Measuring the Effectiveness of America's War on Terror

Erik W. Goepner

ABSTRACT: America's efforts in the war on terror have been substantial and sustained, with more than four trillion dollars spent, two and a half million military members sent into harm's way, and nearly 7,000 service members losing their lives over the past 15 years. To date, however, few studies have sought to measure the effectiveness of those efforts. This study empirically assesses the extent to which US efforts in the war on terror have achieved the government's objectives and concludes those endeavors have been largely ineffective.

Whether seeking the defeat of al-Qaeda or, more recently, that of the Islamic State, the United States government has been prosecuting a war on terror for nearly 15 years. Tangible costs to the United States include 6,874 service members killed, 2.5 million Americans sent to fight, and an estimated $4.4 trillion dollars spent.[1] Despite such significant costs, little attention has been focused on what has been achieved. How effective have US efforts been in the war on terror?

Determining an answer to this question is complicated by the inherently political environment in which the terror attacks of 9/11 and US responses took place. Terrorism is, itself, inherently a political act. Moreover, US leaders faced reelections as they attempted to balance varying constituent perspectives domestically and alliance interests globally. Significant national debates have occurred, and many continue, over the decision to invade Iraq, the closing of the detention facility at Guantanamo Bay, the use of drones, Syria, Libya, the Islamic State, et cetera. The stated objectives of President Bush and President Obama, however, remain a crucial component of any assessment by any side of the debate. Are Americans safer today? To what extent have al-Qaeda and terror groups of global reach been defeated?

This question of effectiveness can be carved out as a technical exercise. This paper attempts to measure the government's effectiveness in achieving its stated objectives. Its focus is on US efforts outside the homeland, rather than on domestic efforts to protect against attacks. The first section briefly outlines US objectives in the war on terror. An

Col Erik Goepner, USAF (Retired), is a PhD student in Public Policy at George Mason University. During his military career, he commanded at the group and squadron levels, to include a provincial reconstruction team in Afghanistan and a security forces squadron in Iraq.

---

1 Neta Crawford, *US Costs of 2014: $4.4 Trillion and Counting: Summary of Costs for the US Wars in Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan* (Boston: Boston University, 2014), 4; Nese DeBruyne and Anne Leland, *American War and Military Operations Casualties: Lists and Statistics* (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2015); and Chris Adams, "Millions Went to War in Iraq, Afghanistan, Leaving Many with Lifelong Scars," McClatchyDC, http://www.mcclatchydc.com/2013/ 03/14/185880/ millions-went-to-war-in-iraq-afghanistan.html.; http://icasualties.org/.

overview on measuring policy effectiveness in general and the war on terror, in particular, follows. The data are analyzed in section three and then a theoretical explanation for the results follows.

US Objectives for the War on Terror

America's stated objectives have remained consistent over time. As outlined in various strategy documents published by the White House, they include protecting Americans, preventing terror attacks, defeating specific terror groups, and diminishing the conditions that fuel terrorism through promoting democracy. Less than two weeks after the attacks of 9/11, President Bush articulated the defeat of al-Qaeda and all terrorist groups with global reach as a US goal. President Obama has echoed that objective and added the Islamic State to the list. Both administrations pursued a broad objective of preventing terror attacks worldwide and a narrower one of protecting Americans and the homeland. Both administrations also sought the additional goals of diminishing the underlying conditions that facilitate terrorism by promoting democracy.[2]

Measuring Policy Effectiveness

Significant gaps exist in the scholarly research regarding the measurement of government effectiveness. The literature focuses more on how effectiveness could be measured, rather than on actually measuring it. The war on terror is no exception.

In war, measuring effectiveness is typically difficult absent a total victory. War inflames human passions and is, inevitably, subject to psychological biases. Additionally, accurate data are often unavailable in conflict-affected states. Some scholars note that attempts to measure effectiveness in prosecuting a war, without one side surrendering, will be controversial and fraught with uncertainty.[3]

The myriad political and other non-technical factors provide scholars various vantage points from which to analyze the US government's effectiveness in the war on terror. One approach could focus solely on whether another 9/11 was prevented in an attempt to eliminate all of the complexities, political and otherwise. The scale of 9/11 and the uncertainty and fear it produced can make this perspective attractive.[4]

Conversely, another perspective might broaden the aperture to account for political elites' policy preferences both within and beyond the war on terror, the tradeoffs created when those policies are pursued concurrently, and the constraints faced by policymakers. This would

---

2   The White House, *The National Security Strategy of the United States* (Washington, DC: The White House, 2002), 21; The White House, *National Strategy for Combating Terrorism* (Washington, DC: The White House, 2003), 11, 22-24; The White House, *National Strategy for Combating Terrorism* (Washington, DC: The White House, 2006), 1; The White House*, National Strategy for Counterterrorism* (Washington, DC: The White House, 2011), 1, 8-9; and *The Telegraph*, "9/11 Anniversary: Al-Qaeda Nearing Total Defeat, Says Barack Obama," September 8, 2011.

