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19 Years Later: How to Wind Down the War on Terror

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Executive Summary

As the legacy of September 11, 2001, fades, it is time to reassess the war on terror. The United States has negotiated an Afghan withdrawal agreement with the Taliban, significantly drawn down its military presence in Iraq, and maintains only a small troop contingent in Syria. The grim innovations associated with the war on terror—indefinite detention, black sites, extraordinary renditions, torture, military trials, targeted killings—have for the most part been abandoned, although a small group of prisoners remains at Guantanamo and drones are still deployed to kill terrorism suspects. At the same time, U.S. counterterrorism (CT) operations have increased in Africa.

During this period, homeland security efforts were ramped up quickly but have remained the junior partner in the war on terror. Yet it was no doubt due to the maturation of these efforts that, since September 11, jihadists have successfully infiltrated the United States only once to carry out deadly attacks, when a Saudi aviation student deployed by the Saudi Air Force to a US naval air station in Florida murdered three U.S. sailors in December 2019. According to the FBI, the student had been in contact with al-Qaeda. The greater danger now is posed by self-radicalized individuals at home, the majority of whom are linked to white supremacist movements.

As the external terrorist threat has declined, with U.S. defenses strengthening and insurgents turning their guns on local adversaries, the U.S. has an opportunity to realign its war on terror with the realities of a new strategic dispensation. The policy departures recommended in this paper are intended to thread the needle by reducing the scope and intensity of U.S. CT operations and increasing congressional oversight while retaining an effective capacity for self-defense. Our policy proposals include the following:

“Current U.S. overseas military commitments in the war against jihadist terrorism are out of proportion to the damage jihadist terrorists are currently capable of inflicting on Americans and, in some situations, jeopardize the goal of countering radicalization.”

- **Repeal and Replace the AUMF.** The authorization for the use of military force, first signed into law a week after the September 11 attacks and followed in 2002 by a second measure authorizing the use of force against Iraq, is now interpreted as providing widespread authority for the president to wage war. Congress should repeal the 2002 authorization, replace the 2001 authorization with a more narrowly tailored law, and pass a reformed War Powers Act that would preserve the nation’s ability to respond rapidly in a crisis while ensuring congressional and therefore public oversight.
- **Reduce Forward Deployed U.S. CT Forces.** The focus on counterterrorism in our overall military presence in the Middle East, Africa, and South Asia should be reduced and reconstituted offshore, or in friendly countries where it is less likely to become a target of itself. Controlling territory and garrisoning U.S. forces have serious countervailing effects that are often overlooked: the inherent potential for escalation, the contribution of U.S. occupation forces to instability, the exacerbation of civil conflicts where they are deployed, and potential harm to non-combatants. There are also opportunity costs as other, more immediate threats to U.S. interests are neglected, and the reputational risks incurred when civilians are inadvertently injured or killed. These downsides tend to offset the advantages of holding ground.

- ***Reduce Targeted Killing.*** Targeted killing should be confined to preempting imminent threats to U.S. persons when no other resolution is feasible. As a means of disabling terrorist organizations, targeted killings have an uneven record and should be reserved only for contingencies when a jihadist group emerges with the determination and capacity to strike the United States, U.S. civilian installations abroad, or U.S. citizens overseas where such operations are feasible.
- ***Scale Back Partnership Capacity Building.*** Some of the arrangements the U.S. has made to build the CT capacities of partner countries are valuable, but many are unsuccessful and liable to link the U.S. with corrupt or repressive governments and draw in U.S. forces as combatants rather than as advisers, which engenders an inherent risk of escalation in civil wars of peripheral interest to the United States. Capacity building efforts should continue, but only under close oversight and with full awareness of the risk of mission creep and complicity in human rights violations by partner governments. They should be terminated where they have failed to achieve stated objectives.

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Introduction

The roots of the war on terror extend back well before 2001. It began in earnest during the 1980s, with American responses to attacks by Iranian-backed militants against U.S. installations in Lebanon, the kidnapping and torture of U.S. officers, also in Lebanon, and a 1986 Libyan bombing in Berlin that took two American lives and wounded 79 others. The Libyan attack triggered a U.S. airstrike against one of Muammar al-Gaddafi's encampments. In a ghastly game of retaliation, Gaddafi ordered the destruction of Pan Am Flight 103 over the Scottish town of Lockerbie in December 1988, killing 259 passengers and crew and 11 people on the ground.



Rescue personnel carrying a body away from the crash site of the Lockerbie bombing in December 1988. REUTERS

The U.S. faced renewed attacks in the 1990s by Shiites organized by Iran and by Sunni jihadists—as well as the murder of 168 Americans in Oklahoma City in 1995 by self-designated Christian patriots. The September 11, 2001 tragedies in New York, Pennsylvania, and Washington, D.C. transformed the war on terror, after which it became a pillar of U.S. security policy. Although there had been “extraordinary renditions”—the abduction of terrorist suspects without the knowledge or consent of host governments—before September 11, these subsequently increased sharply. We also saw the creation of black sites, the use of torture, military trials of alleged terrorists, targeted killings, and, of course, the invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan and long military occupations of both countries.

Much of this is now behind us. The black sites are gone, as far as is known. Reports of torture have dwindled, and troop numbers are rapidly diminishing in Afghanistan, from a peak of 100,000 in 2010 to 13,000 in 2020 and to 8,600 this year, assuming the U.S.–Taliban agreement, concluded in February 2020, holds. A relatively small number of U.S. troops remain in Iraq—5,200, down from a 2007 high of 170,300—primarily in training and advisory roles. In Syria,

there are thought to be about 500 personnel. Targeted killings still occur, however, even as reports of extraordinary renditions no longer appear in U.S. or foreign media. As spending on the war on terror has decreased, spending on homeland security has ramped up in recent years. International intelligence and law enforcement cooperation have also improved over time. Taken together, these developments—an emphasis on homeland security, intensive intelligence collection, more effective coordination of policing across borders, suppression of core al-Qaeda, combined with changes in jihadist strategy and probably a fair bit of luck—had driven the number of successful attacks by jihadists infiltrating the United States to zero until the morning of December 6, 2019 when a Saudi airman shot and killed three American military personnel at the Pensacola naval air station. This was a revealing exception to a 19-year span free of such tragedies.

“The nature of the jihadist terrorist threat to the American homeland has fundamentally changed; yet, the U.S. government and much of the foreign policy establishment have failed to recognize this or alter their response.”

The gunman, 2nd Lieutenant Mohammad Saeed Alshamrani, was in the U.S. as a consequence of the close military relationship between Saudi Arabia and the United States. There is a strong current of anti-Americanism in Saudi Arabia; Bin Laden himself was Saudi. And support for jihad in defense of Muslims perceived to be beleaguered has strong roots in the Kingdom going back to the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan. The risk of infiltration by a radicalized Saudi military detailee was long appreciated, but the potential for “green on blue” — a periodic feature for example of NATO – Afghan operations — has been seen as worth the gain. No forward-deployed U.S. forces could have prevented the murders at Pensacola and no defensive framework at home would have been able to block it. The attacker did not emerge from a war zone, but rather from within the ranks of an informal ally, whose own intelligence services evidently failed to detect the perpetrator’s contacts with al-Qaeda operatives. And there is no conceivable military response to this kind of attack unless the plotters are located in a war zone and can be identified and targeted. Otherwise, the response lies in investigatory and forensic work by intelligence

and law enforcement agencies. As explained later in this study, the reduced threat of jihadist terrorism does not signify an eternally decisive end to terror attacks. And there will be more of these attacks in the future.

