# Rethinking the Wars Against ISIS and the U.S. Strategy for Counter-Terrorism and Counter-Insurgency

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By the time a new President takes office, the United States will have been at war for roughly a decade and a half. What began as a limited war against terrorism has become a major counterinsurgency campaign in Iraq and Afghanistan, and U.S. military involvement in Syria and Yemen, while the U.S. largely stands by after having played a major role in the defeat of Gaddafi in Libya.

Violent Islamic extremism is a serious threat in all five cases, as it is more broadly throughout much of the Islamic world. At the same time, in every case, the nation involved has been the equivalent of a failed state. The insurgency did not come from some foreign source and the country had a long history of violent politics, failed governance, and failed economic development.

The rise of extremism came after the failure of secularism, and because of deep religious, ethnic, regional, and other internal tensions and violence. The result was not simply insurgency, but civil war. These conflicts were sometimes triggered and fed by the actions of outside states, including the U.S. and former Soviet Union, but they escalated because of massive civil failures as well as growing violent incidents and military clashes.

The Burke Chair in Strategy has recently updated a series of reports that show the linkages between the escalation of violence and the level of failed politics, governance, and economic development in Iraq and Syria. These reports show that the civil causes of violence are so deep that no defeat of extremist movements alone can hope to bring any lasting form of security and stability.

They also raise fundamental questions about the way in which the U.S. has approached the struggle against major terrorist movements and fought counterinsurgency campaigns. They suggest that the fundamental threat in each case where the U.S. has found itself involved in long conflicts has not been the terrorist or extremist movement, but the failure of the host country government to create a political structure, level of governance, and progress toward economic stability that could win and sustain popular support, and develop effective host country security forces.

In practice, the four threats that allow extremism to create serious insurgencies, and lead to what are really lasting civil wars, have the following priority:

- *Host Country Government and Security Forces*: Authoritarianism, failure to cope with internal divisions, poor governance and corruption, failed economy development and equity, population pressure and youth bulge, repression and violence by internal security forces, traditional and corrupt military.

- *The Overt "Threat"*: Moderate and peaceful beginnings shift to extreme and violent movements that feed on the civil-military divisions and failures of the host country governments.

- *The U.S. Threat to the U.S.*: Relearn counterinsurgency yet again. Separate military (tactical) and civil (project-oriented development) efforts. Threat oriented and downplay Host Country problems. No meaningful overall civil-military plan or net assessment. Rapid rotations with limited expertise. Cycle of denial, flood resources, rush to generate Host country forces, then leave too soon. "Take note" of lessons, then ignore.

- *Other Nations:* Allied, Neutral, Hostile: Allied limits to engagement, national caveats, demands; neutral interference for competing national interests, hostile action because anti-U.S., support overt threat, opposing national interests.

They also suggest that no amount of tactical success can end civil conflict, and bring lasting stability and security. "Nation building" may have become an unpopular term, and it may well be impossible to accomplish unless the host country develops a level of improvement in its politics and governance that allows outside aid to be effective. It is probably a grim reality that no nation that is torn by massive civil violence today can end that violence unless its own leaders and people take responsibility for massive reform and change.

At the same time, the U.S. must take a far more realistic look at what is really happening in its present wars, and in how it deals with the broad patterns of unrest and conflict emerging in the Islamic and developing worlds. Other studies by the Burke Chair suggest that the "revolution in military affairs" that focuses on the changes that technology and new tactics and strategy could bring to conventional conflicts have been matched – if not superseded by a "revolution in civil-military affairs"

It also seems all too clear if one looks at the patterns in the various metrics on Iraq, Syria, and Afghanistan – as well as the overviews of the same patterns in Libya and Yemen – that all of these countries will face years of continued civil fighting and tension – or revert to authoritarian control – even if today's Islamist extremists are defeated. It also seems likely that the U.S. will not succeed even in creating effective host country forces, and the basis for a meaningful rule of law and civil security, unless it creates a far more effective civil-military strategy for helping each host country.

The analyses, metrics, maps, and trend analyses that support these conclusions can be found in the following reports:

- **21st Century Conflict: From "Revolution in Military Affairs" (RMA) to "Revolution in Civil-Military Affairs" (RCMA):** http://csis.org/files/publication/150702_Speech_RMA_RCMA_Rev_in_Mil_Affairs.pdf

- **Beyond Partisan Bickering: Key Questions About U.S. Strategy in Syria,** http://csis.org/files/publication/150917_Cordesman_Beyond%20Partisan%20Bickering.pdf.

- **War and the Iraqi Economy: A Case Study,** http://csis.org/files/publication/150915_Cordesman_Iraq_War_Economy.pdf

- **Trends in Iraqi Violence, Casualties and Impact of War: 2003-2015:** http://csis.org/files/publication/150914_Trends_in_Iraqi_Violence_Casualties.pdf

- **Constructing a New Syria: Dealing with the Real Outcome of the "ISIS War":** http://csis.org/files/publication/150908_Cordesman_Constructing_A_New_Syria.pdf

- **Losing the "Forgotten War": The Need to Reshape US Strategy in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Central Asia:** http://csis.org/files/publication/141006_Losing_the_Forgotten_War_Final.pdf

- **Iraqi Stability and the "ISIS War":** http://csis.org/publication/iraqi-stability-and-isis-war.

- **The Revolution in Civil Military Affairs: Case Studies in "Failed State Wars" in Libya, Iraq, Syria, Yemen and Afghanistan:** http://csis.org/files/publication/150702_PPT_Slides_RCMA_and_Failed_State_Wars.pdf

- **The Civil Transition: in Afghanistan: The Metrics of Crisis?:** http://csis.org/files/publication/141217_Afghan_Civil_Transition.pdf.

- **Afghan Forces on the Edge of Transition – Sharply Contradictory Data on Levels of Violence**: http://csis.org/files/publication/141216Security_Transition_in_Afghanistan_II_2.pdf