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On the Horns of the US Counterterrorism Dilemma: Confronting ISIL and the Consequences of the War on Terror

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Two major stories concerning terrorism and counterterrorism which appeared in mid-December 2014 provide important perspective for considering counterterrorism policy thirteen years after 9/11. The BBC reported that, in their words, “Jihadist attacks killed more than 5000 people in just one month [November].”¹ The report details the devastating effects that these attacks have had, particularly in Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan, Nigeria, Yemen, Somalia and Pakistan. The Islamic State was responsible for 44% of the deaths and Boko Haram, al-Shabab, al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and the Taliban were named as the most deadly groups responsible for the actions in these countries. Secondly, the US Senate Intelligence Committee released the long awaited and anticipated Committee Study of the Central Intelligence Agency's Detention and Interrogation Program, a 525 page summary of its 6000 page report.

These two reports, detailing the continuing and devastating costs that have occurred and the continuing debates on what is productive and legitimate as components of a counterterrorism policy direct us to consider not only the nature of the threat but the means employed to confront it as we consider the Obama administration's counterterrorism approach and component strategy in the middle east, south and southwest Asia. An evaluation of the Obama administration's counterterrorism strategy in the Middle East necessitates placing that counterterrorism strategy within the larger United States foreign policy context and US strategic objectives as well as making clear the threats that are being confronted. How the United States responds to particular terrorist threats cannot be divorced from the larger foreign policy arena and US relations with the nations in the region as well as the world at large. It also requires that we do not divorce the development and execution of that policy from the historical and regional context within which it is embedded. Having said that, it should be clear that there are no simple counterterrorism solutions and that it is often the case that the choices with which policy makers are confronted involve choosing perceived “least bad” options rather than optimal solutions.

Thus, the analysis, must at least be mindful of how counterterrorism choices are impacted by and impact the US relationship and support for traditional friends and allies in the region as well as the calculus for how the policy reduces and manages the threat of terrorism both within the region and protecting the United States (and American targets) from attack. Therefore, an analysis of counterterrorism policy must consider not only whether the particular

¹ BBC “Jihadism: Tracking a Month of Deadly Attacks” accessed at <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-30080914>

counterterrorism policy is effective (and should indicate how effectiveness is measured), but also how its formulation, implementation and impact affects, and is affected by, these regional and wider global foreign policy interests as well as how it affects and is affected by domestic US interests.

While terrorism is almost universally condemned it is often mislabeled for political purposes because it generates such condemnation. It is important that we carefully distinguish between terrorism and other violent acts because the response to terrorism involves communication as well as security (police or military) strategies and actions. Terrorists seek through their acts of violence (whether perpetrated or threatened) to create fear and/or compliant behavior in a victim and/or an audience for the act or threat. Not all violent acts are terrorism. What distinguishes the terrorist act is that the violence is directed at an audience beyond the victim(s) and that is the main purpose of the violence. That is, terrorism is communicatively constituted violence and it is the action not the actor that makes a particular act, terrorism. The violence which occurs in the context of a pitched battle thus is not generally considered terrorism.

The focus on the actions requires that that we distinguish the victims of the violent act from the targets (the audience of that violence). As difficult as it is for us to accept in the immediate aftermath of an attack with victims in plain view, the terrorists are primarily interested in the audience, not the victims. There are a number of consequences of viewing terrorism in this manner. It means not all actions by organizations that employ terrorism are terrorism and not all violence is terrorism.

Terrorism is a process which involves the act or threat of terrorism itself, the emotional reaction of the audience and the social effects of the act or threat and the resultant reaction.² Thus when considering counterterrorism and judging whether particular policy options and implementation are useful, we need to consider not only the violent act or threat, but also the reaction of the audience(s) to the immediate act and the social effects which result from this reaction and subsequent behaviors in response including counterterrorism efforts. These reactions and social effects are at the heart of both terrorist actions and counterterrorism.

² E.V. Walter, *Terror and Resistance*. New York: Oxford University Press. 1969.