Jihadist ideology and propaganda are still powerful and widely disseminated. The anarchic conditions and sectarian rivalries created by the invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan sparked a bloodletting; as the U.S. was blocking the infiltration of jihadists, regional states were unable to do so. The violence that characterized the war on terror has likely widened the pool of recruits in countries that became battlefields.

Nearly two decades after the September 11 attacks, the jihadist threat within our borders has devolved to self-radicalized individuals as well as a burgeoning, violent, white supremacist movement. Many U.S. troops and air and naval units remain active in the Middle East, but chiefly as a counterweight to Iran rather than as a bulwark against jihadist terror. A large-scale reduction in the U.S. regional presence will therefore entail a change in U.S. strategy or in the strategic environment.

This paper proposes changes to U.S. policy to better align policy with the reduced threat.

No policy disconnected from politics is sustainable. For the foreseeable future, no politician of either major party will want to be accused of having disregarded a threat actualized on her or his watch and will—as a matter of political prudence—not countenance a unilaterally declared end to the war on terror. The policy departures recommended in this paper are intended to thread the needle by reducing the scope and intensity of U.S. CT operations and increasing congressional oversight, while retaining an effective capacity for self-defense. The threat of terrorism is not entirely going to disappear; the U.S. will need to retain capabilities, particularly in the Middle East and Indian Ocean, that enable an effective response to imminent threats.

By engendering a discussion of the changes in the nature and scope of the terrorist threat to the United States, we hope to widen the space for a reconsideration of emerging threats, not least infectious disease, whose effects are arguably more insidious and dislocating than terrorism. This is an unfolding story. The Clinton administration had anticipated this challenge, establishing a National Security Council directorate for international health security and putting in place response capabilities. Regrettably, these measures were not activated with the early detection of Covid-19. The Trump administration has reverted to a more conventional view of national security, thus inadvertently exposing Americans to a grave threat, which, not incidentally, also harms U.S. military readiness.

In the 19 years since the invasion of Afghanistan, successive administrations, Republican and Democratic, have relied heavily on forward deployed combat forces to counter the threat of jihadist terrorism.¹ Their missions have included conventional combat operations, raids, and targeted killings using drones or other platforms. Current military commitments in the war against jihadist terrorism, however, are out of proportion to the damage jihadists are currently capable of inflicting on Americans. In some situations, deployments can jeopardize the goal of countering radicalization. There are compelling military, political, and economic rationales for reducing the size of the force dedicated to this mission in the greater Middle East and Africa, which, as of 2016, had absorbed 55% and 17% respectively of all deployed special operations forces (SOF). As the SOF numbers declined by a third in the greater Middle East over the previous decade, the number in Africa leapt by 1600%.² A reduction in these forces in both theaters would yield a footprint that is more closely aligned with the lessened threat of jihadist terrorism to the U.S. homeland.

Although this paper makes the case for winding down the war on terror in the Middle East, Africa, and South Asia, it does so with several caveats. U.S. counterterrorism operations in the region are umbilically linked to the broader U.S. military posture, but they do not drive it. This presents a challenge as an analytical matter, since the larger U.S. military posture has been justified by a welter of objectives ranging from facilitating humanitarian assistance to weakening the Assad regime in Syria, strengthening the Iraqi government, rolling back Iranian power and influence in the region, protecting the Kurds, assisting the Turks, and backing a weak central government in Kabul against an Islamist social movement and a potent insurrection. Battling the remnants of the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq is also asserted as an objective, but it is of decreasing urgency.

As these objectives have coalesced or collided, the U.S. presence has ebbed and flowed. In recent years, this tidal movement was partly due to differing views within the Trump administration regarding the salience of the region to U.S. interests and therefore the utility of the U.S. military presence. The roles of Israel, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE, all eager to enlist the U.S. in their efforts to weaken Iran, have also been important, as the White House could not easily disregard their anxieties and the pressure they were able to bring to bear, particularly during the Trump administration. Complicating matters, multiple missions meant that troops dedicated to counterterrorism operations supported other combat missions as well, as seen most recently in confrontations with Russian-supported forces in Syria. These missions would continue to drive the U.S. forward presence, even if maintaining CT activities were scratched off the Pentagon's to-do list. It is unlikely that even the Office of Management and Budget could tease out expenditures specific to CT operations from the broader Overseas Contingency Operations budget.

The Costs of the WOT

Critics of the global war on terror often emphasize the large bill associated with U.S. military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan and our extended occupation of these two countries. This criticism, however, conflates prolonged counterinsurgency (COIN) and nation building operations with a global CT campaign. The distinctions are essential to note. The decision to invade Iraq in 2003 was justified on multiple grounds, only one of which was related to counterterrorism. This was expressed at the time by the asserted need “to fight them over there so we don’t have to fight them over here.”

In the years after coalition forces crossed the Iraqi border in March 2003, the U.S. battled a full-blown insurrection and then intervened in a civil war on behalf of a beleaguered Iraqi government. It was only after the emergence of ISIS in 2014 that the U.S. was engaged solely in a CT campaign, in which Iraqi forces bore the brunt of the fighting. The Trump administration no longer justifies the presence of U.S. troops in Iraq as related solely to counterterrorism; it argues the troops are there to counter Iranian power projection.³ In Afghanistan, CT operations morphed into an open-ended experiment in nation building, stabilization, and reconstruction long after al-Qaeda’s presence was dispersed.⁴

The costs of these campaigns to the U.S. and to the countries where COIN has been waged have been ably documented by authoritative academic research and by the U.S. government.⁵ The important points to recall are that these are sunk costs that cannot be recovered, and they are not relevant to the current debate about the appropriate scope and scale of U.S. global anti-terror operations. If the U.S. wants to avoid the tremendous toll of civilian death and injury and the expenditure of blood and treasure in response to a future terrorist attack on U.S. soil, it will first avoid large-scale expeditionary operations in failed or failing states with the professed aim of establishing a durable civil order. There are very few prominent politicians apart from Senator Lindsey Graham, who currently favor regime change and nation building in response to a jihadist threat.



A fighter of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIS) holds an ISIS flag and a weapon on a street in the city of Mosul June 23, 2014. REUTERS

Indeed, the costs of global CT operations are a rounding error in the context of an FY 2020 defense budget of \$738 billion. At the same time, the claim that the U.S. would save a great deal simply by ending the WOT is hard to assess, primarily because of the programmatic and budgetary challenges of disentangling expenditures in support of the war on terror from spending that supports this versus other related operations. According to a study of CT spending led by Amy Belasco⁶, an authoritative, nonpartisan expert on national security financing, the Defense and State Departments obligated \$107.3 billion in non-war related expenditures from 2005 to 2017 under the war on terror rubric. But this is a best guess. Working out exactly what line items in the budget are related to counterterrorism is an arduous accounting challenge. It is difficult, if not impossible, to isolate CT spending, for example, from the budget for command, control, communications, reconnaissance and surveillance, combat support, and service support.

