

## The Last War—and the Next?: Learning the Wrong Lessons From Iraq

By [Jon Finer](#)

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Earlier this year, the U.S. Army published two volumes that amount to the most comprehensive official history of the [Iraq war](#). They cover the conflict's most important episodes: the U.S. invasion in 2003, the death spiral into civil war that took shape in the aftermath, the more hopeful period that began with the surge of U.S. forces in 2007, and the withdrawal that saw the last U.S. forces [leave Iraq](#) at the end of 2011.

Blandly titled *The U.S. Army in the Iraq War* and based on 30,000 pages of newly declassified documents, the study recounts a litany of familiar but still infuriating blunders on Washington's part: failing to prepare for the invasion's aftermath, misunderstanding Iraqi culture and politics and sidelining or ignoring genuine experts, disbanding the Iraqi army and evicting Baath Party members from the government, ignoring and even denying the rise of sectarian violence, and sapping momentum by rotating troops too frequently.

Years in the making and admirably candid, the study has largely been ignored by the media and the policy community. That may be because of its daunting length and dry, "just the facts" narrative. Or because some understandably prefer independent accounts to authorized after-action reports. Or because, compared with other major conflicts in U.S. history, so few Americans experienced this one firsthand. Or because the study declines to focus on more timely and contested questions, such as whether it was ever in the realm of possibility to invade a large and diverse Middle Eastern country—one that posed no direct threat to the United States—at an acceptable cost. But the study also comes at a time when many of the supposed lessons of Iraq are increasingly contested, with significant implications for a debate that is raging between and within both major political parties over the most consequential foreign policy choice any country faces: when and how to use military force.

In this critical debate, the Iraq study does seem to take a side, intentionally or otherwise. For that reason, and to better understand what the institution charged with fighting the controversial war believes it has learned, two of the study's claims are worthy of further reflection, particularly for those who believed that the Iraq debacle would lead to an era of American military restraint. The first claim, which runs through the study like a subplot, is that the war's "only victor" was "an emboldened and expansionist Iran," which gained vast influence over its main regional adversary when Iraq's dictator was toppled and replaced by leaders with close ties to Iran.

Washington “never formulated an effective strategy” for addressing this challenge, the study concludes, in part because it imposed “artificial geographic boundaries on the conflict” that “limited the war in a way that made it difficult to reach its desired end states.” Put more succinctly: the United States erred not by waging a war far more expansive than its national interests warranted but by failing to take the fight far enough, including into neighboring Iran.

The study’s second notable claim, mentioned only in passing in its penultimate paragraph, is even more controversial: that “the failure of the United States to attain its strategic objectives in Iraq was not inevitable.” Rather, it “came as a by-product of a long series of decisions—acts of commission and omission—made by well-trained and intelligent leaders.” In other words: the failure of the Iraq war—which cost somewhere between \$1 trillion and \$2 trillion, led to the deaths of nearly 4,500 Americans and perhaps half a million Iraqis, spawned a grave humanitarian crisis, and incubated the most virulent terrorist franchise the world has ever seen, all with no clear strategic benefit—was one of execution, not conception.

Couched as impartial assessments, these claims—about how the United States’ military restraint empowered its main regional adversary and about the supposed feasibility of fighting a better war—contribute to the deliberate and systematic erosion of what was once conventional wisdom: that, in the future, the United States should be far warier of potential conflicts like the one in Iraq. An alternative view of the Iraq war has flourished since the arrival of U.S. President Donald Trump, driven by both some of his most ardent critics and some of his closest advisers. And it may help bring about the [next U.S. conflict](#) in the Middle East.

## MUNICH, SAIGON, BAGHDAD

What policymakers learn from history is of more than mere academic interest. Just as generals reputedly prepare to fight the last war, foreign policy officials lean heavily on historical analogies in addressing current threats. U.S. officials frequently use—and often abuse—history to help bolster their arguments during critical debates. In doing so, as the historian Ernest May put it, they become “captives of an unanalyzed faith that the future [will] be like the recent past.”

The British appeasement of Hitler in 1938 has been particularly compelling in policy debates, with allusions to “another Munich,” referring to the city where European powers acceded to some of Hitler’s earliest territorial claims, providing an easy caricature of supposed weakness. In 1965, as President Lyndon Johnson considered whether to deploy 100,000 U.S. troops to Vietnam, the National Security Council held a fateful meeting. His team in the Cabinet Room was divided on the issue, until the

U.S. ambassador in Saigon, Henry Cabot Lodge, Jr., effectively ended the debate: “I feel there is a greater threat of World War III if we don’t go in. Can’t we see the similarity to [the British] indolence at Munich?”

By the 1970s, the Vietnam quagmire that resulted in part from that reading of history began to compete with Munich as the dominant historical analogy. Just as Munich became a shorthand for policy approaches that were overly passive, Vietnam became a warning against those deemed too interventionist. Reluctant to plunge the United States back into conflict, President Jimmy Carter pursued détente with the Soviet Union. In response, critics attacked him for “tapping the cobblestones of Munich” and fostering a “culture of appeasement.” In the decade that followed, President Ronald Reagan sought to overcome what he and others called “the Vietnam syndrome” and shake the United States free from what he believed was an excessive reluctance to confront global threats. But it was not until 1990 that the United States faced an act of aggression so stark that the debate shifted again.

In August 1990, Saddam Hussein’s Iraq invaded and occupied Kuwait. “International conflicts attract historical analogies the way honey attracts bears,” noted Alexander Haig, a former U.S. secretary of state and former supreme allied commander of NATO, in a [New York Times op-ed](#) that December. “Which analogy, Munich or Vietnam, . . . has more to tell us?” His answer was the former, which meant that Saddam had to be confronted. Rather than ignore or contest the Vietnam analogy, Haig twisted it to suit his purposes. And to leave no doubt, Haig also drew a somewhat contrarian lesson from Vietnam, arguing that it suggested the United States should not stop at liberating Kuwait: it must destroy the Iraqi regime entirely. “The Vietnam analogy instructs us not that we should refrain from using force,” he wrote, “but that if our purposes are just and clear, we should use it decisively.”

In the end, President George H. W. Bush followed only half of Haig’s advice, evicting Saddam’s army from Kuwait but stopping short of marching on Baghdad. In his victory speech, Bush boasted, “We’ve kicked the Vietnam syndrome once and for all.”

## WHICH IRAQ LESSON?

That cure cemented the United States’ status as the world’s sole superpower but had some unforeseen side effects. The country has now spent nearly three decades engulfed in Iraq in various ways. Iraq has provided the leading historical analogies for foreign-policy makers in the past four U.S. administrations and has informed their understanding of the extent and limits of American power, even as other crises have flared and faded.

President Bill Clinton quietly continued the conflict with Saddam after the end of the 1990–91 Gulf War by bombing Iraqi targets throughout his tenure, imposing unprecedented sanctions, and shifting the United States’ official policy to regime change. His secretary of state, Madeleine Albright, coined the phrase “the indispensable nation” to justify further U.S. intervention in Iraq. A few years later, to bolster the case for an invasion, officials serving President George W. Bush used his father’s supposed strategic error of not proceeding to Baghdad, along with a healthy dash of the Munich analogy. They also massively exaggerated the threats posed by Saddam’s weapons programs and the Iraqi leader’s purported ties to terrorist groups.

Repulsed by that sales job and the fiasco it helped promote, President Barack Obama, whose rise was fueled by his early opposition to the Iraq war, drew new lessons from his predecessor’s failures in Iraq. Obama’s understanding of what had gone wrong encouraged his wariness of wielding U.S. power, especially in the Middle East; his commitment to diplomacy as the tool of first resort and openness to engaging even the most difficult adversaries; and his conviction that U.S. military action should come only as part of the broadest possible coalition and in accordance with international law.

Those lessons guided Obama’s approach to the two most difficult problems he faced during the last several years of his term—the mounting Iranian nuclear threat and the Syrian conflict. On Iran, Obama resisted the drumbeat of another reckless war and instead [made a deal](#) that removed an immediate nuclear threat from the world’s most volatile region without the United States having to fire a shot. In Syria, Obama avoided a major military escalation in favor of a varied approach, with elements of diplomacy, humanitarian assistance, and force, which ultimately failed to quell a devastating conflict. In each case, the Iraq war weighed heavily in internal debates.

## A BIG, FAT MISTAKE

Although it would be hard to imagine a presidential candidate more different from the incumbent he sought to replace, Trump also argued that the United States should avoid Middle Eastern “quagmires” and called the Iraq war “[a big, fat mistake.](#)” As president-elect, he told an audience at Fort Bragg of his commitment to “only engage in the use of military force when it’s in the vital national security interest of the United States,” pledged to “stop racing to topple . . . foreign regimes that we know nothing about,” and promised to end what he termed a “destructive cycle of intervention and chaos.” Early in his presidency, he called the 2003 invasion “the single worst decision ever made.”

