetuate jihadist militancy are likely to persist, even as the United States withdraws from its foreign commitments. The question is the extent to which this possibly diluted but still potent form of jihadism threatens American and international security. Certainly, al-Qaeda, the Islamic State, and their friends and affiliates are a source of serious instability in states lacking both a robust security apparatus and political legitimacy. It is not outside the realm of possibility

⁷⁶ Eric Schmitt, "Under Trump, U.S. Launched 8 Airstrikes Against ISIS in Libya. It Disclosed 4," *New York Times*, March 8, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/08/world/africa/us-airstrikes-isis-libya.html>. Also Declan Walsh and Eric Schmitt, "U.S. Strikes Qaeda Target in Southern Libya, Expanding Shadow War There," *New York Times*, March 25, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/25/world/middleeast/us-bombs-qaeda-libya.html>.

that jihadist groups could prevail in present or future civil wars. This threat would likely spark outside military intervention, yet again. The jihadists' capacity for directing complex mass-casualty terrorist attacks outside their base areas (as opposed to inspiring sporadic amateur "homegrown" terrorism) has not recently been demonstrated, but it could be revived if groups possess secure bases and are persuaded by the old al-Qaeda argument that the far enemy is the obstacle to the defense of Muslims worldwide.

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4. With Us and Against Us: Understanding the Mixed Record of U.S. Partners on Counter- Terrorism Cooperation Since 9/11

Stephen Tankel

Nine days after the 9/11 attacks, the anniversary of which we mark today, President George W. Bush gave an address in front of the U.S. Congress. He declared, “This is the world’s fight. This is civilization’s fight. This is the fight of all who believe in progress and pluralism, tolerance and freedom. We ask every nation to join us.”⁷⁷ It was a clarion call for cooperation, but one that also came with an explicit threat. In the same address, Bush famously drew a line in the sand, saying, “Either you are with us or you are with the terrorists.”

No government, other than the Taliban-led regime in Afghanistan, seriously entertained siding with al-Qaeda. Yet aligning with America in the “War on Terror” often has not translated to unity of action and purpose, or even effective cooperation.

Most partner nations, especially in regions where the terrorists who threaten America are most concentrated, both help and hinder U.S. counter-terrorism efforts. Put another way, they are both with *and* against the United States. Yet, working with these countries is, for the most part, unavoidable. As the 9/11 Commission Report observed, “Practically every

⁷⁷ “Transcript of President Bush’s Address to a Joint Session of Congress on Thursday Night, September 20, 2001,” CNN, Sept. 21, 2001, <http://edition.cnn.com/2001/US/09/20/gen.bush.transcript/>.

aspect of U.S. counterterrorism strategy relies on international cooperation.”⁷⁸ As interstate competition displaces terrorism as the primary U.S. national security priority, getting more out of partner nations will be critical if the United States is going to do more with less when it comes to counter-terrorism.

A core challenge for the United States is to consolidate cooperation where it is good, mitigate risks where it is bad, and get the most out of the space in between. This will require U.S. policymakers and practitioners to devote the same amount of attention and resources to understanding America’s partners as they do to understanding America’s enemies. In my most recent book, *With Us and Against Us: How America’s Partners Help and Hinder the War on Terror*, I analyze the factors that shape counter-terrorism cooperation between the United States and partner nations in the Middle East, South Asia, and Africa.⁷⁹

Combatting al-Qaeda, the Islamic State (ISIL), and affiliated and associated terrorist groups has required the United States to adapt longstanding relationships with some countries in the Middle East, South Asia, and Africa — and to forge new ones with others. If one considers the totality of U.S. counter-terrorism objectives writ large since 9/11, America has been asking for more over the past 17 years than it did before. The United States has also been seeking more from the countries in the aforementioned regions than ever before.

⁷⁸ National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, *The 9-11 Commission Report* (Washington, DC: Norton, 2004), 379.

⁷⁹ Stephen Tankel, *With Us and Against Us: How America’s Partners Help and Hinder the War on Terror* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018).

In many cases, the United States is seeking cooperation against terrorists who operate on its partner nations' territory. When it comes to these partnerships, the dynamics of traditional state-to-state alliances interact with the relations that exist between the partner nation and the terrorist group in question. Alliance dynamics include the nature of the U.S. bilateral relationship with the partner in question, and the instruments of statecraft it can bring to bear. State-to-terrorist relations, on the other hand, are a function of both how a state perceives the nature of a given terrorist threat and qualifies it relative to other threats, and how useful it believes the terrorist group to be.

The interplay of these two relationships helps to determine the level and type of counter-terrorism cooperation that exists between the United States and a partner nation in four different areas: partner-led counter-terrorism operations that target terrorists or curtail illegal activities that support them; tactical cooperation, which includes the provision of access, intelligence cooperation, and coordination on detainees; regional cooperation, such as through coalitions or diplomatic initiatives; and “countering violent extremism” programs designed to address radicalization and recruitment.

Managing Expectations

Because the United States cannot deploy combat troops to every country where terrorists operate, it works by, with, and through partner nations to take the fight to the enemy. Various factors influence whether a partner will expend effort and resources on a counter-terrorism campaign, including its capacity, strategic culture, and the popularity of the terrorists' cause. A partner's relationship with a terrorist group or infrastructure is the most critical factor.

Where the United States and its partner share the same threat perceptions and both treat a terrorist group as a belligerent, strong bilateral relations and the provision of security assistance can augment and improve the partner's counter-terrorism operations.

However, the United States has often been unable to keep its partners from adopting repressive counter-terrorism approaches that violate the rule of law and fuel terrorist recruitment.

In cases where a partner views a terrorist group as useful and nonthreatening, America's use of incentives or coercion can sometimes move the needle when it comes to these types of counter-terrorism operations. However, such tactics cannot entirely overcome the dynamics related to terrorist-state relations. And while it may seem like a stretch to use the term "partner" when talking about a state that has positive relations with a terrorist group, Pakistan and Yemen did become critical counter-terrorism partners following the 9/11 attacks.

The reasons why a partner does or does not conduct robust counter-terrorism operations targeting terrorist groups or infrastructure matter — or at least they should — when it comes to how the United States uses its instruments of statecraft. If resource shortages are a genuine problem for a state that is sincerely committed to conducting counter-terrorism operations, then capacity building might help it become a more effective partner. Conversely, if a state does not consider a terrorist group to be a threat, then pouring in aid is unlikely to make any difference unless its threat perception changes. This is even truer for states that consider a terrorist group to be useful in some way.

Traditional alliance dynamics and instruments of statecraft — such as foreign assistance — are most useful for optimizing counter-terrorism cooperation when it comes to access

for basing, troop presence, supply lines, over-flight, and drone strikes. These dynamics are also important for intelligence cooperation and coordination on detainees. Notably, these elements, which fall under the umbrella of tactical cooperation, are the most widespread. The United States cooperates on intelligence, coordinates on detainees, and seeks access from allies and partner nations around the world, regardless of whether terrorists operate on or near their territory.

Critically, the absence of shared threat perceptions does not preclude tactical cooperation. States may provide access or limited intelligence cooperation even in cases where their position toward a terrorist group or infrastructure makes domestic counter-terrorism efforts unlikely. Sometimes, pre-existing agreements regarding access or longstanding relationships between intelligence agencies help to facilitate ongoing cooperation. Providing access or intelligence cooperation also enables a partner to service its relationship with the United States (and perhaps keep assistance flowing) without acting against its core interests by conducting counter-terrorism operations, committing to regional efforts, or undertaking painful domestic reforms that it does not wish to pursue. Indeed, American officials are often reluctant to press partners in these areas lest they jeopardize access or intelligence cooperation.

Of course, stating that traditional alliance dynamics and instruments of statecraft are most useful for optimizing tactical cooperation does not mean that threat perceptions are moot. They still matter, more in some cases than others. If the United States and another country share common threat perceptions, this can enhance these aspects of tactical cooperation. Indeed, some cooperation is even possible in cases where alliance dynamics are weak or nonexistent. For example, the United States cooperated with Syria after 9/11 on rendition and limited intelligence sharing. Conversely, sharing a belligerent position

toward a terrorist group does not guarantee tactical cooperation. Algeria and the United States both prioritized counter-terrorism after 9/11, but the Algerian government was unwilling to provide access in large part because of its history of anti-colonialism. Similarly, for years after 9/11, Algerian intelligence officers treated their American colleagues more as counterintelligence threats than counter-terrorism partners.

Since 9/11, accomplishing U.S. counter-terrorism objectives has increasingly necessitated contributions from allies and partners to regional counter-terrorism missions, military coalitions, stabilization of conflict zones, and diplomatic initiatives to settle conflicts that enable terrorists to operate freely. A country's relationship with the United States can be a major determinant of whether and how it cooperates on regional issues. However, whether or not participants deliver often depends heavily on their threat perceptions and capabilities. States may "free ride" in cases where they perceive a threat but believe they can sit back and allow the United States or other countries to do the heavy lifting.

