

The “End State” Fallacy: Setting the Wrong Goals for War Fighting

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The U.S. involvement in the fighting in Afghanistan and in four wars in the Middle East—Iraq, Libya, Yemen, and Syria—has led to a necessary focus on the military dimension and the tactical need to defeat given extremist movements and “enemies.” This focus, however, cannot bring stability either to the country at war or to the countries around it, and this leads almost inevitably to questions such as “how does this war end?” It also leads to talk about how to shape the “end state” of a given conflict.

The United States and its allies do need to look beyond the fighting, and beyond tactical victory. They also, however, need to understand that they cannot control the end state, that conflict termination agreements almost never shape the aftermath of a conflict even when it actually ends, and that the real world challenges of moving from conflict to stability are far greater and involve far longer time periods.

“End States” are a Historical Myth

In broad terms, efforts to control the “end state” of conflicts have almost always failed. Serious wars almost inevitably change the states involved in ways that none of the participants ever anticipated. They change social structure, economics, and interactions between different ethnic, sectarian, and other groups within society. Political stability and effective governance is often difficult to impossible to achieve, and anger, revenge, and opportunism create major patterns of post-conflict instability.

There are reasons why virtually every war in Europe has been the prelude to the next regardless of the peace settlements involved and the desired end state. As for the United States, it could not succeed in shaping the end state of its own civil war, and has spent a century trying to come to grips with its aftermath in terms of human rights. No one—especially Woodrow Wilson—could control or anticipate the real world end state of World War I. The well-intentioned goals of the United States at the end of World War II did reject the Morgenthau Plan’s draconian end state for Germany; and the efforts of the United States, Britain, and other states had many positive effects. They did not, however, prevent the Cold War, nor did they bring global peace. The U.S.-led victory in the first Gulf War did not bring a stable end state any more than the U.S. “victories” in Afghanistan from 2001-2014, or the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the fighting that followed from 2004-2011.

The United States Cannot Shape the End State to Any of its Current Wars

The United States is the major global military power, but it now faces a world in which it can—at best—exert sustained influence, and cannot possibly control the end state of a given conflict it is involved in. In the real world, conflict termination almost never has an “end state.”

War unleashes forces that make it the prelude to anticipated changes—many of which begin during the conflict and regardless of the intensions of the combatants—and that can only be influenced by a sustained effort that often would have to last a decade or more. They also involve some form of “nation building,” regardless of how unpopular the term has become—precisely because even a power like the United States cannot anticipate many of the key variables involved, help find a workable solution, and overcome the range of problems that cause lasting instability or shape the next conflict.

These are not academic or theoretical issues at a time when the Obama Administration has to deal with five immediate conflicts, and with the reality that even the best possible defeat of ISIS in both Syria and Iraq will immediately raise critical issues for the Arab Sunnis, Arab Shi’ites, Arab Alawites, and Kurds in each country. The broad ideological struggle for the future of Islam now goes far beyond ISIS, or even Islamic extremism. Iran and the Arab Gulf states increasingly are making it struggle between all Sunnis and Shi’ites.

No major element in either Syria or Iraq—including a wide range of armed non-state actors—is really unified or without its own tensions and conflicts between factions of the sect and ethnicity. Major elements of violent Islamist extremists will still survive in both countries and the region, regardless of what happens in Mosul or Raqqa, or to the ISIS brand name. Outside powers all have their own goals and ambitions. Turkey, Iran, and Russia are key players with serious influence that do not want the same “end state” as the United States and its European allies, or have the same goals between them.

The Practical Challenges of Five Wars

Regardless of what happens between now and January, the next Administration will face the need to deal with either sustained fighting, or years of post-conflict effort to bring some form of stability to Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Syria, and Yemen. It will face the broader challenge of the struggle for the future of Islam, and the resulting patterns of terrorism and insurgency. It will have to deal with Iran and the needs of our Arab allies, and the decades-long failure to create a real “end state” out of the Camp David accords.

This will involve many complex military and security challenges, the need to help create effective governance and politics in failed states, and the sustained need to deal with the ideological challenge of extremism. It is critical, however, that the next Administration, the Congress, and the American public understand the civil legacy of problems that already exist.

