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AFTER ISIS: U.S. POLITICAL-MILITARY STRATEGY IN THE GLOBAL WAR ON TERROR



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Introduction

The United States is approaching a strategic pivot in its struggle against jihadist terror groups. It appears increasingly likely that ISIS will be militarily defeated, even if the precise timing remains uncertain.¹ The core of ISIS's self-declared caliphate in Iraq and Syria will be destroyed; the group will no longer exert control over significant territory or population in those countries. ISIS will go down fighting, of course, and do enormous amounts of harm in its death throes. Yet given the formidable international forces—anchored by the U.S. military—arrayed against it, and the organization's increasingly desperate military situation, it seems highly probable that ISIS's days are numbered.

Defeating ISIS militarily, however, will not bring decisive victory in America's broader conflict with jihadist terrorism. The United States has been waging that struggle for decades; it has been fighting the post-9/11 Global War on Terror (GWOT) for more than 15 years. This conflict will persist even after ISIS has passed from the scene. Some of ISIS's "provinces" in countries such as Libya or Egypt may endure; the threat posed by al Qaeda and its various affiliate organizations will remain. More broadly, so long as the root causes of jihadist ideology persist throughout much of the greater Middle East and beyond, so too will the threat itself. Indeed, the fact that the United States has now confronted multiple iterations of the GWOT over the past 15 years—first against core al Qaeda (AQ), then against the AQ affiliates, and now against ISIS—warns against expecting lasting victory in that conflict anytime soon. The end of intense hostilities against ISIS may merely mark the beginning of a new stage in the debate on what strategy will best protect America in the age of terror.

So, what political-military strategy should America pick?² The range of plausible choices is broad and encompasses four principal options. At one end of the spectrum, Washington could withdraw its military forces from the greater Middle East in hopes of averting the ideological blowback that is sometimes alleged to cause or at least exacerbate the terrorist threat. At the other end of the spectrum, the United States could conduct a "GWOT surge"—a heavy footprint approach comparable to the political-military approach seen in Iraq and Afghanistan at the height of the post-9/11 conflicts there. Under this strategy, the United States would conduct decisive military operations against any ISIS- or al Qaeda-like organizations that might remain or emerge following ISIS's military defeat, as well as intensive efforts to go to the source of the problem by fostering political liberalization and effective governance in the societies from which terrorist threats arise.

In between these extremes are two more moderate strategies. One is a "light-footprint" approach similar to the Obama administration's strategy between 2011 and 2014, featuring a reliance on drone

¹ The Islamic State is variously rendered as ISIS, ISIL, or DAESH (the Arabic acronym). This study will refer to it as ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria) but will maintain the rubrics used by various quoted sources in the citations.

² This article is an expanded version of an argument the authors make in Hal Brands and Peter Feaver, "Trump and Terrorism: U.S. Strategy after ISIS," *Foreign Affairs* 96, no. 2, March/April 2017. Here, we focus primarily on the political-military dimensions of American strategy. These dimensions do not constitute the entirety of American strategy, of course, but they constitute one essential dimension of that strategy and are thus deserving of intensive analysis. Moreover, the political-military aspects of American strategy are actually more susceptible to open-source analysis than are issues such as the intelligence or even homeland security dimensions of counterterrorism.

strikes and other long-reach attacks to hold the most dangerous terrorist organizations at bay. The other is a more intensive, medium-footprint approach that resembles—and perhaps somewhat exceeds—the culmination of the Obama administration’s post-2014 efforts to defeat ISIS.³ This strategy combines aggressive air campaigns, special operations forces raids, advise-and-assist operations, and even deployment of modest numbers of ground combat forces as part of a continuing effort not just to contain the most dangerous terror groups, but to roll them back and defeat them militarily.

Each of these strategies rests on an internal logic—a theory of the case—about what causes jihadist terrorism, how much the United States can reasonably expect to accomplish in countering that threat, and what level of cost and risk the country ought to accept along the way. Unpacking the logic of these various approaches, and more systematically assessing their strengths and weaknesses, is essential to charting America’s strategic course in the years ahead.

Unfortunately, there is no clearly dominant GWOT strategy. In theory, the options at the far ends of the spectrum—disengagement on the one hand and GWOT surge on the other—could markedly reduce the terrorist danger. In practice, however, both strategies are unlikely to deliver on their ambitious promises. Disengagement is unlikely to ease the sources of jihadist anger at the United States sufficiently to offset the security vulnerabilities and other geopolitical costs that military withdrawal from the Middle East would cause. GWOT surge, for its part, will probably not actually bring about military victory and political transformation of the greater Middle East—at least at a cost that most Americans would find acceptable. Both strategies are thus likely to fail in very damaging ways—aside from being politically infeasible in the current domestic climate. The two moderate options, by contrast, are more acceptable politically and pose less risk of catastrophic failure. But they entail potent drawbacks and limitations of their own, and they are likely—even in the best-case scenarios—to leave the United States in a protracted, ongoing conflict with jihadist groups for many years to come.

Ultimately, choosing a strategy involves selecting the least-bad option. And the least-bad of America’s strategic options today is a medium-footprint option building on the counter-ISIS campaign that has been waged since 2014. If employed consistently and aggressively, this option holds some promise of rolling back powerful terrorist organizations militarily and thus keeping the threat at a manageable level, without incurring unacceptable resource costs or military risks in the process. But even this approach is rife with dilemmas, and there should be no illusions that it will deliver conclusive victory in a conflict that may very well endure for many years to come.

The Enduring Global War on Terror

Fifteen years after 9/11, the United States faces a cruel paradox in the global war on terror. On the one hand, the U.S. national security apparatus has become quite adept at eliminating terrorists, frustrating

³ We say “culmination” to make clear that Obama’s counter-ISIS strategy intensified over time; the low end of the medium-footprint approach discussed in this article resembles not the relatively anemic approach taken by the administration in August and September 2014, but rather the intensified approach being pursued from late 2015 onward.

their operations, and disrupting their organizations. Washington has developed financial sanctions and other tools used to constrict terrorist finances; it has built or expanded sophisticated counterterrorism intelligence capabilities. It has invested in homeland security and law enforcement measures that have made the United States a harder target; it has secured unprecedented international diplomatic cooperation in combating the terrorist threat. Not least of all, the United States has developed, improved, and aggressively utilized formidable military and paramilitary capabilities, from special operations forces (SOF) to drone strikes and beyond, that have taken a severe toll on numerous extremist groups.⁴ Over the past decade and a half, Washington has thus honed a full suite of tools for thwarting terrorist attacks and inflicting great harm on extremist organizations—and it has used those tools to good effect, in dealing with enemies from “core” AQ in the years after 9/11 to ISIS today.

On the other hand, this prowess has not brought America decisive strategic success. For no sooner has Washington achieved military victory over one terrorist group than another—more vicious and lethal than the last—takes its place. Consider the history of the GWOT to date. In what might be termed GWOT 1.0, the United States gravely wounded core AQ in Afghanistan in 2001–2002 and the years thereafter, only to be confronted by the rise of al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), and other potent affiliates in the years that followed (GWOT 2.0). The United States eventually gained the upper hand in dealing with the worst of those groups (AQI), only to see the struggle against the affiliates superseded by GWOT 3.0—the war against ISIS, which represents the most violent, ideologically extreme, and militarily capable terrorist organization yet. As observers such as Seth Jones have noted, every wave of military success in the GWOT thus seems to be followed by a reverse wave of terrorist resurgence.⁵ Whether this “whack-a-mole” quality of the GWOT owes to policy mistakes or the intractable nature of the problem remains hotly debated. Yet the basic dilemma is inescapable—even as the United States improves its counterterrorism capabilities, enduring strategic victory remains elusive.