3   Dominic Johnson and Dominic Tierney, *Failing to Win: Perceptions of Victory and Defeat in International Politics* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006), 5, 24-25.

4   Recognition, though not necessarily endorsement, of this approach can be seen in Michael O'Hanlon, *US Defense Strategy and the Defense Budget* (Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution, 2015), 6; Daniel Benjamin et. al; *Five Years After 9/11: Accomplishments and Continuing Challenges* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2006), 3; Ronald K. Noble, "Preventing the Next 9/11," *New York Times*, September 5, 2011; and "Senators: Obama Must Defeat Islamic State to Prevent Another 9/11-Scale Attack," *Washington Times*, September 4, 2014.

enlarge the scope to include other, potentially competing priorities (e.g., the economy, health care, and reelection), while also accounting for the degree of difficulty inherent in achieving each objective.

This study pursues a middle path that encompasses the most critical objectives in the war on terror as identified by the Bush and Obama administrations. Assessments of effectiveness may vary depending on the scope of the analysis being conducted and the emphasis placed on different outcomes (money spent, lives lost, terrorists killed, etc.). But, no matter what definition one chooses, no assessment of the effectiveness of the war on terror can be complete without answering the central question of whether the United States has reduced the threat from terrorism since 9/11. Beyond that, a crucial role for policy analysis is to ascertain whether a government has met the goals it sets for itself. Thus, in a very real sense, Presidents Bush and Obama have determined the definition of success used in this paper through their public articulation of the aim of the war on terrorism. In light of these considerations, this study should help provide a useful anchor for future research.

Moreover, this research attempts to help address an existing gap in the literature by measuring effectiveness through empirical and quantitative analysis. This work adopts one of Dominic Johnson and Dominic Tierney's recommended forms of score-keeping: the degree to which an actor has achieved her "core aims." The goal is to measure the success of the strategy employed: how has the agent achieved "gains" with respect to the proposed "aims."[5] The primary sources for identifying US objectives will be national strategy documents, such as the National Security Strategy and the more narrowly focused National Strategy for Combating Terrorism (later renamed the National Strategy for Counterterrorism). Secondary sources will include statements made by the president and key administration officials.

Regarding the war on terror, a Government Accounting Office report observed the US government did not include performance measures in any of its seven strategy documents that identified counterterror goals.[6] Instead, the strategy documents struck an optimistic tone evidently intended to "keep American hearts and minds committed to the fight."[7] Similarly, in the 9/11 Commission's report, the section entitled "Measuring Success" neither highlighted any measures currently in use by the government nor did it propose any. Six years after Secretary Rumsfeld stated, "Today, we lack metrics to know if we are winning or losing the global war on terror," a study from the Royal United Services Institute observed the quote remained equally accurate.[8]

As Raphael Perl noted in a Congressional Research Service report, the Government Performance and Results Act mandates all agencies establish performance objectives and measure progress in meeting those objectives. Anti-terror efforts are not exempt from this requirement. However, the few government attempts at measuring progress in the

    5   Johnson and Tierney, *Failing to Win*, 5-6, 24-27, 33.
    6   Randall Yim, "Combating Terrorism: Evaluation of Selected Characteristics in National Strategies Related to Terrorism" (Washington DC: US Government Accountability Office, 2004).
    7   Johnson and Tierney, *Failing to Win*, 242.
    8   Alex Schmid and Rashmi Singh, "Measuring Success and Failure in Terrorism and Counter-Terrorism: US Government Metrics of the Global War on Terror," in *After the War on Terror: Regional and Multilateral Perspectives on Counter-Terrorism Strategy* (London: RUSI, 2009), 34.

war on terror are filled with statements rather than quantitative data. For example, the 2011 National Strategy for Counterterrorism states the government has become "much more effective" in fighting terrorism, referring to a list of countries and capabilities enjoined in the fight against al-Qaeda as the "critical measure of this success."[9] This implies a large number of allies, together with military force of various kinds, are themselves indicators of success, and no further explanation is offered as to what "success" might be.

The few attempts at measuring the success of anti-terror efforts have also been disjointed. The 2006 National Strategy for Combating Terrorism highlights the killing of al-Qaeda leaders and, absent any further explanation, equates those deaths with a significant degradation in al-Qaeda's capabilities. No connection is made between the loss of leaders and how it has or will degrade the organization's operational capacity. Often, assessments of the war devolve into flattery without substance. When listing successes and challenges in 2006, the White House reported that Afghanistan is now "a full partner in the War on Terror" and Iraq is a "new War on Terror ally in the heart of the Middle East."[10] No attempt was made either to define what a "full partner" or "ally" is or to show how Afghanistan and Iraq met those standards.

One review of 34 years of research noted only 1.5 percent of scholarly articles empirically assessed counterterror responses. Of the thousands of studies examined, only seven contained "moderately rigorous" evaluations of counterterrorism programs.[11] In addition to the paucity of studies, inappropriate measures are frequently used. For example, a Congressional Research Service report noted that increased spending is commonly misinterpreted as a sign of progress.[12] And, as indicated earlier, White House strategy documents present commendations and disjointed claims as measures of success.

