TWENTY YEARS LATER: THE CURRENT AND FUTURE COURSE OF AMERICA'S WAR ON TERRORISM

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TOP LINES

- Since the 9/11 attacks, the Bush and Obama Administrations defined the approach to fighting terrorism as an expansive ideological war of ideas and ideals, based more on what they believed America's mission in the world to be rather than the actual scale and nature of the terrorist threat. The Bush Administration in particular drew parallels between the ideological dimensions of the Cold War and America's fight against terrorism.

- This expansive understanding of "terrorism" corresponded with a policy drift, which included building democratic institutions overseas as part of counter-terrorism policy, and, domestically, policies focused on vague notions of "extremism" and "radicalization," which critics have described as divisive and wasteful.

- The Trump Administration described the ideological nature of the threat ("radical Islam") but abandoned the Bush Administration's expansive nation-building projects and more systematically integrated the focus on radical Islamic terrorism into the Administration's approach to the Middle East, particularly its Iran policy.

- The Trump Administration's domestic fight against terrorism corrected the confusion around terms like "extremism" and "radicalization" with its concept of "targeted violence" — a narrow focus aimed at deterring groups and individuals plotting violent attacks.

- The Biden Administration's politicized focus on domestic terrorism, coupled with its foreign policies to date (including the manner in which America withdrew from Afghanistan), raise questions about the consequences of turning America's national security tools at whole segments of the country, and of the new vulnerabilities it could create as jihadists and other adversaries might be best positioned and least deterred to harm Americans.

America faces a turning point in its fight against terrorism, as we have recently eclipsed the twentieth anniversary of the 9/11 attacks – a date that has now been connected in a new way to Afghanistan considering how America withdrew from the country. The two decades-long military fight against terrorism, known as the Global War on Terror (or GWOT), is taking place across 85 countries, in which over 7,000 U.S. service members have lost their lives, and which has cost the American people over $8 trillion to date (Costs of War, 2021). Although the United States, along with its global partners, have achieved important milestones during this

period – notably killing Osama bin Laden, who planned the 9/11 attack – the threat of terrorism to the American people remains real and urgent in 2021. And that threat, particularly from jihadist groups, is likely to grow, not only as a result of the Biden Administration's repeat of Obama's policies in the Middle East – namely an accommodation of Iran and inaction in the face of malign activities by its proxies, as was evident in the Biden Administration's tepid response to the thousands of rockets lobbed by Iran-backed Hamas at Israel earlier this year – but particularly the way in which it carried out the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan. In particular, as noted by one observer, the drone strike several weeks ago that killed ten innocent civilians (including seven children) shows that the Biden Administration has lost the kind of on-the-ground intelligence resources necessary to make its targeting of terrorist groups more precise and effective (Carroll, 2021).

Al-Qaeda and its offshoots have maintained their ambitions of harming Americans twenty years after 9/11. And yet their ability to successfully launch attacks depended not only on the expansion of counter-terrorism resources, but also – for better or for worse – on the policy decisions of successive U.S. presidents in how to understand and address the threat of terrorism.

Addressing a Joint Session of Congress several days after the attack of September 11, 2001, former President Bush explained the terrorist threat the United States faced as follows:

> Al-Qaida is to terror what the Mafia is to crime. But its goal is not making money. Its goal is remaking the world and imposing its radical beliefs on people everywhere.
>
> The terrorists practice a fringe form of Islamic extremism that has been rejected by Muslim scholars and the vast majority of Muslim clerics; a fringe movement that perverts the peaceful teachings of Islam.
>
> The terrorists' directive commands them to kill Christians and Jews, to kill all Americans and make no distinctions among military and civilians, including women and children (Bush, 2001).

Nearly twenty years later, the Biden Administration describes domestic terrorism as "the most urgent terrorism threat the United States faces today" (White House, 2021). Its strategy document devoted to countering domestic terrorism describes the threat in the following terms:

> Today's domestic terrorists espouse a range of violent ideological motivations, including racial or ethnic bigotry and hatred as well as anti–government or anti–authority sentiment. They also take on a variety of forms, from lone actors and small groups of informally aligned individuals, to networks exhorting and targeting violence toward specific communities, to violent self–proclaimed "militias" who, despite legal prohibitions in all fifty states against certain private militia activity, assert a baseless right to take the law into their own hands. Across violent ideologies, individuals and small groups —both formal and informal —have been galvanized by recent political and societal events in the United States to carry out violent attacks. Among that wide range of animating ideologies, racially or ethnically motivated violent extremists (principally those who promote the superiority of the white race) and militia violent extremists are assessed as presenting the most persistent and lethal threats (National Strategy for Countering Domestic Terrorism, 2021, pp. 5-6).