This dilemma again looms large as Washington and its international partners gradually move toward the endgame of the counter-ISIS campaign. Nearly three years after that campaign started, two things seem clear. First, the U.S.-led coalition will defeat ISIS militarily, in the sense that it will destroy the core caliphate in Iraq and Syria, and thereby put an end to ISIS’s pretensions to hold significant territory and exert meaningful governance in those countries. As of early 2017, ISIS had already lost control of key population centers and territorial strongholds from Fallujah in Iraq to Manbij in Syria; coalition operations aimed at retaking Mosul and Raqqa—the central hubs of its power in Iraq and Syria—were underway. ISIS had also suffered an estimated 45,000 deaths at the hands of the U.S. led

⁴ See Juan Zarate, *Treasury’s War: The Unleashing of a New Era of Financial Warfare* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2013); Eric Rosenbach and Aki Peritz, *Find, Fix, Finish: Inside the Counterterrorism Campaigns that Killed bin Laden and Devastated al Qaeda* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2013); Mark Mazzetti, *The Way of the Knife: The CIA, a Secret Army, and a War at the Ends of the Earth* (New York: Penguin, 2014); and Dallas Boyd, Lewis A. Dunn, and James Scouras, “Why Has the United States Not Been Attacked Again?” *The Washington Quarterly* 32, no. 3, 2009, especially pp. 4–5.

⁵ See Seth Jones, *Hunting in the Shadows: The Pursuit of Al Qa’ida Since 9/11* (New York: Norton, 2012); and Peter Bergen, *The Longest war: The Enduring Conflict between America and Al-Qaeda* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2011).

coalition through the late summer of 2016; it had seen its revenue significantly constricted by airstrikes and other methods; flows of foreign fighters into Iraq and Syria had been reduced dramatically.⁶

As a result of all this, ISIS's combat proficiency, organizational cohesion, and morale have all declined markedly from their peaks in 2014–2015, and the group's leaders have conceded publicly that the "caliphate" might be lost.⁷ Of course, ISIS is still capable of fiercely defending its remaining territories in Iraq and Syria, as the slow progress of the coalition assault on Mosul in late 2016 and early 2017 demonstrated. And as major external attacks against cities from Paris to Brussels to Orlando in 2015–2016 showed, ISIS remains capable of directing or inspiring deadly terrorist assaults abroad. But barring some dramatic and unexpected turn of events, the defeat of ISIS in its current form increasingly appears to be simply a matter of time.

Second, however, ISIS's defeat will not bring the broader GWOT to an end. The defeat of the ISIS core will not necessarily destroy the provinces in countries as diverse as Nigeria, Libya, Egypt, and Afghanistan. It will not remove the danger that ISIS fighters may form a new insurgency to continue the fight even after the caliphate is destroyed. Nor will the defeat of ISIS remove the threat posed by AQ affiliates such as al Shabaab in Somalia, AQAP in Yemen, Jabhat al Nusra in Syria, or other groups capable of carrying out major attacks. Additionally, the fact that the greater Middle East is riven by ongoing conflict and instability, and that it continues to generate toxic ideological radicalism, means that the broader danger of jihadist extremism is unlikely to disappear. The United States may therefore soon find itself confronted with a successor to ISIS—whether in Iraq and Syria or elsewhere—and a GWOT 4.0; it will probably remain in what Director of National Intelligence James Clapper called "a perpetual state of suppression" vis-à-vis extremist organizations.⁸ And, finally, even if the organization (or organizations) that take center stage in GWOT 4.0 are not as formidable as was ISIS at its height, the lingering aftershocks of GWOT 3.0—particularly the problem of foreign fighters who gained experience in Syria before returning to their countries of origin—means that Western homelands may face some irreducible minimum threat of lone-wolf, wolf-pack, and copy-cat terrorist attacks such as those spawned by ISIS in San Bernardino, Paris, Istanbul, and numerous other places.⁹

⁶ Mark Thompson, "Former U.S. Commanders Take Increasingly Dim View of War on ISIS," *Time*, August 31, 2016, available at <http://time.com/4474910/isis-retired-generals/>; Brett McGurk, "Global Efforts to Defeat ISIS," Testimony before Senate Foreign Relations Committee, June 28, 2016, available at http://www.foreign.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/062816_McGurk_Testimony.pdf; Joby Warrick, "Inside the Economic War against the Islamic State," *Washington Post*, December 31, 2016; and Griff Witte, Sudarsan Raghavan, and James McAuley, "Flow of Foreign Fighters Plummets as Islamic State Loses Its Edge," *Washington Post*, September 9, 2016.

⁷ Joby Warrick and Souad Mekhennet, "ISIS Quietly Braces Itself for the Collapse of the 'Caliphate'," *The Independent*, July 13, 2006.

⁸ David Ignatius, "'The U.S. Can't Fix It': James Clapper on America's Role in the Middle East," *Washington Post*, May 10, 2016.

⁹ In all three previous phases of the GWOT, foreign fighters were inspired by terrorist activity and rallied to the terrorist cause. But one of the hallmarks that distinguish GWOT 3.0 from 1.0 and 2.0 is precisely the extent to which a significant fraction of those foreign fighters were neither killed nor captured in the central war theater—as happened, for instance, in Iraq from 2007–2010—but lived to return to Western lands. Moreover, another distinguishing hallmark of GWOT 3.0 is that many of those individuals have been content to conduct low-grade terrorist attacks with casualties in the scores rather than thousands. See Katie Worth, "Lone Wolf Attacks Are

Soon, therefore, the United States will face another strategic pivot in that conflict. America has faced such turning points before; the first came in 2002 after the initial success of the U.S. military campaign in Afghanistan allowed American officials to consider the “next phase” of the GWOT. Fatefully, the Bush Administration chose to focus on state sponsors of terrorism and the terrorism–weapons of mass destruction nexus, leading the administration to invade Iraq.¹⁰ In 2011–2012, the Obama administration reached another strategic pivot with the killing of Osama bin Laden, and the culmination of the decade-long counterterrorism campaign against core AQ. Just as fatefully, it withdrew from Iraq and down-shifted to a light-footprint counterterrorism strategy—decisions that facilitated the rise of ISIS and the revival of the terrorist threat.¹¹

As ISIS is defeated, Washington will again confront difficult decisions about how to proceed. The good news is that operational success against ISIS will provide room for choice—there are four broad political-military strategies that America might pursue. The bad news is although each of these strategies has virtues, each also has significant drawbacks.

Declare Victory and Come Home: Military Disengagement

At one end of the strategic spectrum, defeating ISIS could create an opportunity to make a radical break with the past 15 years of GWOT. The United States could exploit the defeat of that organization to choose a strategy favored by dovish critics ever since the initial reprisals against al Qaeda and the Taliban in Afghanistan gave way to a lengthy occupation: *military disengagement* from the greater Middle East.¹²

Disengagement would roughly approximate a return to U.S. counterterrorism policy of the 1990s and even earlier. The defining feature would be a dramatically reduced military footprint in the Middle East and Afghanistan, with essentially no combat troops beyond the bare minimum required to protect U.S. embassies. Kinetic strikes against terrorist organizations would also markedly decrease. Those operations would largely be limited to punitive strikes in response to successful terrorist attacks, such as the cruise missile attacks against AQ following its bombings of U.S. embassies in Africa in 1998. A very small number of preemptive attacks might also be conducted, but only against truly imminent threats to U.S. personnel or vital interests, and only via drones or other over-the-horizon assets. Furthermore, Washington would eschew the sort of major security force assistance missions

Becoming More Common,” *PBS.org*, July 14, available at 2016, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/article/lone-wolf-attacks-are-becoming-more-common-and-more-deadly/>.

¹⁰ See Hal Brands, *What Good is Grand Strategy? Power and Purpose in American Statecraft from Harry S. Truman to George W. Bush* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2014), chapter 4.

¹¹ Rick Brennan, “Withdrawal Symptoms: The Bungling of the Iraq Exit,” *Foreign Affairs* 93, no. 6, 2014, pp. 25–34; and Dexter Filkins, “What We Left Behind,” *New Yorker*, April 28, 2014.

