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What the Trump Administration Needs to Know: Lessons Learned from Fifteen Years of Counterterrorism Operations

Michael Vickers

Our war with al-Qa’ida, its allies, and offshoots is now in its sixteenth year, and shows no signs of ending anytime soon. It’s therefore critical, as we begin a new administration, to take an objective look at what’s worked, what hasn’t, and where we might go from here.

I have been engaged as a national security policy maker, operational strategist, and Intelligence Community leader for much of the past two decades, so in the next thirty minutes or so, I’d like to share with you what I believe are some strategic lessons learned from our war with the global jihadists. After I conclude my remarks, I’d be happy to take a few questions.

The War with Global Jihadists, Fifteen Years On

Before I share my thoughts with you on what’s worked and what hasn’t, I’d like to briefly review where we’ve been. Our war with al-Qa’ida and its allies began in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, but al-Qa’ida’s war with us, as former Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice famously observed, began several years before. The 9/11 attacks exposed the severe weakness of containment as a CT strategy, and the consequences of treating global jihadi terrorism as just another form of terrorism.

In assessing where we are today, I find it useful to take five, ten, and fifteen year looks at the conflict. These three looks, I would suggest, tell us a lot about the strategic trajectory of the war.

2001–2006

In the first eighteen months after the 9/11 attacks, we had considerable success in rapidly toppling the Taliban regime; eliminating al-Qa’ida’s sanctuary in Afghanistan; capturing al-Qa’ida senior leaders as they sought sanctuary in Pakistan’s settled areas and around the world; building up our knowledge about al-Qa’ida’s strategy, operations, leadership, and organization; and preventing potential follow-on attacks. By 2006, however, we were bogged down and losing the war in Iraq, and sectarian conflict had made the counterinsurgency, counterterrorism, and stability operations campaign much more violent. Al-Qa’ida had reconstituted its sanctuary in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas of Pakistan, and the Pakistani Army had concluded a peace agreement with al-Qa’ida’s safe haven providers in North Waziristan and therefore with
al-Qa’ida. The Taliban senior leadership had reconstituted in Quetta, and was steadily expanding its insurgency in Afghanistan. Al-Qa’ida core had extended its reach through several franchises in other areas of the world, morphing from a terrorist group with global reach to one with semi-global presence. The result was a series of successful al-Qa’ida attacks in Europe, a potential 9/11-scale attack against trans-Atlantic aviation using novel technology that was fortunately disrupted before it could be executed, and an expansion of the conflict to additional theaters.

2006–2011

In the summer of 2008, President Bush approved a series of new policies that resulted in the second great US offensive against core al-Qa’ida. The new policies—among them, greater US autonomy in deciding to strike targets and expanded targeting criteria—produced immediate and dramatic results. Whereas US counterterrorism forces had been “Oh for Oh-Seven” in failing to take a single core al-Qa’ida high value target off the battlefield in the FATA in 2007, we were “Eight for Oh-Eight” in 2008. More strikes were conducted against core al-Qa’ida in the last five months of 2008 than had been in the previous four years.

President Obama sustained these aggressive CT policies through 2012. By the end of 2010, core al-Qa’ida was forced to go to ground in its FATA sanctuary. Five years ago this past May, Usama bin Ladin was killed, and in September 2011, a major threat in Yemen, Anwar al-Awlaqi, was eliminated. The al-Qa’ida threat in Saudi Arabia had also been greatly reduced.

The war in Iraq was dramatically turned around, and by 2010, al-Qa’ida’s franchise in Iraq had been largely pushed out of Iraq’s urban areas and its strength reduced by 90 percent. Shia extremist groups had also been largely brought to heel. Two thousand eleven represents the high water mark for US counterterrorism strategy.

