Daniel Byman and Will McCants

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Fight or Flight: How to Avoid a Forever War against Jihadists

The war on terrorism is enduring and expanding. U.S. forces have been fighting the Taliban in Afghanistan for over fifteen years, the longest armed conflict in American history. President Obama campaigned against the war in Iraq, and U.S. forces briefly withdrew from that country, but he left office with over 5,000 Americans deployed there to fight the Islamic State.[1] These deployments are only the most visible parts of a more massive American effort. In addition to fighting the Taliban in Afghanistan, the United States is also targeting its al-Qaeda allies in Pakistan; conducting regular strikes on al-Qaeda and the Islamic State in Syria; raiding terrorist strongholds from time to time in Somalia, Libya, and Yemen, to say nothing of less explosive military efforts elsewhere. The Trump administration has recently increased the U.S. troop presence in Syria and may expand the number of areas that are formally considered to be war zones.[2]

So many Americans are fighting in so many places because America's government and citizens have lost perspective on what constitutes a real threat to their security. It is not hard to guess why: The specter of Afghanistan and the 9/11 attacks hovers over these deployments. Before 9/11, Americans could rightly dismiss Afghanistan's militant groups and their causes as "a quarrel in a faraway country between people of whom we know nothing," to quote Neville Chamberlain on the eve of WWII.[3] But then an al-Qaeda cell whose leaders had trained in Afghanistan struck the United States. Subsequent attacks like the 2004 train

Daniel Byman is a professor and senior associate dean at Georgetown University's School of Foreign Service as well as a senior fellow at Brookings. He is also an editorial board member of *The Washington Quarterly*. Follow him on Twitter @dbyman. William McCants is a senior fellow in the Center for Middle East Policy and director of its Project on U.S. Relations with the Islamic World at Brookings. Follow him on Twitter @will_mccants.

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bombings in Spain and the 2005 transportation bombings in London, two of Europe's deadliest terrorist attacks, drew from the reservoir of terror al-Qaeda had built in its Afghan training camps. In light of the understandable public outcry that followed, policymakers felt they could no longer afford to let terrorist groups hostile to the United States hold territory for too long.

One reason for this change in perspective had to do with the effect of 9/11 on risk assessment. No security professional could seriously take anything off the table after such a spectacular surprise attack. The view has been reinforced by jihadists who capture land and then colorfully threaten to strike the United States and its allies. Groups in Southeast Asia as well as West and East Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia all espouse anti-American rhetoric. Given the ubiquity of social media, their fulminations are easy for Americans to observe. A hyper-violent group like the Islamic State, which delights in publicized beheadings and other video spectaculars, is made for media and keeps the reality of jihadist violence front and center in the American consciousness.

Another reason for the change in perspective was that 9/11 increased the negative political consequences of a successful terror attack for the party in power. Compare the current politics surrounding Islamic State and al-Qaeda attacks on Americans with similar attacks in the 1980s. President Reagan, not exactly known as a softy when it comes to fighting terrorism, saw Hezbollah car bombs kill 241 Marine peacekeepers and destroy the U.S. embassy on his watch in 1983, which helped spur the departure of U.S. forces from Lebanon. At the end of his time in office, Libyan intelligence bombed Pan Am Flight 103, killing 270 people. Yet no one looks back at the Reagan era as a time when terrorists ran amok or when the United States retreated in the face of terrorism. In contrast, terrorists killed four Americans in Benghazi in 2012, leading to years of Congressional investigations and near constant media criticism. In 1995, Timothy McVeigh, an anti-government white supremacist, bombed a federal building in Oklahoma City, killing 168 people. No one blamed President Clinton. But when home-grown terrorists set off an improvised bomb at the 2013 Boston Marathon, killing three people, the attack shut down the city for a week while law enforcement hunted the terrorists and set off a national avalanche of fear and criticism. President Trump came to office in part by promising to get tough on the Islamic State, preying on a public mood that believes terrorists pose an imminent danger to America. Today, no president can be seen as soft on terrorism. It is politically safer to fight a threat before it materializes than to avoid entanglement and risk being surprised.

