

# Middle East Turmoil and the Continuing Terrorist Threat—Still No Easy Solutions

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*Middle East Turmoil and the Continuing Terrorist Threat—Still No Easy Solutions*

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The RAND Corporation<sup>2</sup>

Before the Committee on Armed Services  
United States House of Representatives

February 14, 2017

**T**he United States continues to face an array of armed threats to its national security: a revanchist Russia determined to recover its superpower status and restore its influence worldwide; an increasingly assertive China pushing its claim over the South China Sea; and in the Middle East, a hostile Iran and continuing jihadist terrorist threats.

**Jihadist terrorism is the most prominent and persistent threat to U.S. security.**

Military confrontation with Russia seems unlikely, although miscalculations remain possible, but Russia poses more than a military threat. Maintaining a strong North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) will, it is hoped, deter Moscow from potentially dangerous courses and allow the United States to play a greater role in checking the growth of Russian influence, which it is presently achieving through measures other than war.<sup>3</sup> China's assertions can be best handled diplomatically while maintaining strong regional alliances. This was underscored by James Mattis, who made his first foreign trip as Secretary of Defense to South Korea and Japan, two countries with which the United States has bilateral defense agreements.

The United States has managed a difficult and, at times, dangerous relationship with Iran since 1979. Those in Washington who may have expected the 2015 nuclear weapons deal to presage diplomatic rapprochement with Tehran were disappointed; that seems a long way off. At

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<sup>1</sup> The opinions and conclusions expressed in this testimony are the author's alone and should not be interpreted as representing those of the RAND Corporation or any of the sponsors of its research.

<sup>2</sup> The RAND Corporation is a research organization that develops solutions to public policy challenges to help make communities throughout the world safer and more secure, healthier and more prosperous. RAND is nonprofit, nonpartisan, and committed to the public interest.

<sup>3</sup> Brian Michael Jenkins, *A Revanchist Russia Versus an Uncertain West: An Appreciation of the Situation Since the 2014 Ukrainian Crisis*, Sofia, Bulgaria: Center for the Study of Democracy, December 2016b. As of February 13, 2017: <http://www.csd.bg/artShow.php?id=17877>

the same time, there appears to be little domestic and even less international support for upsetting the deal. Meanwhile, I believe that it is not in the interest of the United States that Iran become the dominant power in the region, which it seeks to do; preventing that will shape American actions.

While not the most dangerous threat to the United States, jihadist or Islamist terrorism is the most prominent issue. Other terrorist threats to U.S. citizens and interests abroad have receded, although conflict with Iran or North Korea could provoke state-sponsored terrorist incidents.

Of current threats to U.S. national security, jihadist terrorism is also the least amenable to any obvious or immediate diplomatic or military solution, although military force will remain an important part—but only one part—of U.S. counterterrorist efforts. Other counterterrorism activities must include programs aimed at changing the narrative and reducing the attractiveness of the ideology fueling the violence. And while the danger posed by jihadist terrorists would be quickly surpassed if there were war with any state adversary, jihadist terrorism is a threat the United States is going to be dealing with for the foreseeable future. That is the focus of my testimony today.

## **Terrorism has increased dramatically worldwide, but the increase is misleading.**

Terrorism worldwide has increased in recent years, but we should not overestimate the terrorist threat to the United States. In the 15-year period from 2001 to 2015, the Global Terrorism Database maintained by the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism recorded more than 85,000 incidents of terrorism worldwide, with more than 200,000 fatalities. That amounts to an average of more than 5,000 incidents a year, including almost 15,000 incidents for 2015 alone. This is a dramatic increase from the averages of fewer than 1,000 incidents a year in the 1970s, slightly more than 3,000 incidents a year in the 1980s and 1990s, and about 2,500 a year between 2000 and 2009.<sup>4</sup> However, the dramatic rise in global terrorism is misleading. The increase in recent years reflects both better reporting of terrorist events in remote parts of the world and the fact that terrorism is now counted as a separate category of violence, even in the midst of war. Most of the recent terrorist incidents have occurred in war zones.

