Time to Step Back From the War On Terror

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President Donald Trump has expanded every aspect of the war on terror he inherited from his two predecessors. In his first nine months Trump has ordered a renewed surge in Afghanistan, increased the tempo of drone strikes, and granted the military greater autonomy. Meanwhile, in Afghanistan, the Taliban now control or contest more districts than at any point since 2001. And last week four American soldiers died in Niger, an increasingly active front in the war on terror. Americans are now fighting — and dying — in at least eight different countries across the Middle East and Central Asia. The deaths of American forces are a particularly sobering reminder of the war's high costs and should prompt people to ask whether the costs are worth it. Unfortunately, the evidence of the past 16 years clearly indicates that the answer is no. Enough time has now passed since 9/11 to reach two important conclusions. First, the threat posed by Islamist-inspired terrorism does not justify such a mammoth effort. Second, the aggressive military strategy the United States has pursued since 2001 has not only failed to reduce the threat of terrorism; it has likely made things worse.

The attacks on Sept. 11, 2001, were unprecedented. Twice as many people died on 9/11 than in any other terror attack in history. America's immediate response — to attack al Qaeda and invade Afghanistan — made more sense at the time than it does today, based on the severity of the attack, lack of clarity from the intelligence services, and fear among the public. Many at the time reasonably believed that terrorism represented a major new threat to the United States. A decade and a half later, however, a more dispassionate examination of the threat suggests those initial assessments were wrong.

The 9/11 attacks remain an outlier. No other attacks like them have ever occurred, and mass casualty terrorist attacks rarely take place in the West or North America, much less the United States. The second-worst attack on U.S. soil is still the Oklahoma City Bombing, where Timothy McVeigh — decidedly not an Islamist-inspired terrorist — took the lives of 168 in 1995. And the second-worst attack in North America occurred more than 30 years ago when Sikh (again, not Islamist-inspired) extremists bombed a plane originating from Toronto, Canada and killed 329. The fact is that terrorism, including large-scale attacks, almost always occurs in failed or war-torn states.

And neither al Qaeda nor Islamic State has launched a successful attack in the United States since 9/11. Though every death is tragic, when compared to the 15,000 Americans who are murdered each year by "regular" Americans, Islamist-inspired terrorism hardly registers as a threat.

The persistence of Americans' inflated view of the threat stems from a misperception of the goals of groups like al Qaeda and Islamic State. Americans tend to believe al Qaeda and the Islamic State are at war with the United States. It's true that Al Qaeda has attacked the homeland of the "far enemy" (i.e., the United States) and ISIS does dedicate some effort to radicalizing U.S. citizens. But these groups' fundamental goals are more internal: They are engaged in a generational struggle for power in the Middle East and Central Asia. Al Qaeda aims to "rid the Muslim world of Western influence, to destroy Israel, and to create an Islamic caliphate stretching from Spain to Indonesia" and, similarly, ISIL wants to establish an Islamic caliphate. These groups' central problem is the presence of the United States in the Middle East, not its existence. Osama bin Laden's outrage at Arab states for requesting that U.S. forces, rather than a Muslim force, remove Saddam Hussein from Kuwait in 1991 reveals this point. After Operation Desert Storm, bin Laden railed against the continued presence of U.S. military forces in Saudi Arabia, home to Mecca and Medina, Islam's two holiest sites. As long as the United States continues to intervene, it will continue to draw the ire of Islamist groups. Most fundamentally, Al Qaeda, Islamic State, and other similar groups seek power and influence over their own neighborhood.

America's improved homeland security system may be another reason for the low threat level. The 9/11 hijackers legally entered the United States using their real identities. They conducted their pilot training here, with one living with his American flight instructors. Two even successfully argued their way back into the country, assuring U.S. customs and border agents that they were authorized pilot training students. Since then, the United States has started pre-screening all passengers before they fly into, within, or out of the country, and 72 fusion centers have been established to facilitate information sharing. The risk of terror in the most important potential safe haven — the United States — has been substantially reduced. Homeland security improvements have not reduced the risk of terrorism to zero, of course. Nothing can. But they have made conducting large-scale terrorist attacks significantly more difficult. These efforts should have been the extent of America's response to 9/11.

Instead, the United States adopted an aggressive strategy focused on military intervention. America invaded two countries, toppled three regimes, and conducted military operations in eight nations The plan, in the words of the Bush administration's national security strategy, was to "destroy terrorist organizations of global reach." Though Presidents Bush and Obama talked about the need to rebuild Afghanistan and Iraq and weaken the conditions that gave rise to terrorism in the first place, the American strategy has in practice emphasized killing as many jihadist fighters as possible.

