



A Global Strategy for Combating al Qaeda and the Islamic State

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Executive Summary

The United States faces a fundamental challenge to its way of life. Al Qaeda and the Islamic State (ISIS), two groups that have already killed thousands of Americans and tens of thousands of Muslims, are waging war on the United States, our allies, and our friends as part of a general strategy to create a global caliphate. As evidenced by their gains in Syria, Iraq, Libya, Yemen, and South Asia, the extremists are no longer on the run and arguably are winning. Al Qaeda, in particular, has expanded its control and influence in the past few years, with affiliates and linked groups present in more than 20 countries. Whereas these organizations were limited mostly to terrorist activities in 2011, today they are playing leading roles in a dozen active insurgencies and, along with ISIS, are beginning to demonstrate conventional warfare capabilities in places like Syria, Iraq, and Yemen. ISIS, meanwhile, has control of large swaths of territory in Syria and Iraq and is performing all the functions of governance in these areas. Perhaps even more important, the extremists currently have momentum: expanding the territory under their influence, increasing their access to safe havens, spreading their ideology, and raising their capabilities.

In seeking to counter these threats, the United States faces significant strategic challenges. American leaders still have not recognized the nature of this war and have a dangerous misconception of the threat. At the same time, our global position is materially worse than it was just three years ago. We have fewer allies, fewer capable partners, fewer forward bases, fewer available resources, and fewer forces to deal with the threat. The policies the United States has adopted to confront al Qaeda and ISIS are also reactive, rather than proactive, ceding initiative to the extremists. All these developments create the perception that the United States is no longer winning the fight against al Qaeda and ISIS.

Although the ongoing US-led airstrikes in Iraq and Syria demonstrate increased American resolve, the United States needs a new strategy to stop ISIS, al Qaeda, and affiliated groups: a counterinsurgency with ideological, security, diplomatic, economic, and political components. This comprehensive population-centric strategy must confront ISIS and al Qaeda on a regional basis, rather than in independent undertakings. The first effort must focus on the Levant, an area that includes Syria and Iraq, as well as on the Arabian Peninsula, which acts as a crucial support for the extremists' main fight. Beyond these two areas, the US will also need to engage in South Asia, which provides al Qaeda, in particular, with its main command node.

The objectives of this strategy are clear: al Qaeda, ISIS, and the jihadist or Islamist movements close to the group must be defeated decisively, the territory and people that they control must be freed, and extremist ideology must be so discredited that few Muslims will feel attracted to its arguments. Given the size of the problem, the United States needs capable partners with responsive, legitimate governments to help degrade and defeat ISIS and al Qaeda militarily and ideologically.

For the purposes of this strategy, victory will mean reducing al Qaeda and ISIS back to the original terrorist group that they were in the late 1980s: small and incapable of carrying out mass-casualty terrorist attacks. This can happen only when we have degraded the extremists' capabilities until they are once again unable to recruit enough followers to replace leaders lost, to hold territory or enforce their version of sharia, and to carry out anything but minor and local terrorist attacks. None of this is possible without capable partners.

The global and comprehensive nature of this counterinsurgency strategy leads to an especially difficult challenge: this will not be an easy or short conflict,

and the country must be prepared politically, fiscally, militarily, and mentally for a long war. Given the long-term and continuous effort inherent in this strategy, building domestic support and bipartisan agreement is vital. The risks of action seem clear and overwhelming, but the risks of inaction—including the loss of key terrain to both groups, the creation of multiple safe havens for the extremists to plot against us, and the undermining of states around the globe—are even more dire.

As these conditions worsen, al Qaeda and/or ISIS will carry out a mass-casualty attack against the homeland: it is a question of not if, but rather when. Even more worrisome is our assessment that, if we fail to stop the extremists from taking territory and undermining states, al Qaeda or ISIS will obtain weapons of mass destruction; then it will be too late to act. Preventing these outcomes will require a serious and prolonged effort, but it is an effort that is well worth the costs and risks for the United States and our allies and partners.

A Global Strategy against al Qaeda and the Islamic State

The Current Situation

The United States faces a fundamental challenge to its way of life. Al Qaeda and ISIS, two groups that have already killed thousands of Americans and tens of thousands of Muslims, are at war with us as part of a general strategy to create their global caliphate. We need to recognize the depth of the problem that we face, acknowledge the magnitude of effort that will be needed to confront it, and steel ourselves for a long fight if we wish to emerge victorious.

We must equally avoid the temptation of defeatism. This is a conflict we can and must win, sooner rather than later. And while victory in the long term is inevitable because the Muslim world will eventually reject the hateful ideology of al Qaeda and ISIS, our challenge is to minimize the damage to our own people, our way of life, and the world and to avoid the calamities that could befall us if these groups or their allies acquire weapons of mass destruction. This task is hard but not hopeless.

Success requires a new grand strategic approach that views the enemy as the global, interconnected system that it is. Fourteen years of attempting to decapitate al Qaeda have failed—the group now has greater military power and territory than ever before. Yet large-scale invasions of countries where al Qaeda and its affiliates operate cannot be our first option. They allow the enemy to impose high costs on the US and its allies in return for partial successes in individual theaters. The better solution is a coordinated series of regional counterinsurgency campaigns to combat al Qaeda and ISIS. This population-centric and phased approach must organically include a robust stabilization effort and combine diplomatic, political, security, and informational efforts.

These campaigns must be tailored for each specific fight according to the nature and strength of the enemy,

the attitudes of the local population, the capacity of the host government in the particular area of concern, and many other factors. There can be no one-size-fits-all approach. Yet each campaign must be nested in a global framework rather than functioning as an independent undertaking. Indeed, there is no prospect for a lasting or decisive outcome if the individual campaigns are not synchronized with this larger strategy; aligning the United States with Russia, Iran, Syria, and Hezbollah in an effort to defeat ISIS would be an example of this penny-wise, pound-foolish approach, as wasteful as it is strategically counterproductive.

We must also take the long-run view in allocating resources, particularly military resources, to this effort and to each campaign. Because of the global scope and complexity of the conflict, there is no way to achieve the rapid, decisive operations so beloved of US military leaders and policymakers. Moreover, at this point, we do not have sufficient forces, especially land forces, to prosecute the war to the fullest extent in many places.