## **Terrorism remains concentrated in a handful of countries.**

Between 2001 and 2015, 73 percent of all recorded terrorist attacks and 78 percent of all fatalities from terrorism occurred in just ten countries: Afghanistan, Algeria, India, Iraq, Nigeria, Pakistan, the Philippines, Somalia, Syria, and Yemen. The centers of the problem are obvious. Forty-six percent of the incidents, accounting for more than 50 percent of the fatalities, took

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<sup>4</sup> National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism, Global Terrorism Database, College Park, Md.: University of Maryland, undated. As of February 13, 2017: <https://www.start.umd.edu/gtd/>

place in just three countries—Afghanistan, Iraq, and Pakistan—all of which were engulfed in intense, ongoing armed conflicts.<sup>5</sup> Outside of these countries, terrorist attacks occur only occasionally. Although jihadist terrorists have recently carried out some spectacular attacks in Europe, total deaths caused by terrorists in Europe actually have declined during the decades since the 1970s, although there was an increase in 2015 and 2016.

During the same two years, the United States also saw several spectacular attacks. While these attacks had a significant psychological impact, the total number of U.S. casualties caused by jihadist terrorists here since the attacks on September 11, 2001, comes to about 100.<sup>6</sup> Given its current levels in the United States, terrorism cannot be considered an existential threat. Rather, it is a persistent threat requiring our constant attention to ensure that it does not gain momentum in the United States.

### **Although terrorism is increasing, the number of wars and the number of casualties in wars are declining.**

The increase in terrorism appears all the more dramatic because the incidence of warfare itself and the casualties produced by war have declined during the same period. There are fewer wars and fewer casualties today than there were 50 years ago, and far fewer than there were in the bloody first half of the 20th century.<sup>7</sup> Terrorism looms larger, in part, because warfare has diminished and because terrorists have carried out more-spectacular attacks.

### **Terrorist organizations have evolved into global enterprises.**

So-called international terrorism—the globalization of terrorist campaigns—is not new. Terrorist organizations have operated internationally for decades, sending their own operatives to carry out attacks abroad and creating alliances with other terrorist organizations to extend their reach. More recently, terrorist organizations have exploited the Internet and social media to inspire and instruct distant followers to carry out attacks on their behalf.

A few groups—notably, al Qaeda and the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL)—operating from sanctuaries in ungoverned spaces, have sent out missions to establish or acquire affiliates. They often do so by attaching themselves to rebels fighting against local governments for local causes. The arrangement may heighten the global profile and increase the prestige of the

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<sup>5</sup> National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism, undated.

<sup>6</sup> The author's own figures put the total at 89, not counting the perpetrators, but various counts are available. For example, Charles Kurzman reports a higher number of 123, but that includes the deaths of perpetrators, as well as 17 murders attributed to the 2002 "Beltway Sniper" and a few other incidents that I do not see as jihadist terrorism. Admittedly, motives are sometimes murky. See Charles Kurzman, *Muslim-American Involvement with Violent Extremism*, Chapel Hill, N.C.: Triangle Center on Terrorism and Homeland Security, January 26, 2017. As of February 13, 2017: [https://sites.duke.edu/tcths/files/2017/01/Kurzman\\_Muslim-American\\_Involvement\\_in\\_Violent\\_Extremism\\_2016.pdf](https://sites.duke.edu/tcths/files/2017/01/Kurzman_Muslim-American_Involvement_in_Violent_Extremism_2016.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> Several studies indicate a decline in war. See, for example, Max Roser, "War and Peace," *Our World in Data*, University of Oxford, 2016. As of February 13, 2017: <https://ourworldindata.org/war-and-peace/>

local fighters and potentially gain them limited material support and assistance. For the outsiders, these footholds create the impression of new fronts in a vast enterprise, offer new operating bases, and provide potential recruits for the global effort. The footholds eventually may become formal affiliates of the group or “provinces” of a terrorist state, although some of them are mere assertions.

Some of these alliances are strategic; others are purely tactical. And affiliations change. ISIL broke with al Qaeda. Jabhat al Nusra, al Qaeda’s affiliate in Syria, changed its name and announced that it had severed its ties with al Qaeda.

The competition for colonies has resulted in a proliferation of al Qaeda and ISIL entities across Africa, the Middle East, and Asia. While linked by common, or at least compatible, ideologies and personal oaths of allegiance, the actual connectivity varies. With a weak center, al Qaeda’s affiliates operate with virtual autonomy. ISIL has attempted to impose a more formal structure on its acquisitions, but most of these remain focused on their local struggles. The reduction of ISIL’s Islamic state in Iraq and Syria—its presumptive caliphate—will reduce its attractiveness and erode the bonds.

These developments complicate counterterrorism. While it would be inappropriate to see the spread of al Qaeda or ISIL flags as the advance of an occupying army or evidence of a centrally directed campaign, the terrorist colonizers over time may be able to gradually increase their control over their local allies. The colonies also may harbor fleeing central commanders, guaranteeing the survival of their effort. They cannot be ignored, but each must be addressed within the context of the local situation. Instead of one war, countering the enterprise becomes many wars.