Afghanistan is—to some extent—a separate case. Its civil and military challenges are examined in depth in a separate study entitled *The Afghan War: Reshaping American Strategy and Finding Ways to Win*, which is available on the CSIS web site at <https://www.csis.org/analysis/afghan-war-reshaping-american-strategy-and-finding-ways-win>. A summary look at the human costs of war and political upheavals in Iraq, Libya, Syria, and Yemen, however, should make the point that talking about “end states” borders on the ridiculous, and that conflict resolution alone cannot begin to deal with even the most basic humanitarian and economic issues involved.

This is especially true when one realizes that all of these wars have occurred in states that have had critical problems in governance and economic development, with levels of

repression that led to today's conflicts long before 2001, 2003, or 2011. One of the many dangers of the end state fallacy is the tendency to forget the causes of war—and how bad a given state could become in peacetime—until it becomes involved in a civil war or broader conflict.

The Civil Challenges In Iraq

Even if one looks only at the humanitarian and economic issues in Iraq, it is clear that no quick “end state” is possible. UN, CIA, World Bank, and IMF data cannot be fully updated or accurate, but they still produce the following overview:

- Population 37 million (CIA)
- World Bank governance ratings show Iraq is a failure in every major category of governance.
- Transparency International rates as 161st most corrupt out of 167 countries.
- People of concern rose from 1.4 million in 2013 to 4.7 million in 2015. May reach over 7 million after a successful campaign in Mosul. (OCHA, UNHCR)
- 10.0 million in need in August 2016; 7.3 million targets for humanitarian assistance. (OCHA)
- 233,900 Iraqi refugees; 3.385 million IDPs since January 2014: 87,000 IDPs from Falluja and surrounding areas since May, 53,700 IDPs from Mosul and surrounding areas since March, and 88,500 IDPs from Shirqat, Al Qayyarah and surrounding areas since June. (UNHCR, OCHA)
- 1.13 million receiving aid from World Food Program
- 72% urbanized and counting under hyperurbanized conditions with major slums, added ethnic and sectarian pressure, limited job growth, and sharply inadequate infrastructure and security. (CIA)
- Iraq's largely state-run economy is dominated by the oil sector, which provides more than 90% of government revenue and 80% of foreign exchange earnings. (CIA)
- Falling global oil prices resulted in declining export revenues: Iraq government and KRG effectively bankrupt.
- Budget deficit equal to 15.4% of GDP in 2015. (CIA)
- Declining per capita income. \$15,500 (2015 est.) (CIA)
- 25-30% of population below poverty line. (CIA)
- 16-23% direct unemployment; no estimate for indirect/disguised (CIA)

The Civil Challenges In Libya

Libya has fewer challenges than any of the other states, but was never anything approaching a truly wealthy oil state, and Qaddafi's eccentric policies left it without an effective structure of governance, or a functioning economy that went beyond the petroleum sector.

- Population 6.4 million; Median age 28
- World Bank governance ratings show Libya is a failure in every major category of governance.
- Transparency International rates tying with Iraq as 161st most corrupt out of 167 countries.
- Youth unemployment 48.7%; overall unemployment 30% (?)
- 79.7% urbanized
- GDP drops from \$130.2B in 2013 to \$92.6B in 2015. Per capita income drops from \$20,800 in 2013 to \$14,600 in 2015

- 33% below poverty line in 2014.
- As of 2015, 434,869 IDPs, 471,653 people of concern.
- OCHA Estimates in August 2016 that an estimated 2.44 million people are in need of protection and some form of humanitarian assistance, with 1.28 million at risk of immediate food insecurity. This includes at least 659,000 internally displaced persons (IDPs), the non-displaced conflict affected population, refugees, asylum-seekers and migrants. The crisis is predominantly urban centered with most of the fighting taking place in major cities such as Benghazi, Tripoli, Misrata, Sirte, Sabha and Darnah
- Libya's economy, almost entirely dependent on oil and gas exports, struggled during 2015 as the country plunged into civil war and world oil prices dropped to seven-year lows.
- In early 2015, armed conflict between rival forces for control of the country's largest oil terminals caused a decline in Libyan crude oil production, which never recovered to more than one-third of the average pre-Revolution highs of 1.6 million barrels per day.
- The Central Bank of Libya continued to pay government salaries to a majority of the Libyan workforce and to fund subsidies for fuel and food, resulting in an estimated budget deficit of about 49% of GDP.
- Libya's economic transition away from QADHAFI's notionally socialist model has completely stalled
- Libya's leaders have hindered economic development by failing to use its financial resources to invest in national infrastructure. The country suffers from widespread power outages in its largest cities, caused by shortages of fuel for power generation. Living conditions, including access to clean drinking water, medical services, and safe housing, have all declined as the civil war has caused more people to become internally displaced, further straining local resources.
- Extremists affiliated with the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) attacked Libyan oilfields in the first half of 2015; ISIL has a presence in many cities across Libya including near oil infrastructure, threatening future government revenues from oil and gas.