That the threat of terrorism has evolved since 2001 is indisputable. On one level, this is because al-Qaeda has since evolved, and has spawned another, more headline-grabbing, group, the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS). And It is certainly the case, as the latest Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI) Annual Threat Assessment describes, that the ability of al-Qaeda and ISIS to strike the United States from overseas has been significantly diminished through the efforts of the United States and its partners (Annual Threat Assessment, 2021, p. 23). The means by which terrorists have been able to launch attacks have changed, particularly with new opportunities for connectivity and disseminating messages through smartphones and social media platforms. Even the action (or inaction) of prior presidents on other national security issues affect how terrorists determine opportunities to launch attacks, such as the case of former President Obama not following through on his famous threat of a "red line" in Syria – a key event in the deterioration of the conflict in Syria – or former President Trump's killing of Iran's Qasem Soleimani, which put the Iranian government and likely other adversaries on notice.

The question is whether those who intend to kill Americans today adhere to the same ideology as those who tried to do so in 2001, and how prepared a given presidential administration is to understand and address the threat. The Biden Administration's strategy document suggests they have in mind a very different set of actors. Al-Qaeda receives only one mention in the entire document, and barely three out of the document's thirty pages describe foreign connections of domestic terrorists. Although no foreign group is named in those three pages, it is clear that al-Qaeda and ISIS – which target Americans and anyone they deem to be their collaborators – are not the groups the document describes as "the international dimension [that] must be part of a comprehensive approach to tackling the domestic terrorism challenge" (National Strategy for Countering Domestic Terrorism, 2021, p. 17). That is clear in the preceding sentence, where it specifies that today's domestic terrorist threat with an international dimension is "related to racially or ethnically motivated violent extremism" rather than Islamic extremism (National Strategy for Countering Domestic Terrorism, 2021, p. 17).

The difference in these connotations has much to do with how America's war on terrorism evolved into distinct "wars on terrorism," both overseas and at home. The narrow question of what it took to defeat or dismantle the threat of terrorists was lost amid other foreign policy objectives, such as women's education and promoting democratic governance in countries that had never known it. These other objectives emerged out of a parallel and competing focus about what America's mission in the world should be after the Cold War. The Trump Administration took steps toward redressing this loss of focus by returning to basics and properly narrowing the approach to terrorism, while treating other foreign policy objectives on their own terms. Specifically, its approach reasserted an explicit connection between terrorist groups and their ideological leanings and connected that definition of terrorism to concrete policy areas with terrorist threats to Americans (for example, the "maximum pressure" campaign against Iran, often described as the leading state sponsor of terrorism) rather than to a vague sense of national purpose abroad.

The lessons of the last twenty years are not only about the need for maintaining this focused definition of the terrorist threat, but also about the need for a clear understanding of how America's actions overseas, including in other areas, can affect the scale and lethality of the threat. In its first nine months, the Biden Administration appears to have adopted some of the worst practices of the last twenty years —replicating Obama's Middle East policy of accommodating adversaries like Iran and "leading from behind" in the Middle East (which saw the rise of ISIS and the strengthening of Iran), adopting an ever-expansive and inwardly

focused definition of domestic terrorism (with barely a mention of jihadism). In addition, President Biden's harried withdrawal from Afghanistan – the way it was executed, the damage to America's credibility with allies, and the fallout (particularly leaving Americans behind and leaving tens of billions of dollars of military equipment in the hands of the Taliban and other groups) – are almost certain to increase the incentive and ability of other terrorist groups to attack Americans, both at home and overseas.

THE WAR ON TERROR AS A WAR OF IDEAS

It should go without saying that properly identifying who is trying to launch a terrorist attack against Americans is central to any successful effort to protect Americans. It can be the difference between waste and effective use of government resources and taxpayer dollars. Indeed, it can even be the difference between effectively addressing the threat or exacerbating it.

Alongside notable milestones in America's efforts to address terrorism – including, and principally, that of preventing another attack on the homeland on the scale of 9/11 – the last two decades were characterized by ebbs and flows in the relative importance of the ideological dimension to policymaking among different administrations. From the outset, this ideological association appeared just as much to describe the motives of the terrorists as, if not arguably more so, the ideological priorities of America in the world as understood by a particular presidential administration.

"Our nation's cause has always been larger than our nation's defense" (Bush, 2002), was the message President Bush delivered to the West Point graduating class in June 2002. Those words were part of an address explaining the War on Terror, as he would name the effort, that he would order the next generation of soldiers to carry out. That cause, as he went on to explain, is that "[w]e fight, as we always fight, for a just peace —a peace that favors human liberty. We will defend the peace against threats from terrorists and tyrants. We will preserve the peace by building good relations among the great powers. And we will extend the peace by encouraging free and open societies on every continent."

The overall point of the speech, as President Bush stated towards the end, was that "America has a greater objective than controlling threats and containing resentment. We will work for a just and peaceful world beyond the war on terror."

This notion of America's fight against terrorism being one of not only fighting our enemy's ideas, but projecting ours, framed the Bush Administration's first National Security Strategy released several months later. The document opens with a quote from President Bush's West Point address, summarizing the twentieth century as having been "divided by a great struggle over ideas" and sets out America's mission in the twenty first century with the end of that struggle: "a time of opportunity" during which America should aim "to translate this moment of influence into decades of peace, prosperity, and liberty."