¹² See, for instance, Robert Pape, *Dying to Win: The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism* (New York: Random House, 2005); Eugene Gholz and Daryl Press, “Footprints in the Sand,” *The American Interest* 5, no. 4, 2010, pp. 59–67; and Christopher Layne, “America’s Middle East Grand Strategy after Iraq: The Moment for Offshore Balancing Has Arrived,” *Review of International Studies* 35, no. 1, 2009, pp. 5–25.

undertaken in Iraq and Afghanistan, in which it essentially sought to build capable counterterrorism partners from the ground up. Even the more modest, counterterrorism focused military assistance relationships with other countries in the region, such as the Gulf countries and Egypt, might be scaled back.¹³

Disengagement thus means military minimalism, and seeking to protect the United States primarily through non-military means. The United States would combat terrorism at home through a focus on intelligence, law enforcement, and homeland security measures, although it would likely shift away from the rhetoric of a “war on terror” and the most invasive domestic restrictions enacted after 9/11—NSA domestic surveillance programs, for instance. It would also maintain an active diplomatic posture abroad, focused on intelligence sharing and other counterterrorism cooperation. Finally, disengagement might involve some small-scale humanitarian and development assistance to Middle Eastern countries, but it would not entertain any ambitions of remaking the region’s political or economic climate. Put simply, disengagement would take America off a war footing, and seek to make it—as Jeane Kirkpatrick once wrote in another context—“a normal country in a normal time.”¹⁴

Disengagement flows from a simple diagnosis: U.S. military involvement cannot fix the problem of terrorism. Quite the contrary, U.S. military involvement in the Muslim world exacerbates terrorism, making it a far greater threat than it might otherwise be. U.S. meddling sustains repressive regimes; it enrages Muslims who resent foreign military presence; it sows violent anger at the uses and misuses of American power. According to scholars such as Robert Pape, U.S. policy thereby generates blowback in the form of terrorism, and efforts to fight terrorism using the military simply create more terrorists than they kill.¹⁵ Even indirect military intervention—through robust security force assistance—is likely to fail, because it activates many of these same antibodies, and because Washington cannot create capable partners in divided societies that lack enduring political stability. As one advocate of a form of disengagement argues, “A military presence in the Middle East does not by itself have positive value for the United States—and can prove counterproductive, as reactions to American boots on the ground, with the violent consequences that have sometimes ensued, have demonstrated.”¹⁶

Advocates of disengagement thus argue that pulling back is essential to minimizing the terrorist threat. At the very least, disengagement would remove tempting targets such as U.S. military forces from the terrorists’ backyard—and indeed, terrorist groups have killed and wounded many times more U.S.

¹³ Not all advocates of disengagement go this far. Some argue that Washington could still indirectly support regional militaries, even as it withdraws most or all of its forces from the region.

¹⁴ Jeane Kirkpatrick, “A Normal Country in a Normal Time,” *The National Interest* 21, Fall 1990, pp. 40–43.

¹⁵ Pape, *Dying to Win*.

¹⁶ Paul Pillar, “How Donald Trump Should Transform America’s Middle East Policy,” *The National Interest*, December 26, 2016, available at <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/how-donald-trump-should-transform-americas-middle-east-18862>. This critique of security force assistance is longstanding. See Benjamin Schwartz, *American Counterinsurgency Doctrine and El Salvador: The Frustrations of Reform and the Illusions of Nation Building* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 1991).

military personnel deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan than they have killed or wounded U.S. civilians outside of combat zones since 9/11.¹⁷ More optimistically, it might prevent the United States from becoming the target of militant Islamists who would no longer have such fierce grievances against U.S. policy. Most optimistically of all, with less U.S. meddling, local societies might be empowered to address the sociopolitical and ideological roots of terrorism—something that only they can do. Disengagement therefore promises big gains through minimalist means. The United States can achieve significantly greater security, retrenchers claim, if only it leaves well enough alone.¹⁸

Crucially, disengagement does not necessarily claim that military retrenchment would put an end to *all* terrorist attacks against the United States. But it does posit that whatever significantly reduced terrorist threat remains can best be handled not by revenge but by resilience—in other words, by learning to live with the infrequent, low-grade attack rather than lashing out and making the threat worse. Doing less achieves more, according to the logic of disengagement, and whatever threat remains is tolerable.¹⁹

In practice, there are some compelling advantages of this approach. Disengagement offers the war-weary portion of the public a respite from continuous fighting, and a return to some semblance of normalcy. In the short run, it would certainly be the cheapest option of the four considered here. The United States incurred \$1.6 trillion in operational and related expenditures in Iraq and Afghanistan since between 2001 and 2014; this approach would obviate the need for such expenditures in the future.²⁰ Crucially, disengagement would also deprive extremist groups of one powerful propaganda point—“U.S. occupation of the holy land”—and it would mitigate the undeniable blowback that can occur when U.S. military operations kill innocents or otherwise antagonize local populations. Finally, disengagement would significantly reduce the near-term vulnerability of U.S. military forces to attack, simply by getting them out of harm’s way, and remove the danger that more aggressive

¹⁷ According to one study, 164 Americans were killed in terrorist attacks between September 12, 2001 and December 31, 2014. See Erin Miller and Michael Jensen, “American Deaths in Terrorist Attacks,” factsheet, National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism, October 2015, available at https://www.start.umd.edu/pubs/START_AmericanTerrorismDeaths_FactSheet_Oct2015.pdf. During this period, over 5,000 U.S. service members were killed in GWOT-related operations in Afghanistan and Iraq.

¹⁸ These logics of disengagement are laid out in the sources cited previously. They are also detailed (although not endorsed) in Daniel Byman, “A U.S. Military Withdrawal from the Greater Middle East: Impact on Terrorism,” in Stephen van Evera and Sidharth Shah, eds., *The Prudent Use of Power in American National Security Strategy* (Cambridge, MA: Tobin Project, 2010), especially pp. 158–160.

¹⁹ This argument draws on analysis arguing that U.S. policymakers have significantly overstated the terrorist threat. See John Mueller and Mark Stewart, “The Terrorism Delusion: America’s Overwrought Response to September 11,” *International Security* 37, no. 1, 2012, pp. 81–110.

²⁰ Amy Belasco, *The Cost of Iraq, Afghanistan, and Other Global War on Terror Operations Since 9/11* (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2014).

counterterrorism operations might lead to open-ended quagmires—as happened, advocates of disengagement would argue, in Iraq and Afghanistan after 9/11.²¹

Yet disengagement also has significant—and probably fatal—weaknesses. It would deprive extremists of one propaganda point only to grant them another, the one that Osama bin Laden originally sought to make via 9/11—that America is not the strong horse, and that it will flee, not fight, when bloodied. Given the role that Washington has long played as regional stabilizer in the Middle East, disengagement could also cause power vacuums in the region and foster increased instability—perhaps enough to threaten important countries and partners such as Saudi Arabia or Jordan. Moreover, by attenuating robust military-to-military relationships with many Middle Eastern countries, disengagement might undercut U.S. regional influence reaching well beyond counterterrorism. The military protection and security assistance that the United States has historically offered Saudi Arabia, for instance, has traditionally been one part of a multifaceted relationship encompassing economics and other issues; rolling back U.S. military posture might endanger those aspects of the relationship, as well. As Daniel Byman has thus written, military withdrawal from the Middle East “would likely have mixed results on the threat of terrorism, some of which are difficult to predict with certainty and a few of which could prove exceptionally dangerous.”²²

Finally, and most crucially, disengagement may fail to significantly reduce the threat. U.S. military presence is undoubtedly one cause of jihadist hostility toward America, but there are many others. In 2010, for instance, al Qaeda spokesman Adam Gadahn included America’s support—“both moral and material”—for Israel, its non-military support to Arab regimes such as Egypt and Saudi Arabia, its cultural influence in the Middle East, and other issues as justifications for striking U.S. targets.²³ Other issues—including America’s liberal values and its overall importance as a global leader—also seem to figure in jihadist hostility.²⁴ And even if hostility did assuage some anti-U.S. radicalism emanating from the greater Middle East, it would also constrain American officials from striking emerging dangers before they fully matured—as happened, with catastrophic effect, prior to 9/11, when Washington failed to disrupt the metastasizing danger represented by bin Laden and al Qaeda.²⁵ In sum, disengagement might not fully remove America from the extremists’ crosshairs, but it certainly would compromise America’s ability to fight back and disrupt emerging threats. America might find

²¹ On these points, see Gholz and Press, “Footprints in the Sand.”