Not letting "a new Afghanistan" fester seems like an obvious and sensible way to get tough. We argue, however, that this fear of safe havens and the politics that undergird it are misplaced. Safe havens can be dangerous, and at times it is vital for the United States to use force, even massive force, to disrupt them. Yet not all safe havens—and not all the groups in the havens—are created equal. In some countries, the United States can use limited force to deal with a threat, and in still others provide support to allies as they do the bulk of the lifting. The failure to differentiate the dangers leads to wasted resources and U.S. over-commitments to parts of the world that are at best tangential to U.S. interests.

In recent years, global jihadists have focused less on the United States. Sectarian struggles between Sunnis and Muslim minorities like the Shi'a, 'Alawis, and other groups have risen to the fore. Another great enemy of the Islamic State is other Sunnis who oppose the group. Additionally, jihadists have a wider variety of international targets —they still want to kill Americans, but they want to kill Europeans, Indians, and Russians too.

Jihadists also seek to do more than kill people: they want to govern. This tendency was most prominent in 2014, when Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi proclaimed a new caliphate in Iraq and Syria. And well before the Islamic State, jihadists in Afghanistan, Mali, Somalia, and Yemen all sought to govern, albeit with varying degrees of success.[4] These groups will always oppose America and the West, but some may prioritize building their society on their own terms rather than emphasize directly attacking the United States. When the United States disrupts these attempts at governance, it can push groups to embrace international terrorist attacks as the most effective means of reprisal. Not only are these attacks a form of revenge, they also assure supporters of the group that it will stay strong and continue to be relevant.

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The remainder of this essay has three parts. First, it describes why the United States' current approach of fighting terrorism everywhere—began under Bush, expanded under Obama, and about to be put on steroids under Trump—is flawed. It then delineates what priorities and red lines the United States should have regarding jihadists as a way of differentiating the threat. Finally, it tries to match these priorities with actions to show how the U.S. level of effort should correspond to the real danger.

Problems with the Current Approach

The current approach that spreads the War on Terror to the far-flung corners of the earth has many flaws. Perhaps the biggest is that it exaggerates the nature of the

threat. With terrorism in the news seemingly every day, this seems an odd claim, but the post-9/11 media has profoundly changed how Americans assess the risk of terrorism. The 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s saw repeated attacks on U.S. diplomatic facilities and diplomats, but these were recognized as the price of doing business in a rough world. Now, they are points on the scoreboard in the war against terrorism.[5] Americans' threat perceptions now include the latest violence in Bangladesh or Nigeria; before 9/11, these events would not even merit attention.

The grim pace of attack in Europe suggests that the terrorism danger is real. Berlin, Brussels, and Nice in 2016 and Paris in 2015 (as well as a spate of lesser attacks in France, Germany, and the United Kingdom in this period) indicate the problem Europe faces. Yet here too, perception has changed far more than reality. Deaths from terrorism in Europe today are fewer than they were in the 1970s and 1980s when the Irish Republican Army and the Basque separatists carried out massive and sustained campaigns. During the worst of the Northern Irish and Basque terrorism campaigns in the 1970s, terrorism deaths in western Europe often averaged between 300–400 people a year, and the 1980s regularly saw deaths near or over 200 a year. In the post-9/11 era, in contrast, no single year has seen over 200 deaths.[6]

This disjuncture between perception and reality is widest where it should be most obvious—attacks on the U.S. homeland itself. Since 9/11 through the end of 2016, jihadists have killed 94 Americans on U.S. soil. That's 94 too many, but that is a small number given the apocalyptic expectations proclaimed right after the 9/11 blasts. Experts confidently predicted a massive terrorism strike (possibly involving weapons of mass destruction), attacks in the run-ups to elections and major sporting events, and other horrific attacks.[7] Data from the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START) at the University of Maryland show far more attacks on U.S. soil in the 1970s, 1980s, and even 1990s than in the post-9/11 era. The year 1970 saw 460 attacks, and for much of the 1980s and 1990s attacks at or near 50 a year were common, in contrast to the post-9/11 era, where only one year (2016) saw close to that number.[8] Terrorist plots today are far more likely to be disrupted due to a mix of the terrorists' lack

