Counterterrorism Success and Failings

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As President Obama oversees military operations against ISIS, he and his advisers should also be sure to focus on the effectiveness of military operations against terrorist groups over the past 13 years. While succeeding in the short term—largely keeping the United States and its citizens safe from attack—U.S.-led strikes have neither stopped the spread of Islamist extremism, nor addressed growing, related state-level instability from Pakistan to Nigeria.

The increasing capability of terrorists to destroy people and property and to command attention is presenting itself as the strategic challenge of a generation. In response to the most pressing threats, the United States has carried out a series of military strikes, sometimes directly and sometimes through allied militaries, sometimes on the ground and sometimes from the air. Military action against ISIS is the latest U.S. campaign against an armed terrorist group operating from a weak state.

Addressing the long-term challenge of ISIS must begin with broad understanding of the utility of military force against this enemy—the most visible, costly, and active element of U.S. strategy to date. It is true that through innovation, investment, grit, and sacrifice across the U.S. national security enterprise, the United States has developed a remarkable capability to detect and disrupt terrorist plots emanating from overseas. Unmanned aerial systems can operate over remote geographies without putting a single American in harm’s way, while Special Forces capture or kill high-value leaders deep inside sovereign countries, with or without diplomatic permission. The enemy is nowhere safe, and largely the U.S. intelligence community can provide strategic (if not always tactical) warning of an adversary’s activities.

Yet, there are firm limits on what strategic results this approach to counterterrorism brings. Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel told the House Armed Services Committee in September 2014 that “American military power alone cannot eradicate the threats posed by ISIS to the United States, our allies and our friends and partners in the region.” Despite remarkable operational successes in a global direct action campaign by the U.S. intelligence community and the military, a growing web of terrorist groups continues to attract and train recruits, regrow leaders, maintain funding, and gain new operational footholds. Osama bin Laden and hundreds of his top lieutenants and adherents are captured or dead, but during the past decade terrorist groups have expanded across the Middle East and North Africa. As these groups metastasize, U.S. military assets have been spread thin. The U.S. military maintains unflinching focus
on counterterrorism at the expense of other difficult security challenges and strategic imperatives that will matter in years and decades to come.

Former Secretary of Defense Bob Gates has observed that the incredible capability of the U.S. military can be a liability: “Our foreign and national security policy has become too militarized, the use of force too easy for presidents.” With so much military capability on call for the president, and the broad counterterrorism authorities endowed in presidential findings and the 2001 Authorization for Use of Military Force, there is a distortion in the cost-benefit analysis for action versus inaction (or less direct approaches). When option A is to attack the terrorist network and option B is essentially to do nothing, the choice is not difficult, even if it is admittedly short term.

But often, the choice to use military force empowers this enemy. Former Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld asked his staff in an October 2003 memo, “Are we capturing, killing or deterring and dissuading more terrorists every day than the madrassas and the radical clerics are recruiting, training and deploying against us?” The answer to that question is as unnerving today as when he asked it. Al-Qaeda and ISIS not only do not seem to mind that they are hunted; they seem to thrive because of it. Their propaganda depends on images of battle against a superior adversary, stoking a sense of victimization and injustice. Israel has experienced a similar phenomenon in its successive campaigns against Hezbollah and Hamas: battlefield victories translate at best into stalemate and at worst into political losses in a regional context. Terrorist groups feed on the instability and economic decimation that warfare brings.
A more effective U.S. counterterrorism approach is straightforward, well understood, and yet has proven elusive to two administrations. It would be far better to balance the use of military force in the short term against adversaries directly threatening the interests of the United States and its allies and partners with the need to pursue other approaches that cut off recruits and support for these groups in the medium and long terms.

Over the past 13 years, in addition to its military successes the United States has improved border and transportation security, and developed powerful counter-threat finance tools. But it has fallen markedly short in other key areas. The good news is that the shortfalls and needed capabilities are well understood. They are mainly in the areas of information operations, partner security forces and law enforcement capacity building, economic and political development in weak states, and human rights. Our failure to make successful investments in these areas in Iraq helps explain the current challenges the United States and its allies—including the Iraqi government—face there now.

Progress on these issues will require sustained attention from the president and his top advisers. The National Security Council must give the same attention to building up and exercising these tools as it does direct-action counterterrorism. Congress must similarly lend its attention to the necessary missing ingredients of a better approach to counterterrorism. Military force is a sometimes necessary, but strategically insufficient, answer to a growing threat.