Our strategy must reflect our diminished means and the realities of current domestic opinion in the United States and elsewhere. Campaigns should be designed in part to build American and allied confidence that success is possible while acknowledging our commitment must be sustained over time. Our allies, in particular, must be convinced we will not again leave them in the lurch. Given the worsening balance of power across the Middle East, some circumstances—acute threats, the need to buttress a failing ally, or even the opportunity to deliver a locally decisive blow—may demand the direct commitment of a substantial American force. And although we must have a durable and comprehensive strategy, we must remember that no plan survives contact with the enemy or events. This strategy provides a framework for campaign planning, not a step-by-step recipe for victory.

A grand strategy this complex cannot be outlined in a single paper. Its execution requires the development of discrete country and regional strategies and campaign plans. As a group, representing a variety of research institutions, we will work to outline these discrete strategies in coordinated efforts. An initial paper on Yemen, recently released by the Critical Threats Project at the American Enterprise Institute, is the model for these products.¹

The Enemy Situation

The need for a new strategy has never been greater. The extremists are no longer on the run and arguably are winning. They have made major gains in Syria, Iraq, Libya, Yemen, the Caucasus, and Afghanistan and are known to be planning large-scale attacks against the United States and the West, as the Paris siege shows.

Each campaign must be nested in a global framework rather than functioning as an independent undertaking.

Al Qaeda, in particular, has expanded its control and influence in the past three years, with affiliates and linked groups present in more than 20 countries. Where these organizations were limited to mostly terrorist activities in 2011, today they are playing leading roles in a dozen insurgencies from Northern Mali to Myanmar. This has given the group access to numerous safe havens and opportunities to control lives and territory in preparation for the declaration of a state.

ISIS, meanwhile, has controlled a significant percentage of Syria and Iraq for more than a year. It is performing all the functions of a true government in these areas, albeit poorly, and has steadily expanded in the teeth of the Western air campaign, seizing Ramadi in Iraq and Palmyra in Syria. Through brutal murder and intimidation, as well as the creation of institutions, ISIS is directly controlling the lives of millions of people.

The group's military capacity has also grown dramatically, with one estimate putting its total security forces at 200,000, and it is winning over new recruits

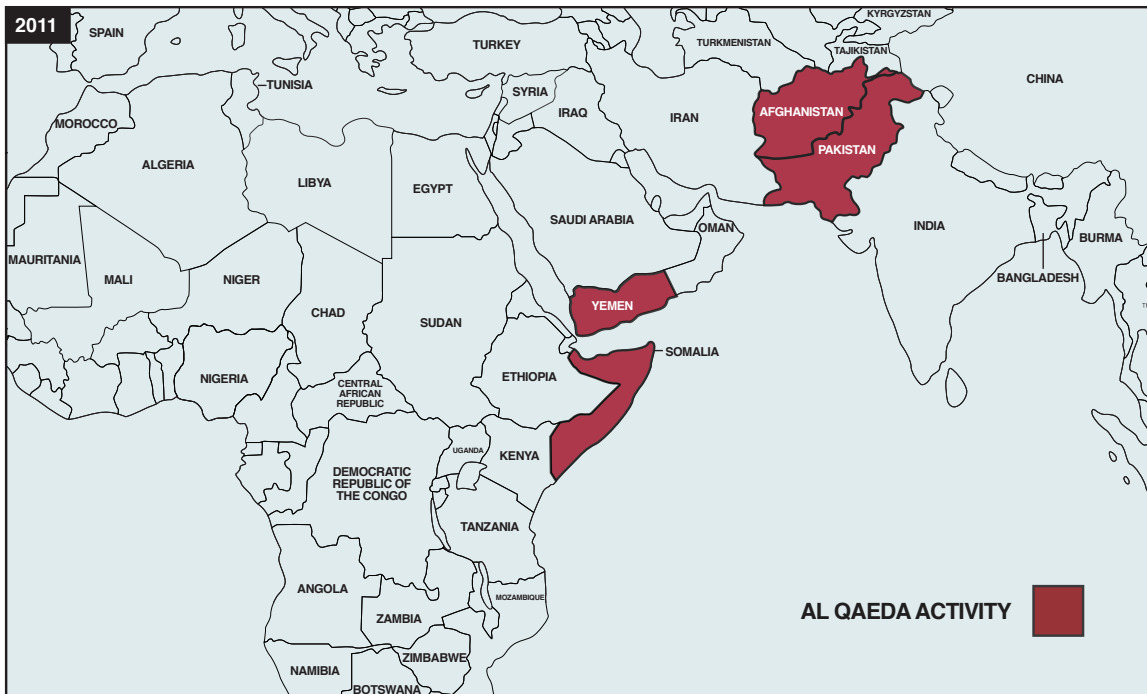
throughout the Muslim-majority world.² ISIS has expanded its franchise into Libya, Yemen, Afghanistan, and the Caucasus, moreover, ensuring that even its defeat in Iraq and Syria (of which there is little hope in the short term) would not destroy it. The strategic result of the appearance of ISIS has not been to splinter al Qaeda or to lessen the threat from the extremists: rather, the threat has doubled throughout the world (figures 1 and 2).

In a few places, like Iraq, Syria, and Yemen, al Qaeda and ISIS are beginning to demonstrate conventional warfare capabilities. They are successfully maneuvering mechanized forces with trucks, Humvees, armored personnel carriers, and artillery against the Iraqi security forces and against Bashar al Assad's troops. Just as important, the extremists have the momentum, while the US and its allies have been merely reacting to events.

Although the revolutions of the Arab Spring have deeply affected these developments, the most important reason for the growth in the reach and power of al Qaeda and ISIS is the decision by the United States to retreat from a direct fight, downgrade our involvement from a wartime to a law-enforcement effort, and focus narrowly on preventing attacks on the homeland. The current analytical framework the Obama administration and its surrogates have promulgated insists on understanding al Qaeda as a "core" disconnected from "affiliates," giving intellectual support to our retreat. Through this framework, the US government has justified ignoring the growing threat from so-called "local" insurgencies by defining the "real" threat to the US as emanating solely from a terrorist core in South Asia and downplaying the command and control exercised by al Qaeda's leadership over its branches. This has been aided and abetted by American war-weariness over Iraq and Afghanistan, the serious economic troubles caused by the financial crisis of 2008, and the politicization of the war with al Qaeda.