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of training and general incompetence, as well as the greater vigilance of the FBI and law enforcement. But despite fewer attacks at home and fewer deaths than anticipated, the public remains terrified. Fifteen years after 9/11, 40 percent of Americans (and 58 percent of Republicans) believed that the terrorists' ability to attack the United States has increased since 9/11, while only 25 percent believe it decreased.[9]

The threat is truly massive in the Middle East, where terrorist groups like the Islamic State and various al-Qaeda affiliates have sparked and fed off of civil wars that have killed hundreds of thousands. As a result, these groups pose a real danger to the lives of citizens in the region and to the stability of U.S. allies. Yet, the stability of some allies is more important than others. If a group posed a true threat to key partners like Israel or Saudi Arabia, then the United States would have a vital interest in the conflict. Fortunately, the groups fighting close U.S. allies are either weak, ably combated by the allied government, or both. Israel, for example, fights Hamas quite effectively on its own, and the U.S. contribution is limited at best. Weak states like Lebanon, Somalia, and Yemen might also count as partners, but their inchoate governments are at most minor partners, and the U.S. interest there is primarily about the terrorist group, creating a self-justifying reason for intervention. Such countries sometimes deserve U.S. assistance, but they should not be conflated with vital partners or allies.

Just as all allies are not equal, nor are all terrorist groups. Many groups have local or at most regional aspirations. Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, for example, has focused on Algeria, Libya, Mali, and other regional countries, not on Europe or the United States. The Islamic State's so-called "province" in Libya is primarily focused on that country's civil war and is weak in any event. Boko Haram, one of the world's most formidable terrorist groups, operates primarily in Nigeria and in neighboring states' border areas. All these groups are part of the jihadist archipelago, but that does not mean they share core al-Qaeda's focus on the West. For many years, the Islamic State itself fell into this category. Between 2004 and 2014 (when the group went by al-Qaeda in Iraq, the Islamic State of Iraq, and other names), it concentrated almost entirely on Iraq itself, and to a much lesser degree on neighboring countries like Jordan, regardless of whether U.S. troops were in Iraq or not.

Even though these groups had a local or regional focus, they all espoused the internationalist rhetoric of global jihad and had connections to groups like al-Qaeda that had an internationalist agenda, which made it difficult for foreign governments to determine when and how to engage, when to rely on allies, and when to ignore them. As a consequence, responses were ad hoc and overly influenced by domestic political considerations. That is unavoidable to some extent, especially for democratic governments responding to dozens of disparate, simultaneous threats on the basis of intelligence that is often incomplete or contradictory. But clear guidelines for when to intervene can help governments bring order to the jihadist chaos by establishing consistent rules of the road for both sides.

New Rules for the Road Ahead

Based on the experience of the last fifteen years, the United States should establish three red lines for militant groups and the direct use of U.S. military force. First, no

militant group should be allowed to build a foreign operations cell that targets the United States. The Yemen-based al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) organized one at the end of the last decade, and then attempted to attack U.S. cargo and transportation aircraft. The U.S. government appropriately sought to destroy the cell. Anwar al-Awlaki, a terrorist propagandist who ran AQAP's foreign operations cell, was targeted even though he was a U.S. citizen. Awlaki was officially targeted because he was "engaged in continual planning and direction of attacks" on Americans;[10] he also had a special gift for recruiting disaffected Westerners. When al-Qaeda dispatched several veterans to create a foreign operations cell to join its branch in Syria and target the United States and other countries outside the Middle East, the United States focused its firepower on the cell, inflicting considerable losses on it in a series of airstrikes that began in 2014.[11] In neither case did the U.S. government seek to destroy the broader group completely with a prolonged military campaign. Instead, it has conducted air strikes that have spanned years to devastate part of a group or at least keep it weak and off balance. As a result, these groups have been unable or unwilling to conduct attacks against the United States.