²² Byman, “A U.S. Military Withdrawal from the Greater Middle East,” p. 157; and Kenneth Pollack, “Fight or Flight: America’s Choice in the Middle East,” *Foreign Affairs* 95, no. 2, 2016, pp. 62–72.

²³ Gadahn quoted in Robert Art, “Selective Engagement in the Era of Austerity,” in Richard Fontaine and Kristin Lord, eds., *America’s Path: Grand Strategy for the Next Administration* (Washington, DC: Center for a New American Security, 2012), p. 27.

²⁴ Robert Art, *A Grand Strategy for America* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2003), pp. 201–202.

²⁵ *The 9/11 Commission Report: Final Report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States*, Official Government Edition (Washington, DC: U.S. GPO, 2004), available at <http://govinfo.library.unt.edu/911/report/911Report.pdf>.

that it had traded reduced short-term risks to U.S. military personnel abroad, for substantially greater long-term risks to the U.S. homeland and American citizens overseas.

If this happened, the other purported benefits of disengagement would become illusory. Although disengagement aims to restore a climate of normalcy, the United States might need harsher domestic security measures to grapple with a persistent or increased terrorist threat. And from a political perspective, leaders who had gambled that disengagement would reduce the danger and the American public would tolerate the occasional lone-wolf attack would face severe political blowback if a less aggressive counterterrorism posture contributed to a mass-casualty calamity.²⁶ Given that Americans consistently rank the threat from terrorism as one of their top concerns, this danger seems particularly salient.²⁷

In the long run, then, the costs of the failure of this strategy could be formidable, as was the case when, post-9/11, the United States finally had to pay the bill for failing to address the threat from al Qaeda in the 1990s. In this regard, disengagement suffers from some of the same debilities that make its sister grand strategy, offshore balancing, an exceedingly risky bet.²⁸

These drawbacks are why U.S. officials are unlikely to choose disengagement. Indeed, although the Obama administration showed some intellectual attraction to the idea after the killing of bin Laden in 2011, it eventually decided that the strategy was not viable on political or policy grounds.²⁹ Disengagement amounts to an all-in bet that removing U.S. presence will diminish the problem of terrorism. If that wager does not pay, the results could be disastrous.

The Limited Liability Option: Light-Footprint

Defeating ISIS might not cause U.S. officials to revert to the counterterrorism posture of the 1990s and even before. A second option—call it *light-footprint*—would only take U.S. posture back to where it was

²⁶ Admittedly, the Bush administration did not face political ruin after 9/11. But it averted that fate precisely because the 9/11 attacks were so unprecedented and unexpected. A recurrence of such attacks would be far more difficult for any political leader to survive. That was certainly the judgment of the Bush administration itself, which devoted extraordinary efforts to prevent a recurrence of a 9/11-style attack.

²⁷ Rebecca Riffkin, “Americans Name Terrorism as No. 1 U.S. Problem,” Gallup, December 14, 2015, available at <http://www.gallup.com/poll/187655/americans-name-terrorism-no-problem.aspx>; and “Top Voting Issues in 2016 Election,” Pew Research Center, July 7, 2016, available at <http://www.people-press.org/2016/07/07/4-top-voting-issues-in-2016-election/>.

²⁸ See Hal Brands and Peter Feaver, “The Risks of Retreat,” *Foreign Affairs* 95, no. 6, November/December 2016, pp. 163–169; and Hal Brands, “Fools Rush Out? The Flawed Logic of Offshore Balancing,” *The Washington Quarterly* 38, no. 2, Summer 2015, pp. 7–28.

²⁹ As Obama stated in 2013, “This war, like all wars, must end. That’s what history advises. That’s what our democracy demands.” “Remarks by the President at the National Defense University,” The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, May 23, 2013, available at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2013/05/23/remarks-president-national-defense-university>.

circa 2011–2014, after bin Laden’s death allowed the United States to downshift its counterterrorism efforts but before ISIS emerged as a major threat.³⁰

The rationale for light-footprint is threefold. First, terrorism is caused by deep-seated socio-political dynamics within the Muslim world that are not amenable to near or medium-term solution by outsiders. Second, anti-U.S. terrorism can nonetheless be kept at an acceptably low level provided that Washington proactively addresses the worst symptoms of this disease—terrorist groups exploiting safe havens to develop the capacity to launch major attacks on U.S. citizens and the U.S. homeland—and doing this requires some use of targeted military force. But third, America must also scrupulously avoid overinvestment in the GWOT; from the perspective of U.S. security interests, the dangers of blundering into a quagmire or of upsetting the proper balance with other foreign policy objectives are no less than the dangers posed by terrorism. As President Obama remarked in 2013, “We must define the nature and scope of this struggle, or else it will define us.”³¹

In practice, light-footprint thus centers on what President Obama called “lethal, targeted action”—sustained, preemptive and preventive military strikes meant to disrupt operational plots and continually degrade the most dangerous terrorist organizations. At the same time, however, the United States would conduct such operations almost exclusively through long-reach or limited-liability forms of military action such as drone strikes, other standoff attacks, and periodic SOF missions. It would assiduously avoid any missions that might expose U.S. troops to the sustained danger of attack, or that would require a moderate-to-heavy footprint of U.S. combat forces. “Our efforts,” Obama explained, “must be measured against the history of putting American troops in distant lands among hostile populations.”³²

To be sure, boots on the ground might well be needed to contain the most lethal terrorist organizations—AQAP in Yemen or al Shabaab in Somalia. Yet Washington would insist that local governments provide those forces, empowering them through long-distance strike, logistical support, advisory capabilities, and other enabling assets that America is uniquely equipped to provide. In all cases, U.S. officials would expect local partners to bear the heaviest share of the load in combating

³⁰ Key elements of the light-footprint were outlined in “Remarks by the President at the National Defense University”; “Remarks by the President at the United States Military Academy Commencement Ceremony,” The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, May 28, 2014, available at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/05/28/remarks-president-united-states-military-academy-commencement-ceremony>; Department of Defense (DoD), *Sustaining U.S. Global Leadership: Priorities for 21st Century Defense* (Washington, DC: DoD, January 2012), available at http://archive.defense.gov/news/Defense_Strategic_Guidance.pdf; and David Sanger, “Even With a ‘Light Footprint,’ It’s Hard to Sidestep the Middle East,” *New York Times*, November 17, 2012.

³¹ “Remarks by the President at the National Defense University”; and “Remarks by the President at the United States Military Academy Commencement Ceremony.”

³² “Remarks by the President at the National Defense University”; Jo Becker and Scott Shane, “Secret ‘Kill List’ Proves a Test of Obama’s Principles and Will,” *New York Times*, May 29, 2012; and Steve Coll, “The Unblinking Stare,” *New Yorker*, November 24, 2014.

extremist organizations located on their territory, and American policy would resist the free riding that arises when U.S. forces take on too much heavy lifting.³³

Looking beyond the military sphere, light-footprint might also include some modest efforts to promote long-term political and economic reform and pursue countering violent extremism (CVE) programs aimed at Muslim populations. But given resource limitations and the inherent difficulty of the task, there would be no expectation that the United States would uproot the socio-political and ideological causes of jihadist terrorism on any foreseeable timeframe. The light footprint would also maintain most post-9/11 homeland security programs, but—on the same principle that overreaction is as dangerous as under-reaction—it would permit recalibration of the most invasive measures, such as domestic surveillance.

