

Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Somalia, and Yemen: Is Half a Strategy Better than None?

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The United States seems to be adjusting the military half of its strategy in Iraq, Syria, and Afghanistan to the point where it can be successful. The estimates of the overall patterns in global terrorism in the semi-official START data base continue to rise, but the U.S. does seem to be on the edge of defeating ISIS's physical Caliphate in Iraq and Syria. At some point before the end of 2017, the issue will no longer be defeating ISIS, it will be what comes next?

The U.S. is correcting the critical mistakes it made in setting a "deadlines" strategy for withdrawing from Afghanistan without first laying the ground work for the Afghan security forces to survive: It is now committed to providing them with the support that is needed instead of trying to leave by a fixed deadline. It is providing major amounts of combat air support, strengthening the U.S. element of the Afghan counterterrorism force, and sending what could be an adequate number of train and assist personnel to the forward roles where they are really needed.

The problem is that the U.S. has no apparent strategy for the civil side of the Iraq-Syrian or the Afghan conflicts, and no clear strategy for conflict termination. Worse, it has no clear strategy of any kind -- *military or civil* -- for its lesser involvements in Libya, Pakistan, Somalia, the two Sudans, and Yemen -- or for dealing with violent Sub-Saharan extremism.

The "war on terrorism" has become a series of counterinsurgency campaigns where the U.S. has no clear strategy for encouraging stability, and countering extremism in the MENA region or South Asia in the countries where it does not have active involvement in counterterrorism and counter insurgency. Worse, it now plans to cut back on its already weak and largely ineffective aid efforts, and it has made no meaningful efforts at helping "nation building" in the other countries which are most vulnerable to extremism and terrorism.

The U.S. is not publically committed to actively supporting Saudi Arabia in its 2030 reform program, or to encouraging similar efforts in countries like Egypt and the rest of the Middle East, South Asia, and other states that are vulnerable to extremism. It is talking budget cuts and bureaucratic reform when it needs to focus on creating effective civil efforts in both conflict and vulnerable states. While Sun Tzu and Clausewitz may not have said it so simply, the U.S. seems to be unable to focus on the fact that an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure -- or several thousand precision guided weapons, billions of dollars, and the lives of U.S. and allied soldiers.

The Cost of Ignoring the Civil Dimension and Impact of Conflict Termination

Back in March 2003, then Major General David Petraeus asked the most important single question in warfighting that shapes every conflict involving extremist movements and weak, divided, and failed states: "Tell me, how does this war end?" He was not asking who would win or lose, but what the grand strategic result of the U.S. invasion of Iraq would be: What kind of Iraq and regional stability -- if any -- would result.

Three Presidents -- Bush, Obama, and Trump -- have now failed to ask that question in any meaningful public form, much less have attempted to shape the answer. U.S. grand strategy in Syria seems to be to try to hold some kind of largely Kurdish enclave in the East and leave the rest of a bankrupt and devastated nation to Assad, Iran, Russia, and the Hezbollah. The U.S. is enabling

Iraq to defeat ISIS, but has no clear strategy for helping a nation that must now recover, is in a deep structural economic crisis, has a weak and divided government, has critical and semi-violent ethnic and sectarian differences, and is under major Iranian military, political, economic, and religious influence.

President Trump has hinted that U.S. support for the fighting in Afghanistan will not be unconditional, and implied that Afghanistan must do its share -- including some unstated forms of civil reform and efforts to counter corruption. The new U.S. strategy he has set forth has no civil dimension, however, for a state in deep economic crisis with rising poverty levels, and with a divided, corrupt, and ineffective levels of politics and governance. Polls like those of The Asia Foundation show all too clearly that its government is losing confidence and trust at time it faces a growing military crisis. As for Libya, Pakistan, Somalia, the Sudans, and Yemen-- or in dealing with violent Sub-Saharan extremism -- if the U.S. has any strategy other than helping them militarily -- what the hell is it?