Partner nations also sometimes calibrate contributions to a regional initiative based on whether or not they believe robust participation will help or hinder their ability to compete with a regional rival. Take, for example, the anti-ISIL coalition: Many of the key regional players were more invested in toppling the Syrian regime or pursuing other agendas than they were in taking down the jihadist group. As ISIL has lost territory, competition among regional actors has fueled struggles over liberated areas and complicated attempts to build on military gains.

One of the many lessons the United States has learned since 9/11 is that it cannot kill its way out of the terrorism problem. Thus, it has attempted, often unsuccessfully, to counter radicalization and jihadist recruitment in countries with large Muslim

populations. These efforts fall under the umbrella of countering violent extremism (CVE). Some U.S. officials and counter-terrorism experts have argued for narrowing the scope of CVE initiatives to directly focus on keeping people at risk of executing or supporting terrorist violence from doing so. Others insist on the need for a more wide-ranging approach that includes CVE-relevant activities to address myriad societal risk factors, including poor governance, corruption, inadequate rule of law, economic underperformance, and underinvestment in education and infrastructure.

Experts and scholars are beginning to make progress in terms of how to assess, monitor, and evaluate CVE programs. Yet measuring a partner nation's cooperation on CVE has been and remains difficult for multiple reasons. To begin with, there is no standard set of methods for measurement. And, while data from the United States is hard to find, it is even harder to find data from foreign governments. Then there is the persistent disagreement over which factors contribute to radicalization or recruitment. Finally, it remains challenging to demonstrate conclusively why something — in this case an individual becoming radicalized or joining a terrorist group — does *not* occur. Nevertheless, it is possible to make two observations.

First, partner nations, at least ones in the Middle East, Africa, and South Asia, appear more willing to implement direct or CVE-specific initiatives than they are to embrace indirect or CVE-relevant reforms related to governance, rule of law, or other structural factors. Second, governments in these regions that implement CVE-specific programs often undercut their value by actively restricting space for civil society organizations, which most experts contend should play a crucial role in countering radicalization and recruitment. These governments increasingly are adopting overly broad definitions of terrorism and violent extremism in order to repress these organizations.

Know Your Enemies and Your Partners

America already had plenty of counter-terrorism instruments at its disposal on 9/11. In the past 17 years, it has expanded its toolkit substantially. The United States has improved its existing capabilities, especially in the areas of intelligence and surveillance, and unleashed new ones, such as the use of drones to launch missile strikes. Yet, despite these advances, counter-terrorism efforts cannot be conducted unilaterally if they are to be both successful and sustainable. This has always been true, and takes on added importance as the United States transitions from prioritizing counter-terrorism to concentrating on great-power competition.

Most partners simultaneously help and hinder the U.S. pursuit of its counter-terrorism objectives. Getting the most out of cooperation with other countries, knowing when to shrink or sever partnerships, and recognizing countries worthy of greater investment necessitates that policymakers have realistic expectations about what U.S. partners can or are willing to offer. It is critical to understand the security paradigm that drives a partner's decision-making, how relations with the terrorist groups that are the target of cooperation fit into that paradigm, and how U.S. policies influence the political and security challenges that a given partner faces.

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5. What Progress Has America Made after 17 Years of Global Counter-Terrorism Efforts?

Michael P. Dempsey

As we approach the 17th anniversary of the 9/11 attacks, it's an opportune moment to stand back and assess both the progress America has achieved in its counter-terrorism fight and the critical work that remains to be done. In examining the campaign's progress, I believe that it's worthwhile to look across several broad mission categories to determine whether America is proceeding along a path that will significantly reduce the terrorist threat, or whether it might be time to adjust key elements of the current approach.

Protecting the Homeland

As a starting point, in the years since 9/11 there has thankfully been no repetition of a centrally directed, large-scale terrorist attack inside the United States, which is a great accomplishment in and of itself, and a credit to the exceptional work of America's military, intelligence, and law enforcement services. To be sure, the homeland threat has not been entirely eliminated. In the past 17 years, more than 400 Americans and others living inside the United States have been charged with participating in terrorism-related activities, and more than 100 Americans have been killed in various attacks.⁸⁰ However,

⁸⁰ Peter Bergen, Albert Ford, Alyssa Sims, and David Sterman, "Terrorism in America After 9/11: Part I. Terrorism Cases: 2001-Today," New America, accessed September 9, 2018, <https://www.newamerica.org/in-depth/terrorism-in-america/part-i-overview-terrorism-cases-2001-today/>.

the success in forestalling a second major externally directed attack within the homeland is, in my view, a major achievement.

In the nearly two decades since 9/11, America's homeland defense capabilities have improved by an order of magnitude. Much of this progress is attributable to an increased focus by government agencies on the terrorism threat, as well as a cultural shift within a few key agencies, especially the FBI,⁸¹ to emphasize attack prevention rather than prosecution after the fact.⁸² There also has been an exponential increase in collaboration between federal law enforcement, intelligence agencies, and their local partners, especially in sharing new identification and collection technologies, travel information, and threat reporting.

So, although there is still critical work to do, especially in trying to prevent lone wolf, jihadist-inspired attacks and in balancing the government's need to collect potentially sensitive information with the privacy rights of every American citizen, it's clear that the multi-year effort to harden the homeland from major terrorist attacks has made significant progress.

⁸¹ Robert S. Mueller, III, "FBI Headquarters Press Availability on the FBI's Reorganization: Re-Engineering the FBI for Today's World," FBI, May 29, 2002, <https://www.fbi.gov/news/speeches/fbi-headquarters-press-availability-on-the-fbis-reorganization-re-engineering-the-fbi-for-todays-world>.

⁸² "FBI Focus to Shift to Terrorism Prevention," CNN, May 29, 2002, <http://edition.cnn.com/2002/US/05/29/fbi.direction/>.

Seizing the Battlefield Initiative

Only a few years ago, al-Qaeda's Syrian affiliate held considerable territory in northwestern Syria,⁸³ and the group's affiliates in both Yemen and Somalia held large swaths of terrain in both countries. The Islamic State, meanwhile, was on the march in Syria and then Iraq, capturing Mosul, threatening Erbil, and even triggering concerns in the West about an eventual assault on Baghdad.⁸⁴ That situation has, thankfully, been largely reversed, and the American military, along with its coalition partners, has dealt a series of major battlefield blows to both al-Qaeda and the Islamic State.

In the fight against al-Qaeda, for example, the United States has succeeded in eliminating several key leaders, including Osama bin Laden, Anwar al-Awlaki, Abu Yaha al-Libi (its second in command), and reportedly last month, Ibrahim al-Asiri, the group's infamous chief bomb maker. Asiri's removal is especially significant because of his unique technical skills and creativity, and his central involvement in operations ranging from the attempted "underwear bombing" aboard an airliner flying from Amsterdam to Detroit in 2009, to his reported efforts to devise increasingly complex bombs and embed them inside electronic equipment capable of defeating airline detection systems.⁸⁵

⁸³ Charles Lister, "Al Qaeda Is About to Establish an Emirate in Northern Syria," *Foreign Policy*, May 4, 2016, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2016/05/04/al-qaeda-is-about-to-establish-an-emirate-in-northern-syria/>.

⁸⁴ Cameron Glenn, "Timeline: The Rise, Spread and Fall of the Islamic State," Wilson Center, June 1, 2018, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/timeline-the-rise-spread-and-fall-the-islamic-state>.

⁸⁵ Ryan Pickrell, "Al Qaeda Terrorist Considered 'probably the Most Sophisticated Terrorist Bomb-Maker on the Planet' Was Killed by US Drone Strike, US Officials Confirm," *Business Insider*, Aug. 20, 2018, <https://www.businessinsider.com/top-al-qaeda-bomb-maker-ibrahim-al-asiri-killed-in-us-drone-strike-2018-8>.

U.S. and coalition efforts to contain and roll back al-Qaeda's franchises and allies have also made significant gains. In Somalia, for example, al-Shabab has suffered several setbacks, including losing the important port cities of Kismayo and Baware to the combined military operations of African Union and Somali security forces, backed by U.S. airstrikes.⁸⁶ Illustrative of America's heavy engagement in Somalia, the U.S. military has already reportedly conducted nearly two dozen airstrikes against Al Shabab in 2018, which is on pace to meet or exceed last year's total.⁸⁷

Moreover, in Yemen, al-Qaeda now controls only about half of the territory it controlled at its peak in 2015. In April 2016, the group lost the important port city of Mukalla to Yemeni government forces assisted by troops from the United Arab Emirates.⁸⁸

Meanwhile, in the fight against the self-professed Islamic State, the United States and its allies have made great strides across a broad front. In Iraq and Syria, the U.S.-led coalition has virtually eliminated the Islamic State's physical caliphate, dramatically reduced its financial resources, and killed thousands of the group's fighters, as well as many of its key leaders. The coalition has also reduced to a trickle the flow of foreign fighters entering the

⁸⁶ "Who Are Somalia's Al-Shabab?," *BBC News*, Dec. 22, 2017, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-15336689>.