Fundamentally, light-footprint would thus be about managing, rather than eliminating, a real but limited threat through cost-effective means. And this approach has advantages. As terrorism analysts have noted, light-footprint leverages America's most unique military capabilities—particularly long-range strike—to keep terrorist organizations off balance and focused on surviving rather than attacking, while also mitigating the danger of overreach that comes with more aggressive strategies.³⁴ It limits the ideological and security blowback caused by heavy-footprint interventions abroad, and avoids overhyping the threat and stoking alarmist impulses at home.³⁵ A threat that takes far fewer American lives than domestic gun violence, heart disease, or highway accidents must be kept in perspective, and light-footprint aims to maintain that perspective.³⁶

Finally, although light-footprint is not as cheap in the short run as disengagement, it is more affordable than the other two strategies considered here. Costs associated with heavy-footprint interventions would be avoided; operational expenses would constitute a mere sliver of the Pentagon's annual budget.³⁷ The light-footprint would thereby address a frequent criticism of post-9/11 policy—that it consumed disproportionate resources and strategic bandwidth—and create greater capacity to deal

³³ See the U.S. policy statements cited previously.

³⁴ On the utility of drones, see Daniel Byman, "Why Drones Work: The Case for Washington's Weapon of Choice," *Foreign Affairs* 92, no. 4, 2013, especially pp. 32–34.

³⁵ This was a central concern of the Obama administration. See Peter Baker and Gardiner Harris, "Under Fire from G.O.P., Obama Defends Response to Terror Attacks," *New York Times*, December 17, 2015.

³⁶ Mueller and Stewart, "The Terrorism Delusion"; and Philip Bump, "President Obama is Right That Guns Kill More Americans Than Terrorism. So Do Lots of Other Things," *Washington Post*, October 1, 2015.

³⁷ Although it is difficult to nail down the probable cost of light-footprint, one useful comparison is that the Libya intervention cost roughly \$1.1 billion for the first five months of operations. The comparison is inexact—the Libya intervention was more intensive than many light-footprint operations, and a number of other countries participated in the air campaign—but it gives a rough sense of what light-footprint operations might cost. Micah Zenko, "What Does Libya Cost the United States?" *Politics, Power, and Preventive Action*, blog, Council on Foreign Relations, August 11, 2011, available at <http://blogs.cfr.org/zenko/2011/08/11/what-does-libya-cost-the-united-states/>.

with problems such as climate change, renewed great power conflict, and shoring up U.S. alliances.³⁸ These advantages are why many strategic studies experts have advocated something approximating a light-footprint strategy, and why this approach appealed to President Obama in the post-bin Laden context.

Yet for all its advantages, light-footprint is no silver bullet. The strategy requires working through flawed local partners who may pursue their objectives by doing unsavory and even morally repugnant things.³⁹ Even in the best-case scenario, moreover, this approach requires enormous strategic patience and persistence in an effort that promises nothing more than holding the line and averting disaster. For light-footprint does not aim to destroy powerful terrorist organizations, but merely to contain them and deny them the breathing space to launch major attacks. The Israelis have likened this approach to “mowing the grass”—a Sisyphian concept invoking perpetual struggle.⁴⁰ As long as this strategy works well enough to prevent anything more serious than very rare, limited-casualty attacks on the homeland, the politics of light-footprint could be manageable. As lone-wolf attacks accumulate or after a mass-casualty attack, however, the domestic audience might well exert intense political pressure for a more aggressive strategy.

Yet perhaps the biggest risk of light-footprint is precisely what killed off that strategy when the Obama administration tried to pursue it—the fact that local partners may not actually be able to contain terrorist groups without more robust U.S. intervention than this approach involves. Between 2003 and 2011, the United States expended enormous sums—over \$23 billion in military and police aid—building up the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) and Iraqi police as a fairly credible counterterrorism force.⁴¹ But when the United States withdrew all combat forces from Iraq and relied on a tiny advisory presence after 2011, the ISF quickly lost combat effectiveness and collapsed under modest pressure from ISIS.⁴²

Moreover, in the process of this withdrawal, the Obama administration lost much of the diplomatic and political leverage it retained over the Maliki government in Iraq. As a consequence, it was unable to prevent Maliki from pursuing ever more sectarian policies that polarized the country and paved the

³⁸ See David Sanger, *The Inheritance: The World Obama Confronts and the Challenges to American Power* (New York: Broadway Books, 2010).

³⁹ Insightful discussions of the client–patron dynamic include Stephen Biddle, Ryan Baker, and Julia Macdonald, “Small Footprint, Small Payoff: The Military Effectiveness of Security Force Assistance,” *The Journal of Strategic Studies* (forthcoming); Daniel Byman, *Going to War with the Allies You Have: Allies, Counterinsurgency, and the War on Terrorism* (Carlisle, PA: U.S. Army War College, Strategic Studies Institute, 2005).

⁴⁰ Efraim Inbar and Eitan Shamir, “Mowing the Grass: Israel’s Strategy for Protected Intractable Conflict,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 37, no. 1, 2014, pp. 65–90.

⁴¹ “Military and Police Aid by Year,” *Security Assistance Monitor*, database, Center for International Policy, available at http://securityassistance.org/data/program/military/Iraq/2003/2011/is_all/Global, accessed January 2017.

⁴² See Eric Schmitt and Michael Gordon, “The Iraqi Army Was Crumbling Long Before Its Collapse, U.S. Officials Say,” *New York Times*, June 12, 2014.

way for ISIS's rise. The result of all this was the rise of a formidable terrorist quasi-caliphate which has served as a base from which to attract foreign fighters, spew venomous propaganda, and inspire or direct attacks on multiple continents—and the need for more aggressive U.S. military intervention to retrieve a situation that bordered on the catastrophic after ISIS conquered Mosul and was threatening Baghdad and Erbil.

Similarly, the light-footprint approach initially delivered results against AQAP in Yemen, and in 2013–2014 Obama repeatedly held up this Yemeni model as a successful template for counter-terrorism strategy. Yet the success did not last long. By 2015, the Yemeni military and the state itself were disintegrating under pressure from an externally supported Houthi rebellion. The result was to force the withdrawal of the U.S. military liaison mission (and the abandonment of significant amounts of military equipment), to disrupt U.S. counterterrorism operations significantly, and to allow AQAP to carve out an enlarged territorial foothold. That foothold was subsequently rolled back somewhat following the Saudi- and UAE-led intervention in Yemen, but that operation itself caused significant destabilization and adverse humanitarian consequences.⁴³

These examples underscore the fundamental risk of light-footprint—that it is intensive enough to involve the United States in a long-duration military struggle against extremist groups, but not intensive enough to truly hold the threat at bay. Light-footprint may thus fail—and in doing so, force Washington to undertake more aggressive interventions under worse conditions than before. This was precisely the fate that befell Obama when ISIS emerged, which leads to a third option—*counter-ISIS plus*.

Striking the Balance: Counter-ISIS Plus

Counter-ISIS plus is a medium-footprint option: it involves a larger, more aggressive commitment of military power than the first two options, but is still significantly less aggressive than the fourth. The lower bound of this option would resemble the level of U.S. effort reached in late 2016 in Obama's counter-ISIS campaign, when over 5000 U.S. troops were deployed on the ground in Iraq and Syria, along with thousands more conducting or facilitating airstrikes or other supporting operations from elsewhere in the region. The upper bound would be around 15,000–20,000 troops (slightly more than the initial U.S. commitment to Afghanistan after 9/11), conducting operations in response to specific threats from the most dangerous and capable jihadist terror groups. This strategy would thus significantly surpass disengagement and light-footprint in the numbers of troops deployed—and also in how assertively those troops would operate.⁴⁴

⁴³ Sean Naylor, "Yemen was Washington's Counter-Terrorism Success Story. Not Anymore," *Foreign Policy*, March 23, 2015; and Mark Mazzetti and Scott Shane, "For U.S., Killing Terrorists is a Means to an Elusive End," *New York Times*, June 16, 2015.