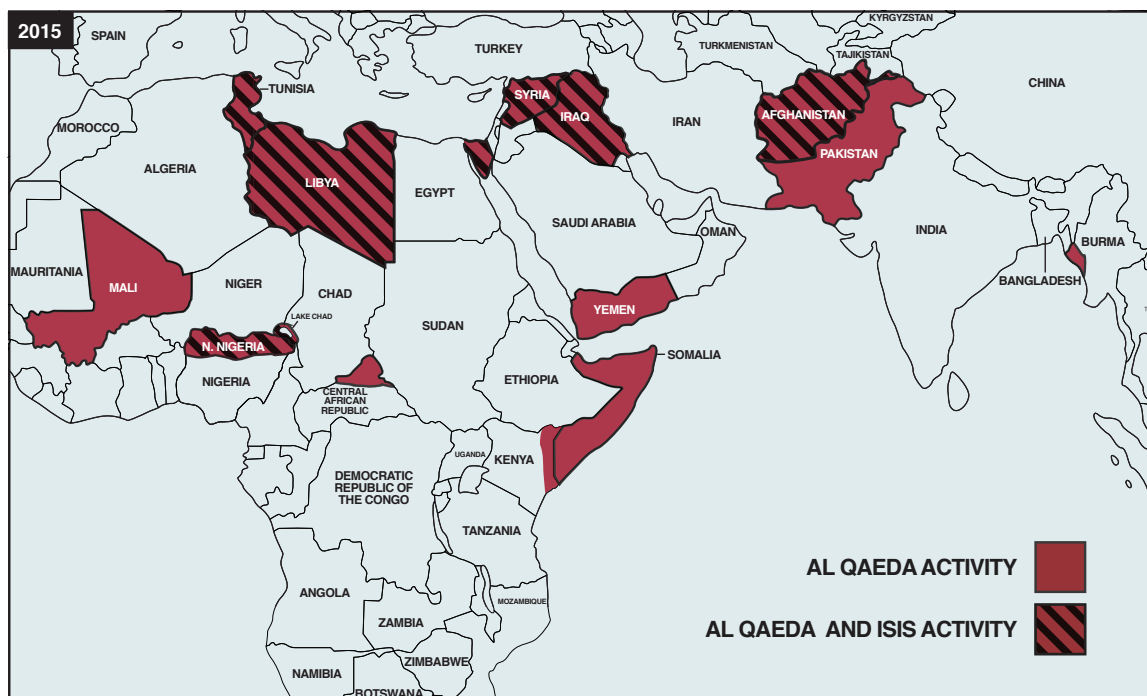
The resulting security situation, which has allowed violence to spiral out of control in places like Iraq, Syria, Yemen, and Libya, requires immediate focus on a solution that will suppress the violence and allow space for political processes and humanitarian engagement. This means that any serious proposal for dealing with

Figure 1. Al Qaeda and ISIS-Linked Insurgencies: 2011



Source: Author and the Central Intelligence Agency.

Figure 2. Al Qaeda and ISIS-Linked Insurgencies: 2015



Source: Author and the Central Intelligence Agency.

the current situation must focus first on the military and security component. Yet despite the urgency of the security situation, we cannot put off political solutions or an ideological struggle, which are necessary for the long-term success of the strategy.

Defining the Enemy. Designing a strategy must begin with a clear vision of the enemy and its plans. Al Qaeda and ISIS are both ideas and entities. They are, first and foremost, groups based on the central idea that they have a divinely mandated vision for ordering human society. This ordering is to be accomplished through implementing their triumphalist version of sharia, which the extremists believe is an individual obligation that all Muslims must fulfill. Along with this very specific version of extremist sharia, al Qaeda is committed to a particular ideology (*'aqida*) and jihadist methodology (*minhaj*) created by Osama bin Laden and other leaders in 1988 and currently espoused by Ayman al Zawahiri and the leadership cadre around him. ISIS accepts all the essentials of this ideological and methodological vision and disputes only the timing and manner of its implementation.

Designing a strategy must begin with a clear vision of the enemy and its plans.

As an entity, al Qaeda is more than just the leadership around Zawahiri: it is a network of organizations with a clear membership and hierarchy. Both of these are generally defined by the swearing of an oath of fealty (called *bay'a*) that binds members to leaders in a feudal relationship, determines leaders and followers, and requires hearing and obeying orders from above. The swearing of *bay'a* means that al Qaeda consists of the leadership around Zawahiri, any lower commander who has sworn the oath to this leadership, and all local soldiers who have sworn fealty to al Qaeda commanders. From a small conspiracy of perhaps a hundred men in 1988, al Qaeda has grown to tens of thousands of commanders and fighters around the world.

ISIS is also an entity, one that once fit into al Qaeda's hierarchy until it broke its oaths to create a distinct

organization. This new entity recognizes Abu Bakr al Baghdadi as "Caliph Ibrahim," the only legitimate religious authority and political ruler of the entire Muslim community. According to the vision of ISIS, all Muslims are now obligated to swear fealty to the caliph and, if they refuse, are in rebellion (*khuruj*) against the sole legitimate authority and should be crucified as punishment. Subordinated to the caliph is the same sort of leadership hierarchy created by al Qaeda, but it is tied more tightly to the "commander of the faithful." Through this hierarchy and his close proximity to his forces, Baghdadi is able to wield greater command and control than Zawahiri over the military-political apparatus that is currently ravaging Iraq and Syria and therefore presents a challenge closer to that of a nation-state than does al Qaeda.

The Enemy's Strategies. Al Qaeda pursues a staged global military-political strategy to achieve its grandiose objective of world domination and the destruction of all competing social, political, and religious orders. The entire strategy is global in scope, ideology, and principles, but local and pragmatic in its application.

The first stage of al Qaeda's strategy focuses on establishing organizations in multiple Muslim-majority countries. Al Qaeda has done this through the creation of new groups or the cooptation of established fighters in target countries that have perceived conditions for success—such as an ongoing insurgency, weak central governments, ungoverned spaces, or domestic hostility toward "agents of the West." This first stage also emphasizes *da'wa*, or proselytism, to convince ordinary Muslims to join al Qaeda in its efforts.