Counter terrorism policy is thus more than simply the prevention of future violence and the minimization of potential terrorist actors, which clearly must be at the heart of any successful strategy. The strategy must also consider the appropriate response to acts that do occur and to both prepare the public for the occurrence of such attacks and respond to the reactions of the audience to the acts when they occur. Terrorists use their violence to communicate fear to the target audience and intend also that the audience begins to doubt if the authorities can protect those that are targeted. Thus, the authorities' tasks are not limited to the prevention of attacks but also the apprehension of the terrorists and taking actions which make it less likely that a future attack will succeed. At the same time, they must also make the public subjectively believe that they are more secure and create confidence and trust that they are not only making them more secure but also that they are doing so in a manner consistent with societal expectations. Failing to make the public more secure, or perceiving that they are, amounts to a victory for the terrorist, but as a process, failing to make the public believe that they are safe and that the political authorities are doing all that they should, often presents more of a threat to the political system than particular security lapses. Thus, countering terrorism involves the use of all the security forces of the state within the context of a political process which is heavily dependent upon the state's ability to communicate to its audience that the state's actions are making the population safer and more secure. Moving beyond a particular state border to the regional or global level immediately increases the number of audiences that the terrorist and the state address and thus increases the difficulty of the communications necessary to engender trust and the perception of security as well as that the actions taken are both legitimate and necessary.

Current US counterterrorism policy in the region, both in terms of the debates about the proper approach to take and in terms of its impact on global audience, cannot be understood by beginning with the Obama administration's current policy actions in the region. It has become a truism that September 11th changed everything. While that may not be completely accurate it is clear that in the counterterrorism arena it certainly changed the debate and transformed United States policy. Within the United States and Western Europe, there had been a long running debate on the appropriate approach to combatting terrorism.³ Within US domestic jurisdictions

³ See for example, J. Bowyer Bell *A Time Of Terror: How Democratic Societies Respond To. Revolutionary Violence*. New York: Basic. Books, 1978. Paul Wilkinson, *Terrorism and the Liberal State*. London: Macmillan, 1978.

and within most European jurisdictions, a law enforcement approach was predominant. This approach emphasizes the tools of criminal investigation (including legal protection and rights and restrictions on the intelligence-gathering process that safeguard civil liberties) and due process. It also presumed that the purpose of the terrorist act involved some element of coercive bargaining, for example, a demand for recognition as a political actor or the meeting of particular political demands. In the international realm a war fighting approach was predominant. This approach views terrorism essentially as a military threat that requires the use of force to defeat the enemy, both because of the nature of terrorism and in the last two decades because a new terrorism had emerged whose perpetrators did not believe in bargaining.⁴ Both the law enforcement approach and the war fighting approach necessitated intelligence gathering and effective diplomacy and cooperation with other states. This is not to argue that either the law or war approach precludes actions that would be constitutive of the other approach but rather to understand that the underlying approach was defined by the definition of the problem as either military or criminal and assumptions about the viability of negotiating or bargaining with the terrorist.

The attacks of September 11 profoundly altered the debate and the responses which followed continued to define policy considerations and choices. The immediate response following September 11 was to frame the attacks primarily as a military problem and thus President Bush declared the global war on terror (GWOT). The approach emphasized attacking the perpetrators of 9/11 and their supporters. In addition, the administration seized the opportunity to emphasize the differences in their approach from that of the Clinton administration which they criticized for its soft and restrained law enforcement concerns. The approach led to full scale military operations against Afghanistan and Iraq under the banner of the war on terror. This change in approach also resulted in the shifting of counterterrorism coordination and resources from the Department of Justice and the Department of State to the Defense Department, a shift that dramatically reduced the importance of the Justice Department, the FBI and the Department of State in counterterrorism policy and actions.

⁴ Bruce Hoffman was perhaps the first proponent Bruce Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism* New York: Columbia University Press, 1998. For a critique see Michael Stohl (2012) Don't confuse me with the facts: knowledge claims and terrorism, *Critical Studies on Terrorism*, 5:1, 31-49, DOI: [10.1080/17539153.2012.659908](https://doi.org/10.1080/17539153.2012.659908)

There have been numerous critiques of not only the decisions to declare war on Iraq and Afghanistan, but also the war metaphor and counterterrorism approach, both emphasizing its rhetorical (i.e. communicative) and tactical problems and why it has often been counterproductive. Scholars, pundits, and serving military leaders as well as numerous retired military officers have argued that the war metaphor undermined the ability of the United States to manage the problem of terrorism. In July 2005, for example, General Richard Myers, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, noted, “I’ve objected to the use of the term ‘war on terrorism’ before, because one—if you call it a war, then you think of people in uniform as being the solution. [...] The long-term problem is as much diplomatic, as much economic—in fact, more diplomatic, more economic, more political than it is military.”⁵