⁸⁷ Bill Roggio and Alexandra Gutowski, "US Military on Track to Match Record 2017 for Airstrikes in Somalia," *FDD's Long War Journal*, Aug. 29, 2018, <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2018/08/shabaab-strike-mogadishu.php>.

⁸⁸ "Yemeni Forces Retake City from Al-Qaeda," *BBC News*, Apr. 25, 2016, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-36128614>.

Islamic State's ranks in Iraq and Syria and, with the seizure of Mosul and Raqqa, significantly curtailed the group's social media outreach.⁸⁹

At the same time, the United States and its allies have inflicted considerable pain on the Islamic State's overseas affiliates, particularly its branches in Afghanistan (where the affiliate's senior leader was killed last month)⁹⁰ Libya, Mali, and Yemen.

Restricting the Terrorists' Ability to Adapt and Regroup

Even as America and its allies have seized the battlefield momentum, there are worrisome signs that al-Qaeda and the Islamic State are rebuilding, shifting tactics, and potentially preparing for a resurgence.

Although al-Qaeda has suffered military setbacks, lost territory, and maintained a lower profile in recent years, terrorism experts note that the group is rebuilding quietly and is methodically bolstering its various branches. These experts note that al-Qaeda has deliberately avoided staging high profile attacks in the West so that the Islamic State would receive most of America's military attention, allowing al-Qaeda to operate below the radar, especially in Syria, while fortifying its strength.

⁸⁹ Alex Hollings, "Mattis, Dunford Weigh in on 'annihilating' ISIS and How Far We've Already Come," *NEWSREP*, May 23, 2017, <https://thenewsrep.com/81860/mattis-dunford-weigh-in-on-annihilating-isis-and-how-far-weve-already-come/>.

⁹⁰ Ryan Browne and Eli Watkins, "US Forces Confirm Death of ISIS Leader in Afghanistan," *CNN*, Sept. 3, 2018, <https://www.cnn.com/2018/09/02/politics/isis-leader-killed-afghanistan>.

Indeed, the latest estimates are that al-Qaeda still maintains an expansive global network of affiliates, and has managed to secure the loyalty of well over 10,000 followers in Syria alone (with most concentrated in Idlib Province, which is now under siege by Russian and Syrian state forces). The group reportedly also retains several thousand supporters in both Yemen and Somalia. And while my experience suggests that personnel estimates for groups such as al-Qaeda and the Islamic State are notoriously unreliable, the broad trends do highlight a worrisome fact — that even in the face of crippling setbacks, these groups are still able to attract and retain followers.⁹¹

As for the Islamic State, while it no longer controls significant territory in Iraq and Syria, it maintains a small presence in the Middle Euphrates River Valley in Syria, and is slowly expanding its presence in Diyala, Salah ad-Din, and Kirkuk in Iraq.⁹² Meanwhile in Libya, the Islamic State has lost control of Sirte and oil rich areas of the country, but in recent months has established cells around Tripoli and has carved out a significant presence in southern Libya.

The Islamic State has also been more active operationally in recent months, launching a series of attacks across the globe that have killed hundreds and wounded many hundreds more. These attacks have occurred in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, the Sinai, and in Syria. It's

⁹¹ Bruce Hoffman, "Al-Qaeda's Resurrection," Council on Foreign Relations, Mar. 6, 2018,

<https://www.cfr.org/expert-brief/al-qaedas-resurrection>.

⁹² Hassan Hassan, "ISIS Is Ready for a Resurgence," *Atlantic*, Aug. 26, 2018,

<https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2018/08/baghdadi-recording-iraq-syria-terrorism/568471/>.

also noteworthy that even after the fall of the caliphate, not one Islamic State branch has renounced their pledge of fealty to the group.⁹³

Somewhat surprisingly, the United Nations reports that many of the foreign fighters that flocked to the Islamic State's banners in Iraq and Syria in recent years have largely remained there even after the caliphate's fall, with recent data suggesting a lower than anticipated return of foreign fighters to their countries of origin.⁹⁴ This lack of movement has, on the one hand, provided the Islamic State with residual strength in Iraq and Syria. On the other hand, a potential flood of battle-hardened Islamic State fighters returning to Western Europe and North America has been a key worry of Western intelligence services for most of the past decade, so this latest information that they are staying put is actually welcome news.

It's also evident that the Islamic State has altered its tactical approach over the past several months, avoiding direct, set-piece engagements with U.S. and allied forces, and instead resorting to isolated suicide attacks and hit-and-run operations. This allows the group to avoid casualties while also remaining militarily relevant.⁹⁵

⁹³ Michael Dempsey, "The Islamic State Threat Hasn't Gone Away," *Axios*, July 31, 2018, <https://www.axios.com/the-islamic-state-threat-hasnt-gone-away-f57adb1b-6fe4-4f4d-8bd4-589be98f9eba.html>.

⁹⁴ Richard Hall, "UN Says 30,000 ISIS Fighters Remain in Iraq and Syria," *National*, Aug. 14, 2018, <https://www.thenational.ae/world/mena/un-says-30-000-isis-fighters-remain-in-iraq-and-syria-1.759695>. See also "Twenty-second report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team submitted pursuant to resolution 2368 (2017) concerning ISIL (Da'esh), Al-Qaida and associated individuals and entities," United Nations, July 27, 2018, <http://undocs.org/S/2018/705>.

⁹⁵ Michael P. Dempsey, "How ISIS' Strategy Is Evolving," *Foreign Affairs*, Jan. 18, 2018, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/syria/2018-01-18/how-isis-strategy-evolving>.

On balance, then, it's fair to say that while the United States has clearly regained the battlefield initiative from both al-Qaeda and the Islamic State, these groups remain wily, adaptive, and lethal, and neither shows any interest in ceding the field anytime soon.

Draining the Swamp

The question of whether America is removing terrorists from the battlefield faster than they are being replaced has formed the backdrop to every counter-terrorism policy discussion since 9/11, and remains just as relevant today as it was 17 years ago.

Unfortunately, there are reasons to worry about current trends.

First, the underlying conditions that have fueled the appeal of extremism for the past few decades — fear within vulnerable Sunni communities about the rise of Shia political power, the accompanying proxy conflict between Saudi Arabia and Iran, the collapse of local governing authority in countries from Afghanistan to Yemen, a lack of political space for young people and an accompanying rise in authoritarianism in key countries such as Egypt, and chronically high youth unemployment rates (approaching 30 percent) throughout the Middle East⁹⁶ — show no signs of improvement. In fact, in most instances, the trends are decidedly negative. These conditions are the kindling that will keep the extremist fire burning indefinitely.

⁹⁶ Suparna Dutt D'Cunha, "Plagued By A 30% Unemployment Rate, Arabian Youth Turn To Startups For A Lifeline," *Forbes*, May 11, 2017, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/suparnadutt/2017/05/11/can-startups-drive-new-job-growth-in-the-mena-region-where-youth-unemployment-rate-is-30/>.

A corollary challenge emanating from this chaos is a growing population-displacement and refugee crisis, which is severely straining governments from Turkey to Jordan, and which may over time increase the appeal of the extremists' message to segments of the displaced population that remain outside of a formal education process and have no viable employment opportunities. The West's response to this humanitarian crisis has thus far been largely disjointed and ineffective.

Reports about the lack of progress in rebuilding devastated Sunni communities in both Syria and Iraq are especially worrisome,⁹⁷ as a key element of the extremist recruiting pitch for years has been that they could offer better basic social services than the central government, and that only they could defend vulnerable Sunni communities. In my view, therefore, any effective long-term campaign to drain the swamp of potential al-Qaeda and Islamic State recruits will have to include programs to improve the quality of life and sense of security for communities devastated by the last several years of fighting. At the moment, that type of tailored assistance seems unlikely.

Avoiding Unforced Errors

Regardless of where one lands in the debate over whether the United States should have invaded Iraq in 2003, there is no doubt that the invasion gave rise to al-Qaeda in Iraq the following year and lit a match to a combustible region. Similarly, while there were many legitimate reasons to draw down U.S. forces from Iraq in 2011, there is also little doubt that the reduced U.S. footprint facilitated the sudden rise of the Islamic State, fueled of

⁹⁷ Alexandra Zavis, "Islamic State's Self-Styled Capital Is in Ruins and Its Population Scattered. Who Will Rebuild Raqqa?" *Los Angeles Times*, Dec. 15, 2017, <http://www.latimes.com/world/middleeast/la-fg-syria-rebuilding-raqqah-20171215-story.html>.

course by the onset of the so-called Arab Spring, the start of the Syrian civil war next door, and the unexpected collapse of the Iraqi military only three years later. And while there was certainly a case to be made for removing Libyan President Muammar Qaddafi in 2011, several of the follow-on effects were quite severe, including the creation of a safe haven for the Islamic State along the coast, and the spillover of the Libyan conflict into sub-Saharan Africa.