The organizational developments described here reflect the evolution of al Qaeda and ISIL, which have global, even celestial ambitions. Organizations pursuing political ends in other parts of the world and future terrorist organizations may not necessarily follow the jihadist trajectory.

## **Inspiring attacks via the Internet pushes terrorists toward soft targets and “pure terrorism.”**

Although the distance recruiting of homegrown terrorists does not preclude centrally directed terrorist operations or strategic strikes directed by affiliates, central capabilities have declined, and distance recruiting has become more important. Afghanistan provides a useful example.

The U.S. invasion of Afghanistan scattered al Qaeda’s central command. Continued international pressure on the organization made central planning more difficult. Nonetheless, al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula attempted to carry on the campaign against the United States by sabotaging U.S.-bound airliners and inspiring homegrown terrorists.

ISIL has recruited tens of thousands of foreign fighters to come to Syria and Iraq and clearly has global ambitions, but it has not attempted to replicate anything on the scale of al Qaeda’s 9/11 attacks. Instead, ISIL has supported operations by terrorist leaders among its foreign fighters. The precise relationship between these foreign organizers and ISIL’s central command is not clear, nor is it consistent across the various attacks. Are they mere lieutenants carrying out orders, or are they independent entrepreneurs?

ISIL is under heavy pressure and has lost territory and fighters. As it faces defeat on the ground, it could attempt to launch large-scale international terrorist attacks. Terrorist operations are intended not just to harm the enemy but also to recruit and compete for followers. ISIL and al Qaeda, although at war with each other, compete for the same constituents.

ISIL has effectively used social media to reach a broader audience of potential recruits. However, the operational capabilities of these volunteers are not likely to match their ideological fervor, so ISIL, through its online publications and contact via the Internet, recommends simple operations that are within these volunteers' range. This means going after soft targets—that is, venues that are usually unprotected.

Terrorists have traditionally concentrated their attacks on unprotected targets that still provided some political symbolism. The political content has faded. For today's terrorists, death, destruction, and notoriety seem to be the paramount goals. We now see truly random attacks on people at restaurants, shopping malls, subway stations, busy streets—virtually anywhere. Random attacks send the message that nothing is safe.<sup>8</sup> Often, these are low-level attacks by a single individual using readily available “weapons”—guns when they can get them, but also knives, axes, trucks, and cars.

Terrorism is violence calculated to create fear and alarm—and it often works. The terrorist organization has come to realize that even small-scale attacks can create extreme alarm and oblige governments to take extraordinary security measures.

However, the small number of attacks and attackers suggest that it is not easy to remotely motivate people to take action. The Internet reaches a vast audience, but it also allows vicarious participation—fervent followers can boast and threaten online but then go on with their ordinary lives. Absent physical connectivity, most online, would-be warriors will do nothing. For those charged with security, however, ascertaining who among the radicals will cross the line into violence is challenging.

## **The current terrorist threat remains inextricably intertwined with events in the Middle East.**

It is understandable that Americans see the Middle East through the lens of terrorism. Indeed, most of the terrorist-created crises involving the United States since the late 1960s have related to the Middle East and the adjacent regions of North Africa and Southwest Asia. In the 1970s, hijackings, incidents of airline sabotage, hostage seizures, bombings, and other attacks by Palestinian terrorist groups posed the greatest threat. In the 1980s, Iranian-backed groups in Lebanon added another dimension to the problem. Since the mid-1990s, groups inspired by al Qaeda and its offshoots have become the principal concern. ISIL is only the latest incarnation of the continuing jihadist threat.

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<sup>8</sup> Brian Michael Jenkins, *The Challenge of Protecting Transit and Passenger Rail: How Security Works Against Terrorism*, San Jose, Calif.: Mineta Transportation Institute, forthcoming.