The war on terror approach raised expectations, justified excesses, escalated fear, and framed the problem as one that requires resolution rather than management. Critics generated a series of still unanswered questions: How will we know when we have won the war on terror? How do we know when our enemies are vanquished? How long do we have to go after the last attack to declare victory? Moreover, by disparaging a law enforcement–legal approach and by privileging the military approach, the war metaphor was intended to make it seem that contraventions of civil liberties and democratic processes and values were necessary as long as the war continued. By so doing, it focused its attention primarily on military actions—most of which were clear tactical successes (killing, capturing terrorists, destroying safe havens etc.) and paid less attention on the impact of these actions (and the policy as a whole) on the audiences of the counterterrorism actions, many of whom, particularly in the Middle East, became less supportive of US policy and the United States.

The war approach was made even more difficult by the second major component of the counterterrorism approach, the identification of a global network of terror. Knowledge and consideration of the number of terrorist attacks, their location and their perpetrators were very much related to how the “enemy” was defined by the Bush administration in the Global War on Terror. At the heart of the problem was the use of the network metaphor by which the administration defined Al Qaeda and all those who were either “with us or against us.” Remarkably, the Bush administration actually never clearly, consistently or fully, identified what they actually meant by a network of terror and who

⁵ Schmitt, E., & Shanker, T. (2005). “Washington recasts terror war as “struggle.” *The New York Times*, July 27: A1

(Beyond Osama Bin Laden and the leaders of Al Qaeda) actually needed to be defeated, captured or killed for the “war” to be won. Their failure might have stemmed from an unwillingness rather than an inability to clearly specify what they actually meant by the global network of terror, some of which was undoubtedly generated by political considerations, but much of the problem was generated by the rather cavalier use of the term network.

In its simplest form, a network refers to the web of social relations that connect individuals, groups, and organizations. An analysis of “networks of terror” should explain how various terrorist groups, and other organizations and states are connected, how they are organized and how they operate as a network. It is important to know what is meant by membership in the network and how the various members are linked. Delineating how the members are linked (and how we know this) informs us of what the meaning of the links and how important the connections are. It is crucial to recognize that not all connections are equal and not all “connections” are important. We can identify five problematic assumptions of the Bush administration’s network approach⁶. The five assumptions were that 1. Networks are information systems. 2. Network links embody uniplex ahistoric relations. 3. Networks are hierarchically organized, top-down command and control structures. 4. Network boundary specification is a political tool. 5. Networks are globalized and homophilous.

We argued that despite the inherent dynamism and emergent flexibility embedded in the term network, policy makers consistently appeared to view (and discuss) the terrorist networks as known and knowable hierarchically organized and centralized bureaucracies. The consequence was that organizational ‘links,’ real or potential, were transformed into organizational control and, in addition to possibly exaggerating the scale of the actual threat, obscured the differing organizational goals, recruitment patterns and tactical and operational coordination of many very different terrorist groups, which arose in very different places for different purposes and different targets and goals.

A second consequential issue for understanding the nature of al Qaeda and the threat it posed (as well as other terrorist groups) was that the clandestine nature of terrorist networks enabled political calculations about public opinion, as well as the development of alliances and

⁶ Taken from Stohl, Cynthia and Stohl, Michael (2007), “Networks of Terror: Theoretical Assumptions and Pragmatic Consequences” *Communication Theory* 47,2:93-124

international resource commitments, to compromise the reliability and validity of identified (and presumed known) boundary specifications, the reports of such linkages, and subsequent conclusions. One result was that when terrorist acts occurred they were characterized as Islamic, jihadist, inspired by bin Laden or al Qaeda, and then treated as acts by *the* al Qaeda organization or network. Secondly, networks were treated as known global entities rather than investigated to determine if they were global, local or glocal. The consequence was the globalization and thus the automatic escalation of the level of threat that it might represent rather than consideration of whether the act might have been a purely local act with local actors and local targets and aims with no connection except the labeling to any global concern. In network analysis boundary specification is critical because it allows the analyst to distinguish between an organization and a movement of which it may (or may not) be part. Careful boundary specification directs the analyst to consider if contacts between and among people and organizations indicate more than proximity and opportunity but also exchange and membership. In short, people and organizations may be in contact but not comprise an operational network and separate organizations may share some particular bits of useful information or material—arms, arms merchants, travel documents, transit routes, and so on—but are not therefore one and the same. This would not argue that the information is not important for intelligence purposes to enable the tracking of movements and capabilities but rather that utility needs to be separated from the characterization of the organizational enemy that is being confronted. Nonetheless when al-Qaeda members transited particular countries or were observed interacting with people in that country it was thus presumed legitimate (and often politically advantageous) to declare that country or the organization with whom they met as part of the network. Thus, fourth, care also was not taken to distinguish among the types of relations among actors and what these relations might actually mean. Any interaction was presented as indicating membership in the network rather than simply potentially important and useful intelligence that need to be further evaluated.