This mission required institutional change. The strategy explains that "[t]he major institutions of American national security were designed in a different era to meet different requirements. All of them must be transformed" (National Security Strategy, 2002). Correctly, as this statement describes, the U.S. national security infrastructure was designed during the Cold War amid a different set of threats and geopolitical dynamics. With the Cold War over, there was a new need for redefining America's role in the world, and its tools and structures

for realizing it. The final section of the document, which focuses on the kinds of changes to the capabilities and processes of America's national security apparatus, also emphasizes a "more comprehensive approach to public information efforts," one that includes the view that this is about a "clash inside a civilization, a battle for the future of the Muslim. This is a struggle of ideas and this is an area where America must excel" (National Security Strategy, 2002).

SETTING A DOMESTIC AGENDA AGAINST KNOWN TERRORIST GROUPS

The Nation's first Strategy for Homeland Security, published in July 2002, defines homeland security as "a new mission and a new term" with the narrow meaning of "a concerted national effort to prevent terrorist attacks within the United States, reduce America's vulnerability to terrorism, and minimize the damage and recover from attacks that do occur" (National Strategy for Homeland Security, 2002, p. 2). The document reflected many of the changes in policy and infrastructure that the Bush Administration oversaw, including the creation of a Department of Homeland Security, to protect Americans from threats, ranging from pandemics to terrorist attacks.

The document's discussion of terrorism centers on "one fact [that] dominates all homeland security threat assessments: terrorists are strategic actors. They choose their targets deliberately based on the weaknesses they observe in our defenses and our preparations" (National Strategy for Homeland Security, 2002, p. 7).

This fact also acknowledges that "[e]ven as we experience successes in the war on terrorism, the antipathy of our enemies may well be increasing, and new enemies may emerge."

The domestic counter-terrorism vision, as defined in the document, is a law enforcement effort centered on "the prevention of all terrorist acts within the United States, whether international or domestic in origin." This effort includes:

> All legal means —both traditional and non-traditional —to identify, halt, and, where appropriate, prosecute terrorists in the United States. We will prosecute or bring immigration or other civil charges against such individuals where appropriate and will utilize the full range of our legal authorities. We will pursue not only the individuals directly engaged in terrorist activity, but also their sources of support: the people and organizations that knowingly fund the terrorists and those that provide them with logistical assistance. To achieve these aims, we will strengthen our federal law enforcement community. In addition, we will augment the scope and quality of information available to all law enforcement. In that regard, we will build and continually update a fully integrated, fully accessible terrorist watch list. When we have identified any suspected tools in our Nation's legal arsenal, including investigative, criminal, civil, immigration, and regulatory powers to stop those who wish to do us harm. (p. 26)

The vision behind countering terrorism domestically was one that belonged strictly to law enforcement. Although the word "ideology" does not appear in the document, a section of the document titled "known terrorist groups" (p. 10) names and describes terrorist groups, including Al-Qaeda, Hamas, and Hezbollah – which the document describes as belonging to "a broader threat that includes other international terrorist organizations with the will and capability to attack the United States," with the "most dangerous [ones]…associated with

religious extremist movements in the Middle East and South Asia." Other known groups include specific named domestic groups.

THE GLOBAL FIGHT: AN ARRAY OF PARTNERS AND PROJECTS

America's global fight against terrorism, much as its domestic one, was focused during the Bush Administration on known terrorist groups and on dismantling the infrastructure of what was then the most prominent terrorist group, al-Qaeda. That ensured a consistent focus on targeting financing, recruitment, and other elements of al-Qaeda's global infrastructure.

In contrast to the domestic context, where the objective of thwarting a potential terrorist attack in the United States appeared fairly straightforward, America's overseas fight against terrorism seemed mired in ambiguity when it came to measuring the success of counter-terrorism missions. What does the defeat of al-Qaeda in Afghanistan, or elsewhere, look like, and what role should the United States play in other dynamics in the country? This question remains hotly contested, with defenders of the Bush Administration's theory arguing that the U.S. counter-terrorism mission is far broader and extends to the stability of local government and the protection of human rights.

This shift in focus was demonstrated as early as President Bush's address to the United Nations General Assembly in November 2001. "Al-Qaeda" appears only once in that address, while "the Taliban" appears eight times. The change is deliberate. As the former President explained, "that regime [i.e. the Taliban] and the terrorists who support it are now virtually indistinguishable. Together they promote terror abroad and impose a reign of terror on the Afghan people" (Bush, 2001b). The objective of stopping terrorism similarly became synonymous with both helping local civilians and rebuilding their country, with Bush explaining in the same address that the mission of fighting terror abroad included not only the provision of food and medicine to Afghans, but also work with multilateral institutions "to reconstruct Afghanistan after hostilities there have ceased and the Taliban are no longer in control" (Bush, 2001b).

The further conflation of fighting terrorism with both humanitarian aid and national reconstruction projects crystallized in the National Security Strategy the Bush Administration released during its second term, which is framed around the "inseparable priorities [of] fighting and winning the war on terror and promoting freedom as the alternative to tyranny and despair" (National Security Strategy, 2006). Part three of the Strategy focuses on "strengthen[ing] alliances to defeat global terrorism and work to prevent attacks against us and our friends," and describes both near- and long-term missions for fighting both the "battle of arms" and the "battle of ideas." The Strategy therefore calls for "freedom and human dignity through democracy" as the "long-term solution to the transnational terrorism of today" (National Security Strategy, 2006).

