

THE HUFFINGTON POST

Why Fight the ‘Long War?’

A. Trevor Thrall

March 19, 2016

The United States appears on the cusp of doubling down on military tactics to fight terrorism. That’s a bad idea.

On March 19, the latest American military member was killed in Iraq. A week later, the U.S.’s top general said he expects an increase in U.S. troop levels there shortly. Presidential hopefuls have offered their insights on the Islamic State, al Qaeda, and the Taliban, with one keeping open the possibility of using tactical nuclear weapons against the Islamic State. Pentagon planners are readying for another round of U.S. intervention in Libya. Most recently, arguably the most-respected general of the modern era, David Petraeus, called for a “sustained” U.S.-led effort in the fight against Islamic extremism.

But why? Islamic terrorism poses a modest threat in the scheme of things, and military campaigns are not effective in diminishing it further. Where is the compelling argument that the United States should continue fighting what is already its longest war?

The attacks of September 11 were as anomalous as they were severe. Nothing like that has ever happened before or since. Almost all of the massive increase in terrorism since 9/11 has occurred in war zones in the Middle East and in weak or failing states. And believe it or not, Americans have been safer from terror attacks since 9/11 than they were the thirty years prior. Data from the Global Terrorism Database indicates we have lost, on average, four Americans per year to terror attacks on U.S. soil since 9/11 compared to 11 per year from 1970 to 2000. This reduction is even more noteworthy, as it occurred while the number of terror attacks and fatalities worldwide rose 64 and 72 percent, respectively.

Still, many assert that only a U.S.-led effort can succeed against ISIS. Though we agree that the world must confront ISIS, the “U.S. must lead” mantra has become dogma among much of the foreign policy establishment, repeated endlessly with great confidence but without evidence. Upon closer reflection, it makes little sense.

First, the argument that U.S. leadership is necessary to motivate a response to ISIS is a non-starter. It is local actors, not the United States, who face an existential threat from the insurgency and terrorism. Iraq and Syria are worried about survival, but their neighbors in the region all have pressing concerns ranging from national security to regional influence and economic stability that are already motivating them to action.

Second, the argument that U.S. leadership is necessary because only the U.S. has the military capabilities to defeat ISIS and terrorism is nonsensical. Terrorists and insurgents are, by definition, weak. Otherwise, they would control the powers of the state and use them. ISIS may not be a pushover, but it is no match for the combined capabilities in the region even without the United States. Moreover, research from the RAND Corporation indicates that local policing and intelligence efforts are five times more likely to lead to the dissolution of a terrorist organization than the use of military force.

Beyond this, the insistence on U.S. leadership in the war on terrorism has muzzled discussion about the unintended consequences of U.S. policies. How might the U.S. invasions of two Muslim-majority states and military operations in another five have fueled recruiting efforts which rely on the narrative that Islam is under attack from the U.S.? Recall that the emergence of ISIS was predicated on the U.S. invasion of Iraq and the ungoverned spaces that have resulted. Similarly, U.S. efforts to install democracies within states where few or none of the needed liberal institutions or cultural norms existed have fallen short and likely exacerbated grievances among Iraqis and Afghans.

Finally, calls to go all in on the “long war” ignore an essential calculation: are the benefits worth the costs? In the past 15 years, nearly 7,000 Americans have given their lives in the fight and the government has borrowed somewhere between \$1.7 and \$5 trillion to fund the wars and their associated costs. The benefits remain elusive, to put it charitably. Worldwide terror attacks and fatalities have soared to unprecedented levels. Islamist-inspired groups and the fighters that comprise them have more than doubled since 2000. Meanwhile, the relative security of America suggests that focusing on homeland security efforts is a more effective approach to dealing with terrorism than endless war.

At the end of the day, the current arguments for fighting the long war are not persuasive. The discussion we should be having now is about how to reduce our footprint in the Middle East and how to end U.S. involvement in the endless conflicts being fought in the name of the war on terrorism.

A. Trevor Thrall is a senior fellow at the Cato Institute and an associate professor at George Mason University's School of Policy, Government, and International Affairs. Erik Goepner is a retired U.S. Air Force Colonel who commanded units in Afghanistan and Iraq.