The necessity of distinguishing between al Qaeda and the broader political Islamist movement and other terrorist organizations should have been understood if analysts were to effectively gauge the possible threats that existed to thus deploy the appropriate resources. In short, the casual (and politically useful) employment of the network metaphor, rather than the work on network theory of network scientists creates difficulties for understanding (1) how

organizations such as al Qaeda operated, (2) how al Qaeda may or may not have been connected to other organizations and (3) whether al Qaeda did or did not represent a part of a “global terror network.” Perhaps even more importantly, this flawed approach created additional problems with both the government discourse and heavily dominated media representations, public perceptions and the scholarly literature on al Qaeda and terrorism and led to far less appreciation for the distinctions between what the administration actually knew and did not know about al Qaeda, the organization and the “global network,” beyond the particular location in which its members such as bin Laden and al Zawahiri were hiding, and when, where, how and by whom the next attack might occur.

This is not to argue that the administration should not have employed a network analysis. Approaching terrorism as a network phenomenon can be revealing and useful for counterterrorism policies and strategy. A network analysis may reveal connections that were heretofore unrecognized; identify key actors and links both adversarial and cooperative; disentangle spatial proximity from organizational structure; and identify how informational, human and material resources may be leveraged. There is no question that the intelligence agencies of the United States approach their analysis of terrorist networks in this manner. But the political leadership fails to make these important distinctions public and educate the public to the distinctions amongst the many different threats that are possibly directed at the United States and its citizens both at home and abroad. By not doing so, the continued success in the actual prevention of terrorist attacks does not create the positive feedback to the perceptions of security and trust that are necessary to yield the rewards of the actionable aspects of security policy and even small mistakes create major fear reactions, loss of trust and open the administration to major opportunities for political attacks at home. As a result, counterterrorism policies and actions, both of which are heavily dependent upon the state’s ability to communicate to its audience that the state’s actions are making the population safer and more secure, will most likely be perceived as failing and thus lead to increased pressures (and the temptation) to employ force and ratchet up the levels of fear to justify the use of force. However, the possible short term public opinion and political benefits of having been perceived as “doing something,” particularly something strong, are often undermined by the collateral damage (and resultant negative publicity within the targeted state) which almost always occurs with the use of force. More importantly, the claims of the necessity for the continued use of force produces the

associated cost of the lingering fear used to justify the force, which itself undermines the attempt to build trust and the perception of security at home in the long run.

After seven years of the Bush Administration's war on terror, Barack Obama came to office in January, 2009 and, fulfilling a campaign promise, issued a series of executive orders on his first day in office the purpose of which was to distance the new administration from Mr. Bush's strategy and demarcate a new approach to confronting terrorism, i.e. one based on law enforcement principles. The new president ordered the closure of the CIA's secret prisons, required the CIA to abide by the same interrogation standards as the military, revoked past presidential directives that authorized abusive treatment of prisoners, and recognized and reaffirmed U.S. adherence to the Geneva conventions. Further, over the next few weeks Mr. Obama reframed the discussion of counterterrorism away from the Bush Global War on Terrorism to the much less elegant and forceful sounding phrase of Overseas Contingency operations to signal the shift in military, legal and intelligence approaches that his administration had adopted.

But these changes, while they challenged some of the political narrative that had been established in the immediate aftermath of 9/11, did not challenge some of the other key components of that narrative, i.e. that 9/11 changed everything and that there was a global network of terror. Nor did it undo most of the Bush administration's counterterrorism programs. And as has been frequently commented upon from civil libertarians who have been quite disappointed with the Obama justice department approach to much of the legal architecture and reasoning with respect to the Bush administration legacy, much has not changed despite the recognition that torture was unacceptable and Mr. Obama's clear prohibition in the future.⁷

⁷ President Obama is operating with the war powers granted George W. Bush three days after the 9/11 attacks." April 6, 2010 "The president is authorized to use all necessary and appropriate force against those nations, organizations, or persons he determines planned, authorized, committed, or aided the terrorist attacks that occurred on September 11, 2001, or harbored such organizations or persons, in order to prevent any future acts of international terrorism against the United States by such nations, organizations or persons." *Cited in Reason.com*
Accessed September 15, 2010 from <http://reason.com/archives/2010/04/06/the-914-presidency>.