On the negative side of the ledger, however, we had a very close call with the 2009 Christmas Day plot to blow up an airliner over Detroit, and al-Qa’ida in the Arabian Peninsula continued to make dangerous innovations in bomb-making technology. The Arab Spring significantly expanded al-Qa’ida’s battlespace in Libya, Syria, and Yemen, and the Taliban insurgency grew steadily worse until it was pushed back for a brief period by the surge of forces in Afghanistan.

2011–2016

The five years since the tenth anniversary of the 9/11 attacks have been predominantly characterized by the rise of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant and its separation from al-
Qa’ida; the civil war in Syria, which has served as a magnet for global jihadists; further global jihadist expansion on the African continent and Indian sub-continent; a Huthi takeover of Yemen; a series of attacks against the West; and increasing estrangement from the United States by many of our Sunni allies. ISIL’s capabilities and global expansion grew at a far more rapid pace than had al-Qa’ida’s, and ISIL supplanted al-Qa’ida as the leader of the global jihadist movement, at least for the time being.

On the positive side, we have had some success in continuing to eliminate al-Qa’ida HVTs and organizational capabilities and disrupt attack plans, in pushing back AQ’s gains in northern Mali and ejecting al-Shabaab out of Mogadishu, in reducing the territory controlled by ISIL and eliminating several of its key leaders, external plotters, and organizational capabilities, and in building up Afghan security forces.

To sum up, our war with the global jihadists is far from over. A 9/11-scale attack on the US homeland has thus far been prevented, and core al-Qa’ida has been brought closer to operational defeat than ever before. But the societal conditions and asymmetric competition that have given rise to the war have not fundamentally changed. Indeed, they are getting worse.

Al-Qa’ida in the Arabian Peninsula remains a dangerous adversary, and al-Qa’ida’s other franchises remain viable. Al-Qa’ida’s regeneration, even in Pakistan’s tribal areas, cannot be ruled out. If ISIL soon loses its physical caliphate, which I hope it does, it will be down, but not out. Sectarian conflict, religious identity, and vulnerable populations will continue to create strategic opportunity for the global jihadist brand. Global Jihad 3.0 should not surprise us where it appears.

Our war with the global jihadists has several similarities, though also many fundamental differences, with our Cold War conflict with the Soviet Empire. Both the Cold War and the war with al-Qa’ida, its allies and offshoots are, at their core, ideological conflicts waged on a global battleground. Both grew out of a previous war, and both took advantage of strengthened positions from victory in the previous war and vulnerable populations. Both conflicts have included secondary or associated wars that have diverted resources and widened the conflict. During the Cold War, the United States started strong, lost its way in the middle, and finished strong. A similar pattern may be emerging in our war with the global jihadists.

The Ends, Ways, and Means of US Counterterrorism Strategy

I’ll now turn to the heart of my talk: what’s worked and what hasn’t in US counterterrorism strategy. I’ll discuss five operational strategies that, in my view, have performed best in our CT fight. These five operational strategies form an integrated strategic approach, and
are much less effective if employed separately or partially. I'll then discuss four broader strategies that have produced poorer results or have failed entirely.

Let me begin first, however, by briefly reviewing the ends, ways, and means of our counterterrorism strategy. In broad terms, we have sought to disrupt, dismantle, and defeat global jihadist groups and prevent their regeneration. We have endeavored to this by strengthening our defenses, denying these groups sanctuary and resources, taking away their global reach, eliminating their organizational capabilities at a rate faster than they can replace them, and building up the capabilities of our many foreign partners to prevent defeated global jihadist groups from regenerating. We have employed both direct and indirect approaches as part of our strategy, and during our fifteen-year war with al-Qa’ida, its allies, and offshoots, we have fallen victim to both strategic overreach and strategic under reach.

Five Operational Strategies That Have Worked

What has worked best are five integrated, operational strategies: (1) hardening our defenses; (2) conducting intelligence-driven operations and pursuing intelligence integration; (3) conducting aggressive and sustained offensive campaigns that combine mass, precision, high operational tempo, covert partnerships, and multiple forms of combat power; (4) advising and assisting partner forces; and (5) building and leading a global network of partners to restrict the reach of global jihadist groups. Let’s look briefly at each.