By the end of 2016, an aversion to military adventurism in the Middle East seemed a rare area of bipartisan consensus. The lessons of Iraq were relatively clear, and the prospects for another U.S. war in the region remote.

Since then, however, the Trump administration's policies and personnel choices have helped erode that consensus and have raised the specter of another conflict. In January 2018, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson delivered [a speech](#) explaining why keeping U.S. troops on the ground in Syria, and possibly increasing their numbers, was essential to national security. He put forward a standard set of arguments in favor of a U.S. presence: the need to conclusively defeat the Islamic State (also known as ISIS), help end the Syrian civil war, counter Iranian influence, stabilize Syria so that refugees could return, and rid the country of any remaining chemical weapons.

He then made a more counterintuitive case for deploying more U.S. forces to Syria, where they would be in harm's way, operating under dubious legal authority, and tasked with a mission arguably far more ambitious than their number could achieve: to "not repeat the mistakes of the past in Iraq." One could be forgiven for believing Tillerson had somehow misspoken by invoking the Iraq war as an argument for, rather than against, further U.S. military intervention in a controversial conflict. He had not.

His comments reflected a view commonly expressed by critics of the Obama administration—many of them Iraq war proponents: that by withdrawing from Iraq in 2011, after the Iraqi parliament declined to endorse legal protections for U.S. troops, Obama had committed a politically motivated blunder that robbed the United States of a durable success, if not victory. The withdrawal, such critics allege, allowed al Qaeda in Iraq to metastasize into ISIS and take control of nearly a third of Iraq's territory, including Mosul, the country's third-largest city.

The U.S. Army's official history of the Iraq war makes a version of that same argument:

At one point, in the waning days of the Surge, the change of strategy and the sacrifices of many thousands of Americans and Iraqis had finally tipped the scales enough to put the military campaign on a path towards a measure of success. However, it was not to be, as the compounding effect of earlier mistakes, combined with a series of decisions focused on war termination, ultimately doomed the fragile venture.

This conclusion neglects a few inconvenient facts. The troops were withdrawn pursuant to a George W. Bush-era status-of-forces agreement between Washington and Baghdad. Under its own internal pressure to end the war, the Iraqi government

would not even consider allowing anything beyond a relatively small number of U.S. forces in a noncombat role. ISIS' rise had less to do with the absence of U.S. troops than with the civil war that erupted next door in Syria, just as American forces were withdrawing. And whatever one thinks of the decision to withdraw U.S. troops, that would hardly seem to negate the original sin of invading Iraq in the first place. Still, this revisionist argument has gained adherents over time and has also spawned a new, unlikely lesson of Iraq: that an aversion to military force in 2011, rather than a fetish for it in 2003, was to blame.

This belief sits uneasily with Trump's professed distaste for military adventurism in the Middle East, and it has led to a fierce tug of war inside the Trump administration over the use of force in the region. Trump's more hawkish advisers have often carried the day. As a result, despite his noninterventionist instincts, Trump has escalated the U.S. military's involvement in every theater of conflict he inherited: Afghanistan, Libya, Niger, Syria, Yemen—and even Iraq itself.

Last spring, Trump appointed as his national security adviser John Bolton, a man who remains perhaps the Iraq war's most fervent and least repentant champion. (As recently as 2015, Bolton said that toppling Saddam was the right thing to do.) Tillerson, a relative moderate, was replaced as secretary of state by the far more hawkish Mike Pompeo. Elliott Abrams, George W. Bush's top Middle East adviser, is now Trump's special envoy for Venezuela. And Joel Rayburn, one of the editors of the U.S. Army's study of the Iraq war, left that role to take two senior positions in the Trump administration, first in the White House and then in the State Department.

Ironically, Trump has resurrected Iraq hawks on both sides of the polarized debate about his presidency. Among his most prominent critics are “Never Trump” Republicans—many of whom were staunch supporters of the 2003 invasion. It was precisely Trump's discomfort with military intervention—and concern that it could lead to a new period of isolationism—that first turned off many of his hawkish critics, such as Max Boot of the Council on Foreign Relations and David Frum of *The Atlantic*. Through their criticism of Trump, many Never Trumpers have regained some of the prominence they lost in the wake of the Iraq disaster, as has the view that the Iraq war was noble in purpose, waged poorly by Bush, salvaged by the surge, and then ultimately lost by Obama.

It is little wonder, then, that Americans' ideas about what lessons their country should take from the Iraq war may be shifting. According to polls, in 2008, five years after the invasion, 56 percent of the country had decided that the war—which had by then claimed hundreds of thousands of lives, displaced millions, and badly damaged the United States' global standing—was a mistake. By 2018, however, that number had

fallen to 48 percent. By comparison, a majority of Americans continue to believe that the U.S. war in Vietnam was a mistake. By 1990, 17 years after the Paris Peace Accords formally ended the conflict, that number had reached 74 percent.

## MAXIMUM PRESSURE

The most immediate test of this ongoing debate about Iraq is the emerging crisis between the United States and Iran. Although the Iraq analogy was once a trump card for opponents of U.S. intervention, today it is also invoked by those portraying Iran as unfinished business of the earlier conflict. As the historian Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., once wrote, for policymakers pursuing an agenda, history is “an enormous grab bag with a prize for everybody.”

Just over two years ago, a war with Iran in the near term seemed almost unthinkable. The Obama administration saw Iran’s nuclear program as the greatest threat and sought to take it off the table, which would also make addressing other threats from Iran less risky. The 2015 nuclear agreement locked up Iran’s program for more than a decade. And Iran adhered to the deal.

One of the clearest and most immediate consequences of the 2016 U.S. presidential election, however, was a [reversal](#) of U.S. policy toward Iran, including the decision to withdraw the United States from the nuclear deal and resume sanctions against Iran and its business partners. The Trump administration is now pursuing a strategy it calls “maximum pressure.” In April, Trump designated Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps as a terrorist organization, the first government entity to earn that distinction. In May, the administration announced that any nation importing Iranian oil—the lifeblood of Iran’s economy—would be sanctioned, with the aim of eliminating Iranian exports.

Trump and his officials have indulged in rhetoric that gives the distinct impression that the administration’s goal is regime change, by force if necessary. Last July, after Iranian President Hassan Rouhani warned the United States not to “play with the lion’s tail” by increasing pressure on Iran, Trump [tweeted](#), “Iranian President Rouhani: NEVER, EVER THREATEN THE UNITED STATES AGAIN OR YOU WILL SUFFER CONSEQUENCES THE LIKES OF WHICH FEW THROUGHOUT HISTORY HAVE EVER SUFFERED BEFORE. WE ARE NO LONGER A COUNTRY THAT WILL STAND FOR YOUR DEMENTED WORDS OF VIOLENCE & DEATH. BE CAUTIOUS!”



Donald J. Trump

✓@realDonaldTrump

To Iranian President Rouhani: NEVER, EVER THREATEN THE UNITED STATES AGAIN OR YOU WILL SUFFER CONSEQUENCES THE LIKES OF WHICH FEW THROUGHOUT HISTORY HAVE EVER SUFFERED BEFORE. WE ARE NO LONGER A COUNTRY THAT WILL STAND FOR YOUR DEMENTED WORDS OF VIOLENCE & DEATH. BE CAUTIOUS!

308K

11:24 PM - Jul 22, 2018

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In February, Pompeo, who had advocated regime change in Iran as a member of Congress, told a group of Iranian Americans that the administration is “careful not to use the language of regime change,” but he has also pointed to supposed signs that U.S. pressure “will lead the Iranian people to rise up and change the behavior of the regime.” In May, he admitted on a podcast that better behavior on the part of the regime was unlikely and upped the ante, arguing, “I think what can change is the people can change the government.” And last year, he named 12 issues that Iran would need to agree to discuss in any future negotiation, which included steps unthinkable under Iran’s current leadership, such as abandoning all uranium enrichment and support for militant proxies.

Iran draws on its own historical lessons when it comes to dealing with the United States, starting with the U.S.-backed coup against its elected prime minister in 1953. To the surprise of many, after Trump pulled the United States out of the nuclear deal, Iran first adopted a form of strategic patience. It seized the moral high ground by working with the same Asian and European partners that had once sat on Washington’s side of the table during the negotiations on the nuclear deal and that still strongly support the agreement.



But in May, after Washington took a series of provocative steps, Rouhani announced that Iran would begin reducing its adherence to some of its commitments under the deal, particularly with regard to the stockpile of enriched uranium it is allowed to maintain, and would set a two-month deadline for countries to provide Iran with relief from U.S. sanctions. He also said that Iran was not abandoning the deal and remained open to negotiations.