Furthermore, while CT operations are reliant on a larger regional force presence, regional commands do not rely on their CT components. The archipelago of U.S. bases in Syria and Iraq, for example, depends on a complex and relatively dense support system. Indeed, the top lines for these budget items would look much the same if the WOT were suddenly cancelled and “war on terror” units and capabilities were struck from the order of battle. Finally, there is the obvious point that no savings would accrue if WOT forces were withdrawn from forward deployed positions but were retained and repurposed for other missions rather than demobilized.

The reality is that the cost of using a very limited number of special operations forces, the intelligence community’s global system for targeted killings, airpower, and local forces to combat terrorist threats to U.S. persons is affordable, compared, for example, with the acquisition of major weapons systems, research and development, or fleet operations to counter Chinese maneuvers in the western Pacific. (The budgetary impact of Covid–19 relief programs could well change the current assessment of what is affordable.) But winding down the WOT would nonetheless have a salutary effect on U.S. security, primarily because it would mitigate adverse perceptions of the United States in the regional locations where U.S. forces have been conducting combat operations for the past two decades. This point is often missed and now deserves a place in forward calculations.

The Nature of the Jihadist Terrorist Threat

In light of the political and security costs the U.S. incurs in its CT operations in response to terrorist activity, it is fair to ask two questions: Does the nature of the jihadist terrorist threat to the U.S. homeland justify these costs? Is there an alternative counterterrorism strategy that promises more effective results with lower risks?

It is possible to look at what the U.S. has spent on counterterrorism operations and draw two different conclusions. The first is that the successful prosecution of the war “over there” has significantly reduced the terrorist threat “here.” The second is that the strategy of jihadist armed groups has shifted from attacking the U.S. to waging war within weak regional states. This renders the counterinsurgency operations the U.S. has conducted in Iraq, Afghanistan, and elsewhere—which have assumed the character of the prolonged policing operations once conducted by European colonial powers—less relevant to the jihadist challenge to the homeland. The ascendancy of local rather than global goals might not be permanent. Since the U.S. killed ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in northern Syria last October, his successor has signaled a new direction. Abdul Rahman al-Mawli al-Salbi, who co-founded ISIS with al-Baghdadi, broadcast the equivalent of a state of the union speech in January 2020 in which he indicated that his preference is to revert to an al-Qaeda-style strategy focused on attacking the United States.⁷

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The capacity of ISIS to do this, however, is open to question, and the new strategy, in operational terms, might simply entail an intensified English-language propaganda campaign aimed at American Muslims or malcontents looking for a cause. The declaration of epic aims, as the United States has learned through hard experience, is still subject to quotidian constraints, including the adversary’s strength and will and one’s own ability to match strategic ends with the necessary means. Thus, al-Salbi’s manifesto is best read for insight into his thinking rather than as prophecy. The jihadist track record in attacks against the U.S. homeland, at any rate, is unimpressive. These groups have only succeeded once in infiltrating the United States to carry out an attack since al-Qaeda’s September 11 onslaught. While the United States has made progress in correcting the mistakes made by intelligence and law enforcement agencies preceding al-Qaeda’s surprise attack, it is unclear that jihadists have made equal advances.

Judging from its deployment patterns, the U.S. currently defines the jihadist threat as large and amorphous. From Washington’s perspective, the threat is comprised of Sunni militants fighting

the Iraqi government; the Taliban battling the Afghan government; Iran, Lebanese Hezbollah, and ISIS circulating in Syria; al-Qaeda-linked militants and Houthi Ansar Allah militias in Yemen; al-Shabaab insurgents in the Horn of Africa; Abu Sayyaf guerillas in the Philippines; and an assortment of militants, criminals, and armed extremists in Algeria, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Senegal, Nigeria, and Morocco. In the Western Hemisphere, Operation Enduring Freedom–Caribbean and Central America (OEF–CCA) is engaged in a “key initiative to address potential terrorist threats in the region.”⁸ There are now more special operations forces in Africa than anywhere else except the greater Middle East. According to the Special Operations Command within AFRICOM, the U.S. military deploys 1,700 trainers and advisers in 20 countries across the continent, and at any given time these forces are conducting 100 missions a day.⁹ Worldwide, the Defense Department has allocated \$3.7 billion from FY 2009 to 2017 for upgrading the counterterrorism capabilities of U.S. partners.¹⁰

The breadth and diversity of the countries where the U.S. maintains counterterrorism deployments and operations is measure enough that the enemy is not monolithic, even if most groups espouse a more or less unified set of beliefs as to the combatant status of non-Muslims and of Muslims considered heretical. Given the remarkable array of these deployments, it would be reasonable to infer that the U.S. is bent on subduing all movements that use or justify violence in pursuit of their objectives, rather than just those who credibly threaten the U.S. homeland or American citizens and installations abroad. And as a demonstration of the law of unintended consequences, deployments justified at some point as counterterrorism operations have also brought the U.S. into confrontations in Syria with Russia and Turkey.

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If there is anything U.S. adversaries in the broad front of the war on terror have in common, it is their status as combatants in civil wars or in insurgencies contending for local and regional power. (Al-Qaeda in its early and middle phases, by contrast, focused on attacking outside powers that it perceived as supporting apostate Muslim regimes.¹¹) ISIS displayed this local preoccupation in its grandiose attempt to erase the borders drawn in the 1916 Sykes-Picot Agreement and reestablish the caliphate after a disruption of 90 years. Although this campaign included attacks against the United Kingdom and France, its ambitions were clearly territorial and therefore necessarily local. The Islamic State's gains on the ground were reversed relatively quickly by a multinational campaign in which the awkward combination of the United States, Russia, Syria, Iraq, Kurds, and Iran played leading roles. The key point is that this was a local battle fought locally. The physical destruction of the declared caliphate was not intended to magically delete the Islamic State's ideology from the imaginations of those who are oppressed, believe their religion is under attack or disrespected, or are otherwise aggrieved, even as it has reinforced the despair of some and the determination of others.

Extirpating an ideology that so satisfactorily explains the plight of its adherents and offers such a boldly straightforward solution is very hard, if not impossible, for outsiders to accomplish. Indeed, the roots of radicalism are difficult to disentangle, which accounts in part for the reductionism regrettably evident in the debate. In parts of the Middle East and Africa, failed, abusive, and illegitimate governments; economic deprivation; environmental degradation; inadequate education, social services, and health care delivery; political disenfranchisement; indiscriminate and aggressive policing, and pervasive, ostentatious corruption at all levels of governance will ensure a large pool of angry unemployed young men and women.¹² There is little hope of these conditions disappearing in the near future; indeed, they are likely to worsen at least in the medium term. Yet there is no plan for a long war to combat these pre-existing conditions, presumably because of an appreciation among outside powers of the sheer impossibility of winning such a war. In this respect, the interventions of the past twenty years have been chastening. Battling the violent actors mobilized by these conditions—clearly defined adversaries requiring a military as against a holistic response—seems cheaper and easier.

