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Defining Endless Wars

The First Step Towards Ending Them

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Introduction

Since the attacks on September 11, 2001, the United States has entered a period of counterterrorism warfare that seems endless. The United States has committed American troops and air power to the fight against al-Qaeda, ISIS, and other jihadist groups with little or no coherent explanation of when or, more importantly, how these wars could conclude.

Political rhetoric abounds regarding ending America's endless wars, yet much of it is little more than talk—proclaiming an end to endless war while continuing to wage them. This situation has led some to dismiss ending endless war as nothing more than a political talking point or a vague expression of a desire to bring more troops home rather than a commitment to actually ending the wars. However, the concept of endless war is not a meaningless talking point. It is a description of the character of today's counterterrorism wars in which the United States pursues objectives it is unable to achieve while its jihadist enemies prove incapable of ending the war by defeating the United States. Insofar as these two conditions appear unlikely to change, America's counterterrorism wars have become endless.

Even where the U.S. troop commitment is small, this endless character poses substantial risks. It fuels the militarization of American politics. At the same time, the state of war risks escalation. Even the small numbers of U.S. forces active in Syria and Iraq have clashed with forces tied to Iran, Russia, the Syrian regime, and Turkey—hardly a record that suggests escalation control. Evaluating the costs today makes a temporal error of analysis—calculating the costs of the war before they have ended under conditions where there is no clear plan to end them. While all wars bring risks, those risks are magnified when wars are pursued in strategically incoherent ways without achievable objectives.

The only way to truly end America's endless wars is to bring American objectives in line with achievable results. As long as politicians remain committed to defeating jihadist terrorist groups, America's counterterrorism wars will not end. This is because these groups are rooted in the Middle East's contentious politics and have decentralized to the point that they may not even hold a centralized governing body capable of being defeated in a traditional sense.

The rest of this report is divided into three sections. The first section presents a definition of endless war and responds to criticism that the phrase is a new and meaningless pejorative. The second section presents a framework for analyzing what gives rise to endlessness in America's counterterrorism wars. This framework both illustrates the meaningfulness of the definition and can be used to assess the root of endlessness in America's ongoing wars and the risk for potential future wars to become endless. The third section discusses the relevance of the definition for policy and responds to critics who affirm endless

war as an acceptable strategy. The paper also includes two appendices. The first appendix uses the framework presented here to discuss the lessons of the attack in Pensacola, Fla. for understanding the threat to the United States. The second appendix provides detail on the distinctions this report uses when assessing terrorist threats.

Key Findings

Endless war is a definable concept. Endlessness emerges when a belligerent adopts objectives it lacks the capability to achieve and at the same time is not at risk of being defeated.

- Because endlessness is rooted in objectives and their achievability, there is no linear relationship between troop numbers and endless war, and hence no linear relationship between withdrawals on their own and ending endless war.

- Accepting troop drawdowns without discussion of objectives is a trick that encourages advocates of restraint-oriented policy to trust politicians rather than build a full platform to end endless war.

Four factors play a key role in giving America's counterterrorism wars an endless character.

- First, the United States lacks a terrorist enemy capable of posing an existential threat.

- Second, the United States has tended to adopt unlimited objectives seeking to destroy not just specific terrorist organizations but the jihadist movement as a whole. Even America's limited objectives tend towards the unachievable.

- Third, the United States has set unclear or unstable objectives for its wars.

- And finally, the United States has done little in the way of planning and preparation for the termination of its current wars; it faces an enemy that is particularly difficult to negotiate terms to end wars with, and often lacks effective partners who might protect U.S. interests in the absence of direct U.S. involvement.

The United States is incapable of achieving the unlimited objective of defeating jihadist terrorism and is likely incapable of even destroying most major jihadist groups.

- Unlimited objectives may simply be incoherent when it comes to terrorist groups because they lack governments in a traditional sense.

- Jihadist terrorist groups, including al-Qaeda and ISIS, have survived decades of American counterterrorism warfare and resurged after having been declared defeated or near defeat.

- Jihadist terrorism arises out of real grievances and socioeconomic conditions in the region that make it difficult to defeat groups formed in response to these conditions.

- The jihadist movement and particular groups have decentralized. Killing leaders or even destroying particular organizations—itself a tall order—is unlikely to provide a lasting defeat.

The adoption of unlimited objectives—such as destroying or defeating a terrorist group or movement—makes it difficult to end wars even when the true aim is more limited than the total destruction of a movement.

- Unlimited objectives stigmatize negotiations that are essential to ending wars and even consolidating victory when a group is defeated.

- Unlimited objectives also blur the line between individual participation in a movement and the existence of organizational structures, making it difficult to claim victory when a group lacks the control to enforce surrender upon its members.

- Calls for the defeat or destruction of terrorist groups leave administrations that seek to withdraw from or end a war open to public criticism that they have not truly defeated the enemy and to internal bureaucratic efforts to continue the war no matter how decimated the enemy is.

The United States decides whether to wage counterterrorism warfare in a strategic context where the available choices are far from stark. The United States has a wide spectrum of available responses to terrorism, including choosing not to view it as an issue requiring war. Jihadists lack the capability to impose major costs on the U.S. homeland, allowing the United States to decide the character of the wars it chooses to wage.

- Jihadist terrorist groups lack the power projection capability to pose an existential threat to the United States or seize American territory. Nor can they deny the United States access to the battlefield.

- Jihadist groups have not demonstrated a capability to direct and carry out sustained campaigns of deadly terrorism inside the United States.

- If terrorist violence proves to be an existential threat, the mechanism by which it becomes existential will be societal overreaction to terrorist violence.

Endless war poses significant costs and risks even when an administration is able to keep the number of troops involved and the resultant casualties low.

- Assessments that the cost of U.S. counterterrorism wars are low make a temporal error of analysis, assessing costs before the wars are over. The endless character of America's wars means that the United States is vulnerable to greater costs if and when systemic conditions change.

- Even small troop deployments pose escalation risks, as exchanges of fire between U.S. forces and Iranian, Russian, Syrian regime, and Turkish-aligned forces in Syria and Iraq prove.

- Endless war harms American democracy by militarizing American politics, even if the wars themselves do not escalate and impose direct costs.

Endless War: A Term with a History and a Definition

Endless war. It's a term that, along with that of similar phrases like "permanent war" and "forever war," has grown in usage in the post-9/11 era.[1] In recent years, both Democratic and Republican politicians have promised to bring an end to endless war.[2] Some analysts assert that calls to end endless war constitute a "vacuous" narrative used by politicians to avoid strategic thinking or are a mere political trope that avoids debate over strategy.[3] This is wrong. Endless war is not only definable, but proper strategic analysis of America's counterterrorism wars requires analysis of their endless character.[4]

Contrary to claims that endless war is a mere slogan with no content, recently adopted as a pejorative in disputes over today's wars, the term—or approximations of it—has long been used to describe wars that share a particular character of seeming permanence. This section presents a definition of endless war and responds to common criticisms of the concept.

Defining Endless War: More Than a Political Talking Point

What is an endless war and how has the United States gotten into so many of them? The first step to understanding how the United States has found itself mired in endless war, and thus how it might escape them, is to define what endless war is.

Wars take on an endless character when two conditions are met: First, when a belligerent adopts objectives while lacking the capability to achieve said objectives. Second, when, despite the inability to achieve its objectives, the belligerent is also not at risk of being defeated itself. Where these two conditions hold over a prolonged period of time with no clear possibility of change in sight, endless war emerges.

This definition is not pulled out of thin air. The conditions in which a war takes on an endless character can be usefully compared to the second stage of the Chinese-Japanese War as described by Mao Zedong in *On Protracted War* in which the Japanese advance stalled but the Chinese forces continued to prepare rather than advance against Japanese forces.[5] Mao foresaw a protracted period within that stage rather than a quick victory for either side. However, Mao tended to view the second stage as unstable, eventually resulting in a rebalancing of power in China's favor based on existing trends in material conditions rather than as a potentially stable condition absent an exogenous shock.[6] To the extent that such a rebalancing was not in the cards without an exogenous shock, the second stage would fit the definition of endlessness presented here.[7]

We can find a fictional representation of the concept of endless war as a stable condition in George Orwell's *1984*. Orwell imagines a scenario of permanent war that he describes as "continuous." Orwell wrote "in past ages, a war, almost by definition, was something that sooner or later came to an end, usually in unmistakable victory or defeat," but in Orwell's fictional endless war, the superstates "cannot conquer one another," leading him to draw a comparison to "the battles between certain ruminant animals whose horns are set at such an angle that they are incapable of hurting one another."[8] The purpose of pointing to *1984* is not to suggest that Orwell's larger theory of what a continuous or permanent war might mean for society is necessarily correct—though it certainly has uncomfortable resonances with parts of today's politics—but to reveal how concepts of what defines an endless war are not new.[9]

The concept of endless war is not merely a fictional device. Strategists and commentators have used the specific term "endless war" in discussions of the strategies and character of prior wars—most notably the Vietnam War.[10] In addition, there is a long tradition in American foreign policy circles of using terms that suggest similar concepts such as quagmire, again dating largely to the Vietnam War, and recent scholarly work in the field of civil war research by Jonah Schulhofer-Wohl, assistant professor of political science at Leiden University, has given the term definition that allows comparison across multiple cases of civil war.[11]

America's enemies in the war on terror appear to understand the concept and apply it in their strategic theories. Osama Bin Laden, for example, wrote in a letter to the United States: "You are wading into a war with no end in sight on the horizon," adding, "Continue the war if you will. ... The path to security is for you to lift your oppression from us."[12] Notably, Bin Laden's interpretation in this letter of his war with the United States as endless places the final decision as to whether the war will end in the hands of American decision makers while suggesting that al-Qaeda is not capable of forcing an end to the war except by coercing changes in American opinion.

In addition, the phrase "endless war" has been used to describe conflicts that do not involve the United States as a primary belligerent in the same way that the war on terror does. For example, Colombia's civil conflict has been described as an endless war.[13] The *New York Times* also used the phrase to describe the Israeli-Palestinian conflict prior to the 9/11 attacks.[14]

Some analysts may assert that the concept of endless war is a novel pejorative designed merely to win rhetorical points during political campaign season. However, to adopt such a view is to willfully ignore how the concept has long held meaning for those waging and writing about war and its effect on society.

The Challenges of Defining Endless War

Endlessness is not clear-cut. Efforts to define endless war face three main challenges. First, a declaration of a war's endless character projects an assessment of future events. Second, defining some wars as endless tends to suggest other wars have clear ends, a binary that does not necessarily hold true historically. Third, maintaining endless war as a meaningful concept requires efforts to resist attempts by politicians and others to broaden the term and turn it into a mere talking point to portray steps short of actually ending endless war as more meaningful than they are.

First, we cannot predict the future. A declaration of endlessness is a claim about future events that are inherently unpredictable. The Cold War seemed endless into the late 1980s—only to have it suddenly come to an end with the collapse of the Soviet Union.[15] However, just because a conflict might end due to unexpected shifts in systemic conditions does not erase the strategic incoherence of waging war without an achievable objective.