These messages promoting democracy, freedom, and reconstruction as antidotes to terrorism appeared to work in building international coalitions. A fact sheet produced by the Bush Administration regarding the first 100 days of the Global War on Terror cites impressive numbers, with the United States getting support from over 80 countries and 46 multilateral organizations; 142 countries froze terrorist assets, and in the first 100 days the U.S. military campaign in Afghanistan, which began on October 7, 2001, "destroyed 11 terrorist training

camps and 39 Taliban command and control sites…[a]nd al-Qaeda terrorists have been captured, killed, or are on the run" (The Global War on Terrorism: The First 100 Days, 2001).

What the United States failed to appreciate is that its successes at building a global alliance had more to do with the shared threat of jihadi terrorism by partner nations rather than with the shared commitment to building democratic governments overseas. This, for example, explains Saudi Arabia's course as one of America's strongest partners in the fight against terrorism. The country, which for decades had exported Wahhabism, a version of the same Islamic tradition, and which was home to fifteen out of the nineteen 9/11 hijackers, faced its own jihadist threat. Its close partnership with the United States on counterterrorism, particularly stopping terrorist financing and recruitment, made sense not only as a gesture of solidarity but also as its own security priority.

In a different sense, the close collaboration between the United States and its European partners came not only from a shared awareness and kinship between transatlantic partners, but also because of the deep roots that radical Islamic currents have set in Europe over the course of decades, and because of the distinct nature of the threat of jihadism in the European experience.

Another challenge in this global effort was the lack of clarity on what success looked like. Just two years after the 9/11 attacks, the global coalition of nations grew to 170, with many of those nations better equipped to stop terrorist threats within their borders (Progress Report on the Global War on Terrorism, 2003). Rightfully, nations demonstrated a common commitment, if not varied ability, to stop financing, recruitment, and planned attacks.

Beyond the absence of attacks, how was the United States to determine, and justify continuing its allocation of resources to coordinate with global partners its fight against terrorism?

As the U.S. entered its sixth year in Afghanistan, a report published for Congress noted that "[a]mong the various U.S. government agencies involved in anti-terrorism efforts, there is currently no common set of criteria for measuring success" (Perl, 2007, 2). It is noteworthy that, as early as 2007, when that report was published, it was "unclear just how much the United States spends overseas annually in non-military areas to combat terrorism." Congressional oversight reports and testimonies from the same period found minimal details and lack of transparency on how counter-terrorism tax dollars were spent and how outcomes were measured by the U.S. Government (Johnson, 2008; Government Accountability Office, 2005), as specialized oversight offices emerged to oversee country-specific missions, most notably the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR). As the case of SIGAR demonstrates, in the absence of metrics for achieving successes in a country, those oversight offices would impose their own metrics to build a level of accountability.

America's entry into Iraq in 2003 was not only a problematic exercise in nation-building, but also a diversion of focus from the task of dismantling and defeating terrorist organizations. Much as with Afghanistan, American policymakers failed to take into account how a one-size-fits-all approach could meet the headwinds of local traditions and political dynamics that had been around for decades, if not centuries. These dynamics began to demand America's attention in Iraq as it sought to transition the country to a post-Saddam era and in a way that would not pose a security threat to the United States or its allies.

As the Bush Administration neared the end of its second term, over 4,500 American soldiers had lost their lives in Iraq and Afghanistan as part of the Global War on Terror, and a 2008 report published by the Congressional Joint Economic Committee found that the dollar amount spent on both wars exceeded $800 billion, with over $600 billion of it for Iraq (War At Any Price, 2008). That report estimated the "total economic cost of the war in Iraq to a family of four" from years 2002-2008 to be $16,500, and $20,900 including Afghanistan. The report further projects those costs to rise to over $46,000 from 2002 to 2017. That year, the Defense Department requested $141.7 billion for its global war on terrorism missions – nearly 23% of the overall defense budget for that year – with the stated justification being to "establish stable, democratic and secure nations, with the institutions and resources needed for each nation to provide for its own security" (FY2008 Global War on Terror Request, 2007). President Bush delivered his Farewell Address from the Oval Office on January 15, 2009, as America faced new challenges at home with the Great Recession that struck in 2008. In his address, he reminded the American people that although "our nation is safer than it was seven years ago, the gravest threat to our people remains another terrorist attack" (Bush, 2009). At the same time as America prevents another attack, he explained, "security and prosperity at home depend on the expansion of liberty abroad."

His successor would both apologize for the counter-terrorism approach of the Bush Administration and expand the definition of the terrorism threat and America's policy priorities and resources to address it at home and overseas. At the same time, ironically, President Obama's foreign policy decisions created new challenges overseas that exacerbated the threats America faced, while emboldening its most aggressive adversaries.