## The Middle East also has been the predominant theater of U.S. military operations.

Most of the U.S. military engagements over the past 30 years have been in the Middle East, in North Africa, and in western parts of Asia, Afghanistan, and Pakistan. The United States supported the Afghan rebels fighting against Soviet invaders in the 1980s, sent troops into Lebanon in 1982 and 1983, bombed Libya in 1986, deployed American naval forces and took military action against Iran in 1987, drove Iraqi forces out of Kuwait in 1991 and imposed no-fly zones on Iraq, deployed American forces to Somalia in 1992 and 1993, bombed Iraq in 1993 and Sudan and Afghanistan in 1998, invaded Afghanistan in 2001, invaded Iraq in 2003, participated in the bombing of Libya in 2011, initiated a bombing campaign in Iraq and Syria in 2014, and joined military efforts in Yemen in 2015. About half of these engagements were in response to terrorism. The conflicts in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Somalia, Syria, and Yemen continue. In addition, the United States has conducted special operations and, since 2002, has carried out manned and unmanned air strikes and special operations to kill terrorist leaders and operatives throughout the region.

The above chronology is instructive: There are few years in which the United States has not been directly or indirectly involved in the Middle East's conflicts. And for the past 15 years, American military engagement has been continuous. The high cost of these continuing military operations adversely affects U.S. military forces and readiness.

## Middle East turmoil will continue.

The United States and its allies are currently dealing with terrorist spillover from ongoing conflicts in the Middle East, North Africa, and western Asia. The turmoil in these regions seems likely to continue. Afghanistan has been in a state of war since the late 1970s—some would say throughout much of the nation's history. Al Qaeda found sanctuary in this environment and declared war on the West more than 20 years ago. Somalia has been a theater of conflict since the early 1990s. Iraq has had few years without armed hostilities since the Iran–Iraq War in the 1980s. Yemen's civil wars reach back to the 1960s. The current conflicts in Syria and Iraq have exacerbated sectarian and ethnic conflicts, which will persist into the future.

Progress is being made in reducing ISIL forces and recapturing some of the urban centers and towns the group held, but the reduction of ISIL-controlled territory will not end its campaign, nor will the end of ISIL's open control of territory end its armed struggle. Its leaders will likely go underground, but its foreign fighters cannot so easily survive an underground war. They will scatter to other jihadist fronts in the region or return home, some with intentions to carry on the armed struggle.

No government in Syria will be able to restore central authority throughout its territory. Iraq appears on a path to remain divided. Yemen will not easily be unified. Somalia will not easily be subdued. The violence has increased in Afghanistan. Libya remains in a chaotic state. The terrorist threat made possible by this regional chaos will continue to fuel terrorist threats around the world.



## The United States faces a multilayered terrorist threat.

Jihadist terrorists pose a multilayered threat. For the United States and its partners, improved intelligence, greater international cooperation, and continuing military operations have made it more difficult for terrorists to carry out ambitious, centrally directed strategic strikes like the 9/11 attacks—which have been our greatest concern. But jihadist terrorist organizations have demonstrated their continued determination to attack commercial airliners on their way to the United States.

As we have seen in France and Belgium, terrorist volunteers who have joined the ranks of al Qaeda’s affiliates or ISIL may receive assistance in returning to their homelands to link up with local jihadists and carry out attacks. With thousands of nationals who have gone to fight in Syria and Iraq, Europe and even countries like Tunisia face a much greater threat from returning fighters than the United States does; according to the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), about 200 U.S. citizens have joined or tried to join jihadist fronts abroad.<sup>9</sup>

The final layer of the threat comprises those already in the United States who find resonance and reinforcement in jihadist ideology and radicalize themselves.

## Homegrown terrorists are America’s principal concern; fortunately, jihadist ideology has gained little traction.

The principal terrorist threat faced by the United States comes overwhelmingly from homegrown terrorists—citizens and residents who radicalize themselves and plot to carry out local attacks. Fortunately, there are relatively few of them. Despite constant exhortations from jihadist organizations abroad, their violent extremist ideology has gained little traction among Americans, in sharp contrast to the situation in Europe.

Since 9/11, several hundred individuals have been arrested for providing material support to jihadist groups or attempting to join terrorist fronts abroad. In addition to these, approximately 150 have been arrested for plotting terrorist attacks in this country.<sup>10</sup> The FBI and local police have uncovered and thwarted more than 80 percent of the jihadist terrorist plots in the United States since 9/11.<sup>11</sup> It is a remarkable record. Some of these cases have resulted from investigations initiated by tips from Muslim communities.