On the supply side, so to say, the dispossessed will remain ripe for cooptation and enlistment by local power entrepreneurs who weaponize ideological claims and pay foot-soldiers recruited to their cause, and by foreign governments that hand out weapons and cash to recruit fighters for proxy battles. Americans are present throughout regions where these elements exist, and as we have seen over the years in numerous instances, they are vulnerable to attack. There are clearly a variety of ways in which Americans could suffer at the hands of terrorists. The questions are whether military interventions could have prevented these events or, conversely, might have caused them. Neither question can be answered with absolute certainty, but there is research to suggest that suicide terrorist attacks, in particular, are motivated by occupation or the presence of foreign troops.¹³

The most salient feature of the contemporary jihadist terrorist threat is its ideational character and the ease with which it can be disseminated widely, vividly, and graphically on the internet via social media platforms. These qualities enable a process of self-radicalization that, for the first time, suggests the prospect of a truly leaderless resistance—as reflected in the terrorist attacks conducted in San Bernardino, C.A., and Orlando, F.L., by radicalized individuals. Even this concept is open to argument, of course, since social media messaging is often centrally directed and then rebroadcast via numberless followers throughout the cybersphere. There is also some evidence that the catalyst for internet-borne terrorism has occasionally entailed an inspiring encounter with an individual with combat experience in one of the post-September 11 battlefields.¹⁴ Intervention by outside powers, repressive regional governments, highly visible corruption, and other excesses of local elites, combined with communal rivalries believed to be primordial, contribute to a powerful narrative easily expressed in a small number of memes. Rapid evolution of communication technologies supercharge the spread of these memes and offer ample justification for a violent response wherever the communicant resides. These technologies also convey potent imagery of the violent actions of others carried out with no more than a knife or a vehicle jumping a curb. Taken together, these conditions render physical sanctuaries less important in conducting transnational jihadist terrorist attacks than they were at al-Qaeda's inception. Safe haven now can be in the Cloud, or in an immigrant neighborhood in Brussels.

The drivers of the jihadist terrorist threat are not susceptible to military countermeasures, although the destruction of the ISIS caliphate did curtail much of the centralized online propaganda it produced, if only temporarily. Presumably, ISIS cadres will find a way over time to reestablish robust information operations. The point to be taken is that changes in the scope and tempo of U.S. counterterrorism operations are unlikely to have corresponding effects on the drivers of extremist violence, except perhaps to energize radicalized individuals and affirm claims made about the United States by their leaders. It is probably true that some jihadist terrorists will interpret and publicize a U.S. drawdown as a victory for them, but this is not a good reason to maintain a troop presence where reductions are otherwise in the U.S. interest. However, because forward deployed forces can be more effective than other approaches in disrupting imminent attacks against Americans emanating from a weak or hostile state, a drawdown of U.S. counterterrorism assets will require finesse.

“Plans to reform economies and liberalize politics have underestimated the structural nature of the problems and overestimated the power of the United States to fix them.”

The net effect of these countervailing trends is not easy to determine, but it is clear that there are serious limits on U.S. capacity to help states improve governance and fix the economic, social, and political factors that have contributed to the ubiquity of extremist groups. It should also be acknowledged that there is little reason to expect democracy promotion efforts to revamp the political economies of competitive or fully authoritarian regimes in the region.¹⁵ Plans to reform economies and liberalize politics have underestimated the structural nature of the problems and overestimated the power of the United States to fix them. Although such efforts can help people at the margin—and in certain cases are worthwhile for this very reason—it is unrealistic to expect them to reduce political and religious violence.

Problems with the Current U.S. CT Strategy

In assessing the risks, costs, benefits, and consequences of American CT operations, it is important to distinguish among four related but separate lines of effort: 1) targeted strikes against terrorists; 2) counterinsurgency operations; 3) building partnership capacity, and 4) homeland security programs.

Targeted Strikes Against Terrorists. Targeted killing is narrower in scope, scale, and military effect than counterinsurgency operations. These consist of “personality” and “signature” strikes against high-value targets. The former are attacks against known individuals whose precise location has been identified by real or near-real time intelligence. Signature strikes are executed when the identity of the targets is not known but patterns of activity indicate involvement in terrorist activity. The U.S. military carries out targeted killings using a combination of small-unit special operations forces conducting raids on suspected terrorist hideouts and tactical aircraft and drones, even if the U.S. has not established any intent on the part of the target to attack the U.S. homeland. They are limited in duration and will become increasingly precise and lethal with the introduction of more modern munitions. To date, according to the Bureau of Investigative Journalism, there have been at least 14,040 air strikes in Pakistan, Yemen, Somalia, and Afghanistan, which together killed 910 to 2,200 civilians from 2004 to 2018.¹⁶ Further, there is anecdotal information, albeit with few hard data, to suggest that these strikes can motivate at least some fence-sitters to pick up a gun and point it at U.S. targets.¹⁷



A United States Air Force MQ-9 Reaper drone sits on static display at the 2018 Arctic Thunder Airshow in Anchorage, Alaska, June 30, 2018.

The continuation of special operations and armed drone attacks when there is no conclusive evidence that the targeted individual poses an imminent threat to Americans, while a low-cost way of transferring risk, is problematic from an ethical and legal perspective. A more appropriate approach would be to rely on targeted killings within a framework of constraints that limit them to situations where American non-combatants, or any remaining forward deployed forces, face an imminent threat; where, to the extent practicable, the attack can be conducted effectively with offshore assets or from locations outside the conflict zone, rather than requiring permanently deployed ground troops; and where such operations are in accord with U.S. and international law. In the Obama administration, at least, the nature of “imminence” was vigorously debated, as was the question whether a potential target was engaged in activities that would “ultimately” result in American deaths. Participants in those discussions recall that a reasonable balance was struck between those who felt the constraints were too tight and those who believed that some targets were not a clearly imminent threat. These were not simple calculations for either the policy or operational echelons.

The stricter criteria proposed here would require enforcement to be effective. Commanding officers should be accountable for violations, civilian casualties should be documented, and noncombatant victims should be compensated for the suffering they have endured. (The Trump administration has rejected these requirements.) Finally, although the drone killing last January of Qassim Soleimani, Iran’s premier military strategist, fell into a definitional gray area between a legitimate attack against an enemy commander on the field of battle and an assassination of a government official, Congress would do well to transform the current executive order banning assassination by the U.S. government into legislation that clarifies which targets are permissible and under what circumstances.