Hardened Defenses

Hardening our defenses, while neither strategically sufficient nor foolproof, has made us safer. In the aviation field, these actions have ranged from restricting travel by potential terrorists, to making airliners less vulnerable to takeover, implementing improved screening at airports, and restricting items that can be brought onboard. Security at critical facilities and of critical materials has also significantly improved. The FBI’s transformation in the years after the 9/11 attacks has dramatically improved our domestic intelligence capabilities. As recent attacks in the United States and Europe have shown, however, there is no shortage of soft targets, and AQ and ISIL have shifted their targeting priorities accordingly.

Intelligence-Driven Operations and Intelligence Integration

Intelligence from multiple sources—human penetrations, detainee debriefings, signals intelligence of all sorts, full-motion video imagery, and liaison reporting—has been the motor that has driven CT operations. It has been central to our war with al-Qa’ida, its allies, and
offshoots. Intelligence has placed al-Qa’ida and ISIL’s senior leaders, operatives, and safe haven providers “on the X,” as we say in the business, for targeting by Predator and other air strikes and raids by special operations forces, and has made them vulnerable to joint capture operations by our many foreign partners. Intelligence gained from sensitive site exploitation and interrogation has led to additional operations in a virtuous cycle. Aggressive foreign and domestic intelligence operations have disrupted numerous plots. Intelligence integration—domestic and foreign and across intelligence disciplines—has made US intelligence far more effective, and all-source analysis has given us a detailed understanding of al-Qa’ida and ISIL’s strategy, operations and organization. Intelligence has had its share of—the Khost bombing, the AQAP plot to blow up an airliner over Detroit, the rapid takeover of Sunni areas in Iraq by ISIL and others—but on the whole, it has been a critical source of US advantage.

Aggressive and Sustained Precision Strike Campaigns

The heart of US counterterrorism strategy over the past fifteen years has been aggressive and sustained offensive campaigns that have combined mass, precision, high operational tempo, covert partnerships, and multiple forms of combat power to disrupt, dismantle, and defeat al-Qa’ida, ISIL, and their allies, and deny them any sanctuary. Our most successful campaigns have been the campaign to topple the Taliban in 2001 and the campaign to defeat core al-Qa’ida in Pakistan’s tribal areas. Although insufficient to prevent al-Qa’ida in Iraq’s reconstitution as ISIL, our campaigns against AQI and Shia extremist groups were also very effective.

The combination of mass, precision, and high operational tempo has been central to the success of US air power. Heavy bombers armed with precision weapons rapidly broke the back of the Taliban in 2001. Covert relationships with key foreign partners, policy changes put in place by President Bush in the summer of 2008 (and continued by President Obama) with regard to US strike autonomy and targeting criteria, a dramatic increase in the number of Predator platforms dedicated to the national CT campaign, continuous innovations in sensors, and a very high operational tempo have played a critical role in bringing core al-Qa’ida close to operational defeat. These same tools have likewise proven effective in disrupting plots by AQAP.

Raids by special operations forces have also been very effective, but only when conducted on a sustained basis and at a very high operational tempo or against a very strategic target, such as Usama bin Ladin. Precision Predator strikes have been very effective at an operational tempo of one strike every other day. Our most effective raid campaigns have sustained an operational tempo as high as ten or more a night.
Advising and Assisting Partner Forces

Advising and assisting indigenous ground forces to enable them to exploit the effects of precision air strikes has also been an effective strategy. The combination of direct air and indirect ground operations was very successful in Afghanistan in late 2001, and to a lesser extent, in Libya in 2011 and in Syria in 2016. Allowing US advisors to engage in combat along side their partner forces, having policies that are aligned with the aims of our foreign partners, and partners whose reach is congruent with our campaign objectives have been keys to success.