President Bush also issued a covert action Memorandum of Notification (MON) on September 17, 2001 which authorized the director of central intelligence (DCI) to 'undertake operations designed to capture and detain persons who pose a continuing, serious threat of violence or death to U.S. persons and interests or who are planning terrorist activities.

Further, because the president did not challenge the foundational cornerstone of the war on terror, the network metaphor, much of the war on terror narrative continues. Remarkably, the Bush administration actually never clearly, consistently or fully identified what they actually meant by a network of terror, indicating different numbers of countries in which the network resided (as high as 60) and who (Beyond Osama Bin Laden and the leaders of Al Qaeda) actually needed to be defeated for the “war” to be won. The failure might have stemmed either from an unwillingness or an inability to clearly specify what they actually meant by the global network of terror. Some of this was undoubtedly generated by political considerations but much of the problem was generated by the rather cavalier use of the term network discussed above.

While we might have expected Mr. Obama and his administration to be more precise, this has not been the case. At the 2008 Democratic National Convention Aug 27, 2008, Mr. Obama repeated a tag line that he employed numerous times on the campaign trail to criticize the prosecution of the war on terror.

You don't defeat a terrorist network by occupying Iraq. You don't defeat a terrorist network that operates in eighty countries by occupying Iraq.

While this is a fine critique of the “misjudgments” that led the Bush administration to engage in the war in Iraq it is important to note that Mr. Obama increased Mr. Bush's undocumented 60 country global network to an 80 country global network. Since assuming office, Mr. Obama and his Secretaries of State, Defense and Homeland Security as well as his National Security Advisor have all issued public statements which characterize the “network of terror” in expansive terms without providing the details which would enable distinguishing amongst al Qaeda, like minded groups and terrorists in general.⁸

These statements from Mr. Obama and his national security colleagues do not distance the Obama administration from the Bush administration network approach and clearly do not recognize boundary specification, the local, global, emergent, adaptive structures or multiplex historically constructed relations operating at multiple levels that most likely reflect the terrorist organizations that exist in the 80 countries that Mr. Obama referenced as problematic. The Bush network metaphor framed our collective understanding of the terrorist threat and what its

⁸ For a fuller analysis see Stohl, M. 2011 “U.S Homeland Security, the Global War on Terror and Militarism,” in Kostas Gouliamos and Christos Kassimeris (eds.) *The Marketing of War in the Age of Neo Militarism*, Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge. Pp.107-123.

implications were and are for understanding counterterrorism. The consequence of Mr. Obama not challenging the characterization of the global network of terror continues to undermine his effort to transform and make US counterterrorism policy more effective.

Thus, early in his administration when the failed attempt of Mr. Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab occurred on Christmas day 2009, Mr. Obama and his administration found themselves in the uncomfortable position of attempting to explain that the nation was safe and that the law enforcement approach was useful and productive as political opponents took aim at the “obvious” weakness of the law enforcement approach which made the attack possible. The consequence was that Mr. Obama appeared to backtrack, saying on January 7, 2010.

We are at war. We are at war against al Qaeda, a far-reaching network of violence and hatred that attacked us on 9/11, that killed nearly 3,000 innocent people, and that is plotting to strike us again. And we will do whatever it takes to defeat them.⁹

In so explaining, Mr. Obama employed not only the war on terror metaphor but connected al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula to Osama bin Laden and all other organizations that choose to employ the name al Qaeda in a geographic location, regardless of whether they had (or have) actual operational connections with bin Laden. By once again framing the terrorists as all connected, all subsequent terrorist attacks (and failed attempts) became more likely to be seen by the public as Mr. Bush and Mr. Cheney framed them, connected to al Qaeda and September 11. The opportunity to not only formulate but also explain the requisites of a successful counterterrorism policy removed from the pressures of the 9/11 frame was lost. I am not arguing that this simple frame is the actual basis for policy formulation. It is clear from the public statements provided by the Directors of the National Counterterrorism Center since 2009, for example, that a far more nuanced and clear analysis of the nature of the links and boundaries among terrorist groups has been undertaken.¹⁰ However, the frame remains the public basis for formulating and defending the policy and public expectations and evaluations of success.