Counterinsurgency Operations. The second strategic component, large-scale, offensive counterinsurgency operations whose primary objective is to seize and control territory, aims in part to deny terrorists safe harbors from which to operate. These operations require hundreds or thousands of forward deployed troops and result in more extensive military and civilian casualties. Depending on where they are located, they are liable to be perceived as occupying forces and generate blowback. Where the United States has chosen to impose a military presence in states where this presence has been explicitly rejected by a parliamentary process and popular sentiment, as is the case now in Iraq, the risks are considerable. Further, the death, destruction, and dislocation caused by these operations place unmanageable burdens on host governments whose failure to deliver adequate public services has already eroded their legitimacy—which, in turn, can enhance the credibility and appeal of an insurgency.

The war against the Islamic State succeeded in Iraq and Syria as a counterinsurgency operation, but it is important to understand the narrow circumstances in which it might be replicated in the future. Several factors stand out. First, the objective to destroy the Islamic State in both countries was specific and largely ungiven to mission creep. Second, the effort relied on multinational forces and was backed by a broad global consensus. It also had the support of the Iraqi government and the majority of the Iraqi public, the acquiescence of the Syrian government, and local armed forces, including Iranian-backed militias in Iraq. Finally, ISIS had weak local roots, no strategic depth once its enemies synchronized their military operations in Syria and Iraq, no reliable safe haven apart from a porous border with Turkey, and no regional or global allies to aid in its defense.



Syrian refugee child from Aleppo entering Turkey in Kilis. September 8, 2017; Kilis, Turkey.

To the degree that the ongoing anti-ISIS mission in Syria and Iraq has become problematic, it is because of the broadening of the mission in Syria (e.g., to protect the Kurds, block Syrian government access to oil fields, and interdict Iranian land corridors through Iraq and Syria). In Iraq, U.S. policy has complicated Baghdad's cooperation with the U.S. military by subordinating anti-ISIS objectives to an effort to roll back Iranian influence in Iraq, which has brought U.S. forces into conflict with Iraqi Shi'a militias and entailed a U.S. green light for an Israeli airstrike on an Iraqi Shi'a base in Iraq.¹⁸ Most recently, the killing of Soleimani, commander of the Quds Force within Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, and Iraqi Popular Mobilization Forces commander Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, alongside several other Iranians and Iraqis near the Baghdad airport, triggered an Iraqi parliamentary vote demanding the departure of

U.S. forces. Mustafa al-Khadimi, elected prime minister in a May 7 parliamentary vote, will face a daunting set of challenges, not least adjudicating the future of the U.S. military presence in Iraq.¹⁹

Even with the dismantling of the ISIS caliphate in Iraq and Syria, U.S. forces will find it difficult to ensure an enduring defeat of ISIS or block the emergence of new armed groups intent on challenging governments too weak to control their territory and preserve a monopoly on the use of force within their borders. Further, as lethal as U.S. operations are, there are at least some limits to what the rules of war permit and American opinion will tolerate in a counterinsurgency context. Residual ISIS combatants and their support structures, as well as newly emerging armed groups, therefore, are likely to survive to fight another day. Their resurgence is effectively guaranteed by the evident disenfranchisement of key sectors of regional populations, patterns of weak or fragmented governance, especially in parts of Iraq and Syria, and a cogent ideology that explains these conditions and justifies a violent response.

U.S. counterterrorist operations also come at a political and diplomatic cost. In Iraq, the counter-ISIS campaign lashed the U.S. to the mast of a corrupt and embattled government, even as Washington throttles its relationship with Iraq because of its ties to Iran—which, of course, is a mortal foe of the Sunni zealots of ISIS. In Syria, CT operations have entangled the U.S. with a regional minority (Syrian Kurds) that has left Washington at odds with a treaty ally and distorted U.S. war aims by setting the security of Syrian Kurds as a new military priority along with the seizure of Syrian oil fields.²⁰

In contrast to the anti-ISIS campaign, the U.S. failure in Afghanistan is attributable primarily to the U.S. decision to broaden the military's mission from eradicating al-Qaeda to fighting the Taliban and then undertaking a state-building enterprise. As Afghan operations expanded to nurturing a more competent and less corrupt Afghan central government capable of delivering essential public services, ensuring respect for the rights of women and minorities, and putting in place a power-sharing arrangement in Kabul, Afghanistan became a case of mission creep writ large. In addition, many Afghans opposed the U.S. presence, which had been authorized by an administration—George W. Bush's—that was able to garner only limited participation of coalition members in combat operations.

Given U.S. experience, it would be unreasonable to expect that any number of U.S. boots on the ground could reduce the ideological threat of domestic terrorism committed by self-radicalized jihadists. In fact, U.S. interventions have made the problem worse for three reasons:

- U.S. ground troops reinforce the jihadist narrative that infidels are occupying holy Muslim lands, propping up corrupt and repressive governments, and scheming to take possession of oil.²¹
- U.S. interventions with ground forces in countries suffering from ethnic, sectarian, and tribal fissures inevitably mean involvement in messy and open-ended conflicts. In effect, American troops get stuck performing “colonial policing” duties in countries that won independence within the living memory of their older citizens and where nationalist fervor and resentment of outside interference run strong. As one study has noted, stationing U.S. ground troops in the region “increases the likelihood of transnational terrorist attacks against the global interests of the deploying state.”²² The U.S. cannot expect to replicate the occasional successes of colonial powers precisely because they had the advantage of a century or more of penetration and occupation, nor would that necessarily be desirable. Long and intensive experience and armies and gendarmeries trained and officered by the colonizer's military is a questionable luxury unavailable to U.S. forces still struggling to master, as it is euphemistically termed, “human terrain.”
- The United States will not be able to defeat jihadist terrorist threats “over there” as long as U.S. intervention inflames civil conflicts and inadvertently contributes to the dysfunctions of the host government. We have witnessed this phenomenon in Afghanistan, to take but one example. The inability of the U.S.-trained and equipped Afghan National Security Forces to control more than 50 percent of Afghan territory speaks for itself.

“There are clearly a variety of ways in which Americans could suffer at the hands of terrorists. The questions are whether military interventions could have prevented these events or, conversely, might have caused them.”

If the key to winning these insurgencies, according to counterinsurgency doctrine, is splitting dead-enders from the local population, whose security, standard of living, and political participation are then improved by the government with the support of the United States, then U.S.-led military operations can be counterproductive. Apart from alienating noncombatants who experience the impact of U.S. firepower, these operations involve the United States taking sides—and being seen to take sides—in the internecine wars that kindle Islamist militancy.

The advocates of ground forces argue that a U.S. military presence, even of the kind that CENTCOM maintains in northeastern and southeastern Syria—a string of small bivouacs and firebases—is essential to the viability of the U.S. intelligence collection effort. The intelligence community piggybacks its local outposts on this relatively modest military infrastructure, from which intelligence officers can sortie to debrief and task assets and sources. The presence of military units, according to the intelligence community, makes these collection efforts less risky by deterring attacks against its personnel in the field.