Thankfully, there have been noticeably fewer foreign policy actions over the past few years that have inadvertently complicated our counter-terrorism campaign on this scale, though there are some issues today that if not handled wisely could fall into the category of major unforced errors. For example, Western policymakers need to be extremely careful in their public rhetoric and actions to avoid creating the perception that the West's fight against Islamic terrorists is actually a war against all Muslims. Also, Western leaders need to think through the full range of issues involved in determining the final disposition of foreign fighters held in captivity. Some key allies, for example, are likely to be pressured by their political leaders to halt counter-terrorism cooperation with the United States if, as has been reported in the press, the White House decides to send a small number of foreign fighters currently held in Syria to Guantanamo.

There is also a growing risk of serious long-term reputational damage to America from its association with the type of incident that occurred last month in Yemen, where, as was widely reported, a busload of Yemeni children were killed by a Saudi-led coalition airstrike.⁹⁸ America's military support to the Saudi campaign in Yemen, which is mainly

⁹⁸ Salma Abdelaziz, Alla Eshchenko, and Joe Sterling, "Saudi-Led Coalition Admits 'mistakes' Made in Deadly Bus Attack in Yemen," *CNN*, Sept. 2, 2018, <https://www.cnn.com/2018/09/01/middleeast/saudi-coalition-yemen-attack/index.html>.

limited to aerial refueling and targeting training, is nonetheless widely criticized in the Middle East — as well as by prominent international observers — for exacerbating the country’s humanitarian nightmare. According to the United Nations, nearly 9 million Yemenis are now on the brink of starvation in what it describes as the world’s worst humanitarian crisis.⁹⁹ Therefore, America’s continuing link to the Saudi-led bombing campaign, whether fair or unfair, risks undercutting critical efforts to win hearts and minds in the global fight against extremism, and it would, in my view, behoove U.S. policymakers to redouble their efforts to help end this conflict.

A final potential unforced error is the grinding conflict in Afghanistan, which continues to require the commitment of more than 10,000 American troops at a cost of more than \$40 billion annually. In many ways, the conflict in Afghanistan is no longer central to the global counter-terrorism struggle, as al-Qaeda’s primary focus is in Syria and with its non-South Asian affiliates, and the Islamic State has at most a few thousand fighters in Afghanistan, located mainly in Nangarhar Province near the border with Pakistan. It’s also evident that the Taliban and the Islamic State hate each other, and press reports suggest that more Islamic State fighters have been killed by the Taliban than by Afghan security forces. The idea, therefore, of the Taliban taking over Kabul and allowing the Islamic State to establish a safe haven or al-Qaeda shifting the bulk of its fighters from Syria back to Afghanistan, seems highly unlikely. The remaining terrorists in Afghanistan are still a patchwork of groups focused primarily on local and regional grievances, thus far with no demonstrated ability or intent to operate internationally.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁹ “Yemen,” UN News, accessed Sept. 9, 2018, <https://news.un.org/en/focus/yemen>.

¹⁰⁰ Michael P. Dempsey, “No Longer a Haven for International Terrorists,” *New York Times*, Jan. 20, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/03/opinion/no-longer-a-haven-for-international-terrorists.html>.

So, while there are many legitimate non-terrorism related reasons to maintain a U.S. military footprint in Afghanistan, U.S. policymakers will need to carefully consider in the coming months whether the long-term terrorist threat there still merits the current commitment of U.S. troops and intelligence resources, or whether the U.S. would be better off redeploying some of these precious resources elsewhere.

Laying the Groundwork for Long-Term Success?

Along these lines, a final metric to examine is whether the current strategy for countering terrorism is sustainable over the long haul. While there is little doubt that that the United States military, law enforcement, and intelligence services are capable of carrying on this fight for the next few years, there are a few worrisome signs to consider. The cost of this fight is, by any measure, staggering. According to a recent report by the Stimson Center, the United States since 9/11 has on average spent approximately \$186 billion per year on counter-terrorism funding (and nearly \$3 trillion total) since 2002, an amount equal to about 15 percent of the government's total discretionary spending.¹⁰¹ That level of spending may become harder to sustain in the future given America's growing national debt, and highlights an urgent need to increase efficiencies, avoid unnecessary mission duplication, and enhance burden sharing with our allies in this fight. It also brings to mind a warning from physicist Ernest Rutherford who once wryly remarked that, "We haven't got the money, so we'll have to think."

Meanwhile, the tremendous monetary commitment does not capture the total cost of this conflict. In particular, it does not take into account the enormous time and attention U.S.

¹⁰¹ Michael Rainey, "What the War on Terror Has Cost Since 9/11," *Fiscal Times*, May 16, 2018,

<http://www.thefiscaltimes.com/2018/05/16/What-War-Terror-Has-Cost-911>.

policymakers have had to devote to this issue over several years, and the myriad ways it has shaped America's relationships with countries across the globe. In fact, as critics have noted, it's fair to question whether the current counter-terrorism emphasis not only influences U.S. foreign policy, but distorts it and subordinates in its pursuit other critical U.S. interests such as democracy and human rights promotion.¹⁰²

While America can certainly bear the cost of the global counter-terrorism campaign at the moment, U.S. policymakers would be wise to constantly question whether there are options for driving down costs, increasing efficiencies, and bolstering its coalition's contribution to this fight — particularly at a time when military competition with peer states such as China and Russia is on the rise.

Lessons Learned

America's counter-terrorism campaign has come a long way from the frantic and frightening days immediately after 9/11. And while there is considerable work left to do and some key adjustments to be made, we have certainly learned important lessons that that will help U.S. policymakers to formulate a more tailored and effective counter-terrorism strategy going forward.

We have learned, for example, about the enduring lethality and resiliency of al-Qaeda and the Islamic State, and the urgent requirement to deny them secure territory in which they can train fighters, plan attacks, raise revenue, and expand their online messaging efforts.

¹⁰² Robert Malley and Jon Finer, "The Long Shadow of 9/11," *Foreign Affairs*, June 14, 2018,

<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2018-06-14/long-shadow-911>.

We have learned about the enormous benefit of working closely with allies, especially from majority Muslim countries such as Jordan and the United Arab Emirates, who have deep expertise about the extremist threat and considerable ground truth to share. We have learned about the utility of empowering partners to spearhead offensive operations with U.S. military and intelligence backing. In this vein, it is critical going forward to maintain close relations with partners such as the Iraqi Special Forces and the Syrian Democratic Forces, allies that have borne the brunt of fighting and are essential to our effort to keep pressure on al-Qaeda and the Islamic State in both Iraq and Syria.

We have also learned about the need for a more proactive counter-radicalization strategy, especially online, that focuses primarily on the timeframe before an individual embraces the jihadists' message and becomes committed to the terrorist cause.

And we have learned about the need to formulate a cost-effective, integrated counter-terrorism strategy that begins to address the underlying causes of radicalization, especially in the Middle East, and which carefully balances the terrorism threat with other U.S. security priorities. Fully implementing these hard-earned lessons will not be easy, but will be critical to our eventual success.

In the end, the past 17 years of America's global counter-terrorism campaign have taught us that only with a creative, inclusive, flexible, and sustained approach will we be able to effectively tackle this challenge, and provide a more secure future for all Americans.

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6. Retrospect and Prospect: On Endless War

David A. Brown, Tim Hoyt, and Craig Whiteside

There is great benefit in thinking about your own country's struggles while listening to someone else's, particularly at a conference inspired by the attacks on 9/11 and conducted annually since. At the annual International Counterterrorism conference held this past week at the IDC-Herzilya,¹⁰³ we attended a panel titled, "Israel and Gaza: Hudna or Victory?" Hudna is an Arabic word meaning "cease fire," but the Israelis at this conference understood it more as a "time-out."¹⁰⁴ The panel consisted of Israeli security officials and politicians debating whether it was a good idea to negotiate with their opponents in order to stop recent border clashes and the periodic rocket, mortar, and flaming kite attacks directed at civilian targets in Israel. Member of Knesset Ksenia Svetlova, from the Israeli center-left Zionist Union party,¹⁰⁵ pithily summed up her perception of the government overtures in this way: "This is not an Israeli victory but a victory for radical Islam: Radical Islam - One, World - Zero."¹⁰⁶ The body language of the former military official on the panel, whose experience in Gaza led him to argue for the

¹⁰³ "World Summit," IDC Herzliya and International Institute for Counter-Terrorism, accessed Sept. 10, 2018, <https://www.ict.org.il/ContentWorld.aspx?ID=36 - gsc.tab=0>; "Welcome to IDC Herzliya," IDC Herzliya and International Institute for Counter-Terrorism, accessed Sept. 10, 2018, <https://www.idc.ac.il/en/about/pages/main.aspx>.