The next stage has focused on removing the United States from Muslim-majority countries. Al Qaeda's leaders believe that only the United States has the resources, capabilities, and willingness to take them on and defeat them, and they have therefore been killing Americans so that the US will be forced to remove not only military forces but also every citizen—diplomat, tourist, scholar, or businessman—from Muslim-majority countries. In countries where the military forces of the US and its allies (France, African Union Mission in Somalia, Ethiopia, and so forth) are present, al Qaeda has also targeted partner

governments to destabilize and punish them for their cooperation with us.

While engaged in these efforts, al Qaeda has imposed its version of governance on any ground al Qaeda and its affiliates have held. In places like Somalia, Yemen, Syria, and Northern Pakistan, al Qaeda affiliates and al Qaeda-linked groups have set up shadow governments—with their own political rulers, military commanders, religious police (*hisba*), and judges—whose main task is to impose sharia. Control of people's public behavior has thus always been the primary indication of al Qaeda's dominance in an area. As the United States has pulled back, al Qaeda and its affiliates have attempted to consolidate their political victories and topple hostile rulers in Muslim-majority countries, the next stage of their strategy. In countries without direct US or allied presence, this stage has taken precedence over attacking America. Succeeding stages will continue to spread al Qaeda's concept of governance around the world through violence and *da'wa* until first Islamic emirates and then the "caliphate" are founded.

In contrast, ISIS has taken a more pragmatic stance in its military-political strategy. Captured documents from Iraq show that the group has adopted and adapted Ba'athist notions on military and political matters, giving their caliphate a realist gloss, especially when compared to the ideologically motivated strategy of al Qaeda. This should not, however, imply that ISIS is not committed to full compliance with an ideology that is very similar to al Qaeda's—but even more extreme—and to the immediate implementation of the most radical version of sharia. These factors must be considered when seeking to understand and combat the group, since ISIS uses its ideology to shape its appeal to Muslims, to justify its murder and enslavement of innocents, and to create its governance structures in Iraq and Syria.

Potential Enemy Courses of Action. The primary goals of al Qaeda and ISIS military operations (in which they include terrorism) are to break the will of the US and the West to fight them, overthrow all of the current governments in the Muslim world, gain control over the territory inhabited by all Muslims, and impose their view of religion and governance on the conquered

areas. Al Qaeda and ISIS see themselves as conquering armies expanding Islam as Muhammad and the early caliphs did.

Their military means are twofold: insurgent and conventional operations (maneuvering units of infantry and sometimes mechanized forces) in theaters where they have sufficient force and terrorist operations (suicide attacks, car bombs, and so forth) everywhere. Terrorism in areas under their control is generally aimed at intimidating wayward populations and eliminating potential fifth columnists, such as those who formed the "awakenings" in Iraq in 2006–08. Terrorism in the West is designed to deter the West from intervening in their affairs and to end Western support for Muslim regimes who resist al Qaeda or ISIS. It is also meant to demonstrate the groups' ability to operate in the enemy's heartland for purposes both of recruitment and fundraising. In the case of ISIS, finally, the aim is also to provoke Western nations to overreact against their own Muslim populations, facilitating their radicalization.

Because they maintain the initiative, ISIS and al Qaeda have a wide variety of options that they can pursue to achieve their military and political goals, some based on terrorism and others on insurgent actions. The most dangerous insurgent course of action that al Qaeda could take, and one that seems increasingly likely, would be to launch a coordinated multitheater offensive. This would entail simultaneous offensives in several of the territorial regions (*aqalim*) into which al Qaeda divides the world.

The American counterterrorism strategy in place today is insufficient to address this course of action. A coordinated multitheater offensive would overwhelm current US counterterrorism partners and would not be contained by the current US approach of prioritized allocation of American military and intelligence resources against a single enemy group. A multifront offensive of this variety could then attack American bases in the region directly, deliver hundreds or thousands of American businessmen and tourists as hostages, cause the collapse of key allies, and plunge the entire region into full-scale and chaotic war.

It is more likely, however, that al Qaeda will move through its doctrinal stages, which include phases for

Figure 3. The Muslim-Majority World in al Qaeda’s Strategic Vision

STRATEGIC OFFENSIVE All-out offensive against central government	STRATEGIC EQUILIBRIUM Imposing governance
Afghanistan	Syria Yemen Somalia Libya Mali Northern Pakistan
STRATEGIC DEFENSIVE First stages of guerilla warfare	COVERT JIHAD Creation of a solid base
Egypt Tunisia Algeria Nigeria Caucasus	Includes countries like Algeria, Niger, and Saudi Arabia

Source: Author.

da'wa and jihad, to transform vulnerable Muslim-majority countries from arenas that merely support jihad (through migration or giving money, for example) into political states that conform to al Qaeda’s vision (figure 3). As al Qaeda moves through these phases, it becomes increasingly embedded with the population, and the effort required to defeat it grows. This approach is less dangerous to the US in the short term but can set conditions for an even broader multi-front attack in the future. The likelihood of its success rests on continuing to confuse, distract, and divert Western attention from the gradual establishment of solid bases. Current American strategy, unfortunately, virtually guarantees that we will remain distracted and confused.

The most dangerous insurgent course of action for ISIS, on the other hand, is the seizure of either Damascus or Baghdad. In this scenario, ISIS would attempt to amass forces in Syria or Iraq to overwhelm defenders and take control of either capital. The ISIS seizure of Palmyra in Syria opens the door to just such an attack on Damascus. The formation of a combined operations room with other Syrian opposition groups in the south increases the likelihood of this eventuality, although it is not clear what role ISIS would play either in the operation or in the governance to follow.

The group’s most likely course of action will be to continue to spread its jihad to countries in the surrounding region. The destabilizing effect of continued ISIS expansion will harm the global economy and undermine the security, economies, and stability of potential US partners such as Lebanon, Jordan, the United Arab Emirates, and Saudi Arabia. In addition, because of the heinous actions of ISIS, some of our allies in the Arabian Peninsula and Persian Gulf have begun to think of al Qaeda as a moderate, and therefore more tolerable, group with which they can actually deal and negotiate. A further dangerous course of action for both ISIS and al Qaeda would be reconciliation between at least parts of the two groups on the basis of attacking the US. This course of action is being actively pursued by al Qaeda and, if successful, would present the US with the most serious terrorist threat that it has ever faced.