This distinction between endlessness as a permanent condition and endlessness as a characteristic of a war at a particular time can be clarified by examining Mao's concept of protracted war. Mao presents a specific, materially based theory about how the Chinese-Japanese war would end. He thus advances a claim that the war was protracted but not necessarily endless.[16] However, this material statement provides the basis for critiques of Mao's interpretation of the Chinese-Japanese war and his strategic advice.[17] If one judges that Mao was wrong about the processes that led to the end of the war, and that the war ended because of an exogenous shock—for example the United States entering the war against Japan —then the war would have held an endless character prior to the shift in systemic conditions.[18]

It is thus helpful to understand a claim of endless war as granting a dual meaning to the term "end." It is not simply a claim about a war's duration—though that is often part of it—but a claim about the lack of ends in the sense of aims on the part of the belligerents (whether the achievement of victory or an acceptance of new ends short of it) that could bring the temporal end into being.[19] While a feeling of temporal permanence is an aspect of what defines endless war, it is not a meaningful challenge to the concept to assert all wars eventually end or to point to the end of a war that has been termed endless. Short wars can take on a feeling of endlessness that is quickly interrupted by unexpected changes in systemic conditions. Indeed, one of the purposes of calling a war endless is to open the space for discussion of how the war might be brought to an end and to identify the strategic failures that lead to a continuing lack of decision.[20]

Similarly, a long protracted war where material trends within the conflict end up culminating in an end to the war can still take on an endless character for periods of the war. This can occur if the conflict settles into a stalemate, where the

strategy of the power waging protracted war lacks a vision of a specific route to victory but instead relies upon the development of resilience until unspecified (or inaccurately specified) systemic conditions change.[21] Such a strategy may prove successful but in the absence of a theory of how the war will move from the second to the third stage, it is an embrace of endlessness. That embrace brings with it the societal challenges of waging war without an end in sight. Critically, given the contingency of historical events, it is problematic to read history backwards in such a case by viewing victory as inevitable.

Second, calling some wars endless suggests that other wars have clear starting and ending points. But that is not necessarily true. The Prussian military theorist Carl Von Clausewitz describes wars as the "continuation of politics by other means," which raises questions about whether we can separate war from other activities, for example policing, sanctions, or preparatory activities that may convey military benefit in the event of war.[22] Wars may not be bound in time, according to the legal theorist and historian Mary Dudziak, but an "enduring condition" throughout American history: "when we look at the full time line of American military conflicts, however, including the 'small wars' and the so-called forgotten wars, there are not many years of peacetime."[23] Dudziak warns of how declarations of ends to specific wars can occur without ending broader social patterns of war making turns such declarations into little more than illusions.[24] Rosa Brooks, a fellow with New America and former counselor to Under Secretary of Defense for Policy Michele Flournoy, has similarly argued that a core factor in the growing sense of endlessness of today's wars is an increased blurring between war and other activities.[25]

A particularly thorny aspect of this problem is the question of whether a country remains at war if it seeks to influence a conflict without directly intervening with its armed forces—in other words, by proxy.[26] This report takes as its focus the direct involvement of Americans in carrying out or directing the use of force. This means that merely training another country's security forces does not mean the United States is waging a counterterrorism war in a country.

On the other hand, conducting special forces raids, accompanying a partner's forces into battle, or giving orders to a partner's forces to engage in military action does constitute war. Thus, when Trump considered outsourcing the war in Afghanistan to private military contractors as a way to fulfill his promise to end endless war, or when during the campaign then-candidate, now President Joe Biden promised to "end the forever wars in Afghanistan and the Middle East" but in the next sentence said "we should bring the vast majority of our troops home from the wars in Afghanistan and the Middle East and narrowly define our mission as defeating al-Qaeda and the Islamic State (or ISIS)," that is not ending war.[27] Similarly, if U.S. forces tasked with training are being put on the frontline, leading to casualties and the use of American force supposedly in self-defense but actually as part of pursuing American objectives, as has been the case, for

example, in Somalia, the simple fact that those efforts are being called training does not mean war has ended.[28]

Third, efforts to define a concept of endless war have to continually contend with attempts by politicians and commentators to use the term to describe steps short of actually ending war. Much of the pushback to the concept of endless war as meaningful has derived from such improper uses of the phrase. One example of this dynamic is when major political figures portray strategies that continue to use military force in the form of special operations raids as an end to endless war. [29]

Another example is the tendency to describe troop drawdowns as a step towards ending endless war. For example, the Heritage Foundation's James Jay Carafano asserts that "President Trump has promised to end America's 'endless wars,'" and contends that Trump "is fulfilling that promise by withdrawing troops from Iraq and Afghanistan responsibly."[30] The number of troops to be withdrawn per the announcement Carafano was discussing is about 2,200 in Iraq and 4,100 in Afghanistan. Such troop declines can hardly be seen as fulfilling the promise to end the war in the absence of actual change in U.S. objectives. Indeed, Carafano gives the game away when he notes: "Sometimes the smart answer is more troops, not less. In the end, the right number is the right number."[31] Carafano is not incorrect to disconnect troop numbers from the effort to end endless wars—at least in general terms—but such a point pushes against the view that troop reductions can be read as progress towards fulfilling a promise to end endless war in the absence of a revision of objectives. Tellingly, in other writing, Carafano has denied that the term "endless war" has meaning, calling it a "bumper-stick excuse for a serious foreign policy."[32] Yet he is willing to use the term when politically helpful. Such views have a broader danger than efforts to justify Trump's policies. In an article denying that endless war is a meaningful concept, for example, Carafano asserts, "President Barack Obama's withdrawal of U.S. forces from Iraq marked the end of that war."[33]

In another example, then-Secretary of State Mike Pompeo appears to have attempted to follow a similar line, trying to square the assassination of Qasem Soleimani with an effort to end endless war by asserting: "Endless wars are the direct result of weakness."[34] Pompeo's method for squaring the circle is to equate ending endless war with reducing troop numbers and then claim that even small reductions constitute linear progress towards the goal: "We're going to get the force posture right. We're going to get our facilities as hardened as we can possibly get them, to defend against what Iran may potentially do. But make no mistake: America's mission is to have our footprint in the Middle East reduced while still keeping America safe from rogue regimes like the Islamic Republic of Iran, and from terrorist activity, broadly, throughout the region."[35] What is missing in this statement is any change to the objectives of America's counterterrorism wars—objectives that Pompeo read broadly enough to allow for

direct action against an Iranian general. On the other hand, what is present is an admission of a willingness to stop short of zero troops or even increase troop numbers in response to crises.

It is essential to reject efforts to equate variations and reductions in troop numbers with ending endless war. Once the United States uses direct force, any reduction or end to the use of such force only constitutes an end to war when it is combined with a statement that U.S. objectives have been achieved or a statement that *changes* U.S. objectives so they have been achieved. A war does not end merely because troops are removed from a particular geographic area or because air strikes halt. An understanding of war defined solely by the presence of troops would struggle to differentiate tactical withdrawals from war termination. As one Department of Defense manual of the law of war notes, "As a legal concept, war has usually been described as a condition or state that applies more broadly than only the mere employment of force or the mere commission of acts of violence."[36]

The United States halted air strikes only to restart them in Yemen and Pakistan and removed troops from Iraq in 2011 only to return them to fight there again in 2014. Such withdrawals are merely tactical decisions about the level and timing of force that is necessary unless the return of force requires and is recognized as a decision to wage a new war. One of the roots of endlessness in American counterterrorism is that the 2001 Authorization for the Use of Military Force remains on the books, and administrations continue to cite it as authorizing war —often in wars that they claim to have withdrawn from—without public and congressional debate over the reintroduction of military force.[37]

While it is critical to note the effort to turn endless war into a meaningless slogan or simply equate it with troop drawdowns, this effort cannot be understood to fully define the use of the term. A wide range of commentators from across the political spectrum have criticized Trump's efforts to portray limited drawdowns as a meaningful form of ending endless war without concluding the term has no meaning.[38] The analysis of those who look at the sloganeering and conclude endless war has no meaning does the work of the sloganeers for them by obscuring their critics and presenting the debate as between those who see no issue with the wars' endlessness and the sloganeers.

For all the definitional challenges, there appears to be a shift in the extent to which specific American wars are understood by Americans to be endless, beginning with the Cold War and continuing in the War on Terror that is worthy of note.[39] One sign of this is that during the 2020 presidential campaign, both major party candidates used the language of ending endless war or ending the forever wars as did multiple candidates during the Democratic primary. Meanwhile, James Jeffrey, the former special representative for Syria Engagement and special envoy to the Global Coalition to Defeat Islamic State under Trump, calls the outcome achieved in Syria under the Trump

administration a "stalemate," proceeding to make an affirmative case for achieving a stalemate as desirable policy, saying, "Stalemate and blocking advances and containing is not a bad thing," adding, "I think the stalemate we've put together is a step forward and I would advocate it."[40]

Another sign of a growing sense of endlessness can be found in the long duration of today's wars and the expression of weariness regarding them. The *Wall Street Journal*, for example notes, that the war in Afghanistan has been waged for "longer than World War I, World War II and the Korean War combined."[41] Not only do the specific wars today seem to last longer (if they do end) and have more of an endless character than wars of the past, but in the post-Cold War era, the United States has carried out more military interventions, suggesting a greater endlessness even in the sense of endlessness as represented by the waging of repeated raids.[42]

Given the growing public concern over endless war and its seeming rootedness in actual changes in the character of wars, it is important to find a usable definition that can ground analyses of how the United States might prevent the wars it wages from taking on an endless character. In the absence of such a definition, analysts, policymakers, and the public are likely to continue to speak past each other on the issue, creating room for those who condone today's endless wars to deny that they exist, thus furthering the strategic incoherence of existing American policy.

A Framework for Analyzing the Roots of Endless War

This report identifies four factors that lie behind the mismatch between objectives and capabilities responsible for America's endless counterterrorism warfare: (1) a lack of an existential terrorist threat; (2) the adoption of unlimited and transformative objectives that are difficult or impossible to achieve; (3) a failure to clearly define objectives in measurable terms; and (4) a failure to sufficiently plan for the termination of war. This section describes the theoretical basis for viewing these factors as the root of endlessness in America's counterterrorism wars and provides a framework for assessing the existence of these factors that can be applied to current or potential future wars.

Lack of an Existential Terrorist Threat

The first factor is the inability of America's terrorist rivals to pose an existential threat to the United States.[43] The United States has not faced a major threat to its territorial integrity since World War II—even from other states, let alone non-state actors.[44] Were groups like al-Qaeda and the Islamic State capable of defeating the United States rather than simply achieving limited objectives, the war might end with an American defeat. However, it is difficult to imagine a scenario in which jihadist terrorists militarily triumph over the United States or European countries. Indeed, defeating the United States outside of the Greater Middle East may not even be an objective for many jihadist groups.[45]

If jihadist terrorists do begin to pose an existential threat, it will most likely be because the United States and its Western allies overreacted to attacks and become too willing to sacrifice their values. Some analysts and commentators view existential social disintegration or the loss of core values as a danger, particularly in Europe.[46] Yet even in Europe, where jihadists have demonstrated a far greater capability to mount sustained campaigns of terror, they have largely failed to generate such a crisis.[47] Moreover, this fear raises questions of whether military responses and the rhetoric of existential threat are helpful or merely the vectors by which such social disintegration could occur.