¹⁰⁴ Robert Crane, "Hudna: A Long-Range Islamic Strategy for Conflict Resolution," The Shalom Center, Jan. 29, 2008, <https://theshalomcenter.org/node/1354>.

¹⁰⁵ "Zionist Union Labor Party-Hatnua," The Israel Democracy Institute, accessed Sept. 10, 2018, <https://en.idi.org.il/israeli-elections-and-parties/parties/zionist-union/>.

¹⁰⁶ ICT (@ICT_org), "@KseniaSvetlova @KnessetIL @IDCHerzliya #ICT18 #IDF #Israel #Gaza #Hammas #counterterrorism," Tweet, Sept. 5, 2018, https://twitter.com/ICT_org/status/1037590106620788736.

benefits of hudna, made it obvious that the politician's sound bite had found a tender spot. After all, who wants to be associated with an effort seen by some to appease terrorists, especially from the left side of the political spectrum?

In a related observation, the outgoing U.S. commander of Afghanistan recently remarked that "it's time for this war to end."¹⁰⁷ This might be interpreted in many ways, but it is difficult not to think that it reflects the universal angst over the failure of the United States and its partners to achieve conflict termination in the larger war against jihadist militants. The conference forced the three of us — faculty of the U.S. Naval War College — to borrow from naval theorist Mahan and ask questions of retrospection and prospect: ¹⁰⁸ How do we assess the evolution of our thinking and practice of counterterrorism since 9/11? What do those influences look like today in execution? How will the conflict be evaluated in ten years' time?

Retrospect

Following the 9/11 attacks, successive U.S. administrations have promulgated three consistent objectives: First, to prevent additional mass casualty attacks on our homeland. Second, to find and punish those responsible. And third, to shatter the larger transnational terrorist movement's capability and capacity to be a future threat. These reasonable objectives contrast with some of the associated rhetoric surrounding the "war

¹⁰⁷ Mujib Mashal, "Time for This War in Afghanistan to End,' Says Departing U.S. Commander," *New York Times*, Sept. 2, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/02/world/asia/afghan-commander-us-john-nicholson.html>.

¹⁰⁸ A.T. Mahan, *Retrospect and Prospect: Studies in International Relations, Naval and Political* (London: Forgotten Books, 2012).

on terror,” often obscuring these objectives and seeking more expansive ones including eliminating terrorism writ large, eliminating “state-sponsored” terrorism, democratizing large parts of the Islamic world, and the attainment of perfect security for Americans at home and abroad.

Ignoring the political rhetoric for the time being, and any corrosive effects it might have on clarity of purpose, we offer an objective evaluation of how the U.S. fared in achieving these three aims.

To stop another mass casualty terrorist attack, the United States has reorganized its internal security institutions and upgraded law enforcement and both domestic and international intelligence capabilities. While these severely complicate jihadist efforts to carry out mass casualty attacks on the United States, there are economic and social costs for this increased surveillance and government infringements on liberty. In the pursuit of this quest, our political leaders have committed significant errors, such as invading Iraq, ostensibly to prevent the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction to jihadist groups. Yet in a narrow but important sense, this concerted effort to prevent a large attack has been impressive and successful with a small residual risk.

The hunt for the perpetrators, off to a good start in 2002, took longer than expected but largely achieved the objective in the end when Osama bin Laden was killed in 2011. However, Ayman al-Zawahiri, who leads al-Qaeda, remains at large. Jihadist replacement of leaders with effective replacements, and the rise of the scion of Bin Laden have undercut perceptions of this success.¹⁰⁹ Furthermore, the use of torture to obtain

¹⁰⁹ Ali Soufan, “Hamza bin Ladin: From Steadfast Son to Al-Qa`ida’s Leader in Waiting,” *CTC Sentinel* 10, no. 8 (September 2017), <https://ctc.usma.edu/hamza-bin-ladin-from-steadfast-son-to-al-qaidas-leader-in-waiting/>.

information about terror attacks and the location of leaders has undermined future efforts.

The United States and its partners have not only failed to cripple the global jihadist movement, the problem is orders of magnitude worse since 9/11. Although America's counter-terrorism campaign has restricted jihadist capability to conduct major attacks in the United States, the same cannot be said for Europe, where large terrorist attacks by Islamic State operatives have killed scores of people and injured hundreds. The split between al-Qaeda and Islamic State in 2013 has complicated the picture for intelligence collection, forcing analysts to look in too many directions. Leaders from both al-Qaeda and the Islamic State still exert control over their respective franchises, although in a degraded manner. The networks and affiliates are disaggregated, often focused on local sovereignty designs, and while nominally dedicated to global jihad are practically focused on influencing local Muslim populations.¹¹⁰ Worryingly, this metastasizing jihadist movement is proving to be an adaptive enemy, operating in a globalized age that has dispersed impressive and cheap technological means to help them in their fight against states.

Our evaluation of the attainment of these objectives fall in descending order, from mostly achieved for the first two to an insufficient grade for the last. Both the failure to manage the growth of the global jihadist movement, and the realization that even the destruction of the caliphate has not ended the campaign, inspires the frustration of politicians, practitioners, scholars, journalists, and voters. Worse, the passing scores on the first two objectives are only interim evaluations, not final ones. They require unending

¹¹⁰ David J. Kilcullen, "Countering Global Insurgency," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 28, no. 4 (2005), <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390500300956>.

maintenance and attention. The resulting disillusionment, compounded by unforced errors that have made the conflict more expansive and expensive, is a serious issue that will continue to have profound consequences if unaddressed by our country's leaders. To understand the source of this frustration, we present a metaphor to understand the challenges of combatting terrorism. Like analogies, there are many metaphors, and none are perfect, but this one is ours.

The Problem with Pythons

Florida has a bit of a Burmese python problem, as odd as that might seem. In an age of globalization, imported pet pythons somehow escaped into the Everglades, particularly in the aftermath of Hurricane Andrew in 1992. They have expanded into an estimated population in the tens to hundreds of thousands — not exactly a small margin of error but a reflection of the difficulty in assessing the threat.¹¹¹ Described as an apex predator, the python's breeding habits and voracious diet has been linked to the extinction of marsh hares and the devastation of small mammal populations in the Everglades. The stated goal of the scientists and policymakers tasked with winning “the war” on pythons is to reduce the environmental impact to “a manageable level.”¹¹² One scientist remarked that while there were other invasive species in Florida, Burmese pythons are “especially unnerving,” and “the idea that this giant snake that doesn't belong here, is here, just

¹¹¹ Kate Baggaley, “Pythons Are Invading Florida. Meet the Scientists Fighting Back.” *Popular Science*, Oct. 13, 2017, <https://www.popsci.com/florida-invasive-pythons>.

¹¹² David Fleshler, “Hunters with Shotguns to Go After Pythons in Everglades National Park,” *Sun Sentinel*, May 31, 2018, <http://www.sun-sentinel.com/news/florida/fl-reg-python-hunters-everglades-20180530-story.html>; Baggaley, “Pythons.”

really is in people’s hearts and minds.” All of these phrases should sound familiar for those who study counterinsurgency and terror.

Much like the futility of trying to stop the growth of the python population, our failure to reduce the scale of global jihadism is more obvious than ever, with each of the successive “waves” growing larger and larger since the late 1970s.¹¹³ A decade ago, the Islamic State of Iraq had a few thousand members. More recently, the Pentagon was claiming they had killed over 60,000 members.¹¹⁴ The Islamic State has new franchises all over the world and an end-strength measured in tens of thousands. Like the jihadist problem, the origin of the python problem might be interesting but it is not instructive in creating any solution. Burmese pythons have adapted to their new environment, are almost impossible to find, and while posing little direct threat to humans are in the process of drastically affecting a delicate ecosystem with unknown consequences. Efforts to open up hunting of pythons by politicians are making a laughably small impact on the problem.¹¹⁵ In essence, these dynamics are very similar to our current effort to reduce terrorism.

All analogies and metaphors have their weakness, and this one suffers from a significant one: unlike pythons, terrorists kill people in increasing numbers with worrisome trends.¹¹⁶ In an age characterized by the rapid transfer of technology, and despite exhortations by some that terrorism is a relatively insignificant problem, the risk of a large-scale terror

¹¹³ Glenn E. Robinson, “The Four Waves of Global Jihad, 1979-2017,” *Middle East Policy Council*, accessed Sept. 10, 2018, <https://www.mepec.org/journal/four-waves-global-jihad-1979-2017>.