Beyond this threat, al Qaeda and ISIS might take one of a series of potential terrorist courses of action. The most dangerous for both groups would be the acquisition and use of nuclear or chemical weapons. We assess that there is only a low probability that al Qaeda will use biological weapons, given Zawahiri’s ideological commitment to protecting Muslim blood and the inherent problems with controlling the spread

of pathogens, although ISIS seems unlikely to subscribe to this ban against biological weapons. Even al Qaeda has no such inhibitions about nuclear weapons, however, and has previously sought to develop or acquire them. Both groups, moreover, are certain to continue the incitement of lone-wolf and low-level attacks in Europe or the United States. Al Qaeda also remains committed to larger-scale attacks, perhaps on the scale of 9/11, and it seems prudent to include this as one of their most likely courses of terrorist action.

The US Situation

The United States faces significant ideological and material challenges in confronting these threats. Many American leaders still have not recognized the nature of this war and have a dangerous misconception of the threat, understanding the al Qaeda network, especially, as presenting a local and disparate challenge rather than one that is coordinated and global. Because of our generally secular perspective, US and Western policymakers and analysts devalue the importance of ideology, ideas, and faith in the motivations of al Qaeda and ISIS. This is concerning because al Qaeda, in particular, has been clear from the outset about its motivations and objectives, basing them firmly on extremist religious grounds. Despite these clearly stated ideals, the US has not developed a comprehensive strategy to deal with the core ideological challenge the extremists present.

At the same time, our global position is materially worse than it was four years ago. We have fewer allies, forward bases, available resources, and forces to deal with this problem.

At home, the fact that it has been well over a decade since the 9/11 attacks has led many Americans to believe that we are safe and created a sense of complacency and a willingness to devalue the threat from al Qaeda for several crucial years. The period of limited US counterterrorism action after the withdrawal of all US forces from Iraq in 2011 effectively allowed al Qaeda to reconstitute itself where it had been weakened.

The US long dismissed al Qaeda's regrowth in Yemen as a purely local threat, for example. The group

has since attempted multiple attacks against American targets from there. Similarly, the group resurged in Iraq during a yearlong campaign to rebuild its ranks after the US withdrawal. The group that was once near defeat is now a preeminent threat in the region.

We have pursued wrong ideas and wrong strategies—now we must develop and pursue the right ones.

Although Americans are becoming less complacent, many are still deeply reluctant to consider long-term involvement in the Muslim-majority world or the increase in military expenditures that this conflict requires. Arguments against involvement cite the failure of the US to defeat these groups after 9/11 and question whether there is a sound reason to expect a different outcome. Critiques of the war on terror focus on the fact that it is impossible to defeat the extremist's ideology, and therefore, that the war was lost before it began. Yet this ideology did not resonate strongly at first. It is only in the past decade or so that the ideology has gained strength, keeping pace with the military successes of al Qaeda and ISIS.

The fact that previous efforts have failed, moreover, does not mean that all future efforts are doomed. Any serious reading of American military history, in fact, reveals that the US often makes mistakes (sometimes disastrous ones) early on in conflicts.³ America has historically shown an extraordinary ability to learn from mistakes and early defeats to craft new strategies and approaches to conflict that lead to success. There is no reason for the present conflict to be any exception. We have pursued wrong ideas and wrong strategies—now we must develop and pursue the right ones.

A New Strategy for Combating al Qaeda and ISIS

The objective of the new grand strategy is to defeat al Qaeda and ISIS by reducing their capabilities to those of the original terrorist group that they were in

the late 1980s: small and incapable of carrying out mass-casualty terrorist attacks. This objective requires degrading the extremist groups to the point where they are unable to recruit enough followers to replace leaders lost, to hold territory or enforce their version of sharia, and to carry out any but minor and local terrorist attacks.

Starting Principles. The rapidly deteriorating security situation in the Muslim-majority world means that this strategy must prioritize ending the violence that prevents regional partners from combating al Qaeda and ISIS and creates space and energy for the enemy to recruit and operate. The situation is so dire that military, intelligence, and law enforcement must figure prominently. Yet we cannot ignore the need for political solutions, diplomatic and population-centric engagement, new financial and legal tools, and combating the ideology of the extremists. The entire American government, along with parts of the private sector, will need to work with both allies and partners simultaneously on all these areas to take on and defeat al Qaeda and ISIS.

In addition, as the last few years have clearly demonstrated, the US must take the lead in this conflict: leading from behind has meant, in reality, that no one has led, allowing the global security situation to deteriorate precipitously. American leadership will entail pulling together a coalition that can confront al Qaeda as a united front, making a persuasive argument for a way forward, and investing our own blood and treasure in the fight.

The US will need to develop strong local partnerships to put the region on the path toward stability with governments across the Muslim-majority world that are increasingly legitimate, responsive, and capable of securing their territory. Current trends are, unfortunately, in the opposite direction—many states are becoming less responsive and legitimate or are losing the ability to secure their lands against the increasingly capable enemy. The prioritizing of partnerships should not, however, obscure the fact that the US will also need to lead its allies and partners in a coordinated series of regional counterinsurgency campaigns to combat al Qaeda and ISIS. The aim of these campaigns,

conducted wherever possible through local state and substate partners, is to help bring about the strong, stable, legitimate forms of governance that can prevent al Qaeda/ISIS from reemerging yet again after we have defeated them.

As the United States undertakes this strategy, our leaders need to clearly recognize the positions of key players in the Muslim-majority world. Beyond al Qaeda and ISIS, our adversaries consist of Iran (and its proxy Hezbollah), the Syrian regime, and illiberal Islamism, whose imposition of extremist sharia is incompatible for our way of life. Russia, through its deployment of forces in the region, now presents a challenge that could lead to conflict without wise diplomatic engagement.

We are confronted as well with a number of ambiguous or alienated powers, with whom relationships need to be carefully managed or cultivated. Among these are interested outsiders like China, as well as key regional states like Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Pakistan, Burma, Sudan, Mauritania, and Egypt, which might be productive partners for certain aspects of this conflict. The US has a very large number of regional friends and allies that will be good partners too, such as Jordan, Lebanon, Kurdistan, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Israel, Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Niger, Nigeria, Mali, Afghanistan, India, many states in Central Asia, Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, and the Philippines, along with our allies such as Great Britain, Australia, Canada, and Europe.