Beyond Existential Threat: Evaluating the Starkness of the Strategic Context

In the absence of a total American defeat as a likely possibility, the focus must turn to the question of American objectives. The strategic theorist Lawrence Freedman has correctly criticized the concept of a "war of choice" for lacking meaning, as in the end, all wars involve a choice to fight.[48] While there may be no true wars of necessity, that does not mean that "the strategic context" within which the choices are made is constant.[49] Freedman writes, "decisions facing

previous generations were much starker than those facing our own, for the conflicts that mattered were between great powers. Now the choices are far more complicated, if perhaps less fateful, in a world of terrorists, failing states and delinquent regimes."[50]

The strategic context of America's counterterrorism wars is one where the United States faces a wealth of possible choices, and jihadists have far fewer. Jihadists' inability to carry out a sustained campaign of major attacks inside United States while the United States easily projects military power globally means the United States' choice of objectives plays the primary role in defining the war's character. Unlike members of al-Qaeda, who found themselves targeted by missiles, hunted across the globe, and imprisoned and tortured in black sites, for the vast majority of Americans, jihadist terrorism had very little personal impact on their daily lives. Even in 2001, the risk of dying in a terrorist attack was less than such accepted risks as death in industrial accidents, and between 1970 and 2016, the annual risk of an American dying in a terrorist attack was less than the risk of drowning in a bathtub.[51]

Even the spike of fear surrounding ISIS's surge to prominence in the Middle East did not translate into the presence of a clear and direct terrorist threat to the United States. As the United States initiated its counter-ISIS war, it reiterated that it had no evidence of specific, credible plots by ISIS to strike the U.S. homeland.[52] Two independent reviews of U.S. terrorism cases found no examples of returnees from the Syrian conflict committing violence in the United States, and only one publicly known plot to do so by a returnee from Syria.[53] With the possible exception of the attack in Pensacola, Fla., no foreign terrorist organization has directed and carried out a deadly attack inside the United States in the post-9/11 era.[54] The attack in Pensacola on December 6, 2019 that killed three American sailors was at least enabled by AQAP, but it is not clear to what extent AQAP provided material assistance to the plot beyond effectively branding it by communicating with the attacker prior to the attack and providing evidence of the communication. Nor is it clear whether military action can prevent such attacks over the long term. For further discussion of the Pensacola attack, see Appendix One.

It is certainly true that terrorist groups have managed to inspire and, in a select few cases, advise attacks inside the United States via online communication. ISIS took this approach to an unprecedented level.[55] However, it is not clear that these so-called enabled plots are deadlier or more likely to succeed than attacks that are merely inspired by foreign terrorist groups.[56] For more discussion of this report's differentiation between inspired, enabled, and directed plots, see Appendix Two. Even if one includes all attacks motivated by jihadism interpreted broadly regardless of the existence of actual organizational direction since 9/11, the death toll is similar to the death toll from far-right wing terrorist attacks, a problem the United States does not see as requiring war.[57]

Given this strategic context, American objectives and decisions deserve greater focus than other factors in analyzing what gives rise to these wars and their endless character.[58] Terrorist violence in the United States post-9/11 is more similar to other crimes, for example mass shootings, than a direct military threat that presents a stark context in which to make choices about waging war.

The less-than-stark context of America's decisions regarding its counterterrorism wars reflects the protection provided by the United States' distance from the conflict zones and the separation provided by oceans. As Julian Corbett noted in 1911, much strategic theory assumes a context of continental war distinct from that facing maritime powers like the United States.[59] Corbett's discussion of a continental vs. maritime context illuminates a problem with claims that focusing on U.S. decision-making constitutes a form of "strategic narcissism." [60] Such claims presume the adoption of objectives requiring continental warfare. The decision to adopt such objectives is a choice, and obscuring that choice—as a turn away from U.S. decision-making processes does—constitutes its own form of strategic narcissism because it assumes that one context for war is universal.[61]

The variety of choices available to the United States with regard to its response to terrorism also differentiates the endless wars the United States engages in from other cases that also might be considered endless. For example, in its confrontation with ISIS, the Iraqi government did not benefit from a strategic context in which it could view itself as being the primary determiner of the war's character. ISIS demonstrated its ability to define the character of the war by seizing Iraq's second largest city of Mosul and engaging in occasional further advances even after the U.S. intervened with airpower to support the Iraqi government.[62] In Afghanistan, where United Nations data on civilian casualties attributed almost half of all civilian casualties in 2019 to the Taliban and another 12 percent to ISIS, it likewise would be narcissistic to contend the Afghan government plays an inordinately primary role in defining the character of the war.[63]

Unlike the United States, the Iraqi and Afghan governments could not just decide to retreat across the ocean back to their homeland and expect the threat to be manageable and minimal.[64] These examples, however, only serve to show the immense importance of the original choice to intervene in continental wars and thereby surrender the benefits that geopolitics have endowed the United States with in terms of strategic distance.

Unlimited and Transformative American Objectives

America's expansive objectives, which tend towards the unachievable, have contributed to the endlessness of America's counterterrorism wars. In the wake of the 9/11 attacks, President George W. Bush defined America's objective in the war on terrorism in remarkably broad terms, stating, "Our war on terror begins

with al-Qaeda, but it does not end there. It will not end until every terrorist group of global reach has been found, stopped and defeated."[65] Since then, policymakers across the political spectrum have repeatedly presented the objective of America's counterterrorism wars in more circumspect terms while still maintaining defeat as an objective, for example, seeking the defeat of al-Qaeda, ISIS, or other terrorist groups.[66] However, the United States has never fully abandoned the broad aim that Bush presented in the days following 9/11 as illustrated by Trump's presentation during the 2020 campaign of his agenda were he to win, which included the statement that he would "Wipe Out Global Terrorists Who Threaten to Harm Americans," a line that evokes the breadth of Bush's early comments despite Trump's stated commitment to ending endless war.[67]

In order to evaluate the role of American objectives in generating endless war, it is useful to divide objectives by their type. This report defines three types of objectives: Unlimited, Limited (Transformative), and Limited (Disruptive). While objective type alone does not determine the difficulty of achieving a chosen objective, when it comes to counterterrorism warfare they are related as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Objective Definitions and Relationship to Difficulty of Achieving Objectives

Objective Type	Definition	Example	Difficulty of Achieving Objective
Unlimited	Objectives that seek "to overthrow the enemy government" or destroy or defeat an enemy in its entirety.	"Lasting Defeat," "Defeat" without a qualifier phrase like "territorial," "Destroy."	Very Difficult. Arguably impossible given that terrorist organizations tend to be decentralized and lack governments as commonly understood.
Limited (Transformative)	Objectives that accept some persistent presence of the terrorist organization but seek to shift the conditions of governance in a specific area or permanently eliminate a particular capability rooted in social and political conditions.	Eliminating or reducing a group's capability to direct attacks on the U.S. homeland, denying a group a particular patch of territory. Terms like "degrade" and "territorially defeat" tend to suggest a limited but transformative objective.	Difficult.
Limited (Disruptive)	Objectives that seek the interruption or elimination of a specific threat or capability but do not envision changing the conditions of governance in an area while accepting some persistent presence of the terrorist organization.	Stopping or interrupting a plot. Preventing a terrorist army from advancing. Terms like "disrupt" tend to designate a limited and disruptive objective. However, to be truly disruptive, stated objectives must refer to a specific defined threat constituted by individuals or a structure that can be killed or destroyed and not a broader social or political condition that gives rise to the threat.	Varies but often achievable in the short-term. However, disruptive objectives are often accompanied by unstated transformative goals that are more difficult to achieve.

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War objectives are either unlimited or limited. As Donald Stoker, professor of strategy and policy at the Naval Postgraduate School in Monterey, Calif., argues, the determination of whether a war is limited or unlimited is fundamentally a question of the limited or unlimited character of its objectives. For Stoker, channeling Julian Corbett, unlimited objectives are those that seek "to overthrow the enemy government" and anything that seeks "something less" constitutes a limited objective.[68]

Stoker warns that definitions of limited war not based in this distinction blur means and ends in a way that deprives the term of analytical usefulness.[69] Indeed, many of the United States' post-9/11 wars waged for unlimited objectives have been shaped by limitations on means and a light footprint model that backfired.[70] One prominent example is the American decision to adopt an unlimited objective of regime change in Libya along with transformative objectives regarding what would replace the Ghaddafi regime while refusing to commit significant troops, attention, or resources, helping fuel an internationalized civil war.[71]

In the context of America's counterterrorism wars, Bush's promise that the war "will not end until every terrorist group of global reach has been found, stopped and defeated," Obama's statements that "we've sent a message from the Afghan border to the Arabian Peninsula to all parts of the globe: We will not relent, we will not waver, and we will defeat you" regarding al-Qaeda and regarding ISIS, that "our objective is clear: We will degrade, and ultimately destroy, ISIL through a comprehensive and sustained counterterrorism strategy" all constitute unlimited objectives.[72] Trump's statement that "terrorists who oppress and murder innocent people should never sleep soundly, knowing that we will completely destroy them. These savage monsters will not escape their fate, and they will not escape the final judgment of God" puts forward an unlimited objective as did his administration's more staid comment that "it is the policy of the United States that ISIS be defeated."[73] Joe Biden's statement that we should "narrowly define our mission as defeating al-Qaeda and the Islamic State (or ISIS)" is also an unlimited objective even though he says the U.S. will pursue the aim narrowly.[74]

Limited objectives can be further divided into two types. Some objectives are limited but *transformative* in that they seek a broader change in social and political conditions via the use of military force.[75] Unlike an unlimited objective, a transformative but limited objective would seek such transformation only in a particular area or with regard to a specific capability without defeating the enemy as a whole. Transformative objectives tend to be expressed with terms like "degrade." Terms like "destroy" and "defeat" can also express transformative objectives when qualified by a particular object short of the enemy as a whole, as in "territorial defeat." When CENTCOM releases a press release describing counterterrorism strikes in Yemen while saying the strikes were meant "to degrade these groups' ability to hold territory and coordinate external attacks," those are limited but transformative objectives.[76] The named aim does not mention the defeat of AQAP, but it does seek to reshape the conditions in Yemen to prevent AQAP from holding territory or organizing plots without mentioning a specific plot in need of disruption.

Transformative objectives can be contrasted with *disruptive* objectives that seek to merely interrupt or eliminate a rival's capability to achieve a particular

objective or outcome without reshaping the political and social conditions of an area.[77] Limited and disruptive objectives are defined in terms of particular threats, for example an aim of rescuing particular hostages, killing the individuals plotting a particular attack or set of attacks on the United States, or halting a terrorist army from advancing.[78] For example, the United States' effort to track down and kill Anwar al-Awlaki constituted a disruptive objective. While the U.S. also pursued more transformative and even unlimited objectives in its counterterrorism war in Yemen, the killing of Awlaki was not viewed as a means of re-writing Yemeni governance. Instead it was justified mainly as a means of removing a figure thought to be particularly dangerous due to his role in specific plots that the U.S. believed would at least be interrupted or made less effective upon his death.[79] Similarly, the attempted raid to rescue Americans held hostage by ISIS in Raqqa on July 3, 2014 was not viewed within the U.S. government as part of a campaign to defeat or degrade ISIS but as a specific effort to rescue Americans held hostage, a limited and disruptive objective.[80]

Assessing the Difficulty of Achieving Unlimited Objectives

An objective's type does not inherently define the difficulty of achieving it. Some unlimited objectives may be easy to achieve. One examination of multiple databases of terrorist groups suggests that an average of 50 percent of terrorist groups across the databases do not survive past their first year.[81] This finding would seem to suggest that it is far from impossible to destroy or defeat a terrorist group. In contrast, some limited objectives may be impossible to achieve. For example, it is likely impossible that the United States can degrade an entrenched terrorist group intent on striking the U.S. homeland—like al-Qaeda—sufficiently to prevent it from successfully carrying out an attack in perpetuity.

However, there are general trends regarding the achievability of particular objective types that require examination. A failure to account for the type of objective being sought and its relationship to achievability contributes to the endless character of America's wars.