⁴⁴ On the counter-ISIS campaign and other variants of this option, see Ash Carter, "Remarks to the 101st Airborne Division on the Counter-ISIL Campaign Plan," speech at Fort Campbell, KY, January 13, 2016, available at <https://www.defense.gov/News/Speeches/Speech-View/Article/642995/remarks-to-the-101st-airborne-division-on-the-counter-isil-campaign-plan>; Secretary of Defense Ash Carter, "Statement on the Counter-ISIL Campaign Before the Senate Armed Services Committee," December 9, 2015, available at <https://www.defense.gov/News/Speeches/Speech-View/Article/633510/statement-on-the-counter-isil-campaign-before-the-senate-armed-services-committ>; Efraim Inbar and Eitan Shamir, "What after Counter-

Drone strikes would still feature prominently in U.S. strategy, for instance, but would be integrated into more aggressive air campaigns utilizing manned ground-attack aircraft, forward air controllers, and a larger number of attacks against a broader array of targets. Such air campaigns would be complemented by a steady regimen of SOF and other raids, to target high-level leaders and facilitators, gain intelligence, directly disrupt enemy operations and planning, and intensify the psychological and military pressure on terrorist groups. Battalion-sized U.S. forces might also carry out combat operations to destroy safe havens or training grounds, either independently or in support of local partner militaries. And related to this point, counter-ISIS plus would feature robust, well-resourced security force assistance missions, aimed not simply at training and equipping partner forces, but also at advising, assisting, and accompanying them into battle, and at sustaining their combat effectiveness even after direct combat operations had concluded. Across these initiatives, flexible rules of engagement would allow U.S. troops to take the initiative and use their capabilities to maximum effect.⁴⁵

Counter-ISIS plus is also notable for what it does *not* include. The United States would still refrain from costly efforts to transform Middle Eastern societies, as was envisioned in the Bush-era “freedom agenda,” and it would not undertake the prolonged stabilization or counterinsurgency operations that accompanied that agenda in Iraq and Afghanistan. But America would prod local partners to pursue political and economic reforms that might lessen the appeal of jihadist ideology, and it would commit some economic and diplomatic resources to incentivizing those reforms. (Indeed, such efforts constituted a key aspect of the counter-ISIS campaign in Iraq, even though, as of this writing, they had enjoyed only very modest success.⁴⁶) And in the interim, the United States would seek to achieve something closer to military rollback and defeat—as opposed to containment or degradation—of extremist groups, and it would accept the higher casualties and greater political risk inherent in doing so.

Counter-ISIS plus flows from a similar diagnosis as light-footprint—that terrorism is a product of political and economic pathologies that America cannot fix on any foreseeable timeframe, and that there is therefore some irreducible minimum threat of low-grade, lone-wolf attacks. As CIA Director John Brennan commented in 2015, “The ability [of extremist actors] to cause damage and violence and kill will be with us for many years to come.”⁴⁷ Yet counter-ISIS plus is simultaneously more pessimistic than light-footprint about what might happen if extremist organizations are allowed to survive, and

Insurgency? Raiding in Zones of Turmoil,” *International Affairs* 92, no. 6, November 2016; Steven Metz, “The Case for a Punitive Expedition Against the Islamic State,” *World Politics Review*, February 6, 2015; and Max Boot, *Defeating ISIS*, Policy Innovation Memorandum no. 51 (Washington, DC: Council on Foreign Relations, November 14, 2014), available at <http://www.cfr.org/iraq/defeating-isis/p33773>.

⁴⁵ Boot, *Defeating ISIS*; and Metz, “The Case for a Punitive Expedition.”

⁴⁶ See Hardin Lang and Muath Al Wari, *After Liberation: Assessing Stabilization Efforts in Areas of Iraq Cleared of the Islamic State* (Washington, DC: Center for American Progress, July 2016).

⁴⁷ Micah Zenko, “CIA Director Says the War on Terror May Never End,” *Defense One*, April 9, 2015, available at <http://www.defenseone.com/threats/2015/04/cia-director-says-war-terror-may-never-end/109792/>.

more optimistic about the prospects for dealing them a meaningful military defeat. This approach holds, for instance, that trying to contain terrorist groups is an invitation to disaster—that if threats are allowed to fester, and safe havens are established, then the danger of low-grade terrorism will multiply and the danger of major, mass-casualty external attacks will quickly become too high.⁴⁸ Yet this approach also holds that a more forward-leaning posture can escape some inherent limitations of light-footprint.

By this logic, providing more significant and enduring support to partner forces can help sustain their performance over time and avoid scenarios such as the collapse of ISF in 2014. It can also provide greater leverage to ameliorate behaviors—human rights violations, sectarian abuses—that are distasteful or strategically counterproductive. Thus, the local forces fighting against ISIS—in Iraq and Syria alike—have performed better since the United States shifted away from the light-footprint approach of 2011–2014 and towards a more aggressive approach in late 2014.⁴⁹ Moreover, although Washington should still avoid heavy-footprint deployments that rapidly become politically toxic, it can nonetheless achieve significant—if less than permanent—military results by destroying terrorists’ organizations, eviscerating their leadership and middle management, killing their foot soldiers, and denying their safe havens. Hit an opponent hard enough, the thinking goes, and it will take time for him to recover. Finally, all this can be accomplished through the aggressive use of airpower, advisers, and SOF, along with intelligence, diplomacy, and other tools. The core premise of this approach, then, is that the energetic but carefully calibrated use of U.S. power can allow America to successfully take the fight to the most dangerous extremist organizations at a tolerable price.

So what are the prospects of this strategy? Counter-ISIS plus has a decided advantage over lighter-footprint options, in that it provides more combat punch against terrorist organizations and thereby decreases the chances that a manageable threat today will evolve into something far worse tomorrow. This strategy also leverages *more* of the unique assets that America can bring to bear in conducting counterterrorism operations, and it exploits the synergies that occur when those capabilities—airstrikes, SOF raids, robust partnering with local forces—are intertwined in a dynamic campaign.⁵⁰ Indeed, the history of the past 15 years suggests that this approach can deliver successful operational results against even the most powerful terrorist organizations. The initial U.S. intervention in Afghanistan in 2001–2002 severely disrupted AQ’s leadership, organization, and operations—perhaps 80 percent of its Afghan-based membership was killed—and weakened that group’s military and

⁴⁸ For versions of this concern, see Carter, “Remarks to the 101st Airborne Division on the Counter-ISIL Campaign Plan”; and Stephanie Condon, “Obama: ISIS Must Be Dismantled, Not Just Contained,” *CBS News*, September 5, 2014.

⁴⁹ See, for instance, Yasir Abbas and Dan Trombly, “Inside the Collapse of the Iraqi Army’s 2nd Division,” *War on the Rocks*, July 1, 2014; Ben Kesling and Matt Bradley, “Victory Marks Turnaround for Iraq Army,” *Wall Street Journal*, December 29, 2015; and Rukmini Callimachi, “Inside Syria: Kurds Roll Back ISIS, but Alliances are Strained,” *New York Times*, August 10, 2015. It might be argued, however, that the performance of Syrian and Iraqi forces since 2014 has still not been as good as was the performance of U.S. partner forces during the Iraq surge of 2007–2008.

⁵⁰ On the idea of synergies, see Carter, “Remarks to the 101st Airborne Division on the Counter-ISIL Campaign Plan.”

external attack capabilities significantly.⁵¹ Likewise, the U.S.-led campaign against ISIS is taking a severe toll on that organization today. Finally, this option mitigates some political risk (doing nothing, doing too little) inherent in more passive options. Ideally, it strikes the balance between too much and too little.