This argument raises the question of how much of the intelligence being collected relates to imminent terrorist threats against the U.S. homeland and how much relates to force protection, identification of targets assessed as threats to, say, U.S. or Syrian Democratic Forces control of territory, and/or general situation awareness. The intelligence community contends that these categories are too difficult to tease apart and that, in effect, all collection is related one way or another to safeguarding Americans at home. Former senior U.S. counterterrorism officials we interviewed nonetheless emphasized that the military infrastructure required to support intelligence collection did not have to be heavy or especially elaborate. Yet, from a DOD perspective, small isolated deployments are intrinsically vulnerable, so their presence needs to be within the rapid response envelope of larger, more capable units. Thus, a small presence still necessitates a large one, although, as discussed below, it is not necessarily the case that such a presence needs to be located in current combat zones. With DOD staking out this position, the intelligence community had no incentive to differ.

“The United States will not be able to defeat jihadist terrorist threats ‘over there’ as long as U.S. intervention inflames civil conflicts and inadvertently contributes to the dysfunctions of the host government.”

Building Partnership Capacity. Advocates of continued reliance on the U.S. military and forward deployed forces to deal with the global threat of jihadist terrorism rely on two arguments. First, the Defense Department has developed a successful model of building partnership capacity (BPC) in local military and security forces to assume the responsibility of dealing with the terrorist threats they confront, lessening the burdens placed on American forces. Second, U.S. anti-terrorist forces now operate with a much lighter footprint, comprising low-intensity special forces operations and drone strikes. This approach is said to be effective and sustainable because of lower costs and fewer casualties, U.S. and foreign, associated with these operations. Both claims warrant scrutiny.

The BPC programs in the greater Middle East and Africa have produced a mixed record, sometimes resulting in short-term gains but always creating long-term problems. The U.S.–Syrian

Democratic Forces partnerships in northeast Syria to bring down the ISIS caliphate and, with Iraqi forces, to liberate Mosul are examples of how to seize and hold territory without putting large numbers of U.S. troops in harm’s way. But these examples also show clearly how providing arms and assistance endangers the recipient forces and fuels the very terrorism they are meant to fight.

In the Syrian case, the SDF suffered the loss of 12,000 troops, while the United States effectively took no casualties. However, the assistance created a dilemma for the SDF forces, primarily made up of Kurdish units, who came to rely on it to pursue their own mission for territorial expansion and protection unrelated to the joint mission of defeating ISIS, triggering conflict with Turkey. The aid also exposed them as U.S.–funded military units under threat of suspicion and retaliation by the Syrian government and subsequently led to demands by critics across the spectrum of party affiliation as well as by Israel that U.S. troops remain in Syria to avoid “abandoning the Kurds.”²³ Earlier in the Syrian civil war, U.S. support for allegedly moderate anti-Assad rebels intensified the civil war, worsened conditions for noncombatants, weakened the regime without toppling it or forcing it to negotiate, and likely triggered Russian intervention. These results came at the cost of reportedly \$1 billion per year, until the Trump administration ended

the undertaking in 2017.²⁴ The Pentagon reported it had “lost” \$715 million worth of arms provided to armed groups in Syria, and credible evidence suggests that at least some of those weapons ended up in the hands of ISIS.²⁵ Similarly in the Yemen case, U.S. arms provided to Saudi Arabia and the UAE were documented to be used by al-Qaeda in Yemen.²⁶

In Iraq, the army units and Kurdistan Regional Government forces that fled Mosul in June 2014 were trained and advised by U.S. special forces.²⁷ In the second and successful battle for Mosul from October 2016 to July 2017, regular Iraqi army units, and especially Iraq’s special operations forces trained and equipped by U.S. forces, performed much better, but not without violations of human rights that in some cases rivaled the abuses of ISIS.²⁸ The Popular Mobilization Forces aided by Iran also contributed to the relief of Mosul, and were likewise accused of serious human rights violations.²⁹ Likewise, U.S. army and SOF units have succeeded in training and equipping Afghanistan’s elite CT forces. But they are, by and large, too few in number to seize and hold territory independently. Overall U.S. efforts to train and equip regular army units in both countries have achieved unimpressive results.³⁰



Funeral of Qassem Suleimani in Tehran, January 7, 2020.

Elsewhere in the Arab world, it has been painfully clear since the Arab uprisings in 2011 that the domestic security practices of countries such as Egypt and Yemen—whose armed forces were trained and/or equipped at one time or another by American forces to combat terrorists—have engendered grievances that fuel militancy. Egyptian security forces armed by the United States have razed tens of thousands of homes in the Sinai and carried out large-scale arrests, extrajudicial executions, and interrogations involving torture as part of a long-term counterterrorism operation.³¹ In Yemen, U.S.-trained units did little to combat the terror threat in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks, with credible reports suggesting the government of deposed President Saleh deliberately maintained the terror threat to ensure continued U.S. funding and support.³²

Beyond the Arab world, the Pentagon has flagged the success of BPC programs in Mali, Niger, Somalia, Kenya, and elsewhere in sub-Saharan Africa. But this assessment overlooks several problems. Most partners have proved ineffective or irresponsible, or have had conflicting interests and agendas that make a coherent and unified strategy difficult to implement. The al-Shabaab attack on the Manda Bay airfield in Kenya in 2019, for example, spurred criticism from the U.S. military about the unreliability of its partners in the Kenyan armed forces.³³ Moreover, local security units partnered with U.S. trainers and advisers and operating with U.S. equipment have abused human rights and engaged in corrupt activities, contributing to the appeal of extremist movements. The corruption and human rights atrocities committed by the Nigerian armed forces in its fight against Boko Haram have also occurred in Burundi, Mali, Niger, South Sudan, and Uganda.³⁴ As the Pentagon's regional study center has recently noted, the number of active terrorists in the Sahel has grown as U.S. assistance and BPC engagement have increased.³⁵

The U.S. experience working "by, with, and through" host country militaries to build their internal security capabilities should be confined largely to instances where the recipient country is unable to contain an imminent threat to Americans and where counterinsurgency units are not implicated in grave violations of human rights. One could envisage exceptions to the imminent threat criterion where the bilateral relationship is based on a broad array of shared interests and values and the government's efforts to meet the needs of the population are threatened by militants. Such cases, however, seem to be uncommon.

In sum, security cooperation programs that meet both criteria would reflect the risks they ask local forces to absorb, human rights and laws of war abuses by host country security forces and armed groups, government corruption and lawless behavior, and progress in reforming security sectors to make them more accountable and less repressive.

To increase confidence in compliance with these requirements, Congress could formally raise the bar for providing U.S. military assistance and training to foreign security forces. One approach would be to strengthen existing law banning the transfer of weapons and training to military units implicated in serious rights abuses, the so-called Leahy Provisions,³⁶ by blocking military assistance and training to governments, rather than specific units implicated in abuses. Any such legislation would need to be carefully drafted to avoid penalizing governments willing but unable to exert control over the actions of culpable units in the field and/or where assistance is mandated by strategic necessity despite the recipient's repressive behavior. A carve-out along these lines, however, is clearly open to misuse and would have to be framed narrowly both in scope and duration.

If left unreformed, most BPC assistance is likely to be wasted or misapplied in ways that exacerbate the internal terrorist threats these countries face. It also bears repeating that, by and large, the internal threats facing these governments are consumed with local grievances and goals and appear not to pose a threat to the U.S. homeland. The effort to arm and increase the capacity of local security forces, whether armed groups or official government forces, to deal with terrorist threats can succeed only under rare conditions. These conditions include the host government having domestic legitimacy, the local forces having commitment, motivation, and disciplined behavior toward their civilian compatriots, and both having access to ample resources. These will remain tough conditions to meet.