As of this writing, only 16 jihadist terrorist plots have succeeded in launching an attack. All but one resulted in injuries, including seven that resulted in fatalities. In the remaining case—the attempted Times Square bombing—the device failed to work. In 15 years, jihadist terrorists in the United States have been able to kill about 100 people—and 49 of those were killed in a single

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<sup>9</sup> Julian Hattam, “FBI: More Than 200 Americans Have Tried to Fight for ISIS,” *The Hill*, July 8, 2015. As of February 13, 2017: <http://thehill.com/policy/national-security/247256-more-than-200-americans-tried-to-fight-for-isis-fbi-says>

<sup>10</sup> Brian Michael Jenkins, *Fifteen Years After 9/11: A Preliminary Balance Sheet*, testimony before the Committee on Armed Services, United States House of Representatives, September 21, 2016, *Addendum*, January 11, 2017. As of February 13, 2017: <http://www.rand.org/pubs/testimonies/CT458z1.html>

<sup>11</sup> Jenkins, 2017.

incident, the 2016 Orlando attack on a nightclub. Owing to different interpretations of motives, which are often murky, other analyses may add some incidents, but not many.

The past two years have seen an increase in the number of attacks. This could be a spike, or it may indicate a longer-term trend. But the increase suggests that the United States, despite its enviable record, must maintain its vigilance and continually review its efforts to control its borders and know who is coming and going.

## Europe faces a different, more difficult threat than the United States does.

Europe has suffered a much sharper increase in terrorist activity than the United States has, which some see as presaging a growing volume of terrorism in this country. That may be, but it is important to keep in mind that the situation in Europe differs significantly from that in the United States.

European security services are being overwhelmed by volume. More than 5,000 volunteers went from Europe to Syria to serve in the ranks of the jihadist groups, mainly ISIL. About a third of them have since returned. Thousands more are suspected of trying to travel to Syria or of plotting terrorist attacks at home. The numbers exceed the capacity of the intelligence services and police to monitor.<sup>12</sup> This problem is being addressed, but it will take time to build the necessary strength and skills. Information-sharing among European services is not optimal.

In France and Belgium, the high numbers of travelers to Syria come from subcultures that transcend the criminal underworld and radical underground and which are deeply embedded in some immigrant communities. Returning foreign fighters can hook up with radical jihadists who stayed home and who can provide them with hideouts, weapons, and logistics support, thereby increasing their lethality and ability to evade authorities. These are the personal connections that enable terrorists to operate at a higher level of violence. The network responsible for the deadly 2014–2016 terrorist campaign in Belgium and France provides the best example.<sup>13</sup>

In contrast, the numbers of potential recruits in the United States are significantly lower, and there is no evidence here of an organized terrorist underground. Most terrorist plots have involved a single individual or a tiny conspiracy. While a few of the plotters may have received remote encouragement and guidance from contacts in al Qaeda or ISIL, there is not much connectivity with handlers abroad or with those involved in other terrorist plots. The current jihadist threat also contrasts with the situation in the United States during the 1970s, when there were organized terrorist groups conducting long-term bombing campaigns that lasted years.

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<sup>12</sup> Brian Michael Jenkins and Jean-François Clair, *Trains, Concert Halls, Airports, and Restaurants—All Soft Targets: What the Terrorist Campaign in France and Belgium Tells Us About the Future of Jihadist Terrorism in Europe*, San Jose, Calif.: Mineta Transportation Institute, 2016. As of February 13, 2017: <http://transweb.sjsu.edu/project/1532.html>

<sup>13</sup> The January 2015 terrorist attacks in Paris and the authorities' response were examined in a three-part series by Brian Michael Jenkins and Jean-François Clair, "Attempting to Understand the Paris Attacks," *The Hill*, February 25, 2015; "Predicting the 'Dangerousness' of Potential Terrorists," *The Hill*, February 26, 2015; and "Different Countries, Different Ways of Counting," *The Hill*, February 27, 2015.

The lack of organizational continuity also keeps America's jihadists operating at a low level of competency. It is not that today's jihadists are less intelligent than their 1970s counterparts, who also started their campaigns at a low level of competency, but rather that, over time, the 1970s terrorists had the opportunity to improve their skills by learning from each other and the experience of repeated attacks. The post-9/11 attacks have been one-offs. There is no learning.

Europe also has to deal with hundreds of thousands of political and economic refugees and immigrants pouring in from conflict zones and impoverished areas in Africa and the Middle East; Germany registered more than 1 million asylum seekers in 2015. Refugees land on Europe's shores or cross its land borders and then authorities determine who may be eligible for asylum and who will be deported. In contrast, the United States is able to vet refugees before approving their transfer into the country. Most European countries lack the capacity to handle large numbers of immigrants.

Many of those entering Europe are single, military-age males, and many of these young men have very limited education. They will not easily find work or easily assimilate. Instead, they will spend months in refugee centers. Some will drift into crime. They already are the targets of radical recruiters. In contrast, only a tiny fraction of the refugees entering the United States are young, unattached males.