Yet counter-ISIS plus also has liabilities. The likely resource requirements—perhaps 5000, 10,000, or even 20,000 troops, perhaps \$5 billion, \$10 billion, or even \$20 billion in annual operational costs—are neither economically prohibitive nor incompatible with a balanced global strategy for a superpower that spends nearly \$600 billion annually on defense.⁵² This is, in fact, a key advantage of this approach. Yet these requirements are still far in excess of what more passive options entail, especially as costs accumulate over time. There is also greater risk that a limited boots-on-the-ground presence will eventually lead to a quagmire or at least to higher than expected casualties—dangers that the Obama administration emphasized in resisting this approach prior to ISIS’s rise.⁵³ Moreover, even in the best case, this approach requires a great deal of time and patience to produce operational success—witness the slow pace of the counter-ISIS campaign from 2014 onward. And as with the light-footprint, there is always the possibility that this strategy could prove less effective than predicted—that it might prove interventionist enough to entangle America in the intractable conflicts of the greater Middle East without being sufficient to achieve the desired results. The United States indeed knocked al Qaeda down after 9/11, after all, but the organization eventually got back up, executing major attacks in Indonesia, Spain, and the United Kingdom between 2003 and 2005, and eventually becoming a major player again in Afghanistan by 2007–2008.⁵⁴

This touches on a final danger—that counter-ISIS plus could last indefinitely. In other words, this option risks the same “mowing the grass” problem of indefinite conflict that bedevils the light-footprint approach but at a higher cost. Counter-ISIS plus may, in the right circumstances, produce operational military victories against terrorist organizations. But if one accepts the thesis that terrorism is rooted in the socio-political dynamics of many Muslim societies, then those victories may not endure without transformation of those underlying socio-political dynamics. Such a transformation may not be

⁵¹ Daniel Byman, *Are We Winning the War on Terrorism?* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, May 23, 2003), available at <https://www.brookings.edu/research/are-we-winning-the-war-on-terrorism/>; and Lawrence Wright, “The Rebellion Within: An Al Qaeda Mastermind Questions Terrorism,” *New Yorker*, June 2, 2008, available at <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2008/06/02/the-rebellion-within>. It is worth noting, of course, that the U.S. footprint in Afghanistan evolved over time. The initial U.S. footprint (in October 2001) was very light, but accompanied by intensive airstrikes. From late 2001, the United States built up to a medium-footprint approach for several years, gradually transitioned to a heavy-footprint approach during the first years of the Obama administration, then gradually ramped back down again.

⁵² These cost estimates assume that for every 1,000 U.S. troops that are operationally deployed, annual costs will run at roughly \$1 billion. This assumption is derived from the cost of the ongoing counter-ISIS campaign. See Jon Harper, “Counter-ISIL Campaign Tops \$3 Billion,” *National Defense*, September 2015.

⁵³ “Remarks by the President at the National Defense University”; and “Remarks by the President at the United States Military Academy Commencement Ceremony.”

⁵⁴ See Seth Jones, *In the Graveyard of Empires: America’s War in Afghanistan* (New York: Norton, 2010), pp. 279–295.

possible absent a substantially increased investment of blood, treasure, and time, which leads to a final option—*GWOT surge*.

Going Big: GWOT Surge

If disengagement represents one strategic extreme, GWOT surge represents the other. This option is the strategic equivalent of shooting the moon. It involves an intensive, medium- to long-term commitment of military force to the greater Middle East—probably similar to the 150,000–200,000 military personnel deployed in Iraq during the surge in 2007–2008—accompanied by similar commitments of diplomatic, intelligence, and economic capabilities. Like counter-ISIS plus, this strategy would aim to destroy the most capable terrorist groups militarily, wherever they arise. Unlike counter-ISIS plus, however, it would also aim to fundamentally transform the political makeup of the region.⁵⁵

The logic of this strategy is in some ways familiar. Like light-footprint and counter-ISIS plus, it is premised on the idea that terrorism is a symptom of the deeper disease of socio-political illiberalism in the Muslim world. But unlike those other options, it holds that the costs of *not* successfully curing that disease—as opposed to merely treating its symptoms—are too high. By this logic, socio-political liberalism causes the festering resentment that motivates terrorist attacks; without transforming these underlying conditions, new terrorist groups will arise even as existing enemies are vanquished. And each time the new threat emerges, America risks catastrophic attack. In a world of imperfect intelligence, the threat of allowing any globally capable terrorist organization to enter the business is simply too high; the prospect of fighting an indefinite, inconclusive war on terror likewise exposes the country to unacceptable risk. George W. Bush articulated this logic in 2005: “For as long as whole regions of the world simmer in resentment and tyranny—prone to ideologies that feed hatred and excuse murder—violence will gather, and multiply in destructive power, and cross the most defended borders, and raise a mortal threat.”⁵⁶

This diagnosis informs a twofold American response. First, the United States must roll back and destroy any terrorist organization capable of global reach using all aspects of national power—including sustained combat operations involving thousands or even tens of thousands of boots on the ground. Second, the United States must follow up those military operations by uprooting and transforming the socio-political conditions that breed jihadist violence. The only way assuredly to do this is to catalyze socio-political liberalization and the construction of effective, responsible governance in the Islamic world. And the only sure way to catalyze that liberalization and improved governance is to undertake nation building, democracy promotion, and the major stabilization/counterinsurgency operations that are likely to go with these endeavors in countries where the United States has

⁵⁵ For advocacy of various versions of this approach over the past 15 years, see Max Boot, “The Case for American Empire,” *The Weekly Standard*, October 15, 2001; *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington, DC: The White House, 2006); and Eliot Cohen, *The Big Stick: The Limits of Soft Power and the Necessity of Military Force* (New York: Basic Books, 2017).

⁵⁶ “President Bush’s Second Inaugural Address,” *NPR.org*, January 20, 2005, available at <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=4460172>.

intervened to defeat terrorist groups.⁵⁷ The military defeat of ISIS in Iraq and Syria, for example, would be followed by a major political-military effort—including significant, sustained U.S. troop deployments—to create more inclusive and pluralistic governance in those countries.⁵⁸ In short, GWOT surge pairs a commitment to decisive military operations with a commitment to seeking decisive political outcomes in their wake.

The principal attraction of GWOT surge, of course, is that promises at least the possibility of achieving enduring strategic victory instead of merely transitory operational successes. In fact, if the diagnosis of terrorism as being primarily a function of socio-political illiberalism is correct, then GWOT surge is perhaps the *only* option that offers a theory of strategic victory as opposed to a theory of damage limitation.⁵⁹ In the meantime, this approach minimizes the strategic risk of letting threats gather, as well as the political risk of “doing nothing” or “doing too little.” No politician who chooses GWOT surge will ever be accused of going soft on terror. Additionally, if one accepts the idea that putting more skin in the game gives the United States greater leverage with local partners, then GWOT surge holds the most promise of getting indigenous forces to fight well and behave according to accepted norms.⁶⁰ Indeed, although the ISF never performed as well as U.S. officials might have desired between 2003 and 2011, its performance—and that of the Iraqi government more broadly—was arguably best from 2007 to 2009, the period at which the U.S. political-military commitment was greatest.⁶¹

Finally, this strategy heeds a key lesson from the U.S. experience in Iraq since 2003. Even if one believes, as most strategists do, that it was a mistake to invade Iraq, it was just as damaging a mistake to inadequately resource the occupation, and later to leave the country so quickly and completely, thereby undercutting the blood-soaked gains that U.S. troops had made by 2011.⁶² In other words, a cycle of halfway measures and premature withdrawals leading to short-lived successes is a recipe for

⁵⁷ Boot, “The Case for American Empire.”

⁵⁸ For an assessment that outlines but does not endorse such an approach, see Stephen Biddle and Jacob Shapiro, “Here’s Why We Can Only Contain the Islamic State, Not Bomb It Back to the Stone Age,” *The Monkey Cage*, blog, Washington Post, December 1, 2015.

⁵⁹ There is, it should be noted, ongoing debate regarding the strength of the terrorism–illiberalism nexus. See, for instance, Jennifer Windsor, “Promoting Democratization Can Combat Terrorism,” *The Washington Quarterly* 26, no. 2, 2003, pp. 43–58; Mohammed Hafez, *Why Muslims Rebel: Repression and Resistance in the Islamic World* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2003); Katerina Dalacoura, *Islamist Terrorism and Democracy in the Middle East* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011); Thomas Carothers, “Promoting Democracy and Fighting Terror,” *Foreign Affairs* 82, no. 1, 2003, pp. 84–97; and F. Gregory Gause, “Can Democracy Stop Terrorism?” *Foreign Affairs* 84, no. 5, 2005, pp. 62–76.