Trump is certainly no worse in providing the other half of an effective U.S. strategy than Bush or Obama. But, this is an area where even his usual rescuers -- Mattis, McMaster, and Tillerson -- seem to have no better answers than their predecessors in the previous two Administrations. Further, President Trump has also said the U.S. will not be not involved in "nation building."

It is one thing to give up the futile U.S. efforts to use aid to transform the political, legal, and economic system of a nation from the outside and do so regardless of its cultural values and the views and needs of its deeply divided peoples. It is quite another not to help and push them into shaping and executing their own reform programs when these are vital to their survival, progress, unity, and stability.

The Cost of a Half a Strategy

The end result seems almost certain to be one where the U.S. can work with a given regional security partner to defeat an extremist attempt to combine terrorism and insurgency to seize control of a government. The problem is that each such "war" will end by leaving weak and failed state even weaker. It will have no clear ability to achieve lasting stability, or meet the needs of its divided peoples in the future. Victories in the security dimension will not have lasting civil impact and may actually make the national situation worse as a country's internal divisions, population pressure, poverty, failed politics, and governance interact with the lingering cost of fighting a past generation of extremism without preventing the future rise of another.

The end result may also already have been to help to alienate a broad range of the population in the countries the U.S. is fighting to save and the regions the U.S. is trying to stabilize. One example is the ease with which the Taliban just turned a minor public relations error by the U.S. military in Afghanistan into a serious flap over a seeming U.S. insult to Islam. The U.S. did make a stupid mistake in loosely associating an image of a dog with Islam, but the Taliban could not have capitalized upon it if Afghans felt the U.S. was really seeking to help their government make their lives secure and better.

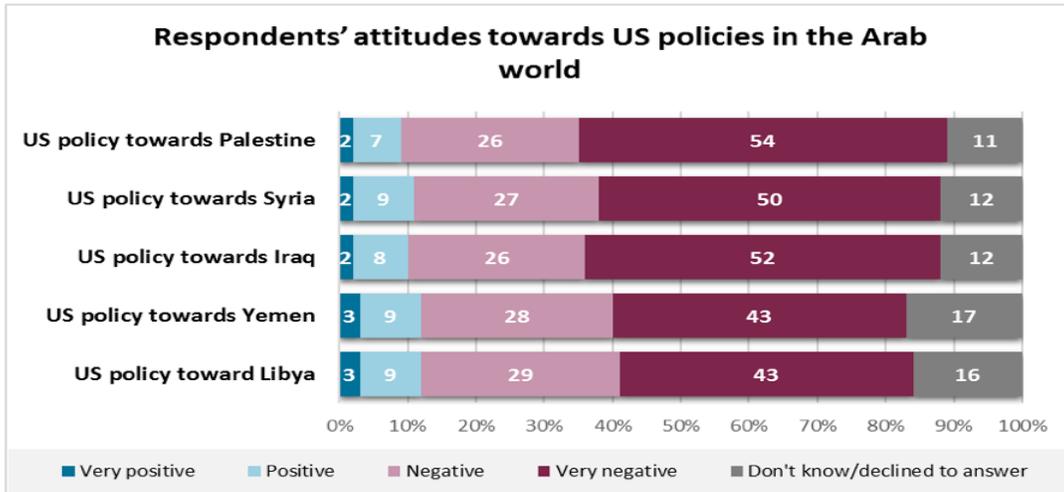
More broadly, no one survey of the region is ever neutral and comprehensive, but -- while the recent survey of Arab support for the United States shown in **Figure One** may have some bias -- it is still broadly based enough to provide the kind of warning that self-praising official U.S. surveys and analyses do not. If Americans are sometimes leery of the Muslim world, the feelings

summarized in the following figure are a warning that American mistakes have made a key part of the Muslim world leery of us.