COUNTERING EXTREMISM: THE BEGINNING OF AMERICA'S WAR WITH ITSELF

It is safe to argue that the most memorable milestone in the fight against terrorism under the two terms of the Obama Administration (2009-2016) was the killing of al-Qaeda mastermind Osama bin Laden in May 2011. That milestone, however important in the history of America's fight against terrorism, might have been more symbolic than it was strategic. A recent analysis of the documents seized in Bin Laden's Abbottabad compound when he was killed reveal that, although he was involved in running al-Qaeda, Bin Laden "was perplexed as to how to respond" to many of the changes in the world ten years after 9/11 (Bergen, 2021). As the decade after 9/11 came to a close, a new chapter in the Middle East began, with popular uprisings across the Middle East that upended the decades-long rule of many of the region's leaders. President Obama inserted himself into these developments, introducing policy that some have described as "leading from behind" to selectively push out rulers like Egypt's Hosni Mubarak and Libya's Muammar al-Qaddhafi, while being less engaged or disengaging in Syria and Iraq. That phrase, as first articulated in a *New Yorker* profile in 2011 by an anonymous Obama advisor, is described by the reporter as stemming "from two unspoken beliefs: that the relative power of the U.S. is declining, as rivals like China rise, and that the U.S. is reviled in many parts of the world" (Lizza, 2011). As such, the approach requires, in the words of that advisor, "stealth and modesty as well as military strength." In 2009, Obama traveled to Cairo as part of a world tour where he gave a speech on "a new beginning between the United States and Muslims around the world," also defining the new scope of the War on Terror: "the first issue that we have to confront is violent extremism in all of its forms" (Obama, 2009a). Several months later, Obama cited that new beginning between America and the Muslim world as the reason for his closing of Guantanamo Bay, as a sign of "respect for the dignity of all people" (Obama, 2009b).

John Brennan, then Assistant to the President for Homeland Security and Counterterrorism, explained in greater detail the connection between Obama's depiction of America's relationship with the Muslim world, his foreign policy in the Middle East, and his approach to terrorism in an address in Washington on the topic of "A New Approach to Safeguarding Americans" (Brennan, 2009).

Acknowledging both the continued threat of an al-Qaeda-directed attack on the United States and the milestones the United States had achieved to date in its War on Terror, Brennan went on to note his being "deeply troubled by the inflammatory rhetoric, hyperbole, and intellectual narrowness that has often characterized the debate over the President's national security policies, particularly those relating to the fight against terrorists." Brennan offered a new approach to "two related but very distinct challenges: the immediate, near-term challenge of destroying Al Qaeda and its allies – those ready and willing to kill innocent civilians – and the longer-term challenge of confronting violent extremism generally."

The latter, which Brennan explained is where he "believe[s] President Obama is bringing a fundamentally new and more effective approach to the long-term obligation of safeguarding the American people" has five key elements, the first of which being to make terrorism one policy area of an overall approach to America's national security policy, rather than the dominating one.

The other elements Brennan outlined put the United States in far more difficult and unprecedented terrain, both conceptually and operationally. As Brennan described, "the heart of his new approach" was not using the word terrorism. On its own, this decision has merits, particularly given the expansive nature of the global war on terrorism to date. However, the second part of this shift was the root of the problem; "the President does not describe this as a 'war on terrorism'" – rightfully, since terrorism, as Brennan pointed out, is a tactic. But there's another part to this explanation: "Likewise, the President does not describe this as a 'global war,'" Brennan explained, since this phrase, as he put it

> plays into the warped narrative that al Qaeda propagates. It plays into the misleading and dangerous notion that the U.S. is somehow in conflict with the rest of the world. It risks setting our Nation apart from the world, rather than emphasizing the interests that we share. And perhaps more dangerously, portraying this as a 'global' war risks reinforcing the very image that al Qaeda seeks to project of itself —that it is a highly organized, global entity capable of replacing sovereign nations with a global caliphate. And nothing could be further from the truth.

Nothing in Brennan's description, in fact, could be further from the truth, as demonstrated by events brewing across the Atlantic at the same time as Brennan was delivering these remarks. Even though no one would argue al-Qaeda has not taken the place of sovereign nations (except maybe controlling large swaths of failed states in Yemen and Syria), his other points here do not hold up against the reality on the ground. It is misleading for him to argue in this speech, delivered in 2009, that al-Qaeda did not have a global brand, that it was not organized and networked around the world at a time that jihadist and Islamist narratives had popular support throughout the Middle East (indeed, in Egypt, the Muslim Brotherhood winning the election after Mubarak was toppled is evidence of this). It is also misleading to make the false analogy, as he did, between "global war" and the U.S. being "in conflict with the rest of the world."

If anything, the preceding decade showed global solidarity with the United States against a common threat.

Brennan went a step further. "Nor does President Obama see this challenge as a fight against 'jihadists.'" The reason he gave is an ahistorical and inaccurate argument that would get much mileage over the following eight years – "using a legitimate term, 'jihad,' meaning to purify oneself or to wage a holy struggle for a moral goal…risks giving these murderers the religious legitimacy they desperately seek but in no way deserve." Rather, as he explained, the United States is "at war with [al-Qaeda's] violent extremist allies who seek to carry on al Qaeda's murderous agenda."