While we should not overestimate the threat these developments pose to the United States, what is happening in Europe does raise security concerns here. It is certainly not in America's interest to see Europe destabilized by terrorism. The continuing terrorist threat to the West in general underscores current efforts to defeat the jihadist terrorist enterprises, particularly al Qaeda and ISIL. Until these organizations are destroyed, the jihadist terrorist threat will continue.

## **Military force will remain a component of U.S. counterterrorist efforts abroad.**

Critics of American efforts often remind us that military measures alone will not defeat terrorism. We know that. At home, we have successfully employed law enforcement and have worked through our courts. Terrorists arrested in the United State come to trial. But dealing with terrorists operating in conflict zones or ungoverned spaces thousands of miles away where law enforcement regimes do not prevail and where effective government does not exist poses different challenges.

The United States has greatly improved its intelligence collection and analysis, forged new alliances, and fostered international cooperation among security services and law enforcement organizations—which, since 9/11, is unprecedented. As a result, today's terrorists face a more hostile operating environment, which impedes (not prevents) their ability to carry out large-scale terrorist operations abroad.

The United States can rely on law enforcement only where the law rules. Where it does not, military operations, in cooperation with local and allied governments—unilateral when absolutely necessary—will remain a component of America's arsenal. It is an enduring task that could exist for years, if not generations.

## There are no easy options.

There are no easy options. None offers a clear solution. All entail risks. Here are some of the approaches that have been suggested and the questions they raise, above all, about defining U.S. national interests and objectives.

### *Can attacking root causes reduce jihadist terrorism?*

One favored option is to attack the root causes driving the terrorist campaigns while reducing the ungoverned spaces where terrorists find sanctuary. This requires addressing chronic grievances, resolving ongoing conflicts, creating stability, ensuring better governance (if not democracy), and providing security, which, in turn, will permit social and economic development. These are laudable goals to be pursued even if there were no terrorists. But they are difficult to do, require major investments, and take years to achieve. And in just about all cases, the United States is at the margin of its influence. Meanwhile, the terrorist threat continues.

### *Can the United States negotiate an end to the threat?*

Negotiations, even with those we label terrorists, should never be off the table. The United States, for example, was deeply involved in negotiations to end the Irish Republican Army's long-running terrorist campaign and has supported negotiations between the Colombian government and Marxist guerrillas that routinely used terrorist tactics. But negotiating an end to the jihadist campaign seems unrealistic. America's jihadist adversaries see this as a struggle to the death mandated by God. The goal is the triumph of their beliefs over the unbelievers.

The jihadists' view of war is process-oriented, not progress-oriented; that is, they derive benefit from mere participation in the armed struggle. God determines the outcome. Their time horizons are long. The war is perpetual and will continue until judgment day. They are not easily discouraged.

Jihadist strategic thinking permits tactical truces if they see these as advantageous. Conceivably, negotiations with a more pragmatic Taliban might be possible. Negotiations with al Qaeda or ISIL are hard to envision, although some lower-level commanders may be persuaded to cut a deal. And not all of the groups currently allied with al Qaeda or ISIL may share their partner's determination to fight to the death.

It may be more productive to think in terms of interim arrangements aimed merely at lowering the level of violence—seeking local accommodations rather than war-ending agreements. A recent RAND Corporation report argues that the cessation of hostilities in Syria sponsored by Russia, Iran, and Turkey could open the way for a more national ceasefire “based upon agreed zones of control”—essentially the partition of Syria with an international administration of Raqqa Province, otherwise known as the Islamic State.<sup>14</sup> The proposal,

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<sup>14</sup> James Dobbins, Philip Gordon, and Jeffrey Martini, *A Peace Plan for Syria III: Agreed Zones of Control, Decentralization, and International Administration*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, PE-233-RC, 2017. As of February 13, 2017: <http://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PE233.html>

however, is predicated on the defeat of ISIL and other jihadists in Syria—they are not seen as participants in the discussion. Essentially, it is an agreement to unite the jihadists’ enemies.

*Can the United States shorten the time line and defeat the jihadists more quickly through escalation?*

Escalation is possible. Suggestions include increasing the presence of U.S. service personnel working with the Iraqi army and irregular forces in Syria to increase their effectiveness. Without personnel on the ground to target and coordinate operations, airpower is largely ineffective over the long run. Some have also argued for relaxing the rules of engagement in order to increase the use of airpower. This can be done, but targets are limited, and bombing errors can lead to backlash and erode international support, not just of the current alliance of nations participating in the air campaign but for overall cooperation against terrorism. The cost may be deemed acceptable, but it is a cost.