Although Trump has also said that he is open to talks, the prospects of a conflict between the United States and Iran are now as high as they have been since early 2013, before the nuclear negotiations began to progress, when there were frequent reports that both countries (and Israel) were preparing for a military clash. It is easy to imagine any number of incendiary scenarios. U.S. forces are currently deployed in relatively close proximity to Iranian troops or their proxies in at least three countries: Iraq, Syria, and Yemen. A missile strike from Iranian-backed forces in Yemen that killed a large number of Saudis or a fatal rocket attack against Israel launched by Iranian proxies in Lebanon or Syria would lead to heavy pressure on Washington to retaliate, perhaps against Iranian targets.

There are also profound similarities between the current situation and the period that preceded the U.S. invasion of Iraq, starting with an impressionable president, inexperienced in world affairs. In the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, the Bush White House pushed the intelligence services to look for evidence of Iraqi involvement—none materialized, and there had been hardly any reason to suspect it would—and to draw the most hawkish conclusions possible from the mixed evidence on Iraq's pursuit of weapons of mass destruction. Today, the Trump administration is reportedly pressuring the intelligence community, which has long judged that Iran is in strict compliance with the nuclear deal, for assessments that would bolster the case for a firmer approach. "The Intelligence people seem to be extremely passive and naive when it comes to the dangers of Iran. They are wrong!" Trump tweeted earlier this year. In May, with the administration pointing to intelligence indicating that Iran might be planning attacks against U.S. forces, anonymous U.S. officials warned that the threat was being hyped. "It's not that the administration is mischaracterizing the intelligence, so much as overreacting to it," one [told](#) the *The Daily Beast*. In addition, as in 2003, the United States is increasingly isolated from all but a small handful of countries that support its approach.

It is unclear whether this brinkmanship will lead to conflict, stalemate, or renewed dialogue. Regardless, some contemporary realities should drive decision-making. Iran is roughly four times as large as Iraq in terms of territory and has roughly four times the population Iraq had in 2003. Iran's geography is more complex than that of Iraq, and its governance is at least as challenging. Although Iran menaces its neighbors and

funds terrorist proxies, Washington has yet to articulate any threat to the United States severe enough to justify a war and lacks clear legal authority to wage one. For these and other reasons, not even the most bellicose proponents of confronting Iran have suggested a full-scale assault.

But for those who believe that a smarter war plan in Iraq would have produced better results, a limited war with Iran, perhaps designed to restore U.S. deterrence supposedly forfeited during the Iraq war, remains firmly on the table. In mid-May, the Pentagon was [reportedly](#) drawing up plans for the deployment of 120,000 troops to the region, about two-thirds of the total number sent to Iraq during the 2003 invasion.

Distorting the lessons of the Iraq war may also be the best way to convince a U.S. president with anti-interventionist instincts of the wisdom of confronting Iran. “During the Iraq War, Iran was most aggressive when the U.S. failed to respond with strength to Iranian malfeasance,” claimed one of the editors of the army’s Iraq study in a [recent op-ed](#) he co-authored in *The Hill*. The authors added: “History makes clear there must be consequences for Iran when Tehran attacks Americans. Otherwise, we should expect more of the same.” It isn’t hard to imagine that argument, which hinges on notions of strength and weakness, appealing to Trump.

But such claims ignore something else that U.S. policymakers should have learned from recent conflicts: once under way, wars evolve and escalate in unforeseen ways. To see how even a war with expressly limited objectives can spiral out of control, look no further than the Obama administration’s experience in Libya. In the case of Iran, perhaps the biggest wildcard is how the Iranians might respond to U.S. force. Unlike Iraq in 2003, Iran has the ability to wage asymmetric war against American forces, diplomats, and allies across the Middle East and beyond. That is especially true in Iraq, where, in response to mounting tensions in mid-May, the United States [ordered](#) the departure of all “nonemergency” government personnel and Germany [reportedly](#) suspended its military training program.

Some variation in how analysts view Iraq may be inevitable, since they draw on different experiences of the war. As a journalist covering the invasion and the descent into civil war for *The Washington Post*, I became convinced that the Iraq cause was hopeless one evening in late 2005, when my Iraqi driver asked me to call the U.S. Army officer in charge of his Baghdad neighborhood and request that he stop delivering candy to the driver’s daughter, because if she told her friends about it, his family could be branded as collaborators. It was a stark lesson in the futility of good intentions.

The authors of the U.S. Army's official history of the Iraq war warn that "above all, the United States must not repeat the errors of previous wars in assuming that the conflict was an anomaly with few useful lessons." Although history is often abused and all conflicts are different, that still seems to be sound advice. But following it requires, at a minimum, some agreement on what those lessons are. Eroding the tenuous consensus on what went wrong in Iraq makes another damaging conflict more likely.

## Trump Is Right to Seek an End to America's Wars

The president's desire to disentangle the country from costly overseas conflicts must be encouraged.

By Jon Finan and Robert Malley  
New York Times (Jan. 8, 2019)

Mr. Finan is an adjunct senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations. Mr. Malley is the president and C.E.O. of the International Crisis Group. They served in the Obama administration.

There is no shortage of policies and decisions made by President Trump worth criticizing, but since the earliest days of his presidential campaign, he has expressed at least one belief that deserves to be encouraged, not denigrated: the desire to disentangle the United States from costly overseas conflicts.

Mr. Trump's noninterventionist impulse has always fit uncomfortably with the team he assembled, particularly the latest, more hawkish iteration in his ever-shifting foreign policy cast. For a time, the President grudgingly deferred, allowing conflicts to escalate in virtually every theater he inherited.

Recently, the president's preferences seemed to prevail, at least momentarily, as he tweeted his decision to withdraw 2,000 American troops from Syria and suggested he would do the same with as many as 7,000 from Afghanistan.

Since then, a bewildering public tug of war between the president and his national security team has left a trail of confusion. It remains unclear whether the United States is withdrawing from Syria right away or gradually; whether it wait until the Islamic State is wholly defeated or it believes that is already the case; whether the United States will protect its Syrian Kurdish allies, somehow; and whether it remains committed to its goal of ending Iran's presence in Syria.

The absence of anything akin to a decision-making process in the administration is not surprising. The surprise is that among the most vocal critics of President Trump's withdrawal announcement have been not just Republican hawks but also a chorus of voices on the left.

Progressive opponents of Trumpism should resist the urge to do so over the wrong transgressions. We may not know what the policy actually is until Mr. Trump implements it, but on Syria and Afghanistan, his initial instinct — to do less, with less — was correct. It is his execution, timing and inability to leverage his decisions for the best possible terms that were damaging.

In Syria, whatever one's view of the tragic and long-debated trajectory of the conflict or past policy decisions, the United States has few remaining, achievable interests at stake: preventing the Islamic State from regaining territorial control, protecting the predominantly Kurdish forces on whom Washington relied to do most of the counterterrorist fighting and supporting our allies in their efforts to defend against threats emanating from Syrian territory. The success of none of those goals will be determined by a relatively small, long-term military presence.

Mr. Trump misled the country by claiming that the Islamic State has been defeated. But the argument that American boots on the ground are needed to address its remaining strongholds is a recipe for a perpetual presence, since the terrorist group represents a generational threat that can be countered and contained but not soon wholly vanquished.

In truth, many on the right who denounced Mr. Trump's announcement did so principally because they see Syria as a venue for confronting Iran. But that is chasing an illusory and dangerous goal: It is hard to see how a few thousand American troops could counter tens of thousands of Iranian and Iranian-backed forces, aligned both with Moscow and President Bashar al-Assad's regime that has largely won the civil war.

A chorus of criticism inevitably greeted Mr. Trump's recent statement that Iranian forces "can do what they want" in Syria. Yet read as a statement of fact rather than the extension of a green light, he stumbled upon a self-evident truth: Notwithstanding Israel's successful efforts to limit Iran's importation of advanced weaponry into Syria, Tehran's position in the country is essentially secure.

Mr. Trump is correct that the better course is to extricate ourselves from Syria, but his fatal error has been in its implementation. Most egregiously, his snap decision during a telephone call with President Recep Tayyip Erdogan of Turkey betrayed our Kurdish

partners who led the fight against the Islamic State and risked being exposed to assault by Turkey and the Syrian regime.

A more responsible course would have been to use the prospect of an eventual American withdrawal to help avert a subsequent conflict between the Kurds and their adversaries. If, as he is now suggesting, the president withdraws the troops more gradually rather than right away, that opportunity might still exist.

It requires Mr. Trump to use that time wisely. He should start by abandoning the dangerous notion of Turkey seizing areas controlled by Kurdish forces and instead allow the Kurds — in the absence of long-term American protection — to negotiate an understanding with the Syrian regime. This might entail returning some aspects of the Syrian state to northeast Syria, Kurdish forces retaining their military capacity but lowering its profile and a degree of self-governance for the region.