⁶⁰ As Biddle, Baker, and Macdonald note, for instance, security force assistance is likely to be most effective when it is highly intrusive and conditional, which generally requires a fairly heavy U.S. footprint. Biddle, Baker, and Macdonald, “Small Footprint, Small Payoff.”

⁶¹ Stephen Biddle, Michael O’Hanlon, and Kenneth Pollack, “How to Leave a Stable Iraq,” *Foreign Affairs* 87, no. 5, 2008, pp. 40–58; and Peter Mansoor, *Surge: My Journey with General David Petraeus and the Remaking of the Iraq War* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013).

⁶² On these issues, see Brennan, “Withdrawal Symptoms”; Filkins, “What We Left Behind”; and Thomas Ricks, *Fiasco: The American Military Adventure in Iraq* (New York: Penguin, 2006); and Hal Brands and Peter Feaver, “Was the Rise of ISIS Inevitable?” unpublished manuscript, 2017

long-term failure. It may be better to take a shot at winning decisively and consolidating that victory decisively, even if it costs much more to do so.

Yet this is the fundamental liability of GWOT surge—the extremely high costs, which must be sustained over many years to have any potential for success. As the U.S. experience in Iraq and Afghanistan indicates, it is debatable whether America could marshal the requisite military power, technical skill, and expertise in foreign cultures to execute such an enormously ambitious strategy effectively even given ideal political conditions at home.⁶³ Yet absent some new, 9/11-sized strategic shock, it is highly doubtful that any presidential administration (or administrations) would have the political staying power to sustain the required level of expenditures, casualties, and other costs over the medium- and long-term. The end result could thus be what the United States encountered in Iraq after 2011—strategic failure, or something very close to it, at a very high cost. Washington might make huge investments of military and economic resources up front, without an enduring enough commitment to reap the fruits of success.

Nor is this the sole problem. Putting more skin in the game might not actually incentivize better partner performance; it could simply incentivize free-riding on American efforts. More seriously still, this approach risks badly upsetting the overall balance of American grand strategy, by committing disproportionate resources to counterterrorism to the detriment of addressing other national security threats.⁶⁴ Finally, a strategy that relies on heavy-footprint military interventions could incur the ideological and security blowback that the light-footprint and particularly military disengagement are meant to avert. U.S. forces could become magnets for terrorist attacks; the jihadist narrative of a U.S. “crusade” against the Muslim world would seem to be affirmed. As some U.S. officials have admitted, such dynamics did manifest in the context of operations in Iraq from 2003 onward.⁶⁵ These flaws are perhaps why no strong contender for the presidency in 2016 advocated anything like GWOT surge—and why the Trump administration has already explicitly discarded regime change and nation building as components of its own GWOT strategy.⁶⁶

Choosing a Course

So where does this leave America as it contemplates the future of its counterterrorism strategy? The short answer seems to be, “in a fairly tight spot.” Operational success against ISIS will give America the luxury of choice as it confronts the next stage of the GWOT. The problem, however, is that there is no clearly superior GWOT strategy. All of the options considered here have selling points, but all of them

⁶³ See, for example, Daniel Byman, “An Autopsy of the Iraq Debacle: Policy Failure or Bridge Too Far?” *Security Studies* 17, no. 4, 2008, pp. 599–643.

⁶⁴ See Sanger, *The Inheritance*; and Brands, *What Good is Grand Strategy?* pp. 183–188.

⁶⁵ Ricardo Sanchez, commander of U.S. troops in Iraq, acknowledged in 2003: “This is what I would call a terrorist magnet, where America, being present here in Iraq, creates a target of opportunity.” See “Transcript: CNN Late Edition with Wolf Blitzer,” *CNN.com*, July 27, 2003, available at <http://transcripts.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/030727/le.00.html>; and Mark Mazetti, “Spy Agencies Say Iraq War Worsens Terrorism Threat,” *New York Times*, September 24, 2006.

⁶⁶ “Donald Trump: ‘We Will Stop Racing to Topple Foreign Regimes,’” *The Guardian*, December 7, 2016.

also have real—and in some cases probably fatal—flaws. The tragedy of America’s war on terror is that it is a devilishly difficult problem for which there is no obvious strategic answer.

Not having a strategy is the worst choice of all, however, so which strategy represents the least-bad alternative? The two extreme options—disengagement and GWOT surge—can fairly easily be eliminated. Disengagement involves wagering everything on a premise—that pulling back will significantly reduce the terrorist threat—that may well prove to be erroneous, and quite dangerously so. For this reason, disengagement is probably politically infeasible; even years after 9/11, few political leaders would place such a risky bet. For its part, GWOT surge is incredibly difficult to execute even under ideal conditions. Moreover, the enormous price tag associated with that strategy means that it is unlikely to have the political endurance necessary to achieve strategic success. The strategy may well fail, then, and is likely to do so at a prohibitive cost.

That leaves light-footprint and counter-ISIS plus—two options that risk less but also promise less in return. Of these, the light-footprint may seem attractive to cost-averse politicians, but in fact, it is probably inferior. For the basic problem with light-footprint is that its recent performance has left a great deal to be desired. After all, it was when the light-footprint ruled U.S. policy from 2011 to 2014 that ISIS emerged, America’s position in the GWOT eroded alarmingly, and the United States found itself facing a new threat that—as then-Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel candidly assessed—was “beyond anything that we’ve seen.”⁶⁷ As this record demonstrates, pursuing light-footprint risks falling into a cycle where the U.S. position deteriorates and the threat increases, and America has to escalate its intervention—under more adverse circumstances—in order to recover. For this reason, light-footprint also occupies a weaker political footing than may initially be apparent. It is not clear that the strategy would survive a replay of the sort of attacks that befell San Bernardino and Orlando in 2015–2016, in which dozens of Americans were killed by individuals who derived inspiration from ISIS.

The strategy that remains is counter-ISIS plus. This strategy has dangers, most notably that it may simply produce unsatisfactory results and enduring conflict at a higher price than the light-footprint. But this approach does at least have a record of operational success when employed aggressively, under both the Bush administration after 9/11 and the Obama administration following the rise of ISIS. And so it is not too much of a stretch to think that it could successfully address the most dangerous parts of the terrorist challenge—safe havens and undisrupted plotting that can lead to high-casualty attacks—if pursued aggressively over time. The resource investments required are not inconsiderable, but if the current counter-ISIS campaign—which cost roughly \$6.2 billion over its first 18 months, and was projected to cost another \$7.5 billion for Fiscal Year 2017—is any indication, they would hardly be unmanageable.⁶⁸ Moreover, if neither this nor any approach is likely to elicit truly superlative performance from local partners on the ground, counter-ISIS plus may at least get them to do marginally better over a longer period of time—which is crucial to curbing U.S. costs in the long-term—than light-footprint. Finally, in the current climate, and notwithstanding Donald Trump’s

⁶⁷ Jeremy Herb, “Hagel: ISIL ‘Beyond Anything’ Yet,” *Politico*, August 21, 2014.

⁶⁸ For cost, see Richard Sisk, “Cost of Anti-ISIS Campaign Now Passes \$6 Billion,” *Military.com*, February 17, 2016, available at <http://www.military.com/daily-news/2016/02/17/cost-of-anti-isis-campaign-now-passes-6-billion.html>; and Linda Robinson, *Assessment of the Politico-Military Campaign to Counter ISIL and Options for Adaptation* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2016), p. 74.

repeated condemnations of the Obama administration's strategy for dealing with ISIS, this approach may be—if only by default—the most politically viable option.

Moving forward, the United States should choose counter-ISIS plus as its counterterrorism strategy. But it should do so while keeping its expectations limited and its eyes wide open. Counter-ISIS plus will require great patience and persistence to produce acceptable results, with no guarantee of ultimate success; it certainly will not bring the war on terror to a decisive conclusion anytime soon. At best, this strategy will simply allow the United States to limit its insecurity to a tolerable level in an age of enduring terror.

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Cover: U.S. Army Sgt. Robert Newman watches the sunrise after a dismounted patrol mission near Zabul, Afghanistan, March 19, 2009. U.S. Army photo by Staff Sgt. Adam Mancini.



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