Some in Washington have argued for American combat forces to be redeployed in the region. That runs the risk of changing the dynamics of the contest while fueling the jihadist narrative and thereby assisting jihadist recruiting. Putting American boots on the ground might be popular in the immediate wake of a major terrorist incident in the United States, but it raises the questions of what exactly would they do, how would they affect the war, and what would success look like. Whatever initial domestic political support exists for redeployment could quickly evaporate and is probably not sustainable for the long run.

*Should the United States cooperate more closely with the Russians?*

Partnering with the Russians to destroy ISIL also has been mentioned as an option, but in my view, it comes with a high cost and offers very little in return. Russia’s and Syria’s siege and ruthless bombing campaign succeeded in driving the rebels out of their stronghold in Aleppo, but it appears that civilian buildings and groups, including hospitals and humanitarian aid, were deliberately targeted, in contravention of the rules of war, and civilian casualties reportedly were high.<sup>15</sup> Among others, the United Nations’ Human Rights director called the campaign a war crime.<sup>16</sup>

However effective or satisfying it may be to pound ISIL, associating the United States with military operations of that type would have long-term consequences. I suspect it would cause deep concern in the American military. It would damage America’s reputation and repel allies in the Arab world and beyond. It could erode U.S counterterrorist efforts for years to come.

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<sup>15</sup> Human Rights Watch, “Russia/Syria: War Crimes in Month of Bombing Aleppo,” December 1, 2016. As of February 13, 2017: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/12/01/russia/syria-war-crimes-month-bombing-aleppo>

<sup>16</sup> Laura Smith-Spark, “UN Human Rights Chief Warns of War Crimes in Aleppo,” CNN, October 21, 2016. As of February 13, 2017: <http://www.cnn.com/2016/10/21/middleeast/syria-aleppo-un/>

### *Should the United States be doing more with local allies?*

U.S. military successes have come from working with locals, including irregular forces. This was the case in Afghanistan in 2001, with the Sunni tribes in Anbar Province in 2006–2007, and most notably with the Kurds in the current conflict in Syria and Iraq.

Supporting local fighters proved less successful with the Free Syrian Army and in the early attempts to field carefully vetted, U.S.-trained rebel formations in Syria. Those failures, which merit more analysis, suggest that it is not enough to train guerrillas and insert them into the battlefield. Their reliability and effectiveness depend on continued engagement—having Americans with them and direct combat support.

The United States may be able to do more than it has done with state partners in the Middle East. Saudi Arabia formed an alliance of Muslim states to fight Islamic extremists.<sup>17</sup> The initiative was dismissed in Washington as unrealistic; Saudi forces are not seen to be effective in suppressing Houthi rebels in neighboring Yemen, even though the United States participates in efforts on behalf of the Yemeni government.

The United States is uncomfortable with the Saudis. Many Americans see Saudi financial support for the spread of Wahhabism as a major source of jihadist radicalization worldwide and suspect the Saudis of duplicity in dealing with al Qaeda and other jihadists in Syria and elsewhere. Others are critical of Saudi Arabia's record on human rights, rigid adherence to Sharia law, and not-always-precise bombing in Yemen. Some in the Barack Obama administration saw a close relationship with Saudi Arabia as an obstacle to what they hoped would be a more friendly relationship with Iran.

These objections notwithstanding, pursuing local alliances makes sense. Politically, local forces are more effective than American combat units. They also have certain operational advantages. They do not necessarily have to be the most-advanced combat units. In some cases, they need only to out-recruit the jihadists—that is, offer higher pay. This will not attract the religious fanatics, but ISIL's ranks contain many who have joined simply in order to survive.

Finally, we may consider the idea of an international force recruited, trained, paid, and led by experienced military commanders from the region and beyond. This option may work where no government or government forces exist. All of these ideas require further exploration. The objective here is to get us out of the mindset that the United States must always be—or even should be—on the front line.

### *Can the United States walk away?*

Should the United States avoid the costs and tribulations of further military involvement by withdrawing from the region, leaving local belligerents to sort things out by themselves? Doing so seemingly would get the United States out of a costly mess and would enable the country to focus on rebuilding the American economy, which is far more important to the country's long-

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<sup>17</sup> Brian Michael Jenkins, *A Saudi-Led Military Alliance to Fight Terrorism: Welcome Muscle in the Fight Against Terrorism, Desert Mirage, or Bad Idea*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, PE-189-RC, 2016a. As of February 13, 2017: <http://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PE189.html>

term strategic goals. It would also enable the armed forces to rebuild to meet threats that endanger the republic more than errant jihadists, which law enforcement has mostly contained.