Data Analysis

This paper measures the effectiveness of US efforts in the war on terror by investigating two questions. First, have US efforts had a significant impact on terrorism over the past 15 years? Second, to what extent has the US achieved its objectives in the war on terror?

More than 100 definitions exist for terrorism. The Department of Defense, in its dictionary of military terms, defines terrorism as, "The unlawful use of violence or threat of violence, often motivated by religious, political, or other ideological beliefs, to instill fear and coerce governments or societies in pursuit of goals that are usually political." The Department of Defense's definition contains the main elements present in a majority of the other definitions for terrorism: (1) the use of unlawful violence to (2) instill fear in order to (3) achieve political goals. As terrorism expert Bruce Hoffman explains, terrorism is inherently political and power focused.[13]

---

9   The White House, *National Strategy for Counterterrorism*, 19.
10   The White House, *National Strategy for Combating Terrorism*, 3.
11   Cynthia Lum, Leslie Kennedy, and Alison Sherley, *The Effectiveness of Counter-Terrorism Strategies* (Oslo: The Campbell Collaboration, 2006), 3, 13.
12   Raphael Perl, *Combating Terrorism: The Challenge of Measuring Effectiveness* (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2005), 3.
13   Bruce Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 2, 33.

To date, little quantitative analysis has been conducted regarding what US efforts have achieved in the war on terror. To that end, the first question—have US efforts had a significant impact on terrorism over the past 15 years?—will be tested in two different settings. In the first, the amount of money spent by the US government fighting the war on terror and the number of military members sent to fight will be compared to the number of terror attacks worldwide since 9/11. Then, a broader analysis will look at the impact of both US efforts and other variables thought to affect terrorism such as gross domestic product per capita, education, etc. The second question—to what extent has the US achieved its objectives in the war on terror?—will be examined by one or more measures for each of the government's critical and enduring war on terror objectives.

Have US efforts had a significant impact on terrorism over the past 15 years?

The data strongly suggest US efforts have had a significant and negative impact on terrorism over the past 15 years. Increased US efforts are correlated with a worsening of the overall terror situation. Statistical modeling indicates for every additional billion dollars spent and 1,000 American troops sent to fight the war on terror, the number of terror attacks worldwide increased by 19 (data available from the author). Furthermore, the model finds up to 80 percent of the variation in the number of worldwide terror attacks since 9/11 can be explained by just those two variables—US money spent and military members sent to fight the war on terror. The data for both money spent and troops deployed come from the Congressional Research Service publication, *The Cost of Iraq, Afghanistan, and Other Global War on Terror Operations Since 9/11* by Amy Belasco. The number of terror attacks is from the Global Terrorism Database, hosted by the University of Maryland.

A broader analysis which examines both the impact of US efforts and other factors thought to affect terrorism, such as gross domestic product per capita and education levels, also strongly suggests US efforts have had a significant and negative relationship with terrorism. The data show countries the US invaded had 143 more terror attacks per year than countries the US did not invade. Similarly, countries in which the US conducted drone strikes were home to 395 more terror attacks per year than those where the US did not. Of note, the model's explanatory power was greatest when drone strikes conducted in year one were compared with terror attacks in year three. Other variations were also investigated, such as comparing drone strikes and terror attacks in the same year and leading drone strikes by a year, but none yielded results as significant. This may mean US drone strikes are having the unintended effect of inciting more terror attacks.

The results were derived from a multiple regression statistical model (data available from the author). The intent was to design a fully specified model that included independent variables frequently used to explain the causes for terrorism, variables designed to capture US efforts in the war on terror (e.g., drone strikes, nations invaded), and variables that proxy for the destabilizing effects frequently observed in heavily traumatized societies. Twenty countries were randomly selected from the universe of countries: 10 from the 51 Muslim-majority states and 10 from non-Muslim-majority states. Certain countries were automatically

included because of their relevance to the study. Iraq, Afghanistan, Somalia, Pakistan, and Yemen were included because the United States either invaded or conducted drone strikes in each of them. The model includes data from 1994 through 2013.

The results from both models strongly suggest US efforts in the war on terror have had a significant impact on terrorism worldwide. Potentially, up to 80 percent of the variation in terror attack numbers from 2001 to 2013 can be attributed to how much money the United States spent fighting terror and how many military members were deployed to fight the war. Unfortunately, the results indicate US efforts have been correlated with a worsening of the terror situation.

To what extent has the US achieved its objectives in the war on terror?