Joint capture operations were a very effective line of operation for years in Pakistan. Arming local tribal elements has also been very successful under the right conditions, and has put additional pressure on al-Qa'ida and its allies in Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Iraq. The Afghan Local Police program successfully denied rural areas to the Taliban, and pound for pound, was one of our most effective counterinsurgency instruments. Raids using partner forces were effective in Iraq 2010 and 2011, and in Afghanistan 2013 to 2016. More limited advise and assist operations supporting third country partners were likewise effective in Somalia 2012 to 2016, and in Mali 2012 to 2016.

The Global Counterterrorism Network

Through its leadership of a global counterterrorism network, the United States has been able to leverage the capabilities of numerous foreign partners to disrupt plots within partner nations and across national boundaries and capture global jihadist operatives. The GCTN is growing in importance as global jihadist groups increasingly shift from directed to inspired attacks, and our Muslim partners are central to the GCTN. Alienating them is a bad idea.

Four Strategies That Haven’t Worked

Let’s now turn to strategies that have failed entirely or have worked far less well. I group them into four broad categories: first, strategies of containment and limited engagement; second, strategies that have sought to engender region-wide catalytic effects through regime change and transformational change through large-scale nation building; third, strategies based on an overly narrow view of the conflict—what I call “strategic myopia;” and fourth, strategies that place all their hopes on a dubious international partner.

Strategies of Containment and Limited Engagement

Containment is a very poor CT strategy. It failed before 9/11, and it was failing in Syria and Libya before our recent interventions. Even the most isolated territory is connected to the
wider world. A close relative to containment, limited engagement, has also fared poorly as a strategy. It has been tried in Libya after the fall of Qaddafi, in Syria, and in Yemen.

Undue constraints on US air power and limiting ground advisers to non-combat roles have also produced poor results, resulting in protracted conflict and increased risk. US precision air power has generally faced tighter policy constraints in Yemen than it has in Pakistan’s tribal areas. As a consequence, we have been far more effective against core al-Qa’ida than we have been against AQAP. In temporal terms, we were far more effective in terms of precision CT strikes during the first Obama term than we have been during the second, when new presidential guidance placed greater restrictions on Predator strikes.

Similarly, we conducted a far more aggressive bombing campaign in 2001 against the Taliban than we have against ISIL, with the result that the Taliban were toppled in a few months, while our campaign against ISIL is well into its third year. Policy constraints limiting ground advisors to non-combat roles have produced similar disparities in strategic outcomes. ISIL is an army and a state as well as a terrorist group, and must be fought using instruments and strategies appropriate to each.

Strategies to Catalyze Democratic Change and Transform Nations

Promoting democratic values and supporting democratic institutions is rightly a central pillar of American foreign policy. As a counterterrorism strategy, however, it has failed to produce the effects its planners had hoped for, in Iraq and across the region. Similarly, US efforts at large-scale nation building have struggled in both Iraq and Afghanistan, and, on a more reduced scale, in Yemen. Capacity building has been most effective with intelligence and security services and least effective with civil institutions. Advising and assisting partner forces has produced much better results than capacity building efforts alone.

In post-conflict stability operations, we have oscillated between doing too much and doing too little. This has perhaps been our most vexing challenge, but we must find a way to win a sustainable peace. We can’t abandon a region as we did in Afghanistan after the Cold War without incurring great risk, and we should have been more engaged with security assistance in Libya after the fall of Qaddafi.

Strategies Based on an Overly Narrow View of the Conflict

US counterterrorism strategy has also suffered from strategic myopia—taking too narrow a view of the conflict in several cases, and getting bogged down in secondary conflicts in others. In Yemen, our narrow focus on AQAP resulted in blinders to the threat emanating from the
Huthis and their partner in crime, Ali Abdullah Saleh. As a result of this myopia and a failure to provide assistance when it was needed, we lost a critical CT partner.