In Afghanistan too, Mr. Trump's bottom line was correct. After more than 17 years of combat and a virtual stalemate, at best, for more than a decade, there is little rationale for continuing to expend American blood and treasure on a conflict trending badly, with unclear objectives.

But here too, the self-proclaimed "great negotiator" erred in folding America's limited cards for nothing in return, rather than using his willingness to withdraw as an incentive for the Taliban — currently locked in negotiations with Mr. Trump's own diplomats — to make peace.

So much is objectionable about the Trump era that it is hard for critics to know which targets to strike. But principled opposition requires that progressive opponents of President Trump not distort their beliefs for quick rhetorical wins. Whatever administration eventually follows will have many messes to clean up and will need to distinguish those that truly matter.

Inevitably, the United States will face threats that will require the use of military force. But we ought to continually question our enduring involvement in faraway conflicts, particularly when they come at a terrible cost to the United States and local populations as in Afghanistan and Iraq; make us complicit in abuses as in Yemen; entangle us with unsavory partners as occurred with some elements of the Syrian opposition; or exacerbate anti-American sentiment as our broader counterterrorism campaign often did.

Troop withdrawals can be messy and costly even in the best of circumstances. But that is not a reason to drift into forever wars while searching for the perfect exit. It is a reason to be disciplined about objectives and judicious about intervening in the first place.

Mr. Trump's Syria and Afghanistan decisions, assuming he sticks to them, may well lead to disastrous outcomes because of how they were executed, their timing, the complete lack of consultation with allies and experts and his utter failure to leverage them. All of that justifies a verdict of malpractice. But one can render that judgment while acknowledging that done differently, withdrawing is the right thing to do.

## The Long Shadow of 9/11

### How Counterterrorism Warps U.S. Foreign Policy

By [Robert Malley](#) and [Jon Finer](#) July/August 2018

When it comes to political orientation, worldview, life experience, and temperament, the past three presidents of the United States could hardly be more different. Yet each ended up devoting much of his tenure to the same goal: [countering terrorism](#).

Upon entering office, President George W. Bush initially downplayed the terrorist threat, casting aside warnings from the outgoing administration about al Qaeda plots. But in the wake of the 9/11 attacks, his presidency came to be defined by what his administration termed “the global war on terrorism,” an undertaking that involved the torture of detainees, the incarceration of suspects in “black sites” and at a prison camp in Guantánamo Bay, the warrantless surveillance of U.S. citizens, and prolonged and costly military campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq.

[Barack Obama’s](#) political rise was fueled by his early opposition to Bush’s excesses. He was clear-eyed about the nature of the terrorist threat and aware of the risks of overstating its costs. Once in office, he established clearer guidelines for the use of force and increased transparency about civilian casualties. But he also [expanded the fight against terrorists](#) to new theaters, dramatically increased the use of drone strikes, and devoted the later years of his presidency to the struggle against the Islamic State (also known as ISIS).

As for Donald Trump, he helped incite a wave of fear about terrorism and then rode it to an unlikely electoral victory, vowing to ban Muslims from entering the United States and to ruthlessly target terrorists wherever they were found. In office, Trump has escalated counterterrorism operations around the world, significantly loosened the rules of engagement, and continued to play up the terrorist threat with alarmist rhetoric.

In short, in an era of persistent political polarization, countering terrorism has become the area of greatest bipartisan consensus. Not since Democrats and Republicans rallied around containing the Soviet Union during the Cold War has there been such



broad agreement on a foreign policy priority. Counterterrorism was a paramount concern for a president avenging the deaths of almost 3,000 Americans, and for his successor, who aspired to change the world's (and especially the Muslim world's) perception of the United States—and now it is also for his successor's successor, who is guided not by conviction or ideology but by impulse and instinct.

Many compelling reasons explain why U.S. policymakers have made [the fight against terrorism](#) a priority and why that fight often has taken on the character of a military campaign. But there are costs to this singular preoccupation and approach that are seldom acknowledged. An excessive focus on this issue disfigures American politics, distorts U.S. policies, and in the long run will undermine national security. The question is not whether fighting terrorists ought to be a key U.S. foreign policy objective—of course it should. But the pendulum has swung too far at the expense of other interests and of a more rational conversation about terrorism and how to fight it.

### **The more things change . . .**

The first and most obvious reason why several consecutive administrations have devoted so much attention to fighting terrorism is that guarding the safety of citizens should be any government's primary duty. Those privy to the constant stream of threat information generated by U.S. intelligence services—as we were during the Obama administration—can attest to the relentlessness and inventiveness with which terrorist organizations target Americans at home and abroad. They likewise can attest to the determination and resourcefulness required of public servants to thwart them.

An excessive focus on counterterrorism disfigures American politics, distorts U.S. policies, and in the long run will undermine national security.

Second, unlike most other foreign policy issues, terrorism matters to Americans. They may have an exaggerated sense of the threat or misunderstand it, and their political leaders might manipulate or exploit their concerns. But politicians need to be responsive to the demands of their constituents, who consistently rank terrorism among the greatest threats the country faces.

A third reason is that, by the most easily comprehensible metrics, most U.S. counterterrorism efforts appear to have immediately and palpably succeeded. No

group or individual has been able to repeat anything close to the devastating scale of the 9/11 attacks in the United States or against U.S. citizens abroad, owing to the remarkable efforts of U.S. authorities, who have disrupted myriad active plots and demolished many terrorist cells and organizations. What is more, when compared with other, longer-term, more abstract, and often quixotic policy priorities—such as spreading democracy, resurrecting failed states, or making peace among foreign belligerents—counterterrorism has a narrower objective over which the U.S. government has greater control, and its results can be more easily measured. In the Middle East, in particular, Washington’s loftier pursuits have tended to backfire or collapse. Focusing on counterterrorism can discipline U.S. foreign policy and force policymakers to concentrate on a few tasks that are well defined and realistic.

Finally, in an age of covert special operations and unmanned drones, the targeted killing of suspected terrorists appears relatively precise, clean, and low risk. For a commander in chief such as Obama, who worried about straining the U.S. military and causing counterproductive civilian casualties, the illusory notion that one could wage war with clean hands proved tantalizing.

The combination of these factors helps explain why such dissimilar presidents have been so similar in this one respect. It also explains why, since the 9/11 attacks, the United States has been engaged in a seemingly endless confrontation with a metastasizing set of militant groups. And it explains why, by tacit consensus, American society has adopted a zero-tolerance policy toward terrorism, such that any administration on whose watch an attack were to occur would immediately face relentless political recrimination. The United States has become captive to a national security paradigm that ends up magnifying the very fears from which it was born.

## **DON'T BELIEVE THE HYPE**

For evidence of how this toxic cycle distorts American politics, one need look no further than Trump’s rise, which cannot be dissociated from the emotional and at times irrational fears of terrorism that he simultaneously took advantage of and fueled. Trump, more blatantly than most, married those sentiments to nativistic, bigoted feelings about immigrants and Muslims. In December 2015, he proposed a simple but drastic step to eliminate the danger: “a total and complete shutdown of Muslims entering the United States.” As a policy, this was absurd, but as

demagoguery, it proved highly effective: several months prior to the 2016 presidential election, some polls showed that a majority of Americans approved of the idea, despite the fact that they were [less likely](#) to fall victim to a terrorist attack by a refugee than be hit by lightning, eaten by a shark, or struck by an asteroid.

But Trump is hardly the only one who has hyped the threat of terrorism for political gain; indeed, doing so has become a national—and bipartisan—tradition. It has become exceedingly rare for an elected official or candidate to offer a sober, dispassionate assessment of the threat posed by foreign terrorists. Obama tried to do so, but critics charged that at times of near panic, such rational pronouncements came across as cold and aloof. After the 2015 terrorist shooting in San Bernardino, California, took the lives of 14 people, he became all the more aware of the pernicious impact another attack could have—prompting baseless anti-immigrant and anti-refugee sentiment, proposals for the curtailment of civil liberties, and calls for foreign military adventures. So Obama intensified his own and his administration’s counterterrorism rhetoric and actions. It’s hard to ignore the irony of overreacting to terrorism in order to avoid an even greater overreaction to terrorism.

This dilemma reflects the peculiar nature of terrorism. For an American, the risk of being injured or killed in a terrorist attack is close to zero. But unlike truly random events, terrorism is perpetrated by people intentionally seeking bloodshed and working hard to achieve it. The combination of seeming randomness of the target and the deliberateness of the offender helps explain why terrorism inspires a level of dread unjustified by the actual risk. At any given time and place, a terrorist attack is extremely unlikely to occur—and yet, when one does happen, it’s because someone wanted it to.