America's critical and enduring objectives have been the protection of Americans and the homeland, defeating al-Qaeda and other terror groups of global reach, and promoting democracy to diminish the underlying conditions favoring terrorism. A review of the seven national strategy documents related to the war on terror strongly suggests protecting Americans and the homeland has been the number one priority.[14] Bush and Obama administration strategy documents further indicate that defeating al-Qaeda and other terror groups of global reach has been the second most important objective. Five of the strategies either list it second after protecting the homeland and US citizens or place it first (as a means to protect Americans and the homeland).[15]

It is less clear whether promoting democracy was the third most important objective for the US government in the war on terror. In the first strategy to combat terrorism promulgated by the Bush administration, diminishing the underlying conditions, which included democracy promotion, was referred to as the "third component" of the strategy. Elsewhere, the promotion of democracy was identified as "the long term solution" in the fight against terror and the "best way" to achieve enduring security for America.[16]

In terms of protecting Americans and the homeland, data from the Global Terrorism Database indicate an average of 65 Americans were killed each year by terrorists for the 12-year period following 9/11, as compared to 57 annually in the 12 years before 9/11. In the past 30 years, 2001 notwithstanding, more Americans were killed in 2012 than in any other year. Moreover, while the overall number of terror attacks in the United States decreased during the post-9/11 period, the subset of Islamist-inspired attacks increased. From 1987 to 2000, five

14   The White House, *The National Security Strategy of the United States* (Washington, DC: The White House, 2002), n.p.; The White House, *National Security Strategy of the United States* (Washington, DC: The White House, 2006), 12; The White House, *National Strategy for Combating Terrorism*, 1; The White House, *The National Security Strategy of the United States* (Washington, DC: The White House, 2010), 17; The White House, *National Strategy for Counterterrorism*, 8; and The White House, *The National Security Strategy of the United States* (Washington, DC: The White House, 2015), 7.

15   The White House, *The National Security Strategy of the United States*, 2002, 5; The White House, *National Strategy for Combating Terrorism*, 1, 15; The White House, *National Strategy for Combating Terrorism*, 2006, 9, 11; The White House, *National Strategy for Counterterrorism*, 8; and The White House, *The National Security Strategy of the United States*, 2010, 19-20.

16   The White House, *National Strategy for Combating Terrorism*, 2003, 22; The White House, *National Security Strategy of the United States*, 1; The White House, *National Strategy for Combating Terrorism*, 2006, 9, 11; and The White House, *National Strategy for Counterterrorism*, 8.

Islamist-inspired attacks took place within the homeland, but in an equal period of time since 2001, the number of Islamist-inspired attacks rose to seven.

Looking at the war on terror more broadly, the indicators worsen. In 2001, some 1,880 terror attacks occurred. By 2014, the number had risen to 16,818. Over the past four decades, the fewest number of terror attacks worldwide occurred in 1998 and that trend continued into the early years of the war on terror. However, 2005 signaled a break out, as terror attacks nearly doubled from the previous year and then continued climbing rapidly.

Globally, fatalities caused by terror attacks have increased to unprecedented levels. The average number of deaths rose 72 percent for the 13 year period after 9/11 as compared to the 13 years prior. In 2014, a record 43,512 people were killed by terrorism, a staggering 297 percent increase from the worst year in the pre-9/11 period which was 1997.

Effectiveness in defeating al-Qaeda and other terror groups of global reach has been similarly bleak. In terms of recruitment, terrorist organizations appear to have taken advantage of America's response to 9/11. Annual reports from the Department of State and data from the Mapping Militant Organizations at Stanford University indicate there were an estimated 32,200 fighters in Islamist-inspired foreign terrorist organizations in 2000. By 2013, that number had more than tripled to more than 110,000. Additionally, the number of Islamist-inspired groups listed by the Department of State as foreign terrorist organizations has likewise increased dramatically. In 2001, there were 13 such groups and by 2013 that number had swelled to 37. The war on terror has been associated with a dramatic increase in both the amount of Islamist-inspired terror groups and the number of fighters comprising them.

The final area regarding effectiveness has to do with the promotion of democracy. Democracy indicators across the 51 Muslim-majority countries have marginally improved since 2001. Data from Freedom House indicates the average political rights and civil liberties scores for Muslim-majority states have improved by 5.7 percent during the war on terror. In the dozen years prior to 9/11, the average score was 5.25, which improved to 4.96 for the 12 years following the attacks (lower scores are better, with 1 representing "most free" and 7 reflecting "least free").

For Afghanistan and Iraq, the Polity IV Project offers another governance measure. Researchers have assessed Afghanistan as "moderately fragmented" ever since 2001, which is defined as 10 to 25 percent of the country being ruled by authorities unconnected to the central government. However, their assessment of Iraq has changed rather dramatically. In the decade prior to the US invasion, Iraq was assessed as extremely autocratic. Beginning in 2003 and holding for the next six years, the assessment was "seriously fragmented," defined as between 25 and 50 percent of the country being ruled by authorities that were not connected to the central government. From 2010 to 2013, however, Iraq was listed as slightly democratic. The data indicates Muslim-majority countries are modestly freer now than they were prior to the war on terror and a degree of democracy has taken hold in Iraq.

Theory

This section reviews the potential causes of, and factors associated with, terrorism, and outlines how terrorist groups end. The majority of the section then focuses on potential theoretical explanations for the results outlined in the previous section.

Causes of—and factors associated with—terrorism

The causes of terrorism and the factors associated with it are complex, varied, and often contested. Typically, terrorists seek to change the status quo or preserve something they value highly, and they are willing to employ violence to achieve those aims.[17] Walter Reich describes terrorists as rational actors making rational choices.[18] Martha Crenshaw further refines the terrorist-as-rational-actor literature by asserting a collective rationality exists at the group level, which addresses the free rider problem otherwise present when the unit of measure is the individual.[19] Bruce Hoffman makes similar points with a splash of provocative language (e.g., terrorist as "altruist" and "intellectual") to highlight terrorists typically have an underlying logic and they are not necessarily self-serving.[20] Crenshaw concludes that the most common characteristic among terrorists is their normality.[21] The scholarly research does not support the popular claim that terrorists suffer from a mental illness or other pathology.

The causes of terrorism are unresolved, and the factors associated with it are often contested. For causes, the desire to correct a perceived grievance is commonly cited.[22] Grievances have frequently resulted from ethnic fractionalization, colonialism, and religious persecution, among others.[23] In addition to perceived grievances, an inability to participate in the political process also plays an important role in motivating people to terrorism.[24] In terms of environmental considerations, Crenshaw suggests a precondition for terrorism is a government that is either unwilling or unable to prevent it.[25] Bolstering Crenshaw's point, James Piazza found that states experiencing failure are likely to experience more terror attacks and to have their citizens conduct more transnational strikes.[26] This feasibility argument—that where the opportunity exists, it will more be likely to occur—has also been used to explain civil war onset.[27]

---

17   Martha Crenshaw, "The Logic of Terrorism: Terrorist Behavior as a Product of Strategic Choice," in *Origins of Terrorism* (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 1998), 10.

18   Walter Reich, *Origins of Terrorism: Psychologies, Ideologies, Theologies, States of Mind* (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 1998), 2-3.

19   Crenshaw, "The Logic of Terrorism: Terrorist Behavior as a Product of Strategic Choice."

20   Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism*, 37-38.

21   Martha Crenshaw, *Explaining Terrorism: Causes, Processes, and Consequences* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 44.

22   Ibid., 5, 37.

23   Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism*, 43, 62, 129.

24   Crenshaw, *Explaining Terrorism*, 38.

25   Ibid., 37.

26   James Piazza, "Incubators of Terror: Do Failed and Failing States Promote Transnational Terrorism?," *International Studies Quarterly* 52, no. 3 (2008): 481.

27   Paul Collier, Anke Hoeffler, and Dominic Rohner, "Beyond Greed and Grievance: Feasibility and Civil War," *Oxford Economic Papers* 61, no. 1 (2009): 1-27.

Robert Pape and James Feldman, referring primarily to suicide terrorism, identify foreign occupation as a key cause. They argue US military presence and efforts to transform Iraq and Afghanistan have inadvertently increased the risk of another 9/11.[28] Jones and Libicki note similar concerns and caution that force often alienates the citizenry and provides significant recruiting opportunities for the terrorists.[29] In terms of the fight against al-Qaeda, they conclude no US military footprint or a light one should be used going forward because of legitimacy issues and terror recruiting opportunities.[30]

Among the contested variables thought to associate with terrorism, poverty and polity stand out. Quantitative studies have found poverty to be statistically insignificant, statistically significant, and both positively and negatively associated with terrorism.[31] Additionally, democracy was thought to be associated with a higher rate of terror groups and terror attacks. However, more recent studies suggest that when democracy is measured with greater granularity (e.g., considering both democracy participation and government constraints), democracy may actually be associated with a reduction in terror attacks.[32]

Additionally, terrorism can overlap with other forms of conflict, such as civil war. Early in the war on terror, Bruce Hoffman argued the United States was fighting an insurgency rather than terrorism.[33] More recently, scholars such as Audrey Kurth Cronin have suggested the fight may have evolved even further and now be against a "pseudo-state" led by a conventional army (i.e., the Islamic State).[34] As with terrorism, the causes of insurgency are often conceived of in terms of motivation and feasibility.[35] Motivation includes grievances; the Sunni-Shia fractionalization in Iraq would be one example. Motivation also encompasses greed, as evident with the criminal groups in Afghanistan exploiting the conflict to profit from the poppy trade. Feasibility refers to those factors that increase the opportunity for terrorism. States with ineffective or non-existent security forces make terrorism more feasible, as do states with low opportunity costs for rebel recruitment.

How terrorism ends

Important work on how terror groups end has been done by scholars such as Audrey Kurth Cronin, Seth Jones, and Martin Libicki. Kurth Cronin identifies six possible ends for terror groups, ranging

---

28   Robert Pape and James Feldman, *Cutting the Fuse: The Explosion of Global Suicide Terrorism and How to Stop It* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 326-331.

29   Seth Jones and Martin Libicki, *How Terrorist Groups End* (Washington, DC: RAND, 2008), xvii.

30   Ibid., 83, 122-123.

31   Alan Krueger and Jitka Malečková, "Education, Poverty and Terrorism: Is There a Causal Connection?" *The Journal of Economic Perspectives* 17, no. 4 (2003): 121; Piazza, "Incubators of Terror," 482; and Edward Newman, "Exploring the 'Root Causes' of Terrorism," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 29, no. 8 (2006): 751.

32   Walter Enders and Todd Sandler, *The Political Economy of Terrorism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 34, 36; Q. Li, "Does Democracy Promote or Reduce Transnational Terrorist Incidents?" *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 49, no. 2 (2005): 287, 294.

33   Council on Global Terrorism, *State of the Struggle: Report on the Battle against Global Terrorism*, ed. Lee Hamilton and Justine Rosenthal (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2006), 88.

34   Audrey Kurth Cronin, "ISIS Is Not a Terrorist Group," *Foreign Affairs* 94, no. 2 (March/April 2015): 88.

35   Collier, Hoeffler, and Rohner, "Beyond Greed and Grievance."

from entry into the existing political process to elimination by brute force, whereas Jones and Libicki offer five.[36] The categories employed in the two works both parallel and diverge in important ways. Broadly, both research efforts include groupings that account for terror groups ending by entering the political process, achieving their goals, or being defeated. However, where Kurth Cronin includes a category for "defeat and elimination by brute force," Jones and Libicki outline one for "policing" and another for "military force." Additionally, Kurth Cronin has a classification for the decapitation of group leaders, which Jones and Libicki subsume under either policing, military force, or elsewhere as appropriate.[37]

Their findings also parallel and diverge from each other. All agree, for instance, few terror groups end by fully achieving their goals or by being defeated through military force.[38] In fact, Jones and Libicki assert the least likely end for a terror group—seven percent of the time—is defeat by military force.[39] However, different conclusions are arrived at with respect to the most likely end of a terror group. Jones and Libicki conclude most terror groups end by entering the political process (i.e., 43 percent) or as the result of successful policing efforts against them (i.e., 40 percent), whereas Kurth Cronin finds most groups end in failure by imploding or being marginalized (no equivalent category exists in Jones and Libicki's work).[40]

Theoretical explanation

US efforts to fight terrorism since 9/11 have been immense. Between $1.7 and $4 trillion dollars have been spent and more than two-and-a-half million military members have served in Iraq and Afghanistan.[41] America has invaded two Muslim-majority states and conducted military operations in an additional five (i.e., Syria, Pakistan, Libya, Yemen, and Somalia). Despite these efforts, the data indicate primary objectives have gone unmet and some areas have worsened (e.g., the number and strength of Islamist-inspired terror groups). Potentially, US efforts may have inadvertently exacerbated conditions important for terrorist activity, conditions that increased the motivation to join terror organizations and the opportunity to carry out terrorist acts. Pape, Feldman and Crenshaw highlight the relevance of these conditions. They assert foreign occupation and an inability to participate in the political process increase grievances. Additionally, they point out governments which are either unwilling or unable to prevent terrorism make future attacks more feasible.[42] Furthermore, the amount of pre-existing traumatization

---

36   Audrey Kurth Cronin, *How Terrorism Ends: Understanding the Decline and Demise of Terrorist Campaigns* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009), 8; Jones and Libicki, "How Terrorist Groups End," xiii, 142.

37   Jones and Libicki, "How Terrorist Groups End," 10; Cronin, *How Terrorism Ends*, 8.

38   Cronin, *How Terrorism Ends*, 81, 92, 142; Jones and Libicki, "How Terrorist Groups End," 30, 32, 124.

39   Jones and Libicki, "How Terrorist Groups End," 9, 19.

40   Cronin, *How Terrorism Ends*, 183, 203; and Jones and Libicki, "How Terrorist Groups End," 18, 35, 124.

41   Crawford, "US Costs of Wars…"; and Ernesto Londoño, "Study: Iraq, Afghan War Costs to Top $4 Trillion," *Washington Post*, March 28, 2013.

42   Pape and Feldman, *Cutting the Fuse*, 326–31; and Martha Crenshaw, "The Causes of Terrorism," *Comparative Politics* 13, no. 4 (July 1, 1981): 382-384.

among the Afghan and Iraqi populations may have amplified the griev-ances and made terrorism more feasible.

The failure of the US government to achieve its objectives in the war on terror may be the result of implementing policies that motivated people to join terror groups and made terrorism more feasible. First, US actions increased the motivation, both in terms of grievance and greed, for people to join the terrorists' ranks and for the terrorists to step up the pace of attacks. Once the United States removed Saddam's regime and then failed to ensure a monopoly on the use of force, the Sunni-Shia rift was given opportunity to express itself violently. The disbanding of the Iraqi army and the de-Baathification of the government left hundreds of thousands unemployed and humiliated at being unable to provide for their families. The status quo political power arrangements were upended and largely reversed. The massive American military presence in these Muslim lands gave terror recruiters an enduring grievance to manipulate. A tsunami of US dollars incentivized corruption and crimi-nal elements inside and outside the government. Moreover, ineffective and corrupt state security forces provided a permissive environment for organizations engaged in criminal and terror activity.

Second, America's push to democratize Afghanistan and Iraq may have made terrorism and insurgency more feasible. Well before 2001, eminent governance scholars had noted that key democracy enablers, such as liberal institutions and culture, were absent in Muslim-majority countries, making successful democracy unlikely.[43] The research further indicated higher levels of political violence were associated with interme-diate forms of government, such as infant democracies.[44] An ineffective government may make terrorism more feasible, particularly if the state security force is ineffective or non-existent.

Finally, attempts to replace autocracies in Afghanistan and Iraq with representative governments were unlikely to succeed due to the nega-tive effects from decades of trauma. At the time of the US invasions, Afghanistan had been at war for more than 20 consecutive years and Iraq had been at war for 16 of the previous 20.[45] As United Nations data show, both countries already had high numbers of refugees and inter-nally displaced persons for many years. Moreover, Iraqis and Afghans endured extremely high rates of political violence and terror well before 9/11. Both populations were suffering the negative effects of substantial and enduring trauma.

A meta-analysis of conflict-affected refugee populations published in the Journal of the American Medical Association suggests PTSD rates among the Iraqi and Afghan populations may have been between 35 and 50 percent *before* the US initiated military operations. The meta-analysis

43   Seymour Martin Lipset, "The Social Requisites of Democracy Revisited: 1993 Presidential Address," *American Sociological Review* 59, no. 1 (February 1, 1994): 6, 17; Alfred Stepan, "Religion, Democracy, and the 'Twin Tolerations,'" *Journal of Democracy* 11, no. 4 (October 2000): 47; and Fareed Zakaria, "The Rise of Illiberal Democracy," *Foreign Affairs* 76, no. 6 (November/December 1997), 35.

44   Håvard Hegre, "Toward a Democratic Civil Peace? Democracy, Political Change, and Civil War, 1816-1992," The American Political Science Review 95, no. 1 (March 2001): 42; and Daniel Byman, *The Five Front War: The Better Way to Fight Global Jihad* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2008), 158-159.

45   Meredith Reid Sarkees and Frank Whelon Wayman, *Resort to War: 1816-2007* (Washington, DC: CQ Press, 2010).

also indicates over 40 percent of Iraqis and Afghans likely met the criterion for Major Depressive Disorder.[46] An array of destabilizing behaviors and negative changes to cognitive processes generally accompany mental disorders such as PTSD and depression. These include increased substance abuse, self-harm, and harming of others, as well as decreased initiative, trust levels, and ability to concentrate.[47] These behavioral and cognitive changes would likely inhibit a state's ability to move away from autocracy. Simply put, a large proportion of Iraqis and Afghans lacked the characteristics needed of citizens in a representative democracy where the population must actively participate in its own governance and the government must be responsive to its people.

Implications for US Defense Policy

American efforts in the war on terror have been associated with a worsening of the situation. This relationship may be a function of US policies unwittingly making first terrorism then insurgency more feasible by 1) creating power vacuums after invading and 2) failing to assure a monopoly on the use of force. Additionally, US policies likely increased grievances that fuel terror recruiting by deploying hundreds of thousands of military personnel into Muslim-majority states and upending political power relationships. If the foregoing analysis is correct, then US Defense policy should be substantially restrained going forward. A reduction, even possibly a cessation, of American military operations in Muslim-majority countries could help stabilize and, over time, diminish the terror situation by eroding the narrative that Islam is under attack from the West.

If the United States reduces or ceases military operations in countries such as Syria and Iraq, stabilization might result as terror recruiting efforts become strained. Both Osama bin Laden and Ayman al Zawahiri have highlighted the narrative power of US military presence. For example, when Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait in 1990, Bin Laden criticized Saudi requests for American protection as an humiliation to the Muslim community. In 2005, Zawahiri reminded Abu Musab al Zarqawi, leader of al-Qaeda in Iraq, that public support would only continue if he fought an "outside occupying enemy, especially if the enemy is firstly Jewish, and secondly American."[48] The message has been consistent and effective: Islam is under attack from the infidel Americans and the West. The

---

46 Steel Z, et al., "Association of Torture and Other Potentially Traumatic Events with Mental Health Outcomes among Populations Exposed to Mass Conflict and Displacement: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis," *JAMA* 302, no. 5 (August 5, 2009): 543.

47 See, for example, Rangaswamy Srinivasa Murthy, et. al., "The World Health Report 2001 – Mental Health: New Understanding, New Hope," WHO, 2001, http://www.who.int/whr/2001/en/; *American Psychiatric Association, Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders – Fifth Edition, DSM Library* (Arlington, VA: American Psychiatric Association, 2013); Deborah Schofield, et. al., "The Personal and National Costs of Mental Health Conditions: Impacts on Income, Taxes, Government Support Payments Due to Lost Labour Force Participation," *BMC Psychiatry* 11, no. 1 (2011): 72; Stephen Stansfeld, Rebecca Fuhrer, and Jenny Head, "Impact of Common Mental Disorders on Sickness Absence in an Occupational Cohort Study," *Occupational and Environmental Medicine* 68, no. 6 (June 1, 2011): 408-13; E. Fuller Torrey, "Violent Behavior by Individuals with Serious Mental Illness," *Psychiatric Services* 45, no. 7 (July 1, 1994): 653-662; Jeffrey Swanson, et. al., "Violence and Severe Mental Disorder in Clinical and Community Populations: The Effects of Psychotic Symptoms, Comorbidity, and Lack of Treatment," *Psychiatry* 60, no. 1 (1997): 1-22; and Terrance Wade and David Pevalin, "Marital Transitions and Mental Health," *Journal of Health and Social Behavior* 45, no. 2 (June 1, 2004): 155-70.

48 Ayman al-Zawahiri, "Zawahiri Letter to Zarqawi (English translation)," 2005, 4, https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/zawahiris-letter-to-zarqawi-english-translation-2.

US invasion of two Muslim-majority nations and execution of military operations in another five feeds that narrative, particularly as the military forces of neighboring Muslim countries remain on the sidelines.

Additionally, the United States should reduce military operations because, as presidents Bush and Obama have noted, the problems ultimately require political solutions which must be led by those directly involved, not outsiders.[49] In both Iraq and Afghanistan, Americans provided herculean levels of assistance for more than a decade, but as the current situation suggests, the will of host governments continues to falter. Moreover, neighboring states in the region continue to be only fractionally involved despite being better positioned to provide assistance.

Further Research

A number of areas would benefit from additional research. First, as this research represents one of only a few attempts to assess quantitatively the effectiveness of US efforts in the war on terror, more studies are needed. Prior to that, these findings should be viewed as tentative. Second, future research should address questions of efficiency rather than just effectiveness. As military-scholars have previously noted, America's debt is a national security concern, with Admiral Mullen referring to it as the "most significant threat to our national security."[50] Research focused on measuring efficiency would account for the cost of implementing Defense counter-terror policies. Potentially, research on efficiency metrics could yield a cost per unit of safety. Finally, quantitative and qualitative research could be combined to measure the effectiveness of US efforts in light of American values. Though complex, this line of research requires attention as America's values are an enduring part of its culture, and they remain important to domestic politics and America's soft power abroad.

In the interim, US Defense policy should avoid expanding offensive operations. In particular, America should not deploy additional ground troops to either Iraq or Syria in response to the Islamic State. Instead, Defense policy should focus on measures to defend the homeland, such as the military's exquisite intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance capabilities.

Conclusion

The data suggest US efforts in the war on terror have been largely ineffective in achieving the stated objectives. More Americans have been killed by terrorist acts since 9/11 than before. While still a very small number, the number of Islamist-inspired terror attacks in the homeland has also increased. Additionally, al-Qaeda and terror groups of global reach have not been defeated and destroyed. Rather, the number of

---

49 Jim Acosta, Kevin Liptak, and Josh Levs, "Obama, Kerry: No US Troops Will Be Sent into Combat against ISIS in Iraq, Syria," CNN, September 17, 2014, http://www.cnn.com/2014/09/17/politics/obama-isis/; "Bush: US Shifting Tactics in Iraq War – CNN.com," CNN, October 26, 2006, http://www.cnn.com/2006/POLITICS/10/25/bush.transcript/; and Barack Obama, "Only a Political Solution for Iraq," *New Perspectives Quarterly* 25, no. 2, (Spring 2008), 54-57.

50 Mr. Y, *A National Security Narrative* (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Center, 2011); and CNN Wire Staff, "Mullen: Debt Is Top National Security Threat – CNN.com," CNN, August 27, 2010, http://www.cnn.com/2010/US/08/27/debt.security.mullen/.

such organizations and fighters supporting them has risen substantially since 2001. However, efforts to democratize Iraq, Afghanistan, and the broader region have achieved a modest degree of success. Freedom, as measured by civil liberties and political rights, have improved marginally, and Iraq is more democratic today than it was before the US invaded.

Interpretations of effectiveness can differ depending on the framework used. One perspective is that since another 9/11—the *sine qua non* measure—has not occurred, the war on terror has been a success. Another viewpoint asserts while many factors have deteriorated, absent the muscular US response, the situation would be worse today. To date, those claims have not been supported empirically.

Finally, policy-makers should substantially curtail America's offensive military operations. Instead, US Defense policy should focus on capabilities, such as intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance, to support homeland security efforts. Finally, additional research is needed regarding the effectiveness of US efforts in the war on terror to augment the few quantitative studies that have been done. Other areas for future research include measuring the efficiency of American efforts and incorporating American values as a variable for investigation.