The approach to fighting "violent extremists" differed too from that pursued by the Bush Administration, one that Brennan argued offered "a broader, more accurate understanding of the causes and conditions that help fuel violent extremism." Unlike President Bush, who viewed jihadist terrorism as the product of the suppression of freedom and for which the solution was creating educational, economic, and political opportunities, President Obama, in Brennan's words, held that "[e]xtremist violence and terrorist attacks are…the final murderous manifestation of a long process rooted in hopelessness, humiliation, and hatred." These factors, Brennan noted, "not only help fuel violent extremism but also contribute to a wide range of national security threats – from other types of organized violence and sociopolitical instability to resource competition. And addressing these factors will help the United States deal with a wide range of threats, including violent extremism." To address these threats, the Obama Administration was focused overseas on a "political, economic, and social campaign to meet the basic needs and legitimate grievances of ordinary people: security for their communities, education for children, a job and income for parents, and a sense of dignity and worth."

Brennan's words are quoted at length here not only for their irony – given that much of President Obama's foreign policy in the Middle East had the direct effect of feeding some of those very grievances of ordinary people there – but also because they represent one of the earliest and clearest expressions of the shift in direction his administration took over two terms. This conceptual shift, and reallocation of resources to new programs focused on the new mission of "countering violent extremism" (CVE), not only diminished the importance of the ideological dimension, but gave the U.S. government the new mandate of addressing a vague "violent extremism" by focusing on the opaque and subjective personal experiences of individuals without regard to a single unifying ideological worldview.

This approach was mirrored in both domestic and overseas contexts. In 2016, the Obama Administration's Department of Homeland Security produced its *Strategy for Countering Violent Extremism,* with the first of its guiding principles stating that "[v]iolent extremists have many motivations and are not limited to any single population, region, or ideology" (Department of Homeland Security Strategy for Countering Violent Extremism, 2016). The document notes the "continuing priority" of counterterrorism and law enforcement to thwart terrorist plots, but emphasizes that the United States "must work to counter violent extremism by dissuading individuals from radicalizing to violence in the first place." This process of addressing "radicalization," the document went on to explain, relies on "supporting and building trust with diverse communities across the country," with "parents, neighbors, colleagues, peers, teachers, and community leaders" being "best positioned to address the underlying causes of violent extremism, recognize when an individual becomes

ideologically-motivated to commit violence, and intervene before an individual or a group commits an act of violent extremism."

This shift in policy direction took place during the most important historical changes in the Middle East in at least a generation, as the people of many of the region's countries toppled local leaders, many who had been in power for decades. In some cases, such as in Syria, the local government proved resilient and the violent suppression of these protests turned into all-out civil war. Much as al-Qaeda and its forebears took root in Afghanistan amidst the Soviet invasion and exploited the theme of Western occupiers oppressing local Muslim communities, so too did its off-shoot groups build bases of support and operations in Syria, Yemen, and elsewhere through focusing on how local Shiite powers (whether Bashar al-Assad in Syria or the Shiite militias in Iraq) killed and repressed local Sunni communities. To prove their sectarian mettle, groups like the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and the Nusra Front emphasized even more strongly their religious credentials and acted more violently to demonstrate their commitment to it. That the Obama Administration consistently sought to appease Iran, the most prominent backer of Assad's and the Iraqi militias, in an effort to win them over to join their Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) – including by lifting sanctions and providing economic relief to the Iranian government that in all likelihood went into the coffers of groups like Hezbollah, Hamas, Shiite militias and other proxies – likely did not help either.

It should have been clear to the Obama Administration based on these developments that understanding the ideological linkages between terrorist groups was integral to addressing the threat of jihadist terrorism. Indeed, as ISIS consolidated territory in Iraq and Syria, individuals from around the world —particularly the United States and Europe —began to flock to its territorial "caliphate" to experience the religious utopia the group promised. Understanding that it was a specific set of ideas that promoted a specific type of violence, and not alienation on its own, should have been foundational to the policy approach to address this challenge.

Predictably, the Obama Administration's CVE concept failed, as various oversight reports and other non-governmental studies showed. A 2019 assessment of the Obama Administration's CVE policy found "a key flaw" was its "failure to explain precisely what activities fell within the domain of the CVE Initiative and how these activities would reduce violent extremism" (Schanzer & Eyerman, 2019, p. 49). This shortcoming, the report went on to state, caused "a lack of focus, especially in the early years, and different agencies and sub-agencies pursued different objectives, all under the CVE moniker." An analysis from the Brennan Center for Justice put the policy framework in more succinct terms as "based on junk science, have proven to be ineffective, discriminatory, and divisive" (Brennan Center for Justice, 2019). These reports echoed central flaws that the Government Accountability Office reported in its assessment that "[t]he federal government does not have a cohesive strategy or process for assessing the overall CVE effort" (Government Accountability Office, 2017).

A RETURN TO POLICY PRECISON IN ADDRESSING TERRORISM AND VIOLENT ACTS

The Trump Administration introduced a series of linguistic changes into America's counter-terrorism tradition that signaled dramatic changes in policy. Among the first were changing the name of the "Counter-ISIS Coalition" to the "Defeat ISIS Coalition." This one word change clarified the objective. By the former President's own admission, it is impossible to defeat

every single terrorist, saying shortly before he announced the destruction of the ISIS caliphate "you're always going to have people, they'll be around" (Morin, 2019). However, there were tangible milestones in the terrorism fight that needed to be met – eliminating ISIS's territorial hold in Syria and Iraq, and the killing of ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.