⁹ Remarks by the President on Strengthening Intelligence and Aviation Security, January 7, 2010

<http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-strengthening-intelligence-and-aviation-security>

¹⁰ <http://www.nctc.gov/speeches.html>

This is not to argue that there have not been significant differences in approach between the two administrations. The most important difference extends from Mr. Obama's decisions to draw down and end the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. This is not the place to discuss the two wars but it is important to recognize the connections between the choices involved in engaging in and the prosecution of those wars on the current strategic and policy questions that need to be confronted in the region. Regardless of what Mr. Obama (or any future administration) might wish to do, the decisions and actions of the post 9/11 period will continue to constrain the possibilities and choices at home and abroad. It is not only the political or military situation on the ground at a particular moment but also the attitudes of the populations and governments of the region towards the United States, their own governments (and others) and the terrorists and violent insurgents that, along with the political and public attitudes in the United States, that shape the possible choices and probable outcomes.

A clear consequence of the War on Terror and Global Network of Terror characterizations has been the legitimizing of the proposition that the United States needs to "wage war" on those identified as "jihadis", "islamists" and their allies. The equation of all terrorist acts anywhere with the al Qaeda network, franchise, alliance or sympathizers has served with each violent attack to remind Americans that they live as a target and hence to accentuate the existence of the 'enemy' and the need to respond militarily.

"So long as the United States remains at war, and therefore conducts targeted killing, alternative options and policies that in other contexts have had success in ending terrorist campaigns become increasingly difficult to implement. The end result is a narrowing of strategic options available to the United States, placing it in a position where tactical victories may be achieved, but unable to finally eliminate the threat from Al Qaeda and its affiliates.¹¹"

In addition to the choice to officially end the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan was the choice to reduce the number of US boots on the ground within any such future conflict. There is no question, regardless of all the debates about the characterization of al Qaeda as an organization or network and the role of bin Laden and his successor as the leader or orchestrator of al Qaeda

¹¹ Christopher McIntosh "Counterterrorism as War: Identifying the Dangers, Risks, and Opportunity Costs of U.S. Strategy Toward Al Qaeda and Its Affiliates" *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 20 November 2014:3

actions that the consequence of US actions beginning in 2001 in Afghanistan was a significant degrading of the capacity of al Qaeda to wage attacks. Likewise there should be no disagreement that the war in Iraq was responsible for the enormous upsurge in terrorist violence, the emergence of al Qaeda in Iraq and the current military insurgency represented by ISIS. There also should be no doubt that the attacks of 9/11 and the subsequent US response and the reactions and propagandistic exploitation of that military response by various groups including al Qaeda was accompanied by significant increases in terrorist recruitment and activity throughout the region. Thus, while Mr. Obama was reducing the US presence on the ground, the choice was made to dramatically increase the deployment and use of unmanned aerial vehicles. Drones became the administration's weapon of choice and the targeted airstrikes they provided were most often combined with support for a local partner. There are clear longer term consequences for the counterterrorism program.

“Every time the United States goes and pummels another Muslim country -- or sends a drone to conduct a "signature strike" -- it reinforces the jihadis' claim that the West has an insatiable desire to dominate the Arab and Islamic world and no respect for Muslim life. It doesn't matter if U.S. leaders have the best of intentions, if they genuinely want to help these societies, or if they are responding to a legitimate threat; the crude message that drones, cruise missiles, and targeted killings send is rather different.¹²”

Terrorists seek safe havens amongst supporters or within populations (or states) which are unwilling to confront them and have made the calculation to acquiesce to the presence of terrorists within their midst, either because they approve of the terrorists goals (if not their methods) or because they do not believe they can count on the state to protect them from the terrorists in their midst. One of the key elements of any counterterrorism strategy is the struggle to convince populations that the costs of offering safe haven – or simply allowing safe havens – are greater than the cost of assisting governments in eliminating such havens. One important consequence of the drone and targeted killing tactic is that the negative impact of civilian casualties, intelligence and targeting mistakes, and consequence of both the rise of anti-American