But that only goes so far in explaining why Americans remain so concerned about terrorism even though other sources of danger pose much higher risks. The fact is that many U.S. political leaders, members of the media, consultants, and academics play a role in hyping the threat. Together, they form what might be described as a counterterrorism-industrial complex—one that, deliberately or not, and for a variety of reasons, fuels the cycle of fear and overreaction.

## **TERROR TALK**

But it's not just American politics that suffers from an overemphasis on counterterrorism; the country's policies do, too. An administration can do more than one thing at once, but it can't prioritize everything at the same time. The time spent by senior officials and the resources invested by the government in finding, chasing, and killing terrorists invariably come at the expense of other tasks: for example, addressing the challenges of a rising China, a nuclear North Korea, and a resurgent Russia.

The United States' counterterrorism posture also affects how Washington deals with other governments—and how other governments deal with it. When Washington works directly with other governments in fighting terrorists or seeks their approval for launching drone strikes, it inevitably has to adjust aspects of its policies. Washington's willingness and ability to criticize or pressure the governments of Egypt, [Pakistan](#), Saudi Arabia, and Turkey, among others, is hindered by the fact that the United States depends on them to take action against terrorist groups or to allow U.S. forces to use their territory to do so. More broadly, leaders in such countries have learned that in order to extract concessions from American policymakers, it helps to raise the prospect of opening up (or shutting down) U.S. military bases or granting (or withdrawing) the right to use their airspace. And they have learned that in order to nudge the United States to get involved in their own battles with local insurgents, it helps to cater to Washington's concerns by painting such groups (rightly or wrongly) as internationally minded jihadists.

The United States also risks guilt by association when its counterterrorism partners ignore the laws of armed conflict or lack the capacity for precision targeting. And other governments have become quick to cite Washington's fight against its enemies to justify their own more brutal tactics and more blatant violations of international law. It is seldom easy for U.S. officials to press other governments to moderate their policies, restrain their militaries, or consider the unintended consequences of repression. But it is infinitely harder when those other states can justify their actions by pointing to Washington's own practices—even when the comparison is inaccurate or unfair.

These policy distortions are reinforced and exacerbated by a lopsided interagency policymaking process that emerged after the 9/11 attacks. In most areas, the process of making national security policy tends to be highly regimented. It involves the

president's National Security Council staff; deputy cabinet secretaries; and, for the most contentious, sensitive, or consequential decisions, the cabinet itself, chaired by either the national security adviser or the president. But since the Bush administration, counterterrorism has been run through a largely separate process, led by the president's homeland security adviser (who is technically a deputy to the national security adviser) and involving a disparate group of officials and agencies. The result in many cases is two parallel processes—one for terrorism, another for everything else—which can result in different, even conflicting, recommendations before an ultimate decision is made.

In one example from our time in government, in 2016, officials taking part in the more specialized counterterrorism side of the process debated whether to kill or capture a particular militant leader even as those involved in the parallel interagency process considered whether to initiate political discussions with him. That same year, those involved in the counterterrorism process recommended launching a major strike against ISIS leaders in [Libya](#) even as other officials working on that country worried that overt U.S. military action would undermine Libya's fledgling government.

It's true that once the most difficult decisions reach the president and his cabinet, the two processes converge, and a single set of players makes the final call. But the bifurcated bureaucratic structure and the focus on terrorism at the lower levels mean that by the time senior officials consider the issue, momentum typically will have grown in favor of direct action targeting a terrorist suspect, with less consideration given to other matters. Even when there is greater coordination of the two processes, as there was for the counter-ISIS campaign, the special attention given to terrorist threats shapes policy decisions, making it more difficult to raise potentially countervailing interests, such as resolving broader political conflicts or helping stabilize the fragile states that can give rise to those threats in the first place.

That policy distortion has produced an unhealthy tendency among policymakers to formulate their arguments in counterterrorism terms, thereby downplaying or suppressing other serious issues. Officials quickly learn that they stand a better chance of being heard and carrying the day if they can argue that their ideas offer the most effective way to defeat terrorists. The Obama administration produced several examples of that dynamic. Officials held different views about how closely to work with Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, who took power in a coup in 2013, and

whether to condition U.S. assistance to Egypt on political reforms. In essence, the debate pitted those who believed that the United States could not endorse, let alone bankroll, the Sisi regime's authoritarian practices against those who argued that relations with Egypt mattered too much to risk alienating its leader. This debate raised difficult questions about the utility of U.S. military aid and the effectiveness of making it conditional, about the importance of Egypt and the Middle East to Washington's security posture, and about the priority that U.S. policymakers ought to place on American values when formulating foreign policy. Yet policymakers often chose to frame the debate in different terms: those in the first camp insisted that Sisi's disregard for human rights would produce more terrorists than he could kill, whereas those in the second camp highlighted the need to work with Sisi against already existing terrorists in the Sinai Peninsula.

In 2014, a similar pattern emerged when it came to policy discussions about the civil war in [Syria](#). Once again, senior officials faced a situation that tested their core assumptions and values: on the one hand, the conviction that the United States had a moral responsibility to intervene to halt mass atrocities, and on the other, a fear that U.S. forces would get bogged down in yet another military adventure in the Middle East. But in front of the president, officials regularly spoke a different language. Those who felt that Washington should try to topple Syrian President Bashar al-Assad asserted that he was a "magnet" for terrorist groups that could be eliminated only through Assad's removal. Meanwhile, officials who opposed intervention argued that the conflict itself was generating the vacuum that resulted in ISIS' rise and that the goal therefore ought to be to de-escalate it; they also pointed out that many of the opposition groups asking for U.S. support had ties to al Qaeda.

But those examples and the often highly defensible decisions they produced are less important than the larger pattern they reflect. When officials package every argument as a variation on a single theme—how to more effectively combat terrorists—they are likely to downplay broader questions that they ought to squarely confront regarding the United States' role in the world, the country's responsibility to intervene (or not) on humanitarian grounds, and the relative importance of defending human rights or democracy.

## **TOO MUCH OF A GOOD THING**

Paradoxically, fixating on counterterrorism can make it harder to actually fight terrorism. The intense pressure to immediately address terrorist threats leads to a focus on symptoms over causes and to an at times counterproductive reliance on the use of force. Washington has become addicted to quick military fixes for what are too often portrayed as imminent life-and-death threats, or officials focus too much on tangible but frequently misleading metrics of success, such as the decimation of leadership structures, body counts, or the number of arrests or sorties. Of course, when it comes to an organization such as ISIS, it is hard to imagine any solution other than defeating the group militarily. But when dealing with the [Afghan Taliban](#), for example, or violent groups elsewhere that have local roots and whose fighters are motivated by local grievances, it is hard to imagine any military solution at all.

Sometimes what's needed is a far broader approach that would entail, where possible, engaging such groups in dialogue and addressing factors such as a lack of education or employment opportunities, ethnic or religious discrimination, the absence of state services, and local government repression. These problems are hard to assess and require political, as opposed to military, solutions—diplomacy rather than warfare. That approach takes longer, and it's harder to know whether the effort is paying off. For a policymaker, and particularly for political appointees serving fixed terms, it's almost always preferable to choose immediate and predictable gratification over delayed and uncertain satisfaction.

But as the war on terrorism nears its third decade, and despite the elimination of countless terrorist leaders and foot soldiers, there are now almost certainly more terrorist groups around the world and far more terrorists seeking to target the United States and its interests than there were in 2001. The United States is engaged in more military operations, in more places, against more such groups than ever before: in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Niger, Somalia, Syria, Yemen, and the Sahel region, to name a few. The spread of such groups is hardly the result of U.S. policy failings alone. Still, it ought to encourage humility and prompt Washington to consider doing things differently. Instead, it has been used to justify doing more of the same.

One possible explanation for the resilience of the terrorist threat is that an overly militarized approach aggravates the very conditions on which terrorist recruitment thrives. The destruction of entire cities and the unintentional killing of civilians, in addition to being tragic, serve as powerful propaganda tools for jihadists. Such

incidents feed resentment, grievances, and anti-Americanism. Not everyone who is resentful, grieving, or anti-American will turn to violence. The vast majority will not. But invariably, some will.

The Obama administration sought to improve the protection of civilians by establishing detailed constraints on counterterrorism strikes and unprecedented standards for transparency about civilian casualties. That approach proved easier to establish than to implement. Outside analysts argued that the administration did not go far enough, and journalists revealed troubling disparities in the way casualties were counted. But things have gotten far worse under Trump. In the name of unshackling the military and halting what Trump administration officials have disparaged as Obama-era “micromanagement” of the military’s operations, Trump has loosened the rules governing the targeting of presumed terrorists, diminished the vetting of strikes, and delegated increased authority to the Pentagon. Not surprisingly, the number of drone strikes has significantly grown as a result; in the case of Yemen, the Trump administration carried out more airstrikes during its first 100 days than the Obama administration did in all of 2015 and 2016.