Unlimited objectives in counterterrorism warfare tend to be unachievable. It is arguably not even possible to formulate an achievable unlimited objective in the context of counterterrorism, as terrorist organizations generally do not have governments that can be destroyed. A useful warning about expanding the definition of unlimited objectives to include the total extirpation of a movement can be extrapolated from Corbett's discussion of naval strategy where he states, "No degree of naval superiority can ensure our communications against sporadic attack from detached cruisers, or even raiding squadrons if they be boldly led and are prepared to risk destruction ... By general and permanent control we do not mean that the enemy can do nothing, but that he cannot interfere with our maritime trade and oversea operations so seriously as to affect the issue of the war, and that he cannot carry on his own trade and operations except at such risk and hazard as to remove them from the field of practical strategy."[82]

Even if destroying a terrorist group as a whole is understood to be a coherent unlimited objective, data on terrorist group longevity suggests that achieving unlimited objectives is difficult. Thus, making an unlimited aim the objective of a counterterrorism war is usually a recipe for endless war.

A 2008 RAND study of post-1968 terrorist group fates by Seth Jones and Martin Libicki found that "military force has rarely been the primary reason for the end of terrorist groups."[83] Studies like that by Jones and Libicki may still overestimate the potential for military defeat of terrorist groups. As Jonathan Powell, British Prime Minister Tony Blair's former chief of staff and chief negotiator in the Northern Ireland peace process, has argued even these studies and ones like them tend to produce an inflated sense of the potential for victory by including small groups alongside more entrenched, larger terrorist groups when few if any entrenched, larger groups have been defeated or come to an end except via negotiations.[84]

A look at the terrorist groups the United States has fought its counterterrorism wars against suggests they tend to fall into the category of larger, more entrenched groups resilient to military defeat.[85] The United States has been fighting various incarnations of ISIS for more than 17 years, and failed to defeat the group despite having 150,000 troops in Iraq, a cost Americans were unwilling to accept.[86] Despite almost 20 years of war in Afghanistan, and more than a decade of drone strikes in Pakistan, al-Qaeda continues to exist in South Asia though in a substantially degraded form.[87] In addition, al-Qaeda continues to operate across the Greater Middle East, is now at least 32 years old, and is more than 24 years into its declared war on the United States.[88]

Former government officials who have worked on counterterrorism policy are cognizant of the difficulty of achieving unlimited objectives like the defeat of al-Qaeda or ISIS. For example, former National Counterterrorism Center Director Nicholas Rasmussen has warned that words like "defeat, destroy, or deny" constitute "very ambitious objectives that, even if we were maximally resourced, even if everything broke our way in the international environment, even if every positive projection of the international environment you could develop came true, we still would have struggled to meet those objectives on the kind of timeline we were setting for ourselves."[89] Similarly, Rosa Brooks, a former counselor to Under Secretary of Defense for Policy Michele Flournoy, wrote regarding terrorism, "we need to ... recognize it as an ongoing problem to be managed, rather than 'defeated.'"[90]

Two limits on the ability of the United States to defeat terrorist groups are worth exploring in particular. First, America's jihadist enemies' resilience is rooted in the fact that they draw upon and give voice to real grievances and socio-economic problems in the Greater Middle East.[91] Second, jihadist groups have decentralized, giving rise to affiliates and front groups while also playing up their identity as brands so any individual can claim to act in their name.[92] As a result,

even in the rare cases where a jihadist terrorist organization might be defeated, it can reconstitute itself or serve as an inspiration for a new organization, and where groups are not eliminated, the networked nature of the jihadist movement can help sustain groups that are struggling due to counterterrorism pressure.

The selection of unlimited objectives can also militate against the pursuit of negotiations, which are critical to resolving conflicts. As noted above, entanglements with entrenched terrorist groups, like those the U.S. is currently fighting, tend to end only via negotiations that integrate them into political arrangements and resolve their grievances to some extent.[93] Yet, the rhetoric that is used to emphasize the need to defeat or destroy terrorist groups tends to label the groups and those who join them as inherently evil – hence the need for destruction and not simply limited aims to protect specific interests.

President George W. Bush summed up his administration's views regarding the United States' negotiations with the Taliban after 9/11, saying, "These demands are not open to negotiation or discussion. The Taliban must act, and act immediately. They will hand over the terrorists, or they will share in their fate," continuing to assert, "Every nation, in every region, now has a decision to make. Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists. From this day forward, any nation that continues to harbor or support terrorism will be regarded by the United States as a hostile regime."[94] The tendency to dismiss negotiation and promote Manicheanism even when it came to states regarding their level of enthusiasm for the war on terror hardly left room to consider negotiation with the terrorists themselves. Of course, all governments deny they will negotiate with terrorists, but it is also worth noting how Bush administration figures like Vice President Dick Cheney sought to torpedo negotiations with the Taliban even over such matters as prisoners.[95]

The power of unlimited objectives to militate against negotiations has not disappeared even as the United States has pursued negotiations with the Taliban. Former Trump National Security Adviser Lieutenant General H.R. McMaster compared negotiations with the Taliban to Neville Chamberlain's appeasement of the Nazis. Notably, the reason McMaster gives for this absurd analogy is that the process "renders the war unjust, because we no longer have defined a just end," presumably because he describes the enemy as "some of the most horrible people on earth. These are the enemies of all civilized people" who require defeat and destruction.[96]

The point about negotiations is not simply a matter of restating the difficulty of achieving unlimited objectives. Even where the United States is in the position to deal a terrorist group a substantial military defeat, the only true way to ensure that the tactical victories can be translated and consolidated into strategic victory is via negotiation and the other party's acceptance of a new political arrangement. As Clausewitz warned, even where an enemy's forces are entirely destroyed and their country occupied, "both these things may be done and the

war, that is the animosity and the reciprocal effects of the hostile elements cannot be considered to have ended so long as the enemy's *will* has not been broke: in other words, so long as the enemy government and its allies have not been driven to ask for peace, or the population made to submit."[97] This is why Clausewitz emphasizes the concept of the "peace treaty," writing that "even if hostilities should occur again, a peace treaty will always extinguish a mass of sparks that might have gone on quietly smoldering."[98]

The unlimited objectives at work in counterterrorism warfare rarely countenance the possibility of a peace treaty even in victory with unconditional or highly favorable terms. As George W. Bush put it in 2005, "In World War II, victory came when the empire of Japan surrendered on the deck of the USS Missouri. In Iraq, there will not be a signing ceremony on the deck of a battleship. Victory will come when the terrorists and Saddamists can no longer threaten Iraq's democracy, when the Iraqi security forces can provide for the safety of their own citizens, and when Iraq is not a safe haven for terrorists to plot new attacks on our nation."[99] Ivo Daalder and James M. Lindsay similarly noted in December 2001 that "the United States campaign against terrorism will not be like America's effort to force Japan's unconditional surrender."[100] They added:

> The campaign against terrorism is instead much more like the cold war of the past century. Like the fight against Soviet communism, today's campaign against terrorism is likely to be nasty, brutish, and long. Because of the diverse nature of the threat, the United States has no clear vision of when or how the war will end. Complete success in the military operations in Afghanistan will not necessarily mean victory. Osama bin Laden's Al Qaeda network of terrorists extends well beyond Afghanistan. It could easily reconstitute itself even if the United States captures or kills bin Laden and his lieutenants.[101]

That the United States and its allies failed to engage the Taliban in negotiations during and around the Bonn talks in 2001 and 2002 over the future of the Afghan government when the United States was at the peak of its relative power in Afghanistan, having destroyed the Taliban state illustrates the catastrophic consequences of rejecting negotiation to pursue unlimited aims of total destruction.[102] Instead the United States left negotiations with the Taliban until much later. As General Nick Carter, the deputy commander of Western forces in Afghanistan put it in June 2013, "Back in 2002, the Taliban were on the run. I think that at that stage, if we had been very prescient, we might have spotted that a final political solution to what started in 2001, from our perspective would have involved getting all Afghans to sit at the table and talk about their future .... The problems that we have been encountering over the period since then are essentially all political problems, and political problems can only ever be solved by people talking to each other."[103]

Even in the oft-cited unconditional surrender of Imperial Japan to the United States in World War II, there was still negotiation over the surrender terms (with the final acceptance of unconditional surrender) and not simply the elimination of everyone involved in the prior regime. Indeed, the United States deliberately chose to maintain the Emperor as a figure and integrate him into the new system because they feared not doing so would preclude the ability to consolidate the victory.[104]

A comparison of the Japanese case to today's counterterrorism wars also helps reveal the definitional problem that haunts theories of unlimited objectives with regard to terrorists. In the Japanese case, the U.S. could claim the achievement of its unlimited objective because the referent point was the Japanese state, not every Japanese imperial figure as an individual. However, terrorists generally do not have the same kind of established state-like structures, meaning that unlimited objectives like "lasting defeat" or "destroy" bleed into broader and more difficult-to-achieve aims, like making every terrorist or adherent of the movement disengage.[105] The current politicized debate around Western ISIS detainees reveals the humanitarian dangers and counterproductive impact on security interests of tying these challenges too closely to military objectives, presumed guilt in atrocities, and preventive security fears.[106] Many citizens of western countries including women and children have been left in poor conditions in Syria or even stripped of citizenship as their status is interpreted through the risks they may pose in a continuing conflict rather than as an issue of human rights and demobilization and disengagement of armed actors.

That terrorist groups are closer to a movement than to a state makes it essential to clearly specify the limited objectives being sought—even if they are quite transformative or involve the destruction of specific organizational structures—rather than fueling a floating image of total defeat. The claim that destroying a particular terrorist structure is the same as destroying the terrorist group just does not ring true to people, nor should it, given how terrorist groups often strategically shift structure while maintaining continuity in a way states are rarely capable of.

At the same time, the moral power mobilized by and through the language of unlimited objectives imposes political constraints on admitting that the aim was always just a limited objective, such as denying territory to ISIS or degrading its ability to project power. One's political rivals can launch accusations of failing to destroy the remaining adherents. If one has proclaimed defeat as the necessary aim, it then becomes difficult to credibly claim defeat really meant something more limited. This point is illustrated by the wave of public criticism of Trump for asserting that ISIS was 100 percent defeated. The claim became an oft-fact checked issue because Trump's own rhetoric about destroying ISIS signaled broader aims, even when he seemed to suggest that he might only mean territorial destruction.[107]

Meanwhile, the use of the language of unlimited objectives rather than the explicit definition and statement of limited objectives in measurable terms—whether it is ISIS's territorial destruction or something else—opens the door for bureaucratic manipulation and invention of new objectives to maintain the presence. James Jeffrey, the former special representative for Syria Engagement and special envoy to the Global Coalition to Defeat Islamic State under Trump, appears to have admitted he took precisely this approach, saying: "When the situation in northeast Syria had been fairly stable after we defeated ISIS, [Trump] was inclined to pull out. In each case, we then decided to come up with five better arguments for why we needed to stay. And we succeeded both times. That's the story," while going so far as to conceal the number of troops in Syria from Trump. [108]

Trump would have been better placed to mobilize support for a withdrawal if he had simply made the case that the specific, limited objectives that implicated U.S. interests had been achieved rather than invoking the moral mantle of destroying the enemy entirely, something he clearly had not done. While these examples are partially the result of Trump's particular style of decision-making and failure to lead, it also reveals how the proclamation of unlimited objectives is ripe for confusion and abuse in ways that promote endlessness.

Assessing the Difficulty of Achieving Limited Objectives

Limited objectives tend to be more achievable than unlimited objectives as they do not require the complete destruction of an enemy. But they also vary in the extent to which they are achievable.