Second, no militant group should be allowed to take over a major city in a country vital to American interests. Those interests include the survival of regimes friendly to the United States and the prevention of mass refugee flows that could destabilize other American allies. When the Islamic State contented itself with seizing small towns in the Sunni Arab hinterland between Syria and Iraq, the U.S. government was right not to begin a concerted push to retake it. The territory was not vital to the survival of the U.S.-aligned Iraqi government. But in 2014, once the group took major cities in Anbar province, captured the country's second-largest city, Mosul, and made a determined push toward Baghdad, the U.S. government took appropriate action to halt its advance and repel it. This initially involved air strikes on Islamic State forces. In the years that followed, the air strikes were more systematic and sustained, there was a more comprehensive and multilateral effort to arm and train various anti-Islamic State forces, there was a program to stop Islamic State financing, and the U.S. deployed limited numbers of forces—all a significant investment of resources and military assets.

Such a guideline will at times require significant U.S. forces as well as a broader sharing of intelligence and other government officials to bolster allied capacity. Most of the fighting will still be done by local allies—but in order to repel the 2014 Islamic State advances in Iraq, the United States needed to provide several thousand U.S. troops as well as considerable air power, and this commitment continues to this day. The United States may need to conduct several such limited interventions over a decade.

Third, no militant group should be allowed to ethnically cleanse an entire people. The United States was right to justify its initial reprisals against the Islamic State as its forces advanced in Iraq in 2014 on the grounds that the group sought "the systematic destruction of the entire [Yazidi] people, which would constitute genocide," in President Obama's words.[12] Genocidal campaigns trigger mass refugee flows and sow the seeds for continuing unrest, which could threaten governments aligned with the United States. The United States, as the world's leading democracy, also has a moral obligation to prevent crimes against humanity when feasible, and jihadist groups' limited military capacities make them far easier opponents than genocidal nation states like Mao's China or Stalin's Russia. And unlike a purely humanitarian objective, political support might be stronger because it would be done in the name of counterterrorism.

The long-term requirements of such a red line will vary. In some instances, the U.S. government may want to simply ensure that the community being attacked is able to flee to the safety of a neighboring state. In such cases, air strikes and other rapid-response support might be necessary to stop attacks, and assisting with refugee care and reintegration is vital in the long term. In other situations, it may involve a military mission to arm and train members of the community to defend themselves, while the United States plays a significant role with its own forces in the interim.

Enforcing these three red lines is vital to defending the two core U.S. security interests: protecting critical allies and ensuring that foreign-based cells are less able to kill Americans in the U.S. homeland. The United States should enforce the first red line unilaterally if necessary. Enforcing the second and third would depend on the cooperation of the local government—or regional allies and local sub-state actors if the local government is unable or unwilling to act. The Syrian regime's brutality and its unpopularity with key regional partners like Saudi Arabia make it unsuitable as a U.S. ally against the Islamic State, so the United States has appropriately worked with regional partners like Jordan and Saudi Arabia, the Iraqi government, and local Kurdish and tribal groups. Such diverse coalitions are unwieldy and imperfect, but they are often the best available. The United States has other interests, like maintaining its influence with lesser partners and discouraging terrorists of all stripes from attacking civilians, even in countries hostile to the U.S. government or where the government has broken down. But those are not vital interests,

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and drawing red lines to protect them would be difficult because the interests themselves are nebulous and thus the red lines are not credible.

Where multiple red lines are crossed, particularly when they involve large-scale terrorist attacks that continually target the United States, a sustained military response, possibly involving ground force deployments, may be appropriate. Al-Qaeda's escalating attacks that culminated on 9/11 fit this example best, but less destructive plots would also fit in this category. In cases where terrorist groups do not threaten the United States but are poised to conquer an important city in a partner nation or commit mass atrocities, limited but forceful operations involving air power, special operations forces, and local allied forces would be appropriate. So when the Islamic State overran Mosul and Tikrit in 2014, killing and enslaving Yazidis and other minorities as it marched, an aggressive U.S. response was appropriate. As we move down the spectrum, the scale and scope of U.S. involvement should diminish, with drones and local forces playing a greater role.