¹¹⁴ Ryan Browne, “US Special Ops Chief: More than 60,000 ISIS Fighters Killed,” *CNN*, Feb. 15, 2017, <https://edition.cnn.com/2017/02/14/politics/isis-60000-fighters-killed/index.html>.

¹¹⁵ Fleshler, “Hunters.”

¹¹⁶ Max Roser, Mohamed Nagdy, and Hannah Ritchie, “Terrorism,” *OurWorldInData*, (January 2018), <https://ourworldindata.org/terrorism>.

attack is commensurately increasing.¹¹⁷ Our past failures are eroding resolve to face up to and try to prevent this future attack, and this is compounded by the looming deficit crisis — some of it fueled by these same costly failures — that will naturally limit our ability to act. The rise of other risks to international cooperation and norms (dare we say an international order) will further complicate and distract from the risk of terrorism.¹¹⁸ How will we get through the next decade without another massive loss of innocent life?

Prospect and the Future of Endless War

There are three factors that we think will determine the future trajectory of global efforts to reduce terror acts and associated loss of life and property. The first will center on whether a shared understanding and more realistic appraisal of the nature of the conflict can be attained. This failure is at the root of wasted effort, mistakes, and disillusionment. The second factor will depend on the management of scarce resources to continue prosecuting the war against jihadi actors in an era of multiplying threats. Finally, the outcome will be determined by the ability of policymakers to unify an international coalition to defeat members of the global jihadist movement, which while divided at the moment, still march to the beat of the same drum.

War on Terror, or War in Error?

¹¹⁷ Nicholas Kristoff, “Overreacting to Terrorism?,” *New York Times*, March 24, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/24/opinion/terrorists-bathtubs-and-snakes.html>.

¹¹⁸ Stephen Wertheim, “Paeans to the ‘Postwar Order’ Won’t Save Us,” *War on the Rocks*, Aug. 6, 2018, <https://warontherocks.com/2018/08/paeans-to-the-postwar-order-wont-save-us/>.

The irony about a conference on terror in the 21st century is that you will rarely find the word “war” mentioned. In fact, most conventional definitions — including one long proposed by the conference organizer, Boaz Ganor — specifically exclude attacks on military targets as terrorism.¹¹⁹ Proponents of this definition desire increased cooperation among international actors and are fearful of delegitimizing what some might call freedom fighters rebelling against brutal oppression. This is the problem in Syria, where critics of groups fighting Assad’s criminal attacks on his own population deliberately elide them with jihadist opportunists, who have quite separate political objectives. As a consequence of this exclusion of attacks on military targets — which often includes police and government workers, even experts get confused about what is terrorism and what is not.¹²⁰ Considering that insurgents always use terror in their campaigns to overtake the state, the line is always blurred.¹²¹

The mistake of the Bush administration of terming the struggle as a “War on Terror” produced a distaste for thinking of the struggle as war, which in retrospect it has become — either due to our mistakes or because it was inevitable. Whichever the case, this is now a war, and describing it as such is a much better use of the word than the ubiquitous use of “hybrid war,” “political warfare,” “cyber war,” “economic war,” “the war on drugs,” and so on, when it is doubtful that anything related to war/warfare is happening in any of

¹¹⁹ Boaz Ganor, “The Definition of Terrorism: A Fundamental Counter-Terrorism Measure,” *YouTube*, accessed Sept. 10, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lunQwBhzgxo>.

¹²⁰ Boaz Ganor, “Defining Terrorism - Is One Man’s Terrorist Another Man’s Freedom Fighter?” *IDC Herzliya*, accessed Sept. 10, 2018, <https://www.ict.org.il/Article/1123/Defining-Terrorism-Is-One-Mans-Terrorist-Another-Mans-Freedom-Fighter - gsc.tab=0>.

¹²¹ Martha Crenshaw Hutchinson, “The Concept of Revolutionary Terrorism,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 16, no. 3 (September 1972), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/173583>.

these constructs. The current effort to defeat the jihadis is a war in almost every sense, fought between military components with sizeable asymmetric power imbalances but nonetheless the power to control territory and populations and inflict violence on one another. It is common to think that the enemy's strategy is to use terror to achieve their end state. The reality is not this simple. Instead, jihadists use terrorism against civilians and military targets as an integrated strategy of attrition/exhaustion/provocation. We refuse to accept this new reality and continue to misread our jihadi opponents, their objectives, and their relative success in achieving modest success to date. Any focus on the defeat of the caliphate,¹²² and not the shocking fact that one was created in the first place by tens of thousands of locals and global migrants,¹²³ is a good example of this failure to understand.

Governments exist in large part to protect its citizens from harm. Failure to do this has large repercussions for politicians. Kori Schake, a member of Bush's National Security Council, told a panel dissecting the motives behind the Iraq invasion this year that rational arguments against invading Iraq were overcome by a palpable fear of an even larger terrorist attack, one that politicians of both parties in both branches were eager to prevent.¹²⁴ Accordingly, they overwhelmingly passed an authorization for the use of

¹²² Haroro J. Ingram and Craig Whiteside, "In Search of the Virtual Caliphate: Convenient Fallacy, Dangerous Distraction," *War on the Rocks*, Sept. 27, 2017, <https://warontherocks.com/2017/09/in-search-of-the-virtual-caliphate-convenient-fallacy-dangerous-distraction/>.

¹²³ Robin Wright, "The Ignominious End of the ISIS Caliphate," *New Yorker*, Oct. 17, 2017, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/the-ignominious-end-of-the-isis-caliphate>.

¹²⁴ Kori Schake, "Realism, Liberalism, and the Ideological Origins of the Iraq War," ISA panel remarks, moderated by Michael Cox and with John Ikenberry, Daniel Duedney, John Mearsheimer, Michael Williams, Beate Jahn, James Goldgeiger, Patrick Porter, and Joseph Nye (San Francisco, April 4, 2018).

military force in 2002.¹²⁵ Sixteen years later, we still cannot accept the reality of the war we are fighting, and three administrations have used this law to justify war against Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State.¹²⁶ We are not executing a series of isolated military strikes with drones, but an extended and significant campaigns with no end in sight.

Crocodiles Closer to the Canoe?

Governments have to set priorities to protect their citizens, and efficiently allocate resources in order to protect its citizens and secure their welfare. The Trump administration's new strategy directives reflect a desire to reshape a balance where the prosecution of the war against jihadist groups is sublimated in every sense to the need to counter a China increasingly acting in a "hegemonic" manner — not just regionally but also globally.¹²⁷ This move has been applauded for realistically and belatedly addressing the rise China as a geopolitical threat to the United States' position as unchallenged global leader. Fears that we are over-invested in the fight against jihadist groups, at the expense of attention to China or Russia, are valid and reasonable concerns addressed in the new *National Security Strategy* and *National Defense Strategy*.

¹²⁵ "Authorization for Use of Military Force Against Iraq Resolution of 2002," Public Law 107-243, Oct. 16, 2002.

¹²⁶ Jack Goldsmith, "The 2002 Iraq AUMF Almost Certainly Authorizes the President to Use Force Today in Iraq (and Might Authorize the Use of Force in Syria) [UPDATED]," *Lawfare*, June 13 2014, <https://www.lawfareblog.com/2002-iraq-aumf-almost-certainly-authorizes-president-use-force-today-iraq-and-might-authorize-use>.

¹²⁷ Mackenzie Eaglen, "In Search of the White Whale: The National Defense Strategy's Quest for Lethality," *Texas National Security Review*, Roundtable, Jan. 26, 2018, <https://tnsr.org/roundtable/policy-roundtable-close-look-2018-national-defense-strategy/-essay3>.

That being said, it could be just as much a mistake to understand China as a threat to the United States, as opposed to a competitor for political and economic influence.¹²⁸ While the competition for resources is always a zero-sum game, risk assessment is not. The probability of a Chinese threat to U.S. citizens, in an era of nuclear deterrence, is lower than the probability of a successful terror attack on U.S. soil, even if it would be much deadlier. Even if we were to decide to actively contest Chinese island building in the South China Sea, as well as influence efforts in South Asia and Africa, it is extremely unclear as to what we could actually do to stop what is a natural increase in influence due to their rising economic power. Furthermore, it is possible that China's obtuse and clumsy efforts to use coercive tactics against South China Sea neighbors and political influence to manipulate internal political considerations in countries like Australia will inspire a natural and increasingly common backlash.¹²⁹

The dilemma of dealing with a rising China is an example of the strategic planning concept former Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld popularized of "known knowns," etc.¹³⁰ Despite indications of China's growing power and new willingness to use it, there is little indication yet of how this will affect the current international order — one that has

¹²⁸ Peter Mattis, "From Engagement to Rivalry: Tools to Compete with China," *Texas National Security Review* 1, no. 4 (August 2018), <https://tnsr.org/2018/08/from-engagement-to-rivalry-tools-to-compete-with-china/>.