Transformative objectives, despite being limited, still require a sufficient application of coercive power to eliminate effective challenges to the desired new order. While American history provides examples of the successful completion of transformative objectives, it is important to keep in mind that many of these successes were achieved through the use of significant violence and acceptance of illiberal means.[109] The history of failure of U.S. regime change cautions against transformative aims, as do the substantial differences between today's Middle Eastern context and the context of the oft-cited transformative efforts in the wake of World War II.[110] In addition, the process of ordering another society tends to produce resistance from those who do not like the new order, even if they were not the original target of force. Too often, the United States has missed how its own interventions generate resistance.[111] Where transformative objectives are set without a commitment to the expenditure of sufficient resources and use of sufficient force to effectively reorder society, war will become endless in the form of constantly fighting against the latest opponents of the new order.[112] It is not even clear whether greater commitment could resolve the issue. Research on civil wars suggests that external intervention can prolong conflict by reshaping both domestic and international incentives regarding the conflict.[113] Moreover, the inevitable civilian casualties that will come with a U.S.

intervention of the sort capable of transforming Middle Eastern politics via military force will likely serve to fuel radicalization across the region, as occurred in Iraq.

In contrast to transformative objectives, disruptive objectives tend to be achievable for the United States. For example, the United States proved more than capable of demolishing Saddam Hussein's regime. This is not to say that disruptive objectives are always achievable. For example, an operation to rescue hostages is a complex operation that can fail for many reasons, and it took almost a decade for the United States to track down and kill Bin Laden.[114] The specifics matter, but disruption of specific threats tends to be more achievable than transformation.

The danger with embracing disruptive objectives is less that the specific objective will turn out to be unachievable, but more that mere disruption will prove unsatisfying. Wars initiated with limited and disruptive objectives can generate endless war in the form of continuous raiding when the capability to be disrupted arises from political and societal conditions that will continue even once the objective of disruption is achieved.[115] In such a case, the unstated aim was not disruptive but transformative, seeking to change societal conditions so the threat would not arise again.

This danger is particularly likely to arise when disruptive objectives are not framed in terms of specific, imminent threats but as a means of preventing a rival actor from gaining a future capability. Preventive war logic is, at its root, the expression of a transformative objective—create societal conditions that prevent the growth of a threat—masquerading as a disruptive objective of destroying a specific capability. Because the capability does not exist yet in a manner that poses an imminent threat, portraying the aim as disruptive is inaccurate, and produces a focus on capabilities that tends to miss how preventive war signals aggression, often making threats worse—what West Point's Scott Silverstone terms the "preventive war paradox."[116] Moreover, once a state accepts prevention of future threats as a legitimate justification for war, the realm of imaginable scenarios that might justify military action in the future expands with few limits, either geographically or temporally.[117]

Unclear or Undefined Objectives

Unclear objectives have also contributed to the endlessness of American counterterrorism wars.[118] The war in Afghanistan provides one example. As the *Washington Post*'s Craig Whitlock put it in his report on the so-called Afghanistan Papers:

> In the beginning, the rationale for invading Afghanistan was clear: to destroy al-Qaeda, topple the Taliban and prevent a repeat of the 9/11 terrorist attacks ... In hundreds of confidential interviews that constitute a secret history of the war, U.S. and allied officials admitted they veered off in directions that had little to do with al-Qaeda or 9/11. By expanding the original mission, they said they adopted fatally flawed warfighting strategies based on misguided assumptions about a country they did not understand. The result: an unwinnable conflict with no easy way out.[119]

When the United States fails to publicly lay out what it seeks to achieve, it can produce endless war by resulting in constantly shifting objectives in reaction to the conflict, denying the clear ability to determine when the objectives have been achieved.[120] Shifting or unclear objectives can also enable politicians to purposefully manipulate opinion to generate support for war.[121]

Further, without a clear statement of American objectives, a reduction or pause in the use of military force that signifies the end of a war cannot be meaningfully distinguished from a pause that merely denotes a tactical adjustment. For example, there has not been a drone strike in Pakistan in more than two years, yet it is difficult to assess whether the war has ended because it is not clear whether the United States views its objectives as having been achieved, has stopped pursuing its objectives, or just views a temporary pause as tactically beneficial.[122] As this example demonstrates, even wars that are not being actively fought can take on an endless character when objectives lack clarity.

This report assesses the level of clarity on a scale of Very Clear, Clear, Unclear, or Very Unclear as defined in Table 2. These judgments are made based on the extent to which public statements lay out specific objectives and do not shift without public explanation and description of new objectives.

Table 2: Definitions of Objective Clarity Levels

Objective Clarity Level	Definition
Very Clear	The government has provided a public statement of the specific objectives it seeks to achieve and a description of how immediate military objectives connect to broader political objectives and does not substantially shift the objective without providing a new statement.
Clear	The government has provided a public explanation of its specific objectives but the explanation lacks a clear description of the link between military and political ends.
Unclear	The government has provided some public statements of it objectives but the statements are general or the objective appears to shift at times without public explanation.
Very Unclear	The government has either not provided a public explanation of its objectives or its objectives shift without public explanation to the extent that it cannot be determined what the objective is at any particular moment.

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Absence of Exit Strategies and War Termination Plans

The pursuit of objectives without planning for an off-ramp or war termination has also contributed to the endless character of America's wars.[123] An objective may seem to have been accomplished, but only insofar as force continues to be applied, effectively accepting a state of permanent war.

Confronted with an apparent success combined with a failure to actually achieve the objective in a way that allows war termination, decision-makers will tend to expand the objective to transformative or unlimited ends to resolve the conundrum and achieve a lasting defeat. However, such an expansion will often —at least in the context of counterterrorism war—not bring the United States closer to having achievable objectives and a meaningful plan for war termination.

Alternatively, policymakers sometimes respond to such a situation by developing a strategy of repeated raiding as a form of militarized management. Victory is declared only to see such victory turn to dust in a few years.[124] Such a strategy may acknowledge that it is unable to sustainably terminate the war beyond the short-term, but view permanent low-level war as an acceptable approach. An example of this strategy is the "mowing the grass" theory prominent in Israeli strategic circles.[125] The discourse of mowing the grass has already emerged

among top U.S. policymakers, as illustrated by Secretary of Defense Mark Esper's use of the phrase regarding counterterrorism strikes in Libya.[126]

The importance of planning for war termination should not be understood as requiring a mechanistic and fully mapped out plan for how to withdraw troops upon initiation of the war. Calls for the importance of having an exit strategy have long received criticism for their ability to distract from the political objectives being sought, over-rationalizing the complex interactions that occur once a war starts, promoting overconfidence in one's intelligence regarding the war's character, and establishing weak plans that fall apart upon contact with the enemy.[127] However, simply dismissing the importance of considering exit strategies and developing war termination options at all stages of a war misunderstands how such efforts can clarify political objectives and has a tendency to explicitly legitimize endless war by accepting an unresolved stalemate as the successful completion of an objective, which in the final analysis it is not.[128]

War termination is particularly difficult when it comes to wars against jihadist terrorists. The gold standard for war termination is the holding of negotiations with the opposing party that produce an agreement to halt the war.[129] Across history, states have been reticent to engage in negotiations with terrorists.[130] States tend to fear granting legitimacy to non-state groups, and also tend to view terrorism—specifically targeting civilians—as a sign that a group has maximal ends and will not negotiate.[131] In addition, some of the jihadist groups the United States is at war with do actually have unlimited or at least transformative objectives of their own that makes negotiation to terminate a war difficult.

As a result, states waging counterterrorism wars—and particularly states like the United States that are fighting primarily outside of their own territory where the enemy lacks the capability to threaten the power's homeland in a major way—often find themselves relying on a different form of off-ramp for war termination. [132] That off-ramp is shifting the waging of the war to a partner or other entity that can take over security provision. For many counterinsurgency theorists, this is the very definition of victory.[133]

In order to allow for comparison of the extent of war termination planning and capabilities across and within cases, this report rates the level of planning and capability as High, Medium, or Low (See Table 3).

Table 3: Definitions of War Termination Planning Levels

Level of War Termination Planning	Definition
High	The U.S. government has a plan for a handoff of responsibility for the war or post-war security and governance provision to a force capable of achieving U.S. objectives without direct U.S. armed involvement.
Medium	The U.S. either has a plan for a handoff, but the presumed party to take responsibility does not clearly have the capability to achieve U.S. objectives without direct U.S. armed involvement, or there is a party that might be able to achieve U.S. objectives but the United States' commitment to such an off-ramp is unclear.
Low	The U.S. has not planned for a handoff and/or there is not a party capable of achieving U.S. objectives without U.S. support.

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Conclusion

On September 14, 2001, three days after terrorists trained in and directed from al-Qaeda's camps in Afghanistan killed almost 3,000 people inside the United States, Representative Barbara Lee (D-Calif.) rose to defend casting the lone vote against the 2001 Authorization for the Use of Military Force. At that time, the choice facing the American public appeared stark. As Lee, put it, "Only the most foolish and the most callous would not understand the grief that has really gripped our people and millions across the world. This unspeakable act on the United States has really—really forced me, however, to rely on my moral compass, my conscience, and my God for direction."[134] Yet even in that moment, Lee identified the dangers of the choice for war that the Bush administration was asking Americans to make, warning, "we must be careful not to embark on an open-ended war with neither an exit strategy nor a focused target."[135]

Almost two decades later, the wisdom of Lee's warning is now clear. Endless war is no longer a warning of what the war on terror might become, but widely recognized as the existing character of today's wars. Yet administrations of both parties have continued to wage counterterrorism wars without either clarifying the objective sought or defining what an achievable end-state might be.

As he left office, President Obama warned, "Democracies should not operate in a state of permanently authorized war. That's not good for our military, it's not good for our democracy."[136] He even criticized the dangers of stretching the 2001 Authorization for the Use of Military Force, yet Obama did not end the war in Yemen and returned the United States to war in Iraq while extending the war into a new country, Syria.[137] President Trump claimed to be ending endless war while continuing the war in Syria—only with even less clarity regarding American objectives.[138] It is clear that the use of the phrase "ending endless war" or variations of it is not sufficient to actually end endless war.

It is valuable that presidents increasingly think about and talk in a language of restraint opposed to endless war, but it is not enough, and if ending endless war is reduced to mere political rhetoric, it will be catastrophic for efforts to actually end the wars.

In order to move beyond such political talking points, advocates of ending endless war must put forward a usable concept of endlessness. In doing so, they must reject the trap of imagining troop reductions or declines in strikes as evidence of a commitment to ending endless war in the absence of discussion and revision of objectives. Endlessness is, at its core, about objectives, and it emerges when military force is approved for objectives that are not achievable by a belligerent that cannot be defeated. Some critics contend that endless war is purely political rhetoric. What this misses is that the term not only can be defined but has been used in the past to describe and assess the character of other wars.

That such claims are themselves political rhetoric is revealed by their ahistorical nature.

Clear objectives and public authorizations are essential to ending endless war. Even where strikes and troop numbers are reduced to zero, in their absence, it is not possible to determine whether a lack of direct military action is really an end to the war or merely a temporary halt. The drone war in Pakistan, which has now passed two years without a public report of a U.S. drone strike, illustrates this uncertainty and how it preserves the war's endless character.[139] The U.S. drone war in Yemen may soon reach a similar situation. As of September 2020, the United States had only conducted four strikes in Yemen, according to New America's tracking.[140] Yet given the long pause between the first strike in Yemen in 2002 and the return of strikes in late 2009, and later shorter pauses to address Yemeni domestic concerns over part of 2010, viewing a reduction or end in strikes as an end to the war is inaccurate.