"It is probably true that some jihadist terrorists will interpret and publicize a U.S. drawdown as a victory for them, but this is not a good reason to maintain a troop presence where reductions are otherwise in the U.S. interest."

Homeland Security. Homeland security, the fourth component of U.S. efforts to prevent terrorist attacks, has been by far the most successful. From FY 2002 to FY 2017, the Departments of Homeland Security, Defense, State, Health and Human Services, and Justice spent \$890 billion on domestic security.³⁷ Most of this money has been spent on preventing terrorist travel to the United States, strengthening surface transportation and global supply chain security, protecting critical infrastructure, and detecting and preventing biological, radiological, and nuclear threats.

“One of the unfortunate byproducts of the conduct of the war on terror, particularly the claim that by fighting ‘them over there’ we will not have to fight ‘them over here,’ is the belief that the threat of terrorism should and can be reduced to zero.”

It is indisputable that better domestic planning and preparedness for preventing terrorist attacks have added extra layers of protection to U.S. territory. Since 9/11, only one successful terrorist attack on the U.S. homeland has been carried out by a foreign jihadist who infiltrated the United States for this purpose, although some attacks were carried out by individuals who at some point had consorted with jihadists in Pakistan, Afghanistan, or Chechnya, or who were otherwise inspired by propaganda developed and disseminated by centralized entities outside the United States. This said, other efforts to carry out jihadist terror attacks have been successfully thwarted. At the height of the ISIS resurgence, there were 196 federal prosecutions against jihadist sympathizers accused of terrorism related offenses, 101 of which involved U.S. citizens, resulting in 137 convictions.³⁸ At this stage, the dominant terrorist threat facing the United States is attacks by individuals radicalized by online propaganda disseminated by jihadist groups in the Middle East, or by right-wing ultranationalist groups, some of whom train in Russia and Ukraine.³⁹

Despite this exceptional record on the part of U.S. law enforcement, public attention and political discourse remain fixed on the use of force abroad to defeat jihadist terrorism. There are at least three reasons for this:

- Homeland security lacks the political traction of expeditionary wars, partly because of the mindset that if the United States is not killing terrorists “over there” it will have to fight them here, and partly because many foreign policy practitioners and analysts equate the exercise of American leadership with the use of force abroad to respond to the nation’s national security challenges.
- Domestic security measures, in particular government surveillance and data collection practices, have infringed upon the civil and privacy rights of American citizens, tarnishing the homeland security enterprise.
- Most Americans are exposed to homeland security operations in one setting, airports, where interactions with the Transportation Security Administration can be vexing. Given that one cannot prove a negative, it is impossible to demonstrate that airport security procedures have prevented or deterred potentially deadly incidents. Yet it is highly likely that this has been the case. Indeed, aviation security has now shifted its focus to the insider threat and danger posed by drones launched for malicious or merely recreational purposes.⁴⁰

These negative perceptions of DHS are also a function not only of its lack of bureaucratic clout and congressional support, but also the limited interest it attracts from the military-industrial complex, which keeps defense spending on counterterrorism buoyant. In fact, since September 11 the government has spent nearly \$6 trillion on kinetic operations to wage counterinsurgency warfare, roughly six times more than on homeland defense during this same period, thereby guaranteeing that voters (and members of Congress) see the former as more effective and, of course, more glamorous. Popular entertainment is replete with the exploits of special operators, while TSA luggage screeners are derided or simply ignored.

The United States has been playing offense and defense with little understanding of the strategic and budgetary tradeoffs between them. It would be wise for the current or next administration to assess these tradeoffs and the comparative advantages of offense and defense, while bearing in mind that homeland defense operations result in fewer deaths, less destruction and—when conducted with due regard for community relations—are less likely to mobilize those susceptible to radicalization.

Current U.S. Military Posture and the Alternatives

The U.S. global military posture and basing structure serves a variety of deterrence, crisis response, reassurance, and military operational requirements. Whether and how this overall footprint should be adjusted to contemporary geopolitical circumstances is beyond the scope of this paper.⁴¹ But part of this forward deployed presence throughout the greater Middle East and South Asia, and to a lesser extent in Africa and elsewhere in Asia, is dedicated to the stated mission of executing and supporting sustained counterterrorism operations. Relying more heavily on an offshore posture for conducting targeted terrorist strikes would allow the United States to withdraw its counterterrorism units from established bases and rely more on air and naval assets outside the region, along with contingency access arrangements with partners in the region, to meet the operational requirements of lawful targeted killings or such other strikes as might be needed to disrupt preparations for an attack on the United States.



People in front of the Bar Hotel Le Carillon street Alliber in tribute to victims of the November 13, 2015 terrorist attack in Paris at the Bataclan.

U.S. sea-based assets, consisting primarily of carrier groups and attack submarines armed with conventionally armed sea-launched cruise missiles can substitute in some limited circumstances for drone attacks and the use of special forces in targeted killings. Further, the United States should also reduce its resort to armed drones commensurate with the lessening threat in a given region. The military could move remaining armed drones and their supporting command, control, communications, computing, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance infrastructure away from current conflict zones, either to offshore platforms or to friendly countries where U.S. forces are not engaged in kinetic operations, such as Jordan, Israel, GCC states, and perhaps Turkey. Marine Expeditionary Units in the northern Arabian Sea or eastern Mediterranean and smaller ground contingents deployed to Kuwait could act as a rapid response team to rescue U.S. intelligence operatives who may be threatened with attack.⁴²

In the aftermath of the deadly assault on the U.S. compounds in Benghazi on September 11, 2012, Pentagon planners reportedly aimed to create a “lily pad” network of facilities around the world that would enable a limited but highly capable force forward deployed in four to five “nodes” to respond to Benghazi-like contingencies, as well as serve as a scalable platform for other CT operations that might be necessitated by contingencies in diverse locales. These nodes were to be situated, for example, in the Persian Gulf area, the Mediterranean, West Africa, and Southeast Asia, either in friendly countries or possibly afloat. The precise locations were to be selected with the objective of achieving response times of less than 10 to 12 hours.

Although this proposal had the support of senior military leaders and appealed to policy makers, jurisdictional differences, operational complexities, the lack of perceived incentives at the service and command levels, and command changes led to the plan being shelved. Caution is therefore called for in making assumptions about how easy it might be to create a force presence that hits the sweet spot—robust enough to augment and protect intelligence collection capability and provide *in extremis* capability that is closer to real time response requirements, while still small enough to harvest the benefits of “withdrawal” from our currently over-deployed state. With this in mind, the current or successor administration should renew consideration of the “lily pad” concept.