Donald Rumsfeld raised questions about this military-centric strategy as early as 2003, asking whether the current situation was such that "the harder we work the behinder we get." American military commanders have understood the difficulties posed by irregular warfare against insurgents and terrorists, leading to the adoption of an updated counterinsurgency strategy in Iraq in 2007 and later in Afghanistan. Despite this innovation, General Stanley McChrystal, the former head of Joint Special Operations Command who led U.S. forces in Afghanistan in 2009 and 2010, answered Rumsfeld's question in the affirmative six years later. Calling it "COIN mathematics," McChrystal noted that military attacks likely create more insurgents than they eliminate "because each one you killed has a brother, father, son and friends, who do not

necessarily think that they were killed because they were doing something wrong. It does not matter — you killed them."

Scholarship has also weighed in, concluding that "repression alone seldom ends terrorism" and "military force has rarely been the primary reason for the end of terrorist groups." Most commonly, terrorism ends when groups eventually implode for lack of support or become politically integrated. To date, American efforts to create political solutions have been overrun by the dynamics generated on the battlefield.

The recent battlefield successes against ISIL in Syria and Iraq have led some (including Trump) to argue that the military approach is working and should be expanded. This is mistaken on two levels. First, the "victory" over Islamic State has not created conditions conducive to peace and stability in the long term. In both 2001 and 2003, decisive military victories gave way to escalating insurgency and terrorism. Most observers agree, moreover, that ISIL will not disappear after military defeat, but rather melt away into the population to continue the fight. Second, the military campaign that defeated ISIL in Raqqa and Mosul was effective only because the terrorist group adopted a strategy of taking and defending territory. To date, neither American airpower nor other military means have proved useful against small and dispersed groups of terrorists or insurgents.

U.S. efforts have not materially reduced the terror threat in the Middle East and may well have increased it. Sixteen years after 9/11, the United States has not defeated Al Qaeda, and Islamic State has arisen and spread throughout the Middle East. In 2000, the State Department identified 13 active Islamist-inspired terrorist groups, fielding a total of roughly 32,000 fighters. By 2015 the number of groups had climbed to 44 and the number of fighters had ballooned to almost 110,000. Terror attacks in the countries where America has intervened increased 1,900 percent after the war on terror began as compared to the 15 years prior to 2001. The terrible irony is that although Islamist terrorist groups pose little threat to the United States, American intervention to confront them may have inadvertently made things worse for everyone else. In spite of mounting evidence for the failures of the war on terror, Trump is doubling down. Secretary of Defense Jim Mattis recently noted that the United States would be expanding its war on terror in Africa even as it again prepares to surge forces into Afghanistan. Trump has promised victory in Afghanistan and a quick defeat of ISIL, but he has offered little on how this strategy will change or accomplish U.S. objectives. History suggests these efforts will do little to change the facts on the ground in Afghanistan or elsewhere, and even less to make Americans more secure.

Instead, continued U.S. action is likely to fuel grievances, amplify instability in the region, and generate more anti-American sentiment. Evidence for growing anti-Americanism in the region since 9/11 is plentiful. Survey data from the Pew Research Center reveal a steady increase in anti-American views after the invasion of Iraq. Several studies, as well as survey data, make it clear that Middle Eastern publics have almost uniformly negative views of American drone strikes, one of the most popular tools of the war on terror. Even worse, the Arab Barometer found that between 53% and 74% of citizens in Egypt, Jordan, Iraq, Yemen, Tunisia, and Algeria felt that U.S. intervention justified "attacks on Americans everywhere." Finally, a recent study of Arab Twitter discourse found deep levels of anti-Americanism among Arabs and

concluded that: "levels of anti-Americanism are primarily driven by the perceived impingement of America on the Middle East, and specifically by United States intervention in the region." Sadly, the jihadist leadership appears to have a firmer grasp on this dynamic than Americans do. In a 2005 letter to ISIL founder Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, Ayman al-Zawahiri (the current al-Qaeda leader) wrote, "The Muslim masses … do not rally except against an outside occupying enemy, especially if the enemy is firstly Jewish, and secondly American."

As we argued in our recent Cato Institute policy analysis, the United States should step back, withdraw military forces, and instead focus on incentivizing local actors towards stability, capability, and transparency. The removal of U.S. military personnel will require local governments to professionalize their bureaucracies and security forces — a difficult task, to be sure, but one the United States has not managed despite 16 years of direct effort. Curtailing the flow of billions of U.S. dollars and weapons into failed states should also help reduce corruption and limit the available spoils of war. The terror threat to the American homeland does not warrant a continued military presence in the Middle East or South Asia, and the military-centric strategy has failed to achieve the stated objectives of successive administrations. Fortunately, the United States has the luxury of not needing to win any war on terror.

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