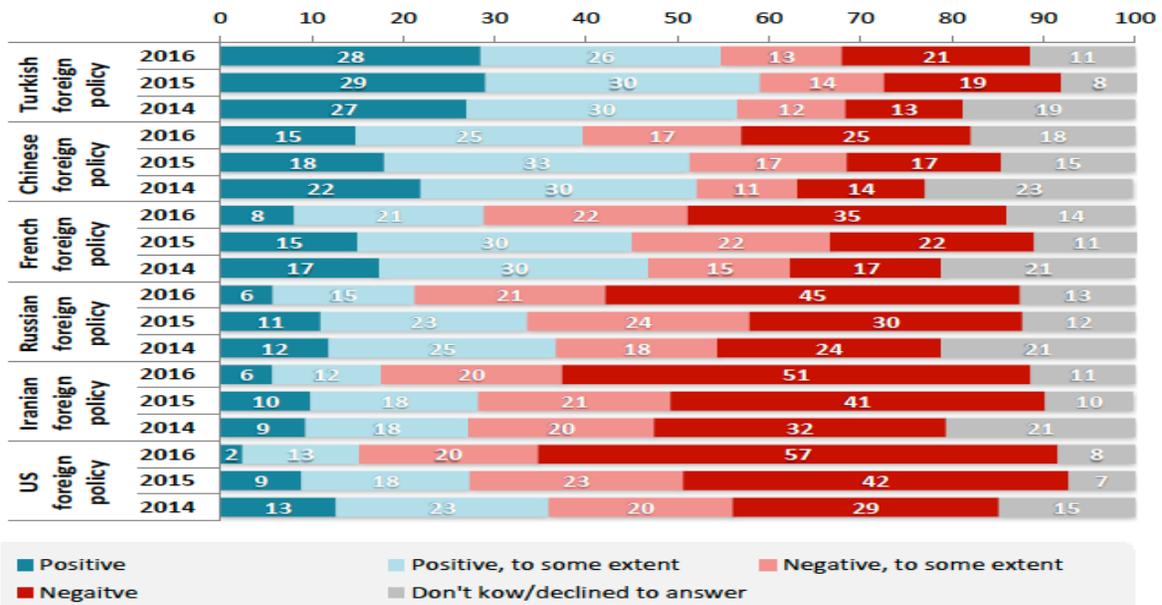
Figure One: The Other Side of the Hill: How the Peoples of Our Strategic Partners and the Middle East See Us

How They See Our Role in Arab Conflict States

When asked to look at specific US foreign policy areas, vast majorities of Arabs had negative views of US policy toward Palestine (80 percent), Syria (77 percent), Iraq (78 percent), Yemen (71 percent), and Libya (72 percent).



How Their Reaction to Our Foreign Policy Compares to Other Outside States



Source: Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies (ACRPS) in Doha, Qatar, *The 2016 Arab Opinion Index: Executive Summary*, p. 3

The 2016 Arab Opinion Index is the fifth in a series of yearly public opinion surveys across the Arab world. The first survey was conducted in 2011, with following surveys in 2012/2013 and 2014. The 2016 Arab Opinion Index is based on face-to-face interviews conducted with 18,310 individual respondents in 12 separate Arab countries: Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Iraq, Jordan, Palestine, Lebanon, Egypt, Sudan, Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco and Mauritania. Sampling followed a randomized, stratified, multi-stage, self-weighted clustered approach, giving an overall margin of error between +/- 2 % and 3% for the individual country samples.

Civil-Military Relations and the Right Kind of Nation Building

There are clear limits to what the U.S. can and should do in the civil dimension. No one should underestimate how difficult it is for the U.S. to win a battle of strategic communications in nations and regions with a different culture and faith, which often have impossible expectations of what the U.S. can do, and where the use of U.S. ground and airpower -- and security measures -- produces collateral damage, casualties, and fear and anger -- even if its tightly controlled and necessary. Even the best real world civil half-of-a-strategy will only ease such problems, not eliminate them.

The U.S. should not return to the wrong kind of nation building. President Trump is right in saying that the U.S. should not engage in such efforts. Outside transformational aid efforts do not work in peacetime, much less in the middle of conflict. Plans and action must suit the pace and needs of a given state and culture and be seen as the legitimate goals of its own peoples and leaders. Expensive project and program aid can have symbolic value and do token good, but is no substitute for a coherent national plan and effort, national political leadership, and progress tailored to the broad