In Syria, we have likewise taken a narrow view of the conflict, focusing primarily on ISIL while largely ignoring the implications that the wider conflict between the Assad regime, Iran, Hizballah and Russia, and the Syrian opposition and their Sunni allies has for strategic success in the CT fight and for the future of the Middle East. We will need a friendly Syrian government to prevail in the long run.

Like the Cold War before it, our war with al-Qa’ida, its allies, and offshoots has also shown a tendency to elevate the strategic importance of secondary conflicts. This has certainly been the case with our counterinsurgency and nation building efforts in both Iraq and Afghanistan.

**Strategies That Rely on a Dubious Partner**

Partnering with Russia in Syria has, in my view, made a very challenging strategic situation there even worse. Its effect has been to weaken our allies and strengthen our enemies. Russia’s recent use of political active measures against the United States, moreover, would seem to make partnering with them going forward a non-starter, if its covert aggression in Ukraine and if its actions against our interests in Syria already haven’t.

**Where Do We Go From Here?**

I’d like to conclude by leaving you with three thoughts on the way forward for US counterterrorism strategy.

First, we need to base on our strategy on the Middle East as it is, not as we wish it to be. The region is in historic flux, and we’re in a period where governance is challenged by powerful societal trends not just in the Middle East, but globally. Strategy is most effective when it is aligned with key trends rather than trying to combat them. A number of strategy implications flow from this: being careful about which regimes to pressure and how hard, working with sub-national elements for stability in appropriate cases, *et cetera*.

Second, we should focus on what’s worked best in counterterrorism strategy, while adapting to the evolving threat. I have three recommendations here. Our new administration should review and revise Presidential Policy Guidance to restore greater agility, diversity, and effectiveness to Predator strikes. The Predator has been our most effective CT instrument, and it is currently being underutilized. Our new administration should also review policy restrictions on ground combat advisors to make indirect ground operations more effective, and further intensify
the bombing campaign against ISIL. Finally, given the increased domestic terrorism threat, we must look at providing the FBI with additional resources.

Third, we need to win not just the operational counterterrorism fight, but also the wider proxy war that is being waged across the region. Strategic success in the CT fight depends on it, as does the future of the Middle East. This means substantially strengthening efforts to support the Syrian opposition; pressuring Russia, Iran, and Lebanese Hizballah to withdraw from Syria and abandon the Assad regime; repairing our frayed ties with our Sunni allies; providing greater support to the Hadi government in exile in Yemen; and providing greater support to fragile friendly regimes after they come to power.

We have had great operational success before in analogous situations, and we can succeed going forward. Three campaigns serve as models for me for the CT fight and the broader war for the Middle East: Afghanistan in 2001, the campaign against core al-Qa’ida 2008 to 2012, and Afghanistan in the 1980s.

None of this will be easy. We face challenges to world order not just in the Middle East, but in Europe and Eurasia and East Asia as well. Prevailing over these three grand strategic challenges will require strategic persistence and resilience and new approaches for new times. But prevail we must.

About the Author

Dr. Michael Vickers was the principal strategist for the covert war that drove the Soviets out of Afghanistan and helped bring an end to the Cold War—the largest and most successful covert action program in the history of the CIA. A quarter century later, he played a major policy and planning role in the war with al-Qa’ida and in the operation that killed Usama bin Ladin. From 2011 to 2015, Vickers served as the Under Secretary of Defense for Intelligence, an $80 billion, 180,000-person, global operation that includes the National Security Agency, Defense Intelligence Agency, National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency, and the National Reconnaissance Office. From 2007 to 2011, he served as the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations, Low-Intensity Conflict, and Interdependent Capabilities. Earlier in his career, he served in the Special Forces and in the CIA’s Clandestine Service. Dr. Vickers is a recipient of the Presidential National Security Medal, our nation’s highest award in intelligence and national security. He holds a B.A. from the University of Alabama, an M.B.A. from the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania, and a Ph.D. from the Johns Hopkins University.