¹² Stephen M. Walt “The Big Counterterrorism Counterfactual: Is the NSA actually making us worse at fighting terrorism? http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2014/11/10/counterterrorism_spying_nsa_islamic_state_terrorist_cve. For a debate on whether the use of drones is effective see also Audrey Kurth Cronin, “Why Drones Fail: When Tactics Drive Strategy,” *Foreign Affairs* 92(4) (2013), pp. 44–51; Daniel Byman, “Why Drones Work: The Case for Washington’s Weapon of Choice,” *Foreign Affairs* 92(4) (2013), pp. 32–41.

sentiment and the reinforcement of preexisting attitudes informed by the past decade and a half can both increase the possibilities for the safe havens for extremist groups and also the loss of support for regimes that “allow” the strikes. The United States is thus trading short term advantages for long term costs.

In the introduction I noted the BBC report of the current deadliest “terrorist” campaigns and the countries effected. If we look back two years earlier we find much the same pattern. In 2012 according to the Global Terrorism Data Base (GTD), three countries, Pakistan, Iraq and Afghanistan, accounted for 54 percent of attacks and 58 percent of fatalities that year and as in this year Nigeria, Somalia, Yemen were in the next group of five countries with the most victims and attacks. What has changed this year is the presence of Syria and the problem of ISIL¹³.

While the White House apparently concluded that there were clear political benefits to using the terrorism label, including the facilitation of the construction of the military coalition against the organization, it should not be concluded that such a coalition could not have been constructed without the labeling of ISIL as “a terrorist organization, pure and simple” as President Obama did in his statement of September 10, 2014 and announcing that “Our objective is clear: We will degrade, and ultimately destroy, ISIL through a comprehensive and sustained counter-terrorism strategy.”¹⁴ The United States and its allies had the option of confronting ISIL as a terrorist group or an insurgency operating in the context of two states. Choosing the terrorist narrative again reinforces the Global War on Terror narrative and does not provide the guidance necessary to distinguish the particular characteristics of the threat that requires confrontation. ISIL is a very different enemy than almost all the other violent extremists confronting the United States. While clearly one can trace the organization back to what was labeled al Qaeda in Iraq, the current organization clearly emerged from both the civil war in Syria and in the continuing Sunni-Shia confrontations in Iraq. It is important that ISIL be considered in the context of the lingering sectarian feuds in both Iraq and Syria.

Unlike many terrorist organizations which operate clandestinely within societies and seek safe havens and the acquiescence of groups that they claim to represent, ISIL in its current state controls large swaths of territory and is not only terrorizing local populations but fighting pitched

¹³ <http://www.bsos.umd.edu/featuredstory/763>

¹⁴ White House, Office of the Press Secretary, September 10, 2014, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/09/10/statement-president-isil-1>

battles with its adversaries, commanding huge stocks of weapons, flows of oil revenues from captured territories, and incorporating many disaffected remnants of Saddam Hussein's military forces. Harrison argues that

ISIS represents a threat with three different faces. To the United States and its western allies, it is a terrorist organization. However, for Arab states, ISIS represents an insurgency without political boundaries that threatens the survival of countries [such as Iraq, Syria and Libya] in the midst of civil wars, puts at risk weak states desperately trying to avert civil war, like Lebanon and Jordan; and poses a challenge to the legitimacy of even stronger states like Egypt and Saudi Arabia. When examined from a regional perspective, ISIS represents the spearhead of a broader movement threatening to sunder the Arab political order that has existed since the end of World War I, and potentially threatening non-Arab states such as Iran, Turkey and even Israel.¹⁵

As such it requires a very different set of responses and framing of those responses than does, for example, confronting AQAP in Yemen or al Shabab in Somalia and there are no obvious benefits to strategy, resources or mobilization by the continuation of the War on Terror narrative. Rather, it unnecessarily reinforces a narrative that ties actions to mistakes of the past (including the War in Iraq that Mr. Obama had cautioned against) and thus serves to alienate and reinforce suspicions among many in the region. Importantly, it also obscures the requisites for the political and diplomatic actions and policies that will be necessary beyond the military containment or destruction of ISIL to manage or construct state based solutions to the wars in both Syria and Iraq without the conflict and its ramifications destroying much beyond the borders within which it now resides. The necessitates the combined and consistent work and lead of the governments within the region, not only in military terms but also in curtailing the financial resources available to ISIL and isolating them politically by providing alternatives that address the genuine grievances that engender the acquiescence of populations under their control (and within the region) for the violence done in their name.