The destruction of entire cities and the unintentional killing of civilians, in addition to being tragic, serve as powerful propaganda tools for jihadists.

Today, the public knows little about what standards the military must follow before launching a strike, but there is little doubt that they have been relaxed. Nor is there much doubt that the rate of civilian casualties has increased. But it’s hard to know for sure because the White House has weakened the transparency rules that Obama imposed at the end of his term. In a sense, such changes represent a natural progression. They are an outgrowth of a discourse that presents terrorism as an existential threat, its elimination as a goal worthy of virtually any means, and secrecy as an essential tool.

Trump represents the culmination of that discourse. During the campaign, he blithely asserted that his approach to ISIS would be to “bomb the shit out of” the group’s members and suggested that the United States should also “take out their families.” *The Washington Post* recently reported that after he became president, Trump watched a recording of a U.S. strike during which a drone operator waited to fire until the target



was away from his family. When the video was over, Trump asked, “Why did you wait?”

## **AVOIDING THE TERRORISM TRAP**

There must be a better way to allocate U.S. resources, define national security priorities, and talk to the American public about terrorism. But it’s hardly a mystery why a better path has been so difficult to find: few politicians are willing to challenge the dominant perspective, hint that the danger has been exaggerated, or advocate a less militarized approach. Fuzzy thinking mars even well-intentioned efforts at change. Senator Bob Corker, a Republican from Tennessee, and Senator Tim Kaine, a Democrat from Virginia, have proposed an update to the legislation that has governed most counterterrorism policy since 2001. Their bill seeks to rein in operations, put them on a sounder legal footing, and reassert Congress’ long-neglected role. But if passed, the bill would end up codifying the notion that the United States is engaged in an open-ended war against an ever-growing number of groups.

Still, a window of opportunity might be opening. Despite its missteps on counterterrorism, Trump’s national security team [has declared](#) that the biggest threats facing the United States result from great-power politics and aggressive “revisionist” states, such as China and Russia. Whatever one thinks of that assessment, it could at least help put terrorism in proper perspective. Moreover, the fight against ISIS appears to be winding down, at least for now, in Iraq and Syria. According to some polls, the U.S. public presently ranks international terrorism as only the third most critical threat to U.S. vital interests, behind North Korea’s nuclear program and cyberwarfare. There is also growing awareness of the considerable portion of the U.S. budget currently devoted to counterterrorism. And Senator Bernie Sanders, an independent from Vermont—and a once and possibly future presidential contender—recently broke with orthodoxy by condemning the war on terrorism as a disaster for American leadership and the American people.

All of this amounts to just a small crack, but a crack nonetheless. It will take more to overcome the political trap that discourages officials from risking their futures by speaking more candidly. For example, Congress could create a bipartisan panel to dispassionately assess the terrorist threat and how best to meet it. Members of the policy community and the media could acknowledge the problem and initiate a more

open conversation about the danger terrorism poses, whether U.S. military operations have successfully tackled it, and how much the global fight against terrorism has cost.

Future officeholders could rethink Washington's bureaucratic organization and the preeminent place granted to counterterrorism officials and agencies, insist on greater transparency regarding civilian casualties caused by U.S. military action, tighten the constraints loosened by the Trump administration, and press harder on allies and partners to act in accordance with international law. Finally, since sloppy language and bad policy are often mutually reinforcing, news organizations could impose on themselves greater discipline when covering terrorism. This would entail eschewing highly emotional wall-to-wall coverage of every attack (or even potential attack).

Washington's militarized counterterrorism culture, born in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, has tended to conflate the government's primary responsibility to protect citizens with a global fight against an ill-defined and ever-growing list of violent groups. This distortion has taken years to develop and will take years to undo. But that process will have to start somewhere, and it ought to start now.

How Iraq War Hawks Can Help Stop Trump from Going to War with Iran  
New Yorker (September 1, 2017)  
By Jon Finer, Jeff Prescott, and Robert Malley

Fifteen years ago this fall, in the run-up to the invasion of Iraq, one of the most compelling public cases for war came not from President George W. Bush or his backers on Capitol Hill but from a wonky book written by a former C.I.A. analyst that landed, improbably, on best-seller lists and nightstands across Washington. Ken Pollack, now a scholar at the Brookings Institution, argued soberly but forcefully that a U.S.-led military assault to remove Saddam Hussein was necessary and affordable, what he called “our best option—or at least our least bad option.” The book’s title, “The Threatening Storm: The Case for Invading Iraq,” was less nuanced but more memorable than Pollack’s analysis, which acknowledged the risk of trading “the threat of a nuclear-armed Saddam for the threat of an Iraq in chaos and civil war.”

The book quickly became the intellectual foundation for proponents of the Iraq War, many of whom, unlike Pollack, knew nothing about Iraq. Democratic politicians found an excuse to avoid opposing the President, a year after the 9/11 attacks. Skeptics were forced to reckon with an expert endorsement of the Administration’s shoddy intelligence. Like the decision to invade Iraq, the book has not aged well.

These days, it is hard not to think back to 2002. Now, as then, a new Administration seems to have come into office with a Middle Eastern country in its crosshairs: this time, it is Iraq’s neighbor, Iran. Now, as then, a President is making increasingly menacing threats and politicizing intelligence to fit alternative facts. And now, as then, some of the same influential voices outside the Administration will play a crucial role in either legitimizing or discrediting decisions that risk another unnecessary and reckless war.

For the last decade, advocates of the Iraq War from both parties have worn scarlet letters around Washington but few have suffered professionally, even after “Mission Accomplished” turned into a brutal sectarian conflict that cost trillions of dollars, claimed the lives of more than forty-five hundred Americans and many times that number of Iraqis (most of them civilians), and badly damaged the United States’s moral and strategic authority in the world.

But several of the Iraq War’s most prominent proponents have experienced a renaissance of sorts after voicing early, principled, and fervent opposition to President

Trump—whose populist rhetoric and isolationist views they found distasteful. As a group, they share right-leaning politics, hawkish foreign-policy views, and strong support for the invasion of Iraq—and they have, to their credit, emerged as some of the most unexpected and effective opposition voices.

David Frum coined George W. Bush’s infamous phrase “axis of evil,” in the speech that laid a predicate for war. Today his anti-Trump essays in *The Atlantic* are among the most trenchant and eloquent anywhere. Max Boot, of the Council on Foreign Relations, who wrote on the tenth anniversary of the Iraq War that its proponents had “no need to repent,” has relentlessly assaulted Trump’s dysfunctional management of national security on television, in print, and on Twitter.

William Kristol, the founder of *The Weekly Standard*, predicted, in 2003, that the Iraq War’s proponents would be “vindicated” by the discovery of weapons of mass destruction, and argued just two years ago that “we were right to fight in Iraq.” More recently, he has taken Trump to task for everything from his troubling ties to Russia to his mishandling of North Korea.

And Bret Stephens was the editor-in-chief of the *Jerusalem Post* when, in 2003, it named one of the Iraq War’s chief architects, Paul Wolfowitz, its “man of the year,” trumpeting his role as “principal author” of the doctrine of preëemptive war that would “underpin U.S. action against other rogue states.” As a longtime *Wall Street Journal* columnist, he continued to defend the evidentiary basis for war with Iraq long after it was discredited, but his attacks on Trump reportedly fell out of favor with the paper’s management, and he decamped earlier this year to the *New York Times*.

Today, these and other “Never Trump” Republicans have found common cause with the left-leaning anti-Trump “resistance,” who devour and distribute their media appearances with a fervor that would have seemed impossible pre-Trump. This alignment of convenience and conviction will face a severe test in the coming months, over the looming prospect of yet another potential conflict in the Middle East. These commentators share another common view: long-standing support for a more belligerent posture toward Iran, including military confrontation, regime change, or both.

Opposition to Trump among Iraq War proponents was always partly rooted in the President’s aversion to activism abroad. They have been right to decry Trump’s abdication of U.S. leadership, including his disregard for human rights, his belittling of

our alliances, and his kowtowing to Vladimir Putin. But as a candidate, Trump's stated suspicion of military adventurism, particularly in the Middle East, had been one of his most—of, arguably, few—rational foreign-policy stances. As President, however, Trump has escalated military action in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Yemen, and Somalia, often without articulating a strategy and without public debate. In the case of Iran, while a formal policy “review” is still ongoing, Trump's own proclivity for bluster, and apparent obsession with undoing whatever President Barack Obama did, is already leading in a dangerous direction.