¹²⁹ Richard Javad Heydarian, "Duterte's Efforts to Align the Philippines With China Face a Backlash," *World Politics Review*, July 19, 2018, <https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/25126/duterte-s-efforts-to-align-the-philippines-with-china-face-a-backlash>; Damien Cave, "Espionage Bills in Australia Stir Fears of Anti-Chinese Backlash," *New York Times*, Dec. 19, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/19/world/australia/australia-china-backlash-influence.html>.

¹³⁰ "DoD News Briefing - Secretary Rumsfeld and Gen. Myers," Department of Defense, Feb. 12, 2002, <http://archive.defense.gov/Transcripts/Transcript.aspx?TranscriptID=2636>.

benefited China to a large degree and may continue to do so. This would function as a “known unknown.”

In contrast, the jihadist threat is a “known known,” with their intentions telegraphed and their determination to fulfill the establishment of the caliphate proven. Without discounting the importance of a new shared awareness that China could develop into a serious threat to stability and the U.S. position as an indispensable leader of the global community, we cannot fail to deal with the “known known.” Certainly, the lessons of chasing uncertain futures should be familiar enough to give us pause.

Coalitions of the Willing, and Able

The initial response to the establishment of the caliphate in 2014 was uncertain, dividing those who urged rollback from those who advised containment.¹³¹ Subsequent terrorist attacks around the world inspired a slow shift to rollback as the preferred option, and today the self-proclaimed caliphate is no more. Despite this achievement, there has been only limited commitment to the reconstruction necessary to prevent an Islamic State resurgence.¹³² States are still largely focused on perceived threats against their specific country, and retain a parochial attitude in approaching the jihadi groups that might be organizationally divided, but follow the same ideology. This well-articulated doctrine

¹³¹ Barry R. Posen, “Contain ISIS,” *Atlantic*, Nov. 20, 2015,

<https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2015/11/isis-syria-iraq-containment/416799/>.

¹³² Margaret Coker and Gardiner Harris, “Iraq Wants \$88 Billion for Rebuilding. Allies Offer a Fraction of That.” *New York Times*, Feb. 13, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/13/world/middleeast/iraqi-donor-conference-abadi-tillerson.html>.

clearly defines the enemy, the strategy, and the acceptable tactics for engagement.¹³³ Despite significant efforts by the United Nations Counter Terrorism Executive Directorate, this lack of unity of the targets of terrorism will likely increase thanks to a U.S. administration that embraces a go-it-alone approach and disdain for the benefits of international cooperation and unified action.¹³⁴ The only thing preventing this to date are the efforts of individual diplomats and administration figures dedicated to reducing the threat of terrorism.¹³⁵

An important point that came up in the counterterrorism conference was a plea for countries to take responsibility for their citizens that committed terror acts in Syria, Iraq, and elsewhere. Despite the new understanding of the dangers of allowing jihadists to build new networks around the world, countries have increased citizenship revocation for foreign terrorist fighters to avoid bringing them home.¹³⁶ To avoid the hassles and risk of repatriating, prosecuting, detaining, rehabilitating, and reintegrating these individuals, countries are passing the buck and contributing to the building of the future fifth wave of

¹³³ Cole Bunzel, “From Paper State to Caliphate: The Ideology of the Islamic State,” Brookings Institution, March 9, 2015, <https://www.brookings.edu/research/from-paper-state-to-caliphate-the-ideology-of-the-islamic-state/>.

¹³⁴ Michèle Coninx, “Threats to International Peace and Security Caused by Terrorist Acts,” video file, United Nations Security Council, 8330th meeting, Aug. 23, 2018, <http://webtv.un.org/meetings-events/treaty-bodies/watch/mich%C3%A8le-coninx-cted-on-threats-to-international-peace-and-security-caused-by-terrorist-acts-security-council-8330th-meeting/5826036031001/?term=&sort=date>.

¹³⁵ “Briefing on the Status of Syria Stabilization Assistance and Ongoing Efforts To Achieve an Enduring Defeat of ISIS,” State Department, Aug. 17, 2018, <https://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2018/08/285202.htm>.

¹³⁶ David J. Trimbach and Nicole Reiz, “Unmaking Citizens: The Expansion of Citizenship Revocation in Response to Terrorism,” *Center for Migration Studies*, accessed Sept. 10, 2018, <http://cmsny.org/publications/unmaking-citizens/>.

global jihad. One United Nations representative at the conference admitted that Russia was taking the lead on repatriating the children of foreign terrorist fighters to grandparents in their country, in an ironic contrast to several liberal democracies.¹³⁷ While countries are cooperating in this collective action problem, the absence of leadership from the United States is problematic.¹³⁸

We end this analysis by presenting a possible black swan related to the fight against jihadist foes. The United States and others have largely ignored Chinese actions concerning its Uighur population, Muslims who live in the Western province of Xinjiang. Reports that over a million Uighurs have been interned and subject to reeducation because of their religious beliefs could be the inspiration for the unity and support the jihadis have tried so hard to win, especially if the repression inspires an uprising.¹³⁹ Anyone entertaining a bit of *schadenfreude* over these Chinese missteps has failed to learn the lessons of 9/11, and of life in our globalized and ever interconnected world. The Uighur issue might start as a Chinese problem, but it will not end as a strictly Chinese problem.

¹³⁷ Ben Hubbard, “Wives and Children of ISIS: Warehoused in Syria, Unwanted Back Home,” *New York Times*, July 4, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/04/world/middleeast/islamic-state-families-syria.html>.

¹³⁸ Kori Schake, “The Trump Doctrine Is Winning and the World Is Losing,” *New York Times*, June 15, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/06/15/opinion/sunday/trump-china-america-first.html>.

¹³⁹ Chris Buckley, “China Is Detaining Muslims in Mass Numbers. The Goal: ‘Transformation,’” *New York Times*, Sept. 8, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/08/world/asia/china-uighur-muslim-detention-camp.html>

Conclusions

How do we think the scorecard on these three factors will look in a decade? It is too early to predict but we are not off to a good start. A lack of confidence in our own values due to past mistakes and shameful violations of our own values are fueling an inclination to reduce our efforts against groups that use terror because of a belief that we are the cause of this increase in terror.¹⁴⁰ Just as the invasion of Iraq was an overreaction inspired by fear, our possible disengagement from the fight against violent extremists could end up as an overreaction to a failure to make an impact on the level of terror violence, and used by populist politicians to justify retrenchment. Western polities are divided and nonchalantly discuss possibilities of civil war, and focus on identity at the cost of unity.¹⁴¹

Distaste for concepts like limited war against the jihadists, meaning limited objectives as well as limited resources, could force us to use illogical constructs like victory to judge success, much like the Israeli politician calling the negotiations with Hamas a defeat in the global war on terror. Until our politicians embrace these distinctions, or at least refrain from using them against their government opponents, we will never understand the war that we have been fighting, a war that will continue. This war plays out in fits and spurts, and the intensity of it ebbs and flows. The anniversary of 9/11 is a great time to

¹⁴⁰ Philip Bobbitt, "America's Relation to World Order: Two Indictments, Two Thought Experiments, and a Misquotation," *Texas National Security Review* 1, no. 4 (August 2018), <https://tnsr.org/2018/08/americas-relation-to-world-order-two-indictments-two-thought-experiments-and-a-misquotation/>; Phil Gurski, "An End to the War on Terrorism," International Centre for Counterterrorism – The Hague, May 30, 2018, <https://icct.nl/publication/an-end-to-the-war-on-terrorism/>.

¹⁴¹ Francis Fukuyama, "Against Identity Politics: The New Tribalism and the Crisis of Democracy," *Foreign Affairs* (September/October 2018), <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/americas/2018-08-14/against-identity-politics>.

conduct introspection; our governments owe us some real talk on what will continue to be a long struggle to reduce terror attacks around the world.

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7. Another Year of the War in Afghanistan

A. Trevor Thrall and Erik Goepner

In August 2017, President Donald Trump rubberstamped his predecessors' failed policies when he announced America's recommitment to the mission in Afghanistan. In his speech, Trump made the same promises of victory and signed on to the same set of goals outlined many times by President George W. Bush and President Barack Obama:

Our troops will fight to win. We will fight to win. From now on, victory will have a clear definition: attacking our enemies, obliterating ISIS, crushing Al Qaeda, preventing the Taliban from taking over Afghanistan, and stopping mass terror attacks against America before they emerge.¹⁴²

Trump's plan for victory in Afghanistan was dead on arrival. Based on the same faulty premises about the threat of terrorism and the benefits of military action, Trump's Afghanistan campaign has done little to make Americans safer.

None of this is news. By the time Trump made his announcement last year, the fundamental indicators of failure in Afghanistan had been easy to see for quite some time. Why has the United States embraced the same feckless strategy over 17 years and three presidents?

¹⁴² "Remarks by President Trump on the Strategy in Afghanistan and South Asia," The White House, Aug. 21, 2017, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-strategy-afghanistan-south-asia/>.