This course of action has great appeal, but few have defined precisely what “getting out” means—withdrawing all American forces from Afghanistan? Ending military support for Iraq’s forces? Halting the bombing in Syria? Ending American support for the Kurds and allied Arab formations? Does the United States continue drone strikes? Does the United States continue to support the Saudi-led fight in Yemen? Should it continue to provide training and other forms of military assistance to willing allies in the region? How can the state institutions—law enforcement, intelligence, and societal programs—be established that will underpin the development required for building and maintaining functional governments that provide security for their populations? And is it the responsibility or in the national interest of the United States to assume this mission?

Withdrawal also comes with risks. In Afghanistan, the Taliban could take control over larger swaths of the country and ultimately defeat the government’s forces if the American forces were completely withdrawn. The U.S. commander in Afghanistan has testified before the Senate that the situation in Afghanistan is at a stalemate and more forces are needed to break it.<sup>18</sup> Meanwhile, Lieutenant General Townsend, who heads the U.S.-led coalition against ISIL, said recently that ISIL’s strongholds in Mosul in Iraq and Raqqa in Syria could be recaptured in the next six months, but he counsels that another complete U.S. withdrawal is too risky.<sup>19</sup> The United States has achieved a measure of success on several occasions—in Afghanistan, in Iraq, in Yemen—only to see things fall apart when it turned its attention to other fronts.

Many in the United States would say, “That’s their problem.” What are the downsides of withdrawal to the United States? Withdrawal would be perceived as another demonstration that the United States is an unreliable ally. That would have strategic implications beyond the Middle East—in Europe and East Asia, where there are concerns about American commitment to its allies. A U.S. withdrawal could result in further destabilizing surrounding countries. It would leave ungoverned spaces not unlike those in pre-9/11 Afghanistan, which allowed al Qaeda to flourish. It would alter political calculations in Baghdad. It would leave Iran in a commanding position in the region. It could prompt further and more-significant military action against the Kurds by Turkey. The withdrawal of U.S. combat troops from Iraq in 2011 is sometimes cited as a contributing factor to the rise of ISIL, although it was technically necessary under the 2008 Status of Forces Agreement.

Withdrawal could also cause the United States to lose any ability to shape outcomes in the region. Significantly, the recent Syrian ceasefire follow-up meeting in Astana with Turkey, Russia, Iran, and the United Nations did not include the United States. This is unexplored territory.

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<sup>18</sup> Rebecca Kheel, “Top US Commander Says He’s Short ‘a Few Thousand’ Troops in Afghanistan,” *The Hill*, February 9, 2017.

<sup>19</sup> Ali Abdul-Hassan, Zeina Karam, and Robert Burns, “U.S. Commander: Mosul, Raqqa Should be Retaken from Islamic State in Six Months,” *New York Times*, February 8, 2017. As of February 13, 2017: [https://www.nytimes.com/aponline/2017/02/08/world/middleeast/ap-ml-iraq.html?\\_r=0](https://www.nytimes.com/aponline/2017/02/08/world/middleeast/ap-ml-iraq.html?_r=0)

The principal reason for U.S. military involvement in these conflicts is that it is seen as necessary to prevent terrorist attacks on the U.S. homeland. Has that risk sufficiently diminished, or is the situation worse? Would withdrawal reduce or increase the risk? Although it encourages homegrown terrorist attacks, ISIL thus far has not followed al Qaeda's earlier pattern of launching large-scale attacks on the United States, although both groups continue to call for attacks here. Al Qaeda's original objective was to drive the United States—the "far enemy"—out of the Middle East, although some analysts argue that the purpose of the 9/11 attacks was to draw the United States into the fight. How would al Qaeda now react to American withdrawal? If the United States were to withdraw, how would ISIL see launching attacks on the United States as being in its strategic interest?

Would any administration that ordered a withdrawal be able to politically withstand a subsequent terrorist attack? And if one were to occur, what options would the United States have?

As indicated by these questions, whether and how the United States ends—or substantially reduces—its military role remains unexplored territory. Yet Americans must accept that this is an open-ended contest, with no easy off-ramps, or we must devote as much strategic thinking about how this war might end as we have (or have not) devoted to going in.