It is apparent from this discussion that this strategy depends on a long-term commitment to solving this challenge. We might be involved in a generational struggle with a foe that is determined to radicalize enough of the Muslim community to sustain a global insurgency. There is no easy, short-term answer to a problem of this magnitude. We can, however, craft a sustainable effort toward a realistic goal that we can accomplish. Commitment to long-term engagement has a number of significant implications for this strategy; we will cover these later in this paper, but it is important from the outset to make this absolutely clear.

Ideology: The Enemy Center of Gravity. Despite our recognition of the appalling security situation in many parts of the world and the need to address this situation quickly, we assess that the center of gravity

for both ISIS and al Qaeda is their ideology, a form of jihadi-salafism. That is, by delegitimizing the ideology that attracts Muslims to al Qaeda and other extremist organizations and motivates their subsequent actions, we can defeat them. Conversely, if we fail to deal with the underlying ideology that motivates al Qaeda and its affiliates, we are likely to enjoy only limited success.

The United States must therefore work with key partners in Muslim-majority countries to show the bankruptcy of the extremist's ideology. This can be done in terms of the disconnect between ideology and reality, the lack of legitimacy of the ideology, the ideology's detrimental effect on the Islamic world, and the inability of ISIS and al Qaeda to create a functioning and modern state.

In short, the US needs a sophisticated and flexible effort that discredits the extremists and takes on directly their core messaging and religious ideology. As part of this effort, the US needs to empower local religious rivals of al Qaeda and ISIS, who will be able to make the sophisticated arguments necessary to take on and defeat the extremists' ideology. The power and appeal of Sufism, a more mystical form of Islam that the extremists hate and seek to destroy, for example, makes this version of Islam in general a natural local ally for confronting and defeating the extremists.

In addition to informational engagement, successfully attacking the extremists' ideology will require US-led actions across the political and military spectrum. This ideology feeds on success and withers on failure. By denying and reversing battlefield victories by ISIS and al Qaeda in places like Iraq, Syria, and Yemen, the US will decisively undermine the enemies' arguments and appeal and set the conditions for advancing legitimate, responsive, and capable governments throughout the region. When this sort of governance is advanced, we also split enemies internally, deprive them of a base of support, and create potential long-term partners for the fight. Diplomatically, the US should stigmatize and punish any interaction with the extremists, while reassuring our allies and partners that we are there for the long term. Undermining the ideology can also be done financially and religiously by cutting off funding for extremist imams and shaykhs while promoting moderate alternatives.

A Long-Term Political Solution. Attacking the ideology sets the conditions for a political settlement, but it will not lead to a long-term solution without a concerted effort by the US and its partners. The most important characteristics of the solution are the encouragement of governance that is legitimate in the eyes of each country's population, responsive to the demands of its citizens, and capable of securing its own territory while combating the extremists with minimal support from outsiders.

*For the success of this strategy, COIN
must be empowered again and revitalized
within the ground forces, in particular.*

Each piece of this solution will require decades, not years, of engagement by the US and our allies, but it is important to stress that without a political solution to the problems of the greater Middle East, there will be no lasting peace. Given the military successes by al Qaeda and ISIS, it is also clear that no political solution is possible while the levels of violence are so high throughout the region and while it appears that the extremists are on the march.

Concept of Operations: Continuous Regional Counterinsurgency Campaigns. This discussion makes obvious that winning militarily against ISIS and al Qaeda is crucial to all other successes, including taking on and defeating the enemy's ideology and establishing a lasting political settlement. As long as both groups continue to hold territory, impose their vision of governance, win allies and fresh recruits, prosecute new military and terrorist offensives, and destabilize entire countries, neither they nor their ideology can be defeated. The only military course of action that has any chance of succeeding against the extremists is a counterinsurgency carried out as a series of coordinated and continuous regional campaigns synchronized with political, diplomatic, and ideological efforts. Each piece of this proposal requires further explication.

Counterinsurgency. As the US learned in Iraq and Afghanistan, it is impossible to depend on attrition or counterterrorism techniques alone to defeat an insurgency that controls peoples' lives, recruits heavily from the population, and engages in sophisticated irregular warfare. The US military developed a set of successful and well-understood population-centric techniques and tactics to defeat the insurgency in Iraq and slow the advances of the insurgents in Afghanistan. Unfortunately, counterinsurgency, or COIN, has been disempowered within the US military and policy elite. For the success of this strategy, COIN must be empowered again and revitalized within the ground forces, in particular.

COIN does not mean hundreds of thousands of American forces fighting in many countries, however. We must learn to place the experiences of Iraq and Afghanistan in proper perspective. Both conflicts started when American military forces overthrew a sitting government and destroyed its security and police forces. We then made numerous mistakes that allowed insurgencies to grow and expand into major military threats without adequately developing indigenous security forces to combat them.

Those are not the conditions we face in most of the theaters in which we must now confront this enemy. Iraq and Afghanistan both have security and paramilitary forces of their own actively engaged against the enemy. They require significant assistance but should not be pushed aside by American combat troops taking the fight to the enemy directly, as was necessary in 2007 in Iraq and 2009 in Afghanistan. Fragmented but still militarily significant local and regional forces confront al Qaeda and ISIS in Yemen, Libya, Somalia, and Mali. The Egyptian and Nigerian militaries are relatively strong and cohesive and could be meaningful partners if governments in Cairo and Abuja could be persuaded to adopt more suitable counterinsurgency strategies. The armed forces and police establishments of Algeria, Chad, Uganda, and Kenya have shown themselves capable of fighting al Qaeda and could be more so with additional limited military assistance and suitable changes to their domestic and regional approaches. Only Syria stands out as lacking anything approaching a local partner we can work with.

The COIN needed to defeat ISIS and al Qaeda will not therefore be the sole provenance of the US military: it depends heavily on supporting efforts from our partners and allies that will in most cases make the deployment of large numbers of American military forces into combat both unnecessary and inadvisable. The low military capacity of many of our intended partners, their lack of experience with modern counterinsurgency, and their general attitude toward target populations that tends to favor attrition or punitive tactics has reduced their effectiveness. The US government and its Western allies must therefore take on as their first task the training of partner forces in COIN and the convincing of both military and political leaders that this is necessary for success. Yet our work with partners will not preclude the engagement (boots on the ground) of limited numbers of American forces if and when the security situation demands it and our partners require more support than trainers.

