



## Do Less in the War on Terror

**The Obama administration started getting it right when it reduced America's footprint in the Middle East.**

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Fifteen years ago, the attacks of Sept. 11 took the lives of 2,903 Americans and spurred the launch of a global war against terrorism. Since then, 6,888 more Americans have died fighting for their country in that war. Today the United States continues to pursue al-Qaida and the Islamic State group throughout the Middle East. Given the importance of homeland security as well as the staggering costs of the war on terror it is critical to ask whether or not the current American strategy is the right one.

The answer is no, but the strategy is slowly improving. America's initial overreaction to the threat of terrorism in the wake of 9/11 was understandable. Not long afterwards, however, it became clear that the threat of terrorism against the United States had not in fact risen substantially. In the years since 9/11, Islamist-inspired terrorism has been responsible for roughly seven American deaths per year. Since 9/11 just two terrorist plots – both of which were foiled – were organized by actual terrorist groups themselves. Every terrorist attack is a tragedy but the truth is that terrorism against Americans in the homeland is a very limited threat. Given this, there was good reason to beef up homeland security after 9/11 and to consider targeted efforts to disrupt al-Qaida. However, there was no justification for an expansive war on terror abroad.

Unfortunately, rather than change course as the limited nature of the threat became clear, both the Bush and the Obama administrations expanded the war on terror in an effort to root out anything that looked connected to terrorism. In the first half of the war on terror, the United States invaded two nations, toppled three regimes and conducted military strikes in seven countries. These efforts have been incredibly expensive in both financial and human terms. Estimates of the war's cost range between \$1.7 and \$4 trillion and of the two and a half million Americans sent to fight, almost 7,000 have made the ultimate sacrifice and tens of thousands more have come back wounded both physically and emotionally.

Compounding this strategic failure was the fact that America's aggressive military intervention and nation building efforts made things worse in the Middle East. Though the United States certainly destroyed the ability of the central al-Qaida organization to coordinate terrorist attacks, the broader war on terror just poured fuel on the fire. Afghanistan remains in constant danger of falling back into the hands of the Taliban despite 15 years of American support. And not even heroic efforts by the United States to rebuild Iraq prevented the rise of the Islamic State group, many of whose commanders are former members of Saddam Hussein's military. The result of the

interventionist strategy was in fact not only a failure to "defeat terror," but instead an explosion of Islamist-inspired terrorism in the Middle East. Globally the number of terror attacks has climbed from 1,908 in 2001 to 14,806 in 2015, almost all of which have occurred in the Middle East and Africa – the very places where the United States has been fighting terrorism.

Ironically, the American strategy has improved over time simply as a result of doing less. Since the 2010 surge in Afghanistan, President Barack Obama has steadily reduced the American footprint in the Middle East, opting for greater reliance on Special Forces, air strikes and working through allies in the region to confront al-Qaida and the Islamic State group. Today, less than 15,000 military members are deployed to Afghanistan and Iraq, down from nearly 200,000 at the high-water mark between 2007 and 2010. As a result, the last two years have seen the fewest military fatalities in the war on terror.

Additionally, the reduced military footprint (and diminished focus on nation building) has also substantially reduced spending; 2016 is on pace to be the least costly year since the war on terror began. At the same time, the United States and its partners have made progress in whittling away at the Islamic State group's territory, manpower, and financial capability.

Many have criticized Obama's new approach for not being aggressive enough, especially in the wake of the attacks in San Bernardino and Orlando. To the contrary, however, Obama should be praised for the remarkable restraint he has shown. As scary as the Islamic State group is and as horrible as those events were, the overall trend is clear. Despite the fires raging in the Middle East, the risk of an American dying in a terrorist attack remains incredibly small. The Islamic State group itself has demonstrated limited motivation to launch attacks on the United States – it was lone wolves, recall, who were responsible for the attacks in California and Florida. These threats cannot be killed on a battlefield in Syria, Iraq or Afghanistan. Indeed, it seems likely that potential lone wolves would be less interested in conducting such attacks if the United States weren't engaged militarily in those places in the first place.

Fifteen years into the war on terror, the United States should acknowledge that it needs to do less, not more. In the long run, the solution for Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria, Libya, etc., and thus the solution to Islamist-inspired terrorism, must come from the citizens of those countries. This is a point affirmed by both presidents Bush and Obama. In the end, America cannot compel a courageous and competent Iraqi security force, just as it cannot coerce a capable and uncorrupt Afghan government into being. By removing American manpower and money, Obama has dramatically reduced the incentives for corruption in those countries and he has eliminated the free rider problem. Now, Iraqi, Afghan, and other leaders must take the necessary steps to stabilize and improve the situation or they must accept a sizeable insurgent presence within their borders.

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