Trump has long decried the nuclear deal with Iran as the “worst in history.” In July, he grudgingly certified to Congress that Iran is implementing the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action—the formal name of the deal, from 2015, which degraded Iran's nuclear program, and increased the amount of time needed to produce enough fissile material for a weapon to more than a year, in exchange for sanctions relief. But Trump also said, in July, that he believes Iran is not complying with the deal “in spirit.” In another echo of 2002, Trump has reportedly assigned a team to build a case against the deal, regardless of what the intelligence might indicate, and despite the fact that the rest of the world has concluded that Iran is honoring its commitments. International inspectors, as recently as Wednesday, have reiterated an opinion that is shared by Trump's own State Department: that Iran is not violating the agreement.

There are many paths that Trump could take to deliver a blow to the nuclear deal and trigger a crisis with Iran. Two deadlines are looming this fall: in September, the U.S. must issue a waiver for sanctions suspended under the J.C.P.O.A.; in October, the U.S. has to certify that Iran is abiding by the agreement. Trump could decline to certify Iran's compliance; re-impose sanctions that were suspended under the nuclear deal; dramatically increase sanctions on Iran for reasons unrelated to its nuclear program; or demand that monitors be allowed to visit sensitive Iranian military sites, in the absence of credible evidence of wrongdoing, a step that the U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations, Nikki Haley, threatened this week.

From there, the path to conflict, intentional or otherwise, is easy to imagine. Already, Trump has severed high-level diplomatic contact between the two countries, which is necessary to address misunderstandings and prevent small disputes from becoming large ones. Meanwhile, talk of promoting regime change in Tehran—among Republicans on Capitol Hill, in conservative Washington policy circles, and even from some Trump Administration officials—gives Iran's already paranoid regime more justification to worry. If Trump imposes new sanctions, Iran could violate its

commitments under the nuclear agreement. A clash between U.S. military advisers and Iranian fighters who are already operating in close proximity in Yemen, Iraq, and Syria could take place. Or, as has happened in the past, Iranian naval vessels could challenge U.S. warships in the narrow waterways around the Arabian Peninsula.

In any of these scenarios, Trump would be incentivized to lash out at Tehran, perhaps through direct military action. Some foreign-policy experts would cheer him, as they did when he fired Tomahawk missiles at the Syrian military after its appalling chemical-weapons attack earlier this year. Iran, faced with its own political pressures and suspicion of U.S. intentions, almost certainly would retaliate, most likely in asymmetric fashion, in parts of the region where Iran has advantages and U.S. interests or forces are vulnerable. What would happen next is hard to predict and even harder to control.

Some take comfort in the fact that Trump's national-security team would push back against ill-advised military steps. So far, they have persuaded Trump to leave the nuclear deal in place and removed three of the most vocal Iran hawks from the National Security Council. But the Secretary of Defense, James Mattis, who was recently described as having a "33-year grudge against Iran"; H. R. McMaster, the national-security adviser; and John Kelly, the new chief of staff, each commanded troops in Iraq when Iran was supplying its proxy militias with roadside bombs that killed hundreds of Americans. Whatever they may have done on other issues to curb Trump's worst impulses, on Iran, they may not be voices for restraint.

In short, deliberately undermining the nuclear deal risks sparking a confrontation. And for what? The most compelling rationale for conflict with Iran—its potential ability to obtain a nuclear weapon—was removed by the agreement. A hundred and fifty international monitors are carrying out inspections that will allow the world to know if Iran tries to cheat.

Clearly, the Iranian regime remains a source of instability in the Middle East and has brutalized its own people. Sanctions and assistance to Iran's rivals should continue to be used to restrain Tehran, but there is every reason to believe that torpedoing the nuclear deal or prompting military escalation would only make things worse. Having worked on these issues under President Obama, who championed the nuclear deal, and whose rise was fuelled by his opposition to the war in Iraq, our position is no surprise. The more interesting question now is what those Trump critics who

supported the Iraq War will do. Most have been conspicuously quiet on this topic, despite their opposition to the nuclear deal and past support for muscular action.

Given all they have written about the new Administration's incompetence and duplicity, will they jump on the bandwagon of another unnecessary conflict, this time under the authority of a President whom they have deemed unfit to serve as Commander-in-Chief? We sought their current views. Most were still thinking through their approach, or else were unwilling to tip their hand.

Before the deal, Boot had called a "bombing campaign" the "only credible option" for dealing with Iran, and he later laid out his opposition to the J.C.P.O.A. in an article titled "Why is the Iran deal bad? Think North Korea." He told us by e-mail that Trump should be "doing more to contain the growth of Iranian power in the Middle East" but acknowledged that such confrontations are a "tricky business that requires a highly competent Commander-in-Chief who will not run reckless risks. That is not a description that applies to Trump." He also said that the President "will be making a mistake if he pulls out of the J.C.P.O.A. absent proof of Iranian cheating, which, as far as I know, does not currently exist."

Frum said that he preferred to convey his views on Trump unravelling the deal in *The Atlantic*, but rejected a comparison to 2002, arguing it would be hard to imagine "Trump striking out in October, 2017—with no preliminary work to build support, zero Democratic buy-in, unsure even of his own party." William Kristol, who once wrote that it was "long since time for the United States to speak to [the Iranian] regime in the language it understands—force," and titled an article about the J.C.P.O.A. "A Very Good Deal—for Iran," declined to comment. Bret Stephens, who wrote, on the deal's first anniversary, that "what diplomats call" the J.C.P.O.A. is "known to the rest of us as the Disastrous Iran Deal," said that he "wrestles with the dilemma" of a policy he may support but a President he's not sure he trusts to implement it.

"Even the best advice, if put through a flawed vessel, is going to come out wrong on the other side," he said. "And to me, the lesson of Iraq is that implementation is nine-tenths of policy. In theory, I might argue we should get out, negotiate a better deal, use a combination of sanctions and pressure to reweight our lever, but Iraq tells you that you have to be extremely careful about thinking through consequences ahead of time. . . . Among the many reasons the Trump Presidency depresses me is that I can't

trust him to carry out those few points of his agenda on which I actually happen to agree.”

The stakes are high—as reckless and unsettling as Trump’s Presidency has been thus far, he has yet to make a mistake anywhere near as costly as the Iraq War. If the proponents of that war support Trump’s apparent willingness to either risk or seek war, they would be giving the Administration’s dangerous approach credibility and Congress a rationale to go along. A more consistent response, given their criticism of Trump, would be to publicly acknowledge that an attempt by this Administration to confront Iran could have dangerous consequences, or that the President can’t be trusted to manage it effectively.

For commentators still considering their position—and members of Congress who may soon be compelled to voice their own—the months leading up to the Iraq War offer a cautionary tale. In October, 2002, about a month after Pollack’s book was published, Congress passed the Authorization for the Use of Military Force Against Iraq with nearly seventy per cent of members voting in favor. Many later suffered electoral consequences, disavowed their vote, or have struggled to justify it ever since.

Only a year after the invasion of Iraq, Pollack published a book on Iran. This time, he advocated diplomacy to address its nuclear program. In a follow-up, published in 2013, just weeks before a major breakthrough in the Obama Administration’s nuclear negotiations, he argued that deterring a nuclear Iran was preferable to war. He also claimed that his earlier book on Iraq had been misinterpreted by those who “read nothing but the subtitle or cherry-picked lines from it.”

In recent weeks, Pollack told us that while he favors a more assertive approach to counter Iran’s regional meddling, he believes it would be a mistake to jeopardize the nuclear deal or risk a major conflict. In describing his intellectual journey, Pollack is the first to acknowledge the burden he carries from the Iraq precedent. No one should blame, or credit, those without an official position or authority for any major policy decision. That responsibility ultimately rests with the President we elect. Nor should anyone assume that advice can be given, or heeded, without consequence, particularly if it would once again urge the country down a path to war.

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## From SEALs to All-Out War: Why Rushing Into Yemen Is a Dangerous Idea

The first foreign-policy crisis of the Trump administration may be in a country most Americans could not find on a map.

BY JON FINER | *Foreign Policy* FEBRUARY 9, 2017

Pro-government forces walk in the port of the western Yemeni coastal town of Mokha as they advance in a bid to try to drive the Shiite Huthi rebels away from the Red Sea coast on February 9, 2017.

Forces supporting President Abedrabbo Masnour Hadi, backed by the coalition, began a major offensive on January 7 to recapture the coastline overlooking the strategic Bab al-Mandab Strait.

The first foreign-policy crisis of the Trump administration may well involve a country most Americans could not find on a map. Already, the new president has signaled his intention to increase military involvement in Yemen, putting Iran “on notice” and warning that it was “playing with fire,” following a Iranian ballistic-missile launch and an attack on a Saudi vessel just off the Yemeni coast by Shiite Houthi rebels. Days earlier, President Donald Trump green-lighted a risky special operations raid against al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) that led to the death of a U.S. Navy SEAL and numerous Yemeni civilians.