Regional Campaigns. Because ISIS and al Qaeda do not recognize international borders and use neighboring states to facilitate, prepare, and train forces for battle, any attempt to combat them must be fought on a regional, rather than state-by-state, basis. Al Qaeda in particular has demarcated its military-political regions in specific and discernable ways that do not follow international norms or the territorial divisions accepted within the US government. This means that the US will need to execute this strategy across our own military-diplomatic boundaries. Defining the precise outlines of each regional campaign should be determined by the individual battlefields and, in some cases, by how ISIS and al Qaeda understand their own areas of responsibility. This will allow us to take advantage of the seams in their own military-political territorial organization.

Aligning the campaigns with the enemy's regional systems that cross state boundaries also deprives the enemy of the use of neighboring undergoverned territory and the ability to exploit illicit cross-border networks. Both ISIS and al Qaeda have established safe havens in undergoverned territory, areas on the periphery of or outside of the state's control. These regions, which run across state borders, directly support the groups' operations, prevent the consolidation of gains

against them, and also host smuggling or migration networks that link into a global system. ISIS and al Qaeda exploit the physical sanctuary for their insurgency and terrorist attacks while they use the networks to funnel fighters, capabilities, and couriers or to tax goods that move through nodes under their control.

Depriving ISIS and al Qaeda of access to physical sanctuary and these enabling regional systems will further divide the enemy and help isolate it from external support. It is important to emphasize that many of these operations are matters to be addressed by local and international law enforcement rather than through combat. The operations can be effective only on a transnational and coordinated basis, however, since the criminal networks on which al Qaeda and ISIS rely are themselves designed to run along the gaps and seams of governance.

Coordinated and Continuous. US regional engagement will need to be closely coordinated to deconflict efforts on a regional scale and to prevent extremists from fleeing to neighboring countries and reestablishing themselves. In addition, the impoverishing of the US military over the past four years means that we will be incapable, at least at first, of carrying out more than one fully resourced military campaign at a time. The main military and political campaigns will therefore need to be carried out sequentially and continuously so that neither ISIS nor al Qaeda has time and space to rest, recruit, and reform in other regions.

The focus on any one region should not, however, imply that the US can ignore or neglect other areas of the world. Al Qaeda groups in Yemen, Mali, Libya, and Syria have benefited directly from our unwillingness or inability to recognize and take action against their growing strength. Rather, the US will need to work with our partners and allies on a global basis, through diplomatic, intelligence, and special operations forces efforts, to suppress any surge in terrorist or insurgent activity, including the movement of foreign fighters, caused by the main effort and, in some cases, to set the conditions in these battlespaces for later campaigns.

Synchronization of Effort. Despite the primacy of the military effort at this time, it is impossible to defeat

ISIS or al Qaeda without the involvement of the entire US government. Key strategic tasks will require ideological, political, and diplomatic engagement, and they will need to be carefully synchronized across the government. We have already pointed out actions that will help to defeat al Qaeda and ISIS ideologically, and it is important to always have in mind that ideology is the enemy's center of gravity. Any military, political, or diplomatic actions must be weighed to ensure they aid in delegitimizing the extremists while not yielding space for the informational strategies of the enemy.

The US must therefore work to foster responsive, legitimate, and capable governments that have the capacity to carry out their own COIN with minimal assistance.

Politically, the regional COIN this strategy proposes is confronted by a serious challenge: the need for partner governments that will not crumble under the weight of a long fight. The Arab Spring showed that even seemingly capable states can fall because of corrupt governance, failed economies, and alternatives offered by extremists and liberals alike. The US must therefore work to foster responsive, legitimate, and capable governments that have the capacity to carry out their own COIN with minimal assistance (primarily logistical and training aid).

The US should encourage governance that responds to the needs and demands of populations as a whole and not just one particular family, clan, tribe, sect, party, or sector of a society. We should understand "legitimacy" in the terms of the societies themselves, not in terms that fit into Western definitions of what constitutes legitimate governance. These governments should become ever more capable of defending themselves from al Qaeda and ISIS both politically and militarily. This will occur only when they too depend less on attrition when confronted with an insurgency and more on a population-centric COIN strategy.

Figure 4. Region for the Main Effort



Source: Author and the Central Intelligence Agency.

To encourage this sort of governance and build the partnerships necessary to defeat al Qaeda and ISIS, the US will also need a global diplomatic strategy that is closely synchronized with military and political efforts. As we have stressed numerous times, the US is incapable of taking on and defeating ISIS and al Qaeda on our own: we must have strong friends, allies, and partners who will join us in this endeavor, or we will fail.

In much the same way, domestic support and bipartisan agreement are vital to this strategy. This includes consistently presenting to the American people the reasons for taking on the extremists, the objectives in this fight, and the fact that it is possible—with persistence and patience—to defeat ISIS and al Qaeda. It is vital as well to maintain political support for the war across partisan boundaries. The survival of the United States cannot be the provenance of just one party, especially when the nation is involved in what might be a cross-generational fight.

US Courses of Action: Main and Supporting Efforts.

Given the urgency of the security situation in Syria and Iraq, and the fact that it is the center of gravity—in terms of terrain—for ISIS, the region containing these two countries is the main effort for our strategy. Focusing on this region (figure 4) will also help to shore up domestic and international support for the fight against ISIS and al Qaeda, since it is globally recognized as suffering from the depredations of the extremists, has partners with whom we can work, and stands a reasonable chance of success with moderate effort. The diverse countries in this region will require individual strategies designed to fit the particular security, political, diplomatic, and ideological situations in each. In Iraq and Syria, security concerns must be at the fore, but this is certainly not true for all countries in the region.

Operations in two other areas—the Arabian Peninsula and South Asia (especially Afghanistan and Pakistan)—are needed to support the main effort. The al

Qaeda affiliate in Yemen, closely tied to Syria's Jabhat al Nusra, has attempted repeatedly to attack the homeland and is now taking advantage of the collapsed security and political situation in that country to seize the entire southern portion of Yemen.