The answer is simple: Washington's continued embrace of a host of strategic myths.

The safe haven fallacy has promoted unwarranted concern over the threat of future terrorism. When Trump asked why the United States needed to stay in Afghanistan, Secretary of Defense James Mattis responded, "to prevent a bomb from going off in Times Square."¹⁴³ And indeed, many argue that the failure of terrorists to launch a second 9/11-style attack proves the value of continued American efforts in Afghanistan and military action elsewhere. In his August 2017 speech, Trump made it clear that this argument was central to his decision to extend the American commitment to Afghanistan, noting,

The consequences of a rapid exit are both predictable and unacceptable. 9/11, the worst terrorist attack in our history, was planned and directed from Afghanistan because that country was ruled by a government that gave comfort and shelter to terrorists. A hasty withdrawal would create a vacuum that terrorists, including ISIS and al Qaeda, would instantly fill, just as happened before September 11th.¹⁴⁴

¹⁴³ Christopher Woody, "How Jim Mattis Defused a White House Confrontation That Left Reince Priebus Saying 'WTF,'" *Business Insider*, Feb. 8, 2018, <https://www.businessinsider.com/mattis-trump-defused-white-house-clash-priebus-mcmaster-2018-2>.

¹⁴⁴ "Remarks by President Trump on the Strategy in Afghanistan and South Asia."

Despite its popularity in Washington,¹⁴⁵ the safe haven argument is overblown.¹⁴⁶ The most important base of operations for the 9/11 terrorists was not Afghanistan, but the United States. As the [9/11 commission report](#) describes, all of the hijackers entered the United States legally,¹⁴⁷ where they received their technical (pilot) training, not in some clandestine Afghan camp. Without the ability to carry out their preparations here in the United States, the 9/11 attack might not have occurred.

Post-9/11 security reforms have made it far more difficult for terrorists to enter the United States, and they now are unable to access such sophisticated training without raising suspicion. These efforts, not the campaign in Afghanistan, have been the most effective in curtailing the ability of would-be terrorists to carry out attacks on U.S. soil.

More generally, the safe haven fallacy is an argument for endless war based on unwarranted worst-case scenario assumptions. To worry about an attack from Afghanistan, a capable terrorist group must have room to operate there safely, must decide a major attack on the U.S. homeland is a good idea, and must figure out a way to carry out that attack from Afghanistan — 7,000 miles from the American homeland —

¹⁴⁵ Jennifer Cafarella, Caitlin Forrest, and Charles Aubin, “ISIS Plotting Attacks from Afghanistan,” Institute for the Study of War, Nov. 17, 2017, <http://www.understandingwar.org/background/isis-plotting-attacks-afghanistan>.

¹⁴⁶ A. Trevor Thrall and Benjamin H. Friedman, eds., *US Grand Strategy in the 21st Century: The Case for Restraint* (Abingdon-on-Thames, U.K.: Routledge, 2018); Risa Brooks, “Do Safe Havens Matter for Terrorist Attacks?” <https://www.dropbox.com/s/z019b6y2kayr4b2/PIPES%202017%20Fall-Oct%205-Brooks-paper.pdf?dl=0>; Micah Zenko and Amelia Mae Wolf, “The Myth of the Terrorist Safe Haven,” *Foreign Policy*, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2015/01/26/al-qaeda-islamic-state-myth-of-the-terrorist-safe-haven/>.

¹⁴⁷ “The 9/11 Commission Report,” National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, July 22, 2004, <https://www.9-11commission.gov/report/911Report.pdf>.

without the sort of support within the United States that al-Qaeda enjoyed in 2001. And all of this must occur without the United States detecting and disrupting the plot.

Though the defense establishment gets paid to plan for trouble, this series of events is so unlikely it does not justify the occupation of Afghanistan today or tomorrow. If the United States left Afghanistan and the Taliban took control again, why would they provide support to Al Qaeda, the Islamic State, or some other group with plans to repeat 9/11? The Taliban did not attack the United States, and they certainly did not benefit from al-Qaeda's strike on the United States. Moreover, leaving Afghanistan does not mean the United States has to ignore what is happening there. Intelligence can provide early warning should events someday point toward the possibility that a major attack on the United States is becoming more likely. At that point the United States could intervene in a more limited fashion to deal with gathering threats.

The belief that terrorism and the conflicts and animosities which give rise to it can be eradicated is the second myth propagating the effort in Afghanistan.¹⁴⁸ Trump's promise to obliterate the self-proclaimed Islamic State and crush al-Qaeda, while emotionally satisfying, is strategically misguided. The roots of terrorism, like the causes of war, run too deep for even a superpower to do much about.¹⁴⁹ Defeating al-Qaeda and the Islamic State will not put an end to jihadist terrorism because the organizations themselves are simply the symptoms of underlying political dynamics and fundamental social and

¹⁴⁸ "The National Security Strategy of the United States of America," The White House, September 2002, 5, <https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/63562.pdf>.

¹⁴⁹ Martha Crenshaw, "The Causes of Terrorism," *Comparative Politics* 13, no. 4 (1981), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/421717>.

cultural conflicts, not their cause. Declaring war on these symptoms and intervening in nations riven by conflict is a recipe for failure.

The evidence indicates America is further from defeating jihadist groups than it was on Sept. 12, 2001. Despite 17 years in Afghanistan, almost as long in Iraq, as well as drone strikes and special operations missions in Syria, Pakistan, Libya, Somalia, Yemen, the Philippines, and Mali, the State Department reports that the number of Islamist-inspired terrorist groups has [tripled since 2001](#),¹⁵⁰ while the number of fighters has risen from approximately 32,000 to more than 100,000.¹⁵¹ In Afghanistan alone, there are as many as 20 such groups operating.¹⁵² And though no one is suggesting that American intervention is the only important factor, it seems more likely that America's presence in Afghanistan is making things worse than making things better when it comes to eliminating the threat.

Finally, American military and political leaders wrongly believe that the key to "victory" in Afghanistan is merely a question of convincing the Taliban of American resolve. In contrast to Obama, Trump promised that the American presence in Afghanistan would be condition-based, not time limited, in an effort to pressure the Taliban to negotiate. As a

¹⁵⁰ "Foreign Terrorist Organizations," U.S. Department of State, accessed Sept. 9, 2018, <http://www.state.gov/j/ct/rls/other/des/123085.htm>.

¹⁵¹ A. Trevor Thrall and Eric Goepner, "Step Back: Lessons for U.S. Foreign Policy from the Failed War on Terror," Cato Institute, June 26, 2017, 9, <https://object.cato.org/sites/cato.org/files/pubs/pdf/pa-814.pdf>.

¹⁵² Helene Cooper, "U.S. Braces for Return of Terrorist Safe Havens to Afghanistan," *New York Times*, March 13, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/12/world/middleeast/military-safe-havens-afghanistan.html>.

Pentagon report from December 2017 put it, “The objective of the campaign is to convince the Taliban that they cannot win on the battlefield.”¹⁵³

With fewer troops on the ground than during the Obama surge, the notion that Trump’s approach is going to produce more leverage is fantastical. Today the Taliban control, contest, or influence more territory than at any point since they were ejected from power in 2001.¹⁵⁴ Making things even worse, the current Afghan government is a disaster. Not only is the government incapable of protecting its own people without help from the United States, Freedom House assesses Afghans as “not free,” the same rating from the Taliban days, and in terms of corruption, Afghanistan ranks fourth worst in the global system.¹⁵⁵ Simply put, nothing the United States is doing will encourage the Taliban to change its course, regardless of how much resolve Trump and his generals have.

The failures of America’s war on terror are obvious at this point — even to the president. During his August 2017 speech, Trump began by noting that he shared the public’s frustration with the costly and prolonged stalemate and that his first instinct was to pull American troops out of Afghanistan.¹⁵⁶ As we remember the victims of 9/11 and honor the

¹⁵³ “Enhancing Security and Stability in Afghanistan” U.S. Department of Defense, December 2017, 1, <https://media.defense.gov/2017/Dec/15/2001856979/-1/-1/1/1225-REPORT-DEC-2017-FINAL-UNCLASS-BASE.PDF>.

¹⁵⁴ Peter Bergen, “It’s Trump’s War ... and It’s Not Going Well,” CNN, Sept. 3, 2018, <https://www.cnn.com/2018/08/20/opinions/trump-afghanistan-war-not-going-well-bergen/index.html>.

¹⁵⁵ “Freedom in the World 2018,” Freedom House, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2018/afghanistan>; Corruption Perceptions Index 2017 in Afghanistan, Transparency International, <https://www.transparency.org/country/AFG>.

¹⁵⁶ “Remarks by President Trump on the Strategy in Afghanistan and South Asia.”

millions who have served in the war that followed, it is past time for the United States to find its way out of Afghanistan.

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