In areas with fewer U.S. interests or where the threat is primarily to other countries, such as North and West Africa, the United States should encourage allies to become involved and support their operations. The 2013 French intervention in Mali, for example, shows the contributions key allies can make. French Special Forces, soldiers, and air assets took on the jihadists who were overrunning Mali, shoring up the Malian army, and pushing back the jihadists. French forces remain in the country to this day to fight the remnants. The United States can and should support these operations, but a direct U.S. role is not necessary.

In cases where red lines are not crossed but other U.S. interests are involved, the U.S. role should primarily support local allies through training, arms, and other forms of assistance rather than conduct airstrikes or deploy U.S. troops. In Tunisia, for example, the United States has an interest in helping a friendly government complete its democratic transition, so it should help it to responsibly fight the jihadist presence there by training the military and intelligence services, providing equipment, and otherwise making them stronger. The United States still has interests in the Middle East and other regions threatened by jihadist groups, but often these are minor and limited, and the U.S. commitment of force should reflect this.

Whither Counterterrorism under Trump?

Early evidence suggests that President Trump will adopt a more aggressive posture against jihadists than President Obama did. In January 2017, he approved sending special operations forces on a high-risk intelligence-gathering mission in Yemen that resulted in the death of a Navy Seal and dozens of civilians.[13] A thousand

Marines deployed in 2017 to join the fight to capture the Islamic State capital in Raqqa, Syria.[14] Trump may rescind President Obama's guidance that said targets must pose a "continuing and imminent threat" to the United States—a standard that was already loosely interpreted by Obama and President George W. Bush.[15]

A more aggressive campaign against the jihadists is not wrong on its face. It would be warranted in some circumstances but ill-advised in others, according to the red lines we suggested. In Syria, a limited increase of American troops may be necessary to help capture and secure Raqqa, where the Islamic State has trained operatives for attacks against the United States and its allies. This would drive the Islamic State underground and, even though it will still launch guerrilla attacks and use terrorism, the group would be less dangerous to the region overall because it is less able to conquer territory, generate mass refugee flows, and impose its horrific form of governance on millions.

In Yemen, however, a major escalation is unwarranted. AQAP has only crossed one of the three red lines by trying to maintain its foreign operations cell, which only requires a limited response to destroy the cell using airpower and special operations forces according to our schema. Saudi Arabia's and the United Arab Emirates' willingness to go

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after AQAP with their own armed forces is a further argument against deploying more American forces.[16] And AQAP itself has claimed that it now deemphasizes foreign attacks to curry favor with the local tribes.[17]

U.S. aggression against jihadists on all fronts, which seems to be the current posture of the new administration, risks confusing our adversaries and making terrorists more likely to attack the United States directly. If everything is a red line, then nothing is a red line. The United States will be unable to affect the jihadists' targeting calculus. Worse, the United States might make jihadist groups more likely to target Americans out of revenge or because they conclude that there is no other way to stop U.S. attacks.

Some may argue that jihadists do not make such calculations. But the evidence based on documents captured in the Abbottabad raid and elsewhere suggests otherwise, at least for some groups. Al-Qaeda's branch in North Africa, for example, privately urged its members to disguise their al-Qaeda affiliation when they captured Timbuktu in Mali, lest they invite unwanted American intervention. In letters to al-Shabaab in Somalia, Bin Laden urged the group to conceal their al-Qaeda membership so the American military would not march against them.[18]

Terrorism is not a problem to be solved any more than war is a problem to be solved. It is a threat to be countered, mitigated, or avoided, but it is part of global reality and will not go away entirely. Addressing it requires clear guidelines about

when the United States will act. If the Trump administration does not agree with the guidelines recommended here, they should craft their own and publicly defend them. In any case, a lack of guidelines will produce an incoherent counterterrorism policy that drains U.S. coffers, makes allies more likely to work at cross-purposes with the United States, and leaves jihadist enemies to write the rules.

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