Former President Trump reverted to the pre-Obama days by returning to the immediate post-9/11 nomenclature of referencing terrorist groups' ideological affiliations by using the expression "radical Islamic terrorism." Unlike uses of similar expressions by the Bush Administration, however, the Trump Administration's use of the term did not imply any lofty notions of America's mission of countering jihadist ideology with exporting democracy and nation-building. Not only did the Trump Administration correct course from this earlier approach, but it focused in particular on burden sharing among partners to meet the same objective of fighting radical Islamic terrorism. Indeed, this was a statement Trump made in August of 2016 in a speech on terrorism, in which he explained that "[o]ur new approach, which must be shared by both parties in America, by our allies overseas, and by our friends in the Middle East, must be to halt the spread of Radical Islam" (Trump, 2016).

The key example of this during the Trump Administration was the D-ISIS fight, as it became known, and in particular America's limited military presence supporting local partners in Syria. By 2017, when President Trump took office, America's presence in Syria was confused following former President Obama's famous "red line" threat, and yet the threats to Americans emanating from Syria demanded attention. Not only was ISIS's capital of Raqqa there, but al-Qaeda had by then established a foothold in the country, among other lesser-known Syrian militant groups. By that time, Iran's forces and Iran-backed-Hezbollah had expanded their already prominent foothold in the country, providing support to their proxy, Bashar al-Assad, while Russia and Turkey asserted their influence there. The mission in Syria was counterterrorism but defined in narrow terms as eliminating the ISIS territorial stronghold. Once that mission was completed, so was the need for the United States to remain militarily involved in the country.

Another noteworthy feature of the Trump Administration's focus on the ideological threat of radical Islamic terrorism, particularly as reflected in his National Counterterrorism Strategy, is its inclusion of Iran-backed groups like Hezbollah and Hamas into the discussion of terrorism alongside ISIS and al-Qaeda (Pompeo, 2018). Although of course there are distinctions in their ideologies and structures, the Iran-backed terrorist groups are just as intent on killing Americans as the Sunni jihadist groups and have perhaps even been at it for longer. As for Hamas, Hezbollah, and Shiite militias, they were distinct in that they had (at least one) common patron, Iran, which meant that the Iranian government needed to be dealt with as the adversary it was. This was a key aspect of the Trump Administration's "maximum pressure" campaign against the Iranian government, informed by the notion that choking the regime's economic resources would mean fewer Iranian rials would flow to its regional proxy network of terrorist groups.

This approach of clearly defining and pursuing known terrorist groups informed how the Trump Administration pursued its domestic terrorism challenge as well. The Trump Administration focused its domestic counter-terrorism efforts on identifying and stopping known terrorist groups while, at the same time, using the framework of "targeted violence" to narrowly identify and stop actors seeking to achieve their objectives through violence who may not be motivated by a particular ideology. In 2019, DHS released its Strategic Framework for Countering Terrorism and Targeted Violence, which introduced the concept of "targeted violence" to describe "a known or knowable attacker [who] selects a particular target prior to

the violent attack" (Strategic Framework for Countering Terrorism and Targeted Violence, 2019). The Department released an accompanying Public Action Plan the following year focused around clear goals that not only helped implement the policy of stopping "targeted violence" but also for bolstering America's fight against terrorism, which included measures ranging from strengthening travel restrictions to preventing terrorists from entering the United States and strengthening U.S. infrastructure and capabilities to respond (Public Action Plan, 2020).

WHERE WE ARE TODAY: THE TERRORISM THREAT AND AMERICA'S NEW WARS

A congressional oversight report released last month noted that since 2010 "the single highest-casualty ideological attack occurred in 2016 by an Islamic extremist, killing 49 people at an Orlando nightclub" (Government Accountability Office, 2021, p. 6). As mentioned previously, the DNI's most recent Annual Threat Assessment observed that global jihadist groups are far less capable, even if no less determined, to strike the United States – an observation that might be ascribed to effective foreign and national security policy decisions over the last four years.

Ten months in, it is still too early to tell what the full scope of the Biden Administration's approach to terrorism will look like. On the foreign policy front, the Biden Administration has repeated some of the worst mistakes of the Obama Administration, particularly overseas with the Middle East and Iran – not surprising since some of the same Obama Administration officials are leading those policy areas. President Obama's national security team, particularly former Secretary of State John Kerry and former National Security Advisor Susan Rice, are currently in the White House, while the lead negotiator of the 2015 Iran Nuclear Deal, Rob Malley, currently serves as the U.S. Special Representative to Iran. Even if, as of this writing, the Biden Administration does pursue a "Plan B" to the 2015 Iran deal, it is not clear how much a new deal will differ from the first. It is similarly unlikely that the Biden Administration's approach to the Middle East will feature a serious contention with the assumptions of and policies pursued by the Obama Administration. The Biden Administration's management of the Afghanistan withdrawal is its own perhaps unprecedented crisis, which will likely only reduce the image and credibility of the United States around the world while emboldening its adversaries, particularly jihadists who likely feel only vindication by these developments. The domestic terrorism agenda, as mentioned previously, makes little mention of links to jihadism and is overly broad in the kinds of actors who fit into the definition of terrorism.