Conclusions

Given the enduring sources of terrorism in the Middle East and elsewhere, the most realistic goal should be to limit U.S. involvement to defending against imminent threats to residents of the United States, both civilians and combatants, as well as official U.S. installations overseas. But the war on terror cannot be won any more than the war on drugs, which it resembles. As in that war, there is intense demand for the product, driven by primarily systemic socioeconomic problems and authoritarian rule, but also by hostility toward American policies in the region, the often-unwelcome presence of U.S. forces on Arab/Muslim lands, and U.S. support for corrupt, authoritarian, or abusive governments perceived as important to U.S. interests.

On those exceptional occasions when the use of force is required for CT purposes, it should be regulated by clear, specific, legally authorized, and narrowly and temporally defined objectives to preclude the proliferation of missions to satisfy a variety of U.S. constituencies inside and outside of government. Consistent with this view, legislation must be revised to avoid overly broad reliance on CT to justify military operations of unlimited duration and ensure accountability for military conduct, both to maintain professional discipline and to limit reputational harm from more or less inevitable military error and misconduct.

Current U.S. overseas military commitments in the war against jihadist terrorism are out of proportion to the damage jihadist terrorists are currently capable of inflicting on Americans and, in some situations, jeopardize the goal of countering radicalization. To some experienced analysts and scholars, the suggestion that jihadists outside of the U.S. currently lack the capacity, motivation, or both was tantamount to yet another premature declaration of victory in the war on terror that would surely be followed by another wave of demands for U.S. intervention.⁴³ In this view, Barack Obama's implementation of the Bush administration's agreement with Iraq to withdraw U.S. forces in 2011 unleashed ISIS in 2014, and Donald Trump's victory march over ISIS in 2019 presages the same outcome.⁴⁴ But the argument advanced here is rather that the overall growth in jihadist movements overseas does not necessarily amount to an unmanageable threat to the security of Americans at home, let alone a strategic challenge to the United States.

"The U.S. objective, therefore, should be to strike a better balance in its counterterrorism strategy between a very limited forward deployed military posture that minimizes the cost, exposure, and footprint of large-scale military operations."

A corresponding realignment of force posture and threat environment can be achieved at low risk, but it would be imprudent to assume that the possibility of a serious attack on the United States or its citizens abroad has been reduced to zero. This judgment might be dismissed by some as worst-case thinking, but it will be the reflexive view of presidents and politicians who fear the electoral effect of an attack on their watch. It cannot simply be dismissed. The U.S. objective, therefore, should be to strike a better balance in its counterterrorism strategy between a very limited forward deployed military posture that minimizes the cost, exposure, and footprint of large-scale military operations.

More broadly, political leaders would do well to encourage greater risk tolerance toward terrorist threats and foster a more resilient society, although incentives are structured perversely, and politicians will likely continue to see it in their interest to inflate threats and stoke anxieties. Still, public opinion polls consistently show the American public is tired of the war in Afghanistan.⁴⁵ And this was before the Covid-19 crisis revealed the irrelevance of the conventional national security thinking to threats emanating from nature. Thus, the political climate for a national discussion of the future of the war on terror might be better than it has been in the past. The starting point for this effort should be a responsible reassessment of the risks of jihadist terrorist attacks against the U.S. and the costs, risks, and consequences of maintaining our current CT strategy and force posture.

Washington needs to bring a more realistic perspective to the counterterrorist mission. The September 11 attacks were bound to produce a radical response by the United States, but not necessarily the invasion and occupation of Afghanistan and a 19-year struggle to subdue the Taliban and install a legitimate and competent government. The sweeping nature of the U.S. response was a function of the Bush administration's idiosyncratic preoccupation with Iraq, infatuation with the use of force, and Manichean worldview. Bearing that in mind, very large interventions in response to outrages even as shocking as the destruction of the World Trade Center, let alone lesser attacks whose proximate consequences might prove to be trivial, are unlikely to be launched at least while memories are relatively fresh. In the meantime, Americans will have to rethink the way we do business:

- In political terms, this means greater restraint in blaming U.S. political leaders for terrorist successes—barring clear cases of misjudgment—so administrations are not quite so incentivized to respond dramatically and disproportionately to attacks.
- In strategic terms, it will be necessary to assess more deliberately and cautiously the presumed reputational cost—in terms of weakened deterrence—of restraint in the face of attack.
- In legislative terms, Congress will need to revise the War Powers Act to ensure that any U.S. military actions in the future requires regular congressional review and approval.

American leaders and the public at large will also need to alter their thinking about risk and risk management. One of the unfortunate byproducts of the conduct of the war on terror, particularly the claim that by fighting “them over there” we will not have to fight “them over here,” is the belief that the threat of terrorism should and can be reduced to zero. This flawed notion was coupled to the conviction that the next attack would have an eschatological impact. These notions might finally be weakening their grip on the American psyche as citizens, for better or worse, go about their lives largely unaffected by gun massacres now perpetrated across the United States with a remarkable regularity by individuals motivated by a range of ideological or psychotic impulses. The Covid-19 crisis should also help spur this reassessment of risk and national security approaches. An April 2020 Pew Research poll shows that international health security has edged out terrorism as the most worrisome threat Americans think they face.⁴⁶

Nonetheless, any determined attempt to reshape U.S. counterterrorism strategy will be an uphill process because it will involve accepting somewhat greater risk. Thus, how public officials and opinion leaders address the issue of risk tolerance will be crucial. The general public must be educated to understand that risk cannot be extinguished completely and that there may be attacks by self-radicalized individuals, but in general the disadvantages of ongoing military operations outweigh the incremental risk to the larger U.S. posture overseas.

John Maynard Keynes is said to have replied to a critic by observing that “when my information changes, I alter my conclusions. What do you do, sir?” One of the greatest obstacles to changing the American mindset on the war on terror is psychological. Since the U.S. military coined “the long war” in 2006 to describe the global war on terror, the nature of the jihadist terrorist threat to the American homeland has fundamentally changed; yet, as previously pointed out, the U.S. government and much of the foreign policy establishment have failed to alter their conclusions about the transnational jihadist threat to the U.S. homeland and its implications for America’s military operations and force posture in the greater Middle East and beyond. Responsible statecraft demands that voters and policy makers join now in a careful, informed reassessment.

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America “goes not abroad in search of monsters to destroy.” — John Quincy Adams

The foreign policy of the United States has become detached from any defensible conception of U.S. interests and from a decent respect for the rights and dignity of humankind. Political leaders have increasingly deployed the military in a costly, counterproductive, and indiscriminate manner, normalizing war and treating armed dominance as an end in itself.

Moreover, much of the foreign policy community in Washington has succumbed to intellectual lethargy and dysfunction. It suppresses or avoids serious debate and fails to hold policymakers and commentators accountable for disastrous policies. It has forfeited the confidence of the American public. The result is a foreign policy that undermines American interests and tramples on American values while sacrificing the stores of influence that the United States had earned.

The Quincy Institute is an action-oriented think tank whose intent is to lay the foundation for a new foreign policy centered on diplomatic engagement and military restraint. The current, rare moment presents a once-in-a-generation opportunity to bring together like-minded progressives and conservatives and set U.S. foreign policy on a sensible and humane footing. Our intent is to seize this opportunity while it lies before us. Our country’s current circumstances demand it.



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