Some critics ask why ending endless war matters. They point to the low fatality rate of America's counterterrorism wars following the troop drawdowns in Iraq and Afghanistan and warn of the risks abandoning the war.[141] They call for militarized management, accepting the framework of "mowing the grass."[142]

Such a stance requires a response, because while an embrace of endless war should perhaps evoke moral disgust, waging war without an imaginable end is not necessarily irrational for certain decision makers.[143] Aside from the possibility of immoral but rational thought processes and issues of miscalculation, the assertion that endless war is necessarily immoral or irrational is often made by those who live where the strategic context for decision making is less than stark. Where the choice being made is between fighting without an end in sight and submitting to extermination, sustained oppression, or the destruction of one's polity, the moral objection becomes less clear.[144] This is not to suggest the United States can reasonably lay claim to such a position with regard to its counterterrorism wars. However, such examples emphasize the need to make the case for why embracing endlessness while waiting for unpredictable systemic change is not a proper choice and not simply presume that embracing endlessness is necessarily irrational or immoral.

It is true that so far, America's counterterrorism wars have had limited direct costs for Americans in terms of service member deaths—that is if you start counting after the height of the Iraq and Afghanistan troop deployments. Yet, to accept endless war on this basis is to make a profound temporal error of analysis —calculating the costs before the war is over. Mowing the grass is less a strategy as it is an embrace of strategic incoherence, and it leaves the United States vulnerable to sudden increases in cost when conditions change.[145] Endless or protracted warfare tends to erode protections for civilians and restraints over time, an issue visible in the way endlessness warps detention policies and the treatment of detainees.[146]

Already, America's endless wars are showing signs that they could escalate and expand rapidly in such a way that would radically increase the costs of the war. In Yemen, where the endless counterterrorism war continues, the United States conducted an airstrike targeting an Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps figure in retaliation for the killing of an American by an Iran-backed militia in Iraq.[147] In Iraq and Syria, U.S. forces have clashed with a range of forces well beyond ISIS. This includes direct clashes with Iranian forces and Iranian-backed militias.[148] U.S. forces have also exchanged fire with Russian semi-state mercenary forces tied to international far-right extremist mobilizations.[149] The United States even deployed more forces to Syria to counter Russia, despite Trump's claims to be ending endless war.[150] The United States has also exchanged fire in Syria with pro-Syrian regime forces and Turkish-backed rebels.[151]

Even if the wars don't escalate or increase in cost and the United States is sufficiently powerful to persist in its strategic incoherence, the acceptance of endless war warps American domestic politics, encouraging the militarization of American policing and society.[152] Moreover, the impact of a constant American military presence in shaping Middle Eastern politics and the casualties attributable to American war must also be examined, even if the cost to Americans remains low.

For those committed to ending America's endless wars, it is essential to reject the continuation of endless war as militarized management, whether rhetorically framed as an acceptance of ongoing war or by the perversion of the rhetoric of ending endless war into cover for special forces raids and drone strikes. That task will require establishing endless war as an analytic category and always challenging those who say their objective is the defeat of a particular terrorist group to spell out exactly what they mean in measurable terms.

Appendix One: Evaluating the Attack in Pensacola

Is There Evidence of a Continued, Sustained AQAP External Attack Capability?

The attack in Pensacola, Fla. in December 2019 provides the strongest indicator that al-Qaeda via its Yemeni affiliate Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) may maintain a sustained capability to attack the U.S. homeland.[153] There is no question that AQAP was connected to and coordinating the plot as it came together.

Yet, it is not clear if AQAP provided any form of material assistance to the perpetrator or actually contributed to the plot beyond branding it as an AQAP attack by communicating with the plotter and providing evidence of that communication. In addition, the plot was not particularly sophisticated despite the involvement of a foreign terrorist organization. The attack only involved a single individual who infiltrated the United States, and that individual killed three people in an attack not dissimilar from the attacks that Americans inspired by jihadist ideology—or other ideologies—with no actual ties to foreign terrorist organizations have conducted.[154] In the absence of other confirming evidence, analysts should be wary of assuming the attack suggests a reconstituted AQAP sustained external attack capability.

If the Pensacola attack does not represent evidence of a sustained AQAP external attack capability, and did not require a substantial material contribution from AQAP, citing the prevention of such an attack as a military objective is a recipe for endless war. There is little reason to believe such an attack would not be resilient to AQAP's loss of territory—indeed it appears to have taken shape while AQAP was struggling to hold its own in Yemen's complex civil war.[155] Nor is it clear why the plot would not be resilient to the killing of specific operational figures in AQAP. As can be seen in Table A-1, this would mean that in the absence of the total and complete defeat of AQAP and the jihadist movement from which it emerges (an objective this author finds implausible), preventing attacks like the one in Pensacola over the long term is not an achievable objective. If the plot is shown to not be resilient to these factors, achievable limited objectives might be available.

Table A-1: Relation of Preventing an Attack Like Pensacola to Achievable Objectives

	High Resilience to Loss of Territory and Operating Space	Low Resilience to Loss of Territory and Operating Space
High Resilience to Death of AQAP Operatives in Yemen Handling the Pensacola Attack	No Effective Military Response Over the Long Term	Transformative Objectives (Degrade AQAP External Attack Capability by Denying Territory)
Low Resilience to Death of AQAP Operatives in Yemen Handling the Pensacola Attack	Disruptive Objectives (Kill the Handlers)	Disruptive or Transformative Objectives (Either Kill the Handlers or Degrade Capability by Denying Territory)

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Appendix Two: A Word on Threat Assessment Definitions

In assessing the threat posed by terrorist groups, this report adopts two key distinctions that need to be defined.

First, this report distinguishes between threats to the United States homeland, threats to regional stability—that is to the United States' preferred order writ broadly in areas outside of the United States, and threats to specific U.S. persons outside of the United States. Threats to regional stability can be subdivided further for analysis by the region in question, for example differentiating threats to Europe from threats to Middle Eastern states.[156]

Second, in assessing the level of threat a terrorist group poses, this report distinguishes between **directed**, **enabled**, and **inspired** attacks. **Directed attacks** are those attacks in which a terrorist organization either carries out an attack itself or provides meaningful material support to an associated third party (e.g., training, payment, or specific intelligence) that played an important role in the attack. **Enabled attacks** are defined as attacks where there is communication specific to the development of an attack, generally online, between a terrorist organization and an attacker, but the attacker has not received material forms of support for the operation from the terrorist group. Finally, **inspired attacks** are those attacks in which the attacker is influenced by the propaganda or ideology of a terrorist group but has not had communication with members of the group specific to their attack plans. Given the covert nature of terrorist organizations and the trend towards decentralization many groups have embraced, it can be difficult to fully determine which category an attack falls into.

It is important to distinguish because these different forms of attacks represent different types of threats that require different responses. For example, disruptive military action can succeed in eliminating a group's material capability to direct an attack, but if the group's attacks are actually inspired rather than directed, such military action is less likely to be successful in preventing attacks or is at least more contingent on how the action is interpreted by public opinion. While enabled attacks have gained notoriety in part due to fears over the role of encrypted communication in facilitating connections between foreign terrorist organizations and terrorists in Western countries in the absence of training, it is far from clear that such enabled plotting is capable of making a material impact on the lethality or success of attack plots, let alone in replicating the expertise and impact of a traditionally directed plot.[157] Moreover, even if one concludes that such online coaching does have an impact, it is unclear why such online coaching would not be resilient to military destruction of safe havens given its networked nature.

Terrorist groups often seek to blur the distinctions between these forms of attacks because, in their mind, there is not a clear distinction and also because attributing organizational ties to attacks that the organization had little material role in grants greater power and prestige to the organization. Analysts should be wary of adopting methods that support their branding efforts by blurring these critical differences.

Notes

1   A Google Books Ngram search showing post-9/11 growth in all three terms can be found at: https://books.google.com/ngrams/graph?content=endless+war%2C+forever+war%2C+permanent+war&year_start=1800&year_end=2019&corpus=26&smoothing=3&direct_url=t1%3B%2Cendless%20war%3B%2Cc0%3B.t1%3B%2Cforever%20war%3B%2Cc0%3B.t1%3B%2Cpermanent%20war%3B%2Cc0

2   Joseph R. Biden Jr., "Why America Must Lead Again," *Foreign Affairs*, April 2020, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2020-01-23/why-america-must-lead-again; @realDonaldJTrump, ..."....Almost 3 Years, but It Is Time for Us to Get out of These Ridiculous Endless Wars, Many of Them Tribal, and Bring Our Soldiers Home. WE WILL FIGHT WHERE IT IS TO OUR BENEFIT, AND ONLY FIGHT TO WIN. Turkey, Europe, Syria, Iran, Iraq, Russia and the Kurds Will Now Have To.....," Tweet, Twitter, October 7, 2019, https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/1181172465772482563, archived at https://web.archive.org/web/20200321035728/https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/1181172465772482563.

3   Thomas Joscelyn, "Endless Jihad: The Problem with Pledging to End Our 'Endless Wars,'" *The Dispatch*, August 20, 2020, https://vitalinterests.thedispatch.com/p/endless-jihad; Paul Miller, "Ending the 'Endless War' Trope," *Atlantic Council*, March 26, 2020, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/ending-the-endless-war-trope/; Dakota Wood, "The Myth of Endless Wars," *The National Interest*, October 31, 2020, https://nationalinterest.org/feature/myth-endless-wars-171712.

4   David Sterman, "Why Ending Our Endless Wars Isn't a 'Vacuous' Exercise," *Responsible Statecraft*, August 27, 2020, https://responsiblestatecraft.org/2020/08/27/why-ending-our-endless-wars-isnt-a-vacuous-exercise/.

5   It is worth noting that the Chinese-Japanese war pitted an overseas dominant military power engaged in a war outside of its home territory, a condition with echoes in the United States' current wars on terror.

6   Mao Zedong, *On Protracted War* (Honolulu, HI: University Press of the Pacific, 2001).

7   It is worth noting that it is far from clear that Mao was correct that the shift was the product of existing material factors. Instead there's a strong case that it was the exogenous shock of the United States' entrance into the war against Japan that rebalanced the conflict.

8   George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2008), 187–90.

9   For discussion of the relevance of Orwell's writing on permanent war to today's endless counterterrorism wars see: Thomas E. Ricks, *Churchill and Orwell: The Fight for Freedom* (New York: Penguin Press, 2017), 255–57.

10   Leslie H. Gelb, *The Irony of Vietnam: The System Worked* (Brookings Institution Press, 2016); James P. Harrison, *The Endless War: Vietnam's Struggle for Independence*, Columbia University Press Morningside Ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989); Leslie H. Gelb, "Causes, Origins, and Lessons of the Vietnam War," § Senate Committee on Foreign Relations (1972), https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CHRG-92shrg83605/pdf/CHRG-92shrg83605.pdf; Paul M. Sweezy, "Vietnam: Endless War," *Monthly Review* 20, no. 11 (April 1, 1969): 1, https://doi.org/10.14452/MR-020-11-1969-04_1; James Chace, *Endless War: How We Got Involved in Central America and What Can Be Done*, 1st ed (New York: Vintage Books, 1984). See also: William B. Quandt, "Even 'Endless Wars' Can Be Ended," *Miller Center*, September 18, 2020, https://millercenter.org/issues-policy/foreign-policy/presidency-endless-war/even-endless-wars-can-be-ended.

11   See Jonah Schulhofer-Wohl, *Quagmire in Civil War*, 2020, Kindle Location 405, 429fn9.

12   David Francis, "Here's Osama Bin Laden's Letter to the American People," *Foreign Policy*, May 20, 2015, https://foreignpolicy.com/2015/05/20/heres-osama-bin-ladens-letter-to-the-american-people/.

13   Luis Fernando Medina, "Ending the Endless War: Will Colombia's Democracy Survive the Violence," *Boston Review*, May 1, 2010, http://bostonreview.net/medina-ending-endless-war; Bert Ruiz, *The Colombian Civil War* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 2001), 18.