Thus regional governments must take the lead with the United States and European powers supporting the development of political solutions (and perhaps funding the economic reconstruction and development) at each possible stage in the military confrontation. Whatever solutions emerge will require not simply the defeat of the

¹⁵ Ross Harrison "Towards a Regional Strategy Contra ISIS," *Parameters* 44(3) Autumn 2014 37-46, page 37.

insurgents but also confronting the grievances of the Sunni populations and other minorities within both states that fueled the insurrections. It also demands the emergence of governments in both Iraq and Syria that can manage the process without violence going forward. This, as Harrison suggests, requires that the United States (and other states) should not attempt to

play a role in the question of political identity in the Arab world. ISIS has raised the stakes by subordinating tribal, ethnic and Arab identities under a jihadist variant of Sunni Islamic identity. Questions regarding state-based Iraqi and Syrian identities and the sectarian divides between Sunni and Shi'i can only be addressed by Iraqis and Syrians.¹⁶

Conclusion

The United States had no choice but to confront ISIL but the administration, having built an expectation that a military response was automatically required and understanding the automatic consequences of employing a military response in terms of the expectation of military victory gave the appearance of hesitancy and inconsistency. However in many important ways, as I have indicated above the administration has been consistent in its preferred options, shifting from boots on the ground to targeted killings while maintaining the bases of a war on terror and terrorist networks narrative.

Whatever response that the Obama administration had chosen, there would have been questions how if it had chosen wisely, was employing the necessary level of military force, properly building a coalition or supporting its allies, escalating or widening the conflict and solving both short and long term problems. The role of the United States vis-à-vis its allies and the impact on the regimes in both Syria and Iraq and the wider effects on the region were, regardless of the strategic choices, going to be component parts of the decision. However, the particular choices as to how to characterize the policy and frame the decision have important negative consequences that unnecessarily assist the propaganda narrative of ISIS and other violent groups in the region and beyond.¹⁷ By choosing to characterize the intervention as a

¹⁶ Harrison, 2014:43

¹⁷ See e.g. Radwan Mortada who describes “the ‘euphoria’ by ISIS forces and their supporters who eagerly await a American military involvement because “they are finally going to fight the ‘alliance of tyrants’ in the ‘War of the Cross’ waged against them.” For them, the American intervention provides great benefits for the sophisticated propaganda enterprise, which in turn ramps up recruitment and prestige for the organization.

<http://english.al-akhbar.com/content/islamic-state-gearing-war-cross%E2%80%9D>

continuation of the war on terror, the Obama administration tied its intervention to a narrative that pays no dividends in this context and lost an opportunity to construct a new approach based on local conditions and needs.

In addition, the administration failed to use the opportunity to educate the public on the differences between military intervention in the context of a civil war or in a fragile or failing state which not only threatens innocents but threatens to spread to other states and counterterrorism activities (which involve far more than military actions and drone strikes) against clandestine terrorist groups. Should the public expect that the same approach is required in Somalia, Yemen, Pakistan and Nigeria? Does the United States need to go to war to eliminate each of these threats? Can they be confronted and managed without war? The narrative appears to imply that all the groups have both the intention and the capacity (or would like to develop it) to strike the United States and that their goals are not the result of local conditions, goals and contexts, making it appear that all emerge from the same global source, require the same levels of military activity (and that military activity is the default option) and also the complete defeat of the enemy thus eliminating the possibilities of multiple approaches and solutions. It reinforces the worry that the War on Terror can never end, an outcome that runs counter to an effective counterterrorism policy. Further, it continues to block the opportunity for the administration and the public to shift attention to “policing the issue rather than continue to fighting a war”... “with the primary goal being to address it in a way that most effectively balances costs and benefits rather than achieving victory once and for all.”¹⁸

¹⁸ Christopher McIntosh “Counterterrorism as War: Identifying the Dangers, Risks, and Opportunity Costs of U.S. Strategy Toward Al Qaeda and Its Affiliates” *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 20 November 2014:10. See also Kruglanski et al., “What Should This Fight Be Called”; David S. Kris, “Law Enforcement as a Counterterrorism Tool,” *Journal of National Security Law&Policy* 5 (2011), pp. 1–95 and Thomas J. Badley, “US Counter-Terrorism: Change in Approach, Continuity in Policy,” *Contemporary Security Policy* 27(2) (2006), pp. 308–324.