It is significant that ISIS has established a beachhead in Yemen, as well. South Asia, on the other hand, is the epicenter of al Qaeda's general command, which must be neutralized if the group is to be defeated. Each of these regional campaigns will need to be pursued in sequence, with care taken to shape the battlespace in the next region for future operations.

The Imperative of Persistence

The global and comprehensive nature of this strategy leads to an especially difficult challenge: this will be a generational fight, and the country must be prepared politically, fiscally, militarily, and mentally for a long war. Everyone wearies of constant warfare, and the temptation to declare victory and go home must be continually fought. To state publicly every few years that the enemy is on the run or knocked back on its heels is as useless and self-defeating as talk of the "light at the end of the tunnel" during the war in Vietnam.

It is up to the political leadership of each nation to ensure that their people are under no illusions about the length of the combat, the number of casualties they are likely to suffer, the fiscal strain of the battle, or the ease of victory over the enemy. At the same time, it will be important not to burden states beyond their capacity to perform, as this can lead to disastrous results.

To help with this challenge, the US needs to show our adversaries that time is not on their side while reassuring our allies, partners, and friends that we are not seeking short-term gains and are committed to seeing this conflict to its end: the final defeat of ISIS and al Qaeda. From the outset, then, we must pursue a strategic course that will disproportionately affect and dismantle the enemy, rather than seeking a quick victory that might impress a domestic audience, but have no strategic effects.

Yet we must also constantly remind ourselves that we can win this difficult fight. Al Qaeda and ISIS are

not remotely as strong as Hitler or the Soviet Union at the heights of their power. They are sophisticated enemies, presenting us with a much greater intellectual challenge in designing and implementing sound strategy, but defeating them is not beyond our means.

Nor are we alone in this effort. On the contrary, despite decades of recruiting and years of gaining ground, the al Qaeda ideology remains highly unpopular throughout the Muslim world, and populations on whom they have enforced their notions of what is right repeatedly seek to overthrow them. Their ultimate defeat is not in doubt. The question is what it will cost. The grand strategy we are proposing is the one that will minimize that cost in time; treasure; and, most importantly, lives.

The Risks of Action and Inaction

The risks of action seem clear and overwhelming. If the US engaged in ill-considered all-out war against al Qaeda and ISIS by invading numerous countries with hundreds of thousands of troops in each, it would be one of the longest and most costly endeavors—in blood and treasure—that America has ever attempted. We do not advocate such a course. But the approach we recommend will require the deployment of tens of thousands of American troops as advisers and enablers to many countries; the use of American air and sea power in support of local partners; significant expansion of our intelligence capabilities and willingness to share information with people we do not trust; the redirection and, in some cases, expansion of foreign assistance, foreign military financing, and foreign military sales; and the dedication of significant elements of the Departments of State, the Treasury, and others to supporting the nonmilitary components of the effort. It may also require the deployment of much larger US forces to address critical crises that cannot be resolved in any other way, and we must be prepared materially and mentally for such emergencies.

The length of the fight, its cost, and the usual difficulties with showing clear progress will create public and elite opposition to its continuation, and politicians will be tempted to prevent American deaths in battle,

win public favor, and save money by declaring victory and quitting the struggle. It is also likely that—given our current political paralysis—the US will have difficulty getting its fiscal house in order, and leaders might therefore believe that it cannot afford to continue the war past a certain point.

There is also no guarantee of victory even if the US dedicates itself to the fight. Insurgencies have a tendency to flare up repeatedly, even after being suppressed with all the skill at the command of the counterinsurgents, while civil wars are inherently generational conflicts. This fact might mean that the US and its partners will have to leave sizable numbers of troops on the ground throughout the world, perhaps for decades, as we had to do following World War II and the Korean War. And the possibility remains that major US intervention to defeat a dangerous enemy when no other options are available might be required, however much we plan and aim to avoid it.

The risks of inaction are even more dire, however. If the US decides to minimize its struggle with ISIS and al Qaeda, perhaps confining policy to counterterrorism to save American lives and money, the extremists will take control of more territory and people and be able to create states in areas that are already threatened. Countries and regions that are facing a minor insurgency threat will be forced by the extremists into a more mature insurgency, areas with a mixed terrorist-insurgency problem will fall into outright insurgency, and even our most capable partners might find themselves overwhelmed or confronting a serious terrorism or insurgency threat.

If the US maintains the current level of effort, we will very likely face an enemy that controls at least twice as much territory and population—in Iraq, Yemen, North Africa (especially Libya), the Sinai, and Syria—and with an army of regular and irregular fighters at least twice as large within two years. If our inaction continues, al Qaeda could reclaim Mali, Yemen, and Somalia, and Afghanistan will once again become

a safe haven in two to three years. A whole series of countries and regions (Mauritania, Niger, Northern Nigeria, the Horn of Africa, Tunisia, Egypt, and eventually Pakistan) will then be seriously threatened if not already gone.

The loss of key terrain to both groups will allow the extremists to create multiple safe havens that they will use to plot against the US and to undermine states around the globe. It will give them access to financial and human resources on a scale they have never before had. As these conditions worsen, al Qaeda, ISIS, or both will carry out a mass-casualty attack against the US: it is a question not of if, but rather of when. Even more worrisome is our assessment that, if we fail to stop the extremists from taking territory and undermining states like Pakistan, al Qaeda or ISIS will obtain weapons of mass destruction, and then it will be too late to act.

Preventing these outcomes will require a serious and prolonged effort, but one that is worth the costs and risks for the United States, our allies, and partners to stop and defeat this enemy. Above all, it is an effort that can and must succeed.

Notes

1. Katherine Zimmerman, “A New Model for Defeating Al Qaeda in Yemen,” AEI Critical Threats Project, September 2015, www.aei.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/A-New-Model-for-Defeating-al-Qaeda-in-Yemen.pdf.

2. Patrick Cockburn, “War with Isis: Islamic Militants Have Army of 200,000, Claims Senior Kurdish Leader,” *Independent*, November 16, 2014, www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/war-with-isis-islamic-militants-have-army-of-200000-claims-kurdish-leader-9863418.html.

3. An entire book, *America's First Battles: 1776–1965*, is devoted to narrating the defeat of American military forces in the first battle of every war fought between 1776 and 1965. See Charles E. Heller and William A. Stofft, *America's First Battles, 1776–1965* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1986).

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