14   Deborah Sontag, "For Israelis, Endless War," *New York Times*, April 14, 2001, https://www.nytimes.com/2001/04/14/world/for-israelis-endless-war.html.

15   Timur Kuran, "Now out of Never: The Element of Surprise in the East European Revolution of 1989," *World Politics* 44, no. 1 (October 1991): 7–48, https://doi.org/10.2307/2010422.

16   Jonah Schulhofer-Wohl usefully distinguishes protracted war in the sense of Maoist strategy from what he defines as quagmire. Schulhofer-Wohl, *Quagmire in Civil War*, Kindle Location 471.

17   Indeed, there is some reason to believe that Mao's optimism about victory may not have reflected an assessment of the actual prospects for victory. For such an argument see: Andrew Ningham Kennedy, "Can the Weak Defeat the Strong? Mao's Evolving Approach to Asymmetric Warfare," *The China Quarterly*, no. 196 (December 2008), https://www.jstor.org/stable/20192272?seq=1.

18   For an argument on why Mao's theory did not fit the war and the exogenous shock of U.S. entry was the key to the shift in phases, see: John W. Woodmanseee Jr., "Mao's Protracted War: Theory vs. Practice," *Parameters* III, no. 1 (1973), https://apps.dtic.mil/dtic/tr/fulltext/u2/a511037.pdf.

19   A useful discussion of the problems of focusing on duration rather than ends as an analytical tool can be found in Schulhofer-Wohl, *Quagmire in Civil War*, Kindle Location 441.

20   Quandt, "Even 'Endless Wars' Can Be Ended."

21   Here it is worth noting, for example, that even though he argues for a frame that emphasizes how the Vietnamese revolutionaries won the Vietnam War rather than a frame that argues that the U.S. lost the war, James P. Harrison still titles his book on the subject "The Endless War." Harrison, *The Endless War*.

22   Carl Von Clausewitz, Michael Eliot Howard, and Peter Paret, *On War.* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 87.

23   Mary L. Dudziak, *War Time: An Idea, Its History, Its Consequences* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2012).

24   Mary L. Dudziak, "This War Is Not Over Yet," *New York Times*, February 15, 2012, https://www.nytimes.com/2012/02/16/opinion/this-war-is-not-over-yet.html.

25   Rosa Brooks, *How Everything Became War and the Military Became Everything: Tales from the Pentagon*, First Simon & Schuster hardcover edition (New York London Toronto Sydney New Delhi: Simon & Schuster, 2016).

26   Candace Rondeaux and David Sterman, "Twenty-First Century Proxy Warfare: Confronting Strategic Innovation in a Multipolar World" (New America, February 20, 2019), https://www.newamerica.org/international-security/reports/twenty-first-century-proxy-warfare-confronting-strategic-innovation-multipolar-world/; "The Legal Framework Regulating Proxy Warfare" (American Bar Association Center for Human Rights & Rule of Law Initiative, December 2019), https://www.americanbar.org/content/dam/aba/administrative/human_rights/chr-proxy-warfare-report-2019.pdf.

27   Carol E. Lee, Courtney Kube, and Josh Lederman, "Officials Worry Trump May Back Erik Prince Plan to Privatize War in Afghanistan," *NBC*, August 17, 2018, https://www.nbcnews.com/news/military/officials-worry-trump-may-back-erik-prince-plan-privatize-war-n901401; Biden Jr., "Why America Must Lead Again."

28   Luis Martinez, "Inside the US Military's Mission in Somalia," *ABC*, May 5, 2017, https://abcnews.go.com/International/inside-us-militarys-mission-somalia/story?id=47239816.

29   Joscelyn, "Endless Jihad: The Problem with Pledging to End Our 'Endless Wars'"; Sterman, "Why Ending Our Endless Wars Isn't a 'Vacuous' Exercise."

30   James J. Carafano, "James Carafano: US Troop Withdrawals from Iraq and Afghanistan Show Progress in Resolving 'Endless Wars,'" *Fox*, September 9, 2020, https://www.foxnews.com/opinion/iraq-afghanistan-withdrawal-trump.

31   Carafano.

32   James J. Carafano, "Be Thankful America Is Not Fighting 'Endless Wars,'" *Heritage Foundation*, December 3, 2019, https://www.heritage.org/defense/commentary/be-thankful-america-not-fighting-endless-wars. On Carafano's dismissal of endless war as a concept see also: Daniel Larison, "Yes, There Are Endless Wars, and They Need to End," *The American Conservative*, July 2, 2019, https://www.theamericanconservative.com/larison/yes-there-are-endless-wars-and-they-need-to-end/.

33   James J. Carafano, "What Those Decrying America's 'Endless Wars' Are Really Talking About," *The Daily Signal*, July 3, 2019, https://www.dailysignal.com/2019/07/03/what-those-decrying-americas-endless-wars-are-really-talking-about/.

34   Tim Hains, "Pompeo: 'Endless Wars Are the Direct Result of Weakness,'" *RealClearPolitics*, January 5, 2020, https://www.realclearpolitics.com/video/2020/01/05/pompeo_endless_wars_are_the_direct_result_of_weakness.html. Thomas Joscelyn correctly identifies this as part of a broader sloganeering effort on the part of the administration regarding the term "endless war" even as his conclusions about whether the term has any meaning are incorrect in this author's view: Thomas Joscelyn, "Trump Tries to Have It Both Ways on 'Endless Wars,'" *The Dispatch*, August 26, 2020, https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2020/08/26/trump-tries-to-have-it-both-ways-endless-wars/.

35   Hains, "Pompeo: 'Endless Wars Are the Direct Result of Weakness.'"

36   "Department of Defense Law of War Manual" (Office of General Counsel Department of Defense, June 2015), 18, https://archive.defense.gov/pubs/law-of-war-manual-june-2015.pdf.

37   Gregory D. Johnsen, "60 Words And A War Without End: The Untold Story Of The Most Dangerous Sentence In U.S. History," *BuzzFeed*, January 16, 2014, https://www.buzzfeed.com/gregorydjohnsen/60-words-and-a-war-without-end-the-untold-story-of-the-most.

38   See for example: Andrew J. Bacevich, "Op-Ed: An End to 'Endless Wars'? Don't Believe It," *Los Angeles Times*, August 31, 2020, https://www.latimes.com/opinion/story/2020-08-31/op-ed-bacevich-headline-tk; Katrina vanden Heuvel, "Trump Hasn't Ended Endless Wars. Congress Must Use the War Powers Resolution.," *Washington Post*, September 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2020/09/01/trump-hasnt-ended-endless-wars-congress-must-use-war-powers-resolution/; Tyler Bellstrom, "Ending 'Endless War' Can't Just Become an Empty Slogan," *Jacobin*, February 20, 2020, https://www.jacobinmag.com/2020/02/ending-endless-war-trump-sanders-buttigieg-biden; Christian Britschigi, "Trump, Self-Proclaimed Ender of Endless Wars, Is Reducing the U.S. Troop Presence in Iraq to Where It Was in 2015," *Reason*, August 28, 2020, https://reason.com/2020/08/28/trump-self-

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39   Samuel Moyn, "'War Time: An Idea, Its History, Its Consequences,' by Mary L. Dudziak," *Lawfare*, May 24, 2012, https://www.lawfareblog.com/war-time-idea-its-history-its-consequences-mary-l-dudziak; Eric Posner, "The Longest Battle," *New Republic*, February 6, 2012, https://newrepublic.com/article/98220/mary-dudziak-war-time.

40   Katie Bo Williams, "Outgoing Syria Envoy Admits Hiding US Troop Numbers; Praises Trump's Mideast Record," *Defense One*, November 12, 2020, https://www.defenseone.com/threats/2020/11/outgoing-syria-envoy-admits-hiding-us-troop-numbers-praises-trumps-mideast-record/170012/.

41   "America's Longest War: A Visual History of 18 Years in Afghanistan," *Wall Street Journal*, February 29, 2020, https://www.wsj.com/articles/americas-longest-war-a-visual-history-of-18-years-in-afghanistan-11583010024. One might question the description of the Korean War as having truly ended. Even so, the comparison of the actual period of direct military action is relevant even as the Korean War with its lack of clear authorization or end is an early example of the endlessness that would emerge in America's counterterrorism wars. Erin Blakemore, "The Korean War Never Technically Ended. Here's Why.," *National Geographic*, June 24, 2020, https://www.nationalgeographic.com/history/reference/modern-history/why-korean-war-never-technically-ended/; "The Korean War Armistice," *BBC*, March 5, 2015, https://www.bbc.com/news/10165796.

42   Samuel Moyn and Stephen Wertheim, "The Infinity War," *Washington Post*, December 13, 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2019/12/13/infinity-war/?arc404=true.

43   On the lack of an existential threat and general limitations to the terrorist threat see: Peter L. Bergen, *United States of Jihad: Investigating America's Homegrown Terrorists*, First edition (New York: Crown Publishers, 2016); John E. Mueller and Mark G. Stewart, *Chasing Ghosts: The Policing of Terrorism* (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2016); John Mueller and Mark G. Stewart, "Misoverestimating ISIS: Comparisons with Al-Qaeda," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 10, no. 4 (August 2016), https://www.jstor.org/stable/26297616?seq=8#metadata_info_tab_contents; "Remarks by National Security Advisor Susan Rice on the 2015 National Security Strategy" (White House Office of the Press Secretary, February 6, 2015), https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2015/02/06/remarks-national-security-advisor-susan-rice-2015-national-security-stra.

44   Even in the case of World War II, there is debate over the extent to which the United States saw its homeland as threatened. On this point see: Stephen Wertheim, *Tomorrow, the World: The Birth of U.S. Global Supremacy* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2020); Daniel Immerwahr, *How to Hide an Empire: A History of the Greater United States*, First edition (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2019); Patrick Porter, *The Global Village Myth: Distance, War and the Limits of Power* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2015), 64–76.

45   There are two ways that jihadists might hold objectives that do not include the defeat of the West. One possibility is that an organization does not view the West as part of the historical territory of Islam and views its war objectives as defensive and limited to expelling the United States from specific territories. Such an argument is made with regard to al-Qaeda in Michael Scheuer, *Imperial Hubris: Why*

the West Is Losing the War on Terror (Washington, DC: Potomac Books, 2005). There are also a number of groups (or even individuals) that might be described as part of a broader jihadist movement but that have adopted even more limited objectives that are less extensive than al-Qaeda's. For an examination of the many disputes over these issues as viewed through the prism of the fight over how to interpret the legacy of one of the jihadist movement's major figures, see: Thomas Hegghammer, *The Caravan: Abdallah Azzam and the Rise of Global Jihad*, 2020, 463–92. For a comparative look at the extent to which unlimited objectives and apocalyptism feature in al-Qaeda and ISIS' ideology, see: William F. McCants, *The ISIS Apocalypse: The History, Strategy, and Doomsday Vision of the Islamic State*, First Edition (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2015). The second possibility is that jihadists do not have political objectives but instead have glorified the means of suicide terrorism as an aesthetic of radical revolt; goals that appear to be unlimited objectives may be referenced but they do not function as a driver of strategy so much as a reference point for the expression of identity. On this possibility, see: Olivier Roy and Cynthia Schoch, *Jihad and Death: The Global Appeal of Islamic State* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017). Different jihadist groups will likely have different objectives, and any one group or individual will likely be influenced by multiple visions of what jihadism's objectives might be that can change over time.