The Civil Challenges In Syria

Bad as Iraq may be, the following overview shows that Syria is far worse:

- Population down from 22-24 million to 17.1 million, median age 23.8
- World Bank governance ratings show Syria is a failure in every major category of governance.
- Transparency International rates as 154th most corrupt out of 167 countries.
- Estimates of dead range from some 270,000 to 470,000
- UNHCR estimates in September 2016 that Syria had 4.8 million refugees out the country – roughly 22% of its prewar population -- and 8.7 million people – over one-third of its present population -- displaced away from their homes and jobs inside Syria.
- 13.5 million need protection. 12.1 million people are in need of humanitarian aid, including 5.7 million children. 11.5 million lack of access to health care and scarcity of medicine have led to a catastrophic health situation. Poor food availability and quality and successive cuts in subsidies on bread have exacerbated nutritional deprivation. An estimated 25 percent of schools were not operational by 2014.
- No reliable summary of how badly the economy has suffered since 2011, but the CIA estimates that Syria's GDP shrank from an already very low \$97.5 billion in 2012 to \$55.8 billion in 2014, and per capita income was only \$5,100 in 2010 – before the fighting began. This drop, instead of growth, ranked Syria as 219th of the world's nations. Unemployment reached 57.7% in 2014, and 82.5% of the population lived below the poverty line by then – putting Syria at a rank of 202nd, and at the near bottom of the world's nations.

- OCHA estimates that Syria's development situation has regressed almost by four decades. Four out of five Syrians now live in poverty. Since the crisis began in 2011, life expectancy among Syrians has dropped by more than 20 years, while school attendance has dropped over 50 per cent, with more than 2 million children now out of school. Syria has also seen reversals in all 12 Millennium Development Goal indicators. The Syrian economy has contracted by an estimated 40 per cent since 2011, leading to the majority of Syrians losing their livelihoods.
- Turkey hosts over 2.7 million [registered](#) Syrians. In Lebanon, more than a million registered Syrians live in over 1,700 communities and locations across the country, often sharing small basic lodgings with other refugee families in overcrowded conditions. In Jordan, over 600,000 men, women and children are currently trapped in exile. Iraq has also seen a growing number of Syrians arriving, hosting nearly 25,000, while in Egypt (UNHCR.)
- In 2009, 94 per cent of Syrian children attended primary and lower secondary education, by June 2016 only 60 per cent of children were in school in Syria, leaving 2.1 million children and adolescents without access to education in Syria. In neighboring countries, over 4.8 million Syrian refugees are registered with UNHCR, and 35 per cent are of school-age. In Turkey, only 39 per cent of school-age refugee children and adolescents were enrolled in primary and secondary education, 40 per cent in Lebanon, and 70 per cent in Jordan. This means that nearly 900,000 more Syrian school-age refugee children and adolescents are not in school.

The Civil Challenges In Yemen

Yemen has not suffered as much from war as have Iraq or Syria, but it began with a far lower standard of living and far worse prospects of development. As a result, Yemen was far more vulnerable to the impact of war:

- Population 27 million; Median age 19
- World Bank governance ratings show Yemen is a failure in every major category of governance.
- Transparency International rates as tying with Syria as 154th most corrupt out of 167 countries
- 40% of children underweight before war.
- Youth unemployment 37%; overall unemployment 27%
- GDP drops from \$105B in 2013 to \$75.5 in 2015
- Per capita income drops from \$3,900 in 2013 to \$2,700 in 2015
- 54% below poverty line in 2014.
- As of 2015, 2.5 million IDPs, 267,000 refugees, 2.8 million people of concern.
- Current data arte lacking by OCHA estimates that at the beginning of 2016, an estimated 14.4 million Yemenis were unable to meet their food needs (of whom 7.6 million were severely food insecure), 19.4 million lacked clean water and sanitation (of whom 9.8 million lost access to water due to conflict), 14.1 million did not have adequate healthcare, and at least two million had fled their homes within Yemen or to neighboring countries. Many of the displaced continue to live with host families, placing additional strain on scarce resources, or renting shelter, which becomes challenging as rental prices increase, displacement becomes protracted, and savings depleted.
- Ongoing war has halted Yemen's exports, pressured the currency's exchange rate, accelerated inflation, severely limited food and fuel imports, and caused widespread damage to infrastructure. At least 82% of the population is in need of humanitarian assistance.
- Rebel Houthi groups have interfered with Ministry of Finance and Central Bank operations and diverted funds for their own use. Yemen's Central Bank reserves, which stood at \$5.2 billion prior to the conflict, currently stand at \$1.5 billion.
- The Central Bank is exposed to approximately \$7 billion in overdraft, more than three times the legal limit, directly linked to the Houthis withdrawing \$116 million on a monthly basis.

- The private sector is hemorrhaging, with almost all businesses making substantial layoffs.
- The Port of Hudaydah, which handles 60% of Yemen's commercial traffic, was damaged in August 2015 as a result of the conflict and is only operating at 50% capacity.
- Access to food and other critical commodities such as medical equipment is limited across the country due to security issues on the ground.
- The Social Welfare Fund, a cash transfer program for Yemen's neediest, is no longer operational and has not made any disbursements since late 2014.

Demographics, the "Youth Bulge," Urbanization, Climate and War

Some of the longer-term forces at work are hard to summarize, but are equally critical. The population in all of these states was at least five times larger in 2010 than in 1950, and is likely to be 50% larger by 2050.

The number of men and women entering the labor force greatly exceeded the creation of meaningful productive jobs—even if only men are included. New entrants from this "youth bulge" saturated government with pointless jobs, and opportunities in the private sector and state-owned enterprises (SOEs) were limited. Education was a major problem in terms of quality, and rarely linked to real world employment needs and standards.

Population growth greatly exceeded the amount of arable land, and water became a steadily growing problem with the possible exception of Libya. A lack of effective agricultural reform, poor state management, and the failure to provide capital investment created serious productivity problems. At the same time, rates of urbanization seem to have increased at least three times between 1960 and 2010, pushing sects, ethnic groups, and tribes together in new ways, and often creating massive slums for the less privileged faction.

War has now had a massive impact by undermining education and job experience for at least a half decade—far longer in Iraq and Afghanistan. It has limited job creation in critical ways, and ensured that education, health, safe drinking water, sanitation, and infrastructure are even less adequate in per capita terms than in 2010.

Using Sustained U.S. Influence to Seek Stability

Serious as all these challenges are, they scarcely mean that the United States cannot accomplish a great deal even if it is limited to "least bad" options. The success of sustained U.S. civil and military efforts during the length of the Cold War—roughly half a century—makes an incredible contrast to first seeking the impossible, and then standing aside between 1920 and 1939. Playing a real world role, adapting to change, setting achievable goals, using resources carefully and under well-defined conditions will not succeed in every case, but they can make a difference in most, and sometimes can succeed over time.

Focusing on the end state fallacy and transformational efforts that go beyond the desires of those they try to transform, can only create new problems for most occupying powers. The same is true of standing aside. Isolationism is as much prelude to new conflicts as ambitious end states. So is moral arrogance. Defining an end state on basis of mirror imaging—seizing the moral high ground—almost inevitably means retreating back to the United States in safety when things go wrong, leaving U.S. mistakes to fester.

In practical terms, this means that the Obama Administration should act now to prepare the best transition plans it can for sustained, practical, affordable action in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Syria, and Yemen. The same should be true of the next President's transition teams. These plans should recognize the reality that the United States cannot control the future and must be adaptable. They should recognize America's limits, its other priorities, and the risks in using U.S. influence. At the same time, they should look beyond war fighting to developing the best possible civil-military options while conflict still goes on, and the best basis for exerting sustained influence over time.