On the domestic front, the Biden Administration's domestic terrorism agenda is not only overly expansive in its definition of a "terrorist," but it is hyper politicized, focused principally on the events of January 6. Its aforementioned strategy for countering domestic terrorism also focuses on a number of "long-term contributors" that include "polarization often fueled by disinformation, misinformation, and dangerous conspiracy theories online," and instead commits to "supporting an information environment that fosters healthy democratic discourse." The document's examples of domestic terrorism range widely, from the 1995 Oklahoma City Bombing, which killed 168 people, to the January 6 "attack" at the U.S. Capitol, both cited in the same paragraph in the introduction.

Criminal cases concerning those involved in the events of January 6 at the U.S. Capitol are still ongoing. Nonetheless, the question may be raised whether the Biden Administration

considers those who were involved in the events of that day at the U.S. Capitol, including those who took no violent actions, as being in the same category as al-Qaeda and ISIS and other radical Islamic groups who pose genuine threats to Americans. What about those who may not have been present at the U.S. Capitol on that day but who share the sentiments of those who were there? If the Biden Administration does consider them all to belong to one category, then what are the implications of turning America's entire law enforcement, surveillance and other national security tools at whole segments of the country who possess those very "long-term contributors" such as voting records and holding views that differ from those of the Biden Administration. America's recent history, particularly Ruby Ridge and Waco, offer examples of how much anti-government sentiment can be enflamed by turning America's law enforcement against American citizens. Doing so on a national scale would have untold consequences in dividing our country further and corroding Americans' faith in their country's institutions, government, and in one another.

So far it seems there is a lack of clarity in the courts about penalties to give to those who were merely present in the U.S. Capitol on January 6, and pointing even to the length of time an individual was present to determine the severity of the sentence (Viswanatha, Gurman, 2021). Nonetheless, the Biden Administration's rhetoric on domestic terrorism and extremism has become institutionalized across departments, with the Departments of Defense and Homeland Security announcing their internal reviews focused on rooting out domestic extremism earlier this year (Department of Defense, 2021; Department of Homeland Security, 2021). A Department of Defense memorandum described the functions of the Counter-Extremism Working Group that would coordinate across different offices to pursue four lines of effort, which include reforming the Uniformed Code of Military Justice, adapting the Insider Threat monitoring to report "concerning behaviors for both military and civilian personnel," screening of social media platforms, and an "Education & Training" effort focused on 'gray areas' such as reading, following, and liking extremist material and content in social media forums and platforms" (Memorandum for Senior Pentagon Leadership, 2021). At the Department of Homeland Security, the Trump Administration's Office for Targeted Violence and Terrorism Prevention was renamed the Center for Prevention Programs and Partnerships, with the shorthand of "CP3," in May 2021, and appears to have reverted to the ill-defined paradigm of countering violent extremism (Government Accountability Office, 2021, p. 11). The home page of CP3, which opens by framing its mission around the events of January 6, acknowledges the introduction of the term "targeted violence" in 2019, but caveats that "[t]he goals of any targeted violence attack may lack a discernable political or ideological motive, but inflict the same type of trauma on communities" (CP3, 2021). This language appears to build on the Obama-era focus on the individual experiences of "hopelessness, humiliation, and hatred." While no one would dispute the need to address the individual experiences of trauma, humiliation, and hatred, there are implications of placing them under the same expansive definition of terrorism – especially at the exclusion of jihadist threats – that can be divisive and damaging in unprecedented ways.

The distraction of these efforts is just as urgent as their divisiveness. It is not clear that the threats from radical Islamic terrorist groups, much less the evolving nature of these threats in the aftermath of its policy decisions on Afghanistan, are a priority to the Biden Administration. President Biden and his administration have not produced a plan for what happens after their withdrawal from Afghanistan, and have not yet answered basic questions about it. The public outcry by other nations, particularly America's close ally in the war on terrorism, the United Kingdom, suggests that the Biden Administration has not sufficiently discussed its plan for withdrawing with partner nations. As the history of the global jihadist movement suggests, the way in which America acts can have a formative

impact on the intentions and actions that its enemies choose. Without predicting exactly how terrorist groups evolve in light of the last nine months, and in particular the Biden Administration's botched withdrawal from Afghanistan, they and America's other adversaries now have one of the most dangerous tools: optionality.

America's adversaries today know they have a range of options in where and whom they try to strike, as well as the kinds of alliances they make and the ways in which they organize and plan their next steps. As America marked the twentieth anniversary of the 9/11 attacks, one lesson is the importance of the decisions an American president makes to respond to the threats as they actually are rather than as they fit into a particular view of how the world should be. Much as over the last two decades, a president's commitment to address a threat as it actually is makes all the difference in advancing the security of Americans and in ensuring that only that objective is what informs the sacrifices demanded of them.

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