46   See, for example: Frederick W. Kagan et al., "Al Qaeda and ISIS: Existential Threats to the U.S. and Europe" (Institute for the Study of War, January 2016), http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/PLANEX%20Report%201%20--%20FINALFINALFINAL.pdf; Walter Russell Mead, "The Threats From Within," *Wall Street Journal*, February 1, 2016, https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-threats-from-within-1454370936.

47   See, for example: Gilles Kepel and Antoine Jardin, *Terror in France: The Rise of Jihad in the West*, Princeton Studies in Muslim Politics (Princeton; Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2017), xii.

48   Donald J. Stoker, *Why America Loses Wars: Limited War and US Strategy from the Korean War to the Present* (Cambridge, United Kingdom; New York, NY, USA: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 66; Lawrence Freedman, "On War and Choice," *The National Interest*, April 20, 2010, https://nationalinterest.org/article/on-war-and-choice-3440.

49   Freedman, "On War and Choice."

50   Freedman.

51   John Mueller and Mark G. Stewart, "Terrorism and Bathtubs: Comparing and Assessing the Risks," *Terrorism and Political Violence*, October 29, 2018, 1–26, https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2018.1530662.

52   Sterman, "Decision-Making in the Counter-ISIS War: Assessing the Role of Preventive War Logic."

53   David Sterman, Peter Bergen, and Melissa Salyk-Virk, "Terrorism in America 19 Years After 9/11" (New America, September 11, 2020), https://www.newamerica.org/international-security/reports/terrorism-america-19-years-after-911/; Sterman, "Decision-Making in the Counter-ISIS War: Assessing the Role of Preventive War Logic"; Alex Meleagrou-Hitchens, Seamus Hughes, and Bennett Clifford, *Homegrown: ISIS In America* (London: I.B. Taurus, 2020), 80.

54   Sterman, Bergen, and Salyk-Virk, "Terrorism in America 19 Years After 9/11"; David Sterman, "We Need More Oversight on US Counterterrorism Policy in the Wake of AQAP's Confirmed Involvement in the Pensacola Attack," *Responsible Statecraft*, May 22, 2020, https://responsiblestatecraft.org/2020/05/22/we-need-more-oversight-on-us-counterterrorism-policy-in-the-wake-of-aqaps-confirmed-involvement-in-the-pensacola-attack/.

55   For a detailed examination of this dynamic that emphasizes ISIS' role in structuring the threat via

online communication between operatives acting as virtual enablers and attackers, see: Meleagrou-Hitchens, Hughes, and Clifford, *Homegrown: ISIS In America*.

56   John Mueller, "The Cybercoaching of Terrorists: Cause for Alarm?," *CTC Sentinel* 10, no. 9 (October 2017), https://ctc.usma.edu/the-cybercoaching-of-terrorists-cause-for-alarm/.

57   Sterman, Bergen, and Salyk-Virk, "Terrorism in America 19 Years After 9/11."

58   Some have argued more broadly that scholarly work on U.S. foreign policy has overemphasized the importance of factors outside the United States and underestimated domestic politics as a core cause given the vast concentration of power in the United States and its role in ordering the international system. This author is sympathetic to this view, but regardless of its broader applicability and questions of what constitutes scholarly value, it holds particular importance when it comes to the assessing how scholarly and semi-scholarly products interpret the threat from terrorists and the causes of the war on terror. See: Daniel Bessner and Fredrik Logevall, "Recentering the United States in the Historiography of American Foreign Relations," *Texas National Security Review,* Spring 2020, https://doi.org/10.26153/TSW/8867.

59   Julian Stafford Corbett, *Principles of Maritime Strategy* (Project Gutenberg, 2005), https://www.gutenberg.org/files/15076/15076-h/15076-h.htm.

60   For claims of strategic narcissism, see: Joscelyn, "Endless Jihad: The Problem with Pledging to End Our 'Endless Wars.'"

61   On the power of individual leader choices and views of how to understand threats and their origins in shaping U.S. policy, see: Elizabeth N Saunders, *Lea ders at War How Presidents Shape Military Interventions*, 2011.

62   Martin Chulov, "Isis Insurgents Seize Control of Iraqi City of Mosul," *The Guardian*, June 10, 2014, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jun/10/iraq-sunni-insurgents-islamic-militants-seize-control-mosul; Ash Carter, "A Lasting Defeat: The Campaign to Destroy ISIS" (Belfer Center, October 2017), https://www.belfercenter.org/sites/default/files/2017-10/Lasting%20Defeat%20-%20final_0.pdf.

63   "Afghanistan Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict 2019" (United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan / United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, February 2020).

64   That noted, states like Iraq and Afghanistan that lack the protection of oceans and are fighting on their own national territory may be able to replicate similar, if lesser, dynamics of strategic distance over parts of their territory that could justify a return to focusing on governmental decision making as the primary factor in shaping the character of war.

65   "State of the Union: Text of George W. Bush's Speech," Guardian, September 21, 2001, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2001/sep/21/september11.usa13.

66   David Sterman, "For Effective Counterterrorism, Abandon the Language of Defeat," *Responsible Statecraft*, February 7, 2020, https://responsiblestatecraft.org/2020/02/07/for-effective-counterterrorism-abandon-the-language-of-defeat/.

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73   "Remarks by President Trump on the Death of ISIS Leader Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi" (The White House, October 27, 2019), https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-death-isis-leader-abu-bakr-al-baghdadi/; "Presidential Memorandum Plan to Defeat the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria" (The White House, January 28, 2017), https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/presidential-memorandum-plan-defeat-islamic-state-iraq-syria/.

74   Biden Jr., "Why America Must Lead Again."

75   This distinction between transformative and disruptive objectives expands on the description of the importance of such a distinction in proxy warfare described by Nate Rosenblatt and David Kilcullen, "The Tweet of Damocles: Lessons for U.S. Proxy Warfare" (New America, April 6, 2020), https://www.newamerica.org/international-security/reports/tweet-damocles/. It also draws upon work by George Washington University Assistant Professor Elizabeth Saunders whose book on presidential leadership in war emphasizes the distinction's importance and shows how even with the challenges of drawing a bright line, transformative objectives can be distinguished from non-transformative ones in a way conducive to analysis. Saunders, *Leaders at War How Presidents Shape Military Interventions*.

76   "U.S. Air Strikes Kill Senior AQAP Militants" (U.S. Central Command, January 10, 2018), https://www.centcom.mil/MEDIA/PRESS-RELEASES/Press-Release-View/Article/1412642/us-air-strikes-kill-senior-aqap-militants/.

77   Any use of military force will transform a targeted area's politics and society, introducing an element of instability into this distinction. However, the inevitable existence of some transformative effect does not eliminate the difference when it comes to whether transformation is an effect of the intervention or a guiding aim.

78   Sometimes an effort to deny or remove an enemy from territory can be considered disruptive if the group does not exercise substantial control and has not established sustained governance structures. For example, the effort to break the siege of Mt. Sinjar can be considered a disruptive objective as ISIS' hold of the area was not based in societal conditions that would require transformation so much as the presence of its military forces. However, in most cases the removal or rollback of territorial gains by a terrorist group constitutes a transformative objective.

79   Eric. H. Holder Jr., "Letter to Patrick J. Leahy, Chairman Committee on the Judiciary, United States Senate," May 22, 2013, https://www.justice.gov/slideshow/AG-letter-5-22-13.pdf; Thomas Hegghammer, "The Case for Chasing Al-Awlaki," *Foreign Policy*, November 24, 2010, https://foreignpolicy.com/2010/11/24/the-case-for-chasing-al-awlaki/.

80   Author's Interview with a former senior government official. On the rescue attempt see: Karen DeYoung, "The Anatomy of a Failed Hostage Rescue Deep in Islamic State Territory," *Washington Post*, February 14, 2015, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/the-anatomy-of-a-failed-hostage-rescue-deep-into-islamic-state-territory/2015/02/14/09a5d9a0-b2fc-11e4-827f-93f454140e2b_story.html.

81   Notably, this percentage is lower than the oft-cited 90 percent first year die-off rate statistic, leading Brian Phillips, the author of the analysis to note that "This suggests terrorist groups are more durable than the conventional wisdom indicates." Brian J. Phillips, "Do 90 Percent of Terrorist Groups Last Less than a Year? Updating the Conventional Wisdom," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 31, no. 6 (November 2, 2019): 1255–65, https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2017.1361411.

82   Corbett, *Principles of Maritime Strategy*, 105.

83   Seth G. Jones and Martin C. Libicki, *How Terrorist Groups End: Lessons for Countering Al Qa'ida* (Santa Monica, CA: Rand, 2008).

84   Jonathan Powell, *Terrorists at the Table: Why Negotiating Is the Only Way to Peace*, First Palgrave Macmillan Trade edition (New York: Palgrave Macmillan Trade, 2015), 30.

85   One indicator of this is that the jihadist movement broadly has generated foreign fighter flows that are unprecedented in their combination of transnational-ness and size compared to Marxist, Palestinian, and other groups of the past. The scholar Thomas Hegghammer calls the jihadist movement the "preeminent rebel movement of the post-Cold War era" noting, "transnationalism has provided flexibility and redundance, allowing the movement to survive the loss of individual leaders and organizations … it is a fair bet that it will keep moving well into the twenty-first century." Hegghammer, *The Caravan*, 2–3, 508.

86   Brian Fishman, *The Master Plan: ISIS, Al Qaeda, and the Jihadi Strategy for Final Victory* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016), 252; Brian Fishman, "Be Honest: ISIS Fight Will Be a Long One," *CNN*, May 23, 2015, https://www.cnn.com/2015/05/21/opinions/fishman-honesty-about-isis-fight/index.html; Peter Beinart, "The Surge Fallacy," *The Atlantic*, September 2015, https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2015/09/the-surge-fallacy/399344/.F

87   Asfandyar Mir, "Al-Qaeda's Continuing Challenge to the United States," *Lawfare*, September 8, 2019, https://www.lawfareblog.com/al-qaedas-continuing-challenge-united-states.

88   Peter Bergen, David Sterman, and Melissa Salyk-Virk, "Terrorism in America 18 Years After 9/11" (New America, September 18, 2019), https://www.newamerica.org/international-security/reports/terrorism-america-18-years-after-911/; Dominic Tierney, "The Twenty Year's War," *The Atlantic*, August 23, 2016, https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2016/08/twenty-years-war/496736/. The question of when al-Qaeda was founded is a subject of debate, but it is generally believed that it had been founded at least by August 1988 and perhaps before. For a summary of discussions on when al-Qaeda was founded, see Hegghammer, *The Caravan*, 352–57.

89   David Sterman, "The Success and Foreboding of American Counterterrorism," *New America Weekly*, May 9, 2019, https://www.newamerica.org/weekly/edition-248/success-and-foreboding-american-counterterrorism/.

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94   "State of the Union: Text of George W. Bush's Speech."

95   Powell, *Terrorists at the Table*.

96   Josh Rogin, "McMaster Says Trump's Taliban Deal Is Munich-like Appeasement," *Washington Post*, October 19, 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2020/10/19/mcmaster-says-trumps-taliban-deal-is-munich-like-appeasement/.

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155 "Letter Dated 15 January 2019 from the Chair of the Security Council Committee Pursuant to Resolutions 1267 (1999), 1989 (2011) and 2253 (2015) Concerning Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (Da'esh), Al-Qaida and Associated Individuals, Groups, Undertakings and Entities Addressed to the President of the Security Council" (United Nations Security Council, January 15, 2019), https://www.un.org/sc/ctc/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/N1846950_EN.pdf.

156 For more detail on these definitions and the reason why it is important to distinguish these types of threats, see: Sterman, "Decision-Making in the Counter-ISIS War: Assessing the Role of Preventive War Logic."

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