When Sen. John McCain questioned the portrayal of that raid as a “success,” Trump and Press Secretary Sean Spicer earned further criticism for lashing out that such comments dishonor American dead and aid the enemy. As is often the case with Trump’s comments on policy, they quickly become the focus of media attention, rather than what the administration is actually doing — or what the facts are on the ground.

The impoverished Gulf nation is actually marred by two separate but overlapping conflicts.

The first, which predates the Arab Spring uprising that swept longtime dictator Ali Abdullah Saleh from power in 2012, is a counterterrorism fight waged by Yemeni government, with U.S. support, against AQAP, al Qaeda’s most virulent franchise.

The second, and more damaging conflict, is a civil war between the government of Yemen and the Houthi minority, which was expected to last a matter of weeks, and maybe months, but is now well into its third year. It began when Houthi militia fighters descended on the capital Sanaa in late 2014 and soon evicted the government of President Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi, a close partner of the United States.

Getting more deeply embroiled in Yemen's first war without a strategy for resolving the second would be a mistake. Getting more deeply embroiled in Yemen's first war without a strategy for resolving the second would be a mistake. Instead, if new Secretary of State Rex Tillerson wants to make an early diplomatic contribution, then there is a confounding but vital mission with his name on it: de-escalating a Yemen civil war that is damaging U.S. interests and should have stopped a long time ago. The civil war escalated dramatically in March 2015, with the intervention of a coalition led by Saudi Arabia, which understandably felt threatened by the turmoil on its border and by ties between the Houthis and Riyadh's arch-rival Iran. The United States, which had long been urging Saudi Arabia to take greater responsibility for security challenges in its region, offered a range of support, including with intelligence, weapons sales, aerial refueling for Saudi planes, and various measures to help secure the Saudi border.

Saudi Arabia's intervention succeeded in shoring up much of southern Yemen, where the Hadi government is seeking to reconstitute, after decamping to Saudi Arabia.

It has also come at great cost. According to the United Nations, 16,200 people have been killed in Yemen since the intervention, including 10,000 civilians. The humanitarian situation in what was already one of the world's poorest countries, is now, after Syria, the most dire on the planet, with one in five Yemenis severely food insecure.

Meanwhile, for well over a year now, the military campaign has failed to make measurable progress, demonstrating what U.S. officials have been telling their Saudi counterparts all along — that any resolution will come through negotiation, not military victory, and that the longer the conflict drags on, the greater the cost to the Yemeni people, as well as to Saudi Arabia's resources and reputation.

For the United States, the cost has also been significant.

The war has preoccupied key partners with an enemy that does not directly threaten the United States. Indiscriminate air strikes, conducted with American weapons and in the context of American assistance, have killed scores of non-combatants (such incidents eventually compelled the Obama administration to review and adjust our assistance to the coalition). And while Iran and the Houthis have historically maintained an arms-length relationship, the long conflict has brought them closer and led to the introduction of more advanced weapons, such as missiles capable of striking deep into Saudi territory or of threatening the Bab al-Mandeb Strait, a critical channel for maritime traffic.

U.S. interests took a further hit earlier this week when the Yemeni government in-exile, frustrated by the bloody U.S. special forces raid near Aden, said it was revoking permission for U.S. operations against AQAP, which poses a genuine threat to the homeland (the Yemeni government later said the operations could continue though asked for greater coordination).

Should he choose to accept this mission, Secretary Tillerson may be well-placed to succeed.

He knows the complex politics and terrain, having served in Yemen early in his career at ExxonMobil. His close relations in the Gulf — and our Gulf partners' purported confidence in him — could help them make the difficult decisions peace will require. He will not face the overhang of (unfounded, but also undeniable) suspicion in the wake of the Iran nuclear deal that the Obama administration tolerated Iranian meddling on Saudi Arabia's border.

The timing may also be ripe. Saudi officials and their Emirati coalition partners have been signaling for months that they are eager to end the conflict, which they did not expect to last nearly this long. The Obama administration was making painstaking but genuine progress toward an accord until the election, after which it partners seemed more inclined to wait for the new team to arrive.

And after years of U.N.-led negotiations that sought to sell a relatively one-sided peace to the Houthis (despite what was, at best, a stalemate on the ground), the Obama administration developed and bequeathed to its successors a more balanced roadmap to which all key parties (the Saudis, the Houthis, and the Yemeni government — as well as the United States, U.N., and U.K.) grudgingly agreed.

The new approach did not reflect a more neutral stance in the conflict — the Obama administration explicitly took one side. It reflected the reality, as we saw it, that the Houthis would be reluctant to concede in negotiations what could clearly not be achieved in combat.

The main innovation in the roadmap was that, rather than requiring the Houthis to make all of the concessions up front, which they would never have agreed to do, given their relative strength on the ground, it carefully sequences the various steps that constitute each side's key demands.

For the coalition, that means the Houthis first withdraw from the Saudi border and key cities, such as Sanaa. For the Houthis, it means the subsequent replacement of the Hadi government with one that includes more of their officials in senior positions.

All of that said, making peace between these adversaries will be extremely difficult. For one thing, the Houthis are infamously difficult to work with. When Secretary of State John Kerry met for several hours with their representatives in Oman last November, he was forced to endure a lengthy airing of historical grievances before embarking on the topic at hand. They also have a long history of violating dozens of agreements, which every Saudi diplomat can recount, chapter and verse.

Negotiating peace will also inevitably involve straining relationships with our key partners, who will need to be pushed in the right direction.

Hadi, who all relevant players acknowledge cannot govern a reconciled Yemeni state, has consistently scuttled deals that would require him leave office. His Saudi patrons have proven either unwilling, or unable, to compel better behavior and are themselves too are quick to revert to unreasonable demands — a tendency that would be reinforced if the Trump administration signals it unconditionally has Riyadh's back.

Meanwhile, the Emiratis, who maintain a heavy troop presence in southern Yemen but have, wisely, been more focused on AQAP (the first war) than the Houthis (second), have for many months been threatening to attack the Houthi-held port of Hudeidah, a provocative step that would almost certain set back any peacemaking efforts indefinitely.

In other words, getting this done will require the United States to play hardball with both sides, and deftly — the kind of tough, cajoling diplomacy that should be right up the alley of a former CEO, guided by an adept team of State Department Arabists.

Early signs, however, suggest the new administration may take a different tack, foregoing the more balanced approach necessary to end the Yemen civil war, while aligning the United States more fully with our Gulf partners.

According to news reports the administration may soon designate Yemen a formal battlefield for U.S. troops, which would give the Pentagon and commanders in the field greater latitude to make operational decisions with less political oversight.

This approach would be fraught with risks that must be managed.

First and foremost is that the civil war, and the humanitarian and strategic catastrophe it has spawned, will not end any time soon. First and foremost is that the civil war, and the humanitarian and strategic catastrophe it has spawned, will not end any time soon. The Houthis, according to one State Department official who dealt with them and refers to as “junk yard dogs,” are hardened fighters ready to dig in for the long haul. Second, depending on their location, mission, and rules of engagement, an expanded presence of U.S. forces — while Yemeni and Saudi governments are still at war with the Houthis — could bring U.S. troops into close quarters with Iran and its proxies, with all of the escalatory potential that entails. Resisting Iranian meddling in the region is a worthy goal that the Obama administration shared and acted upon. The question, though is whether deeper — and possibly even direct — U.S. intervention on this battlefield at this time makes sense. While the Houthis fired on a U.S. ship late last year, they have not repeated that mistake since the Obama administration retaliated by destroying radars located along the coast. If President Trump chooses to put U.S. forces into the middle of a civil war, it should explain a purpose and objective more concretely than simply “pushing back” on Iran. Moreover, it must do so with its eyes open to the risks those forces would be assuming and the reality that a limited special forces mission is unlikely to turn the tide on the ground.

Finally, the longer the conflict with the Houthis continues, the more AQAP will continue to benefit from our, and our partners’, divided focus, as it strengthens its hold on ungoverned territory. Increasing counterterrorism operations in the absence of a viable government partner could also backfire, since such missions tend to be less

effective at best, and at worst can increase the likelihood of mishaps like the January 29 raid.

Every new secretary of state has to prioritize. This means balancing between the issues you choose to tackle, and those that must be addressed. Yemen's civil war probably falls somewhere in between. Given the crush of higher-profile global challenges, Tillerson could easily give it a pass. But if he does, things could continue to escalate quickly, all of its damaging qualities will get worse, and a solution will be even further out of reach. Now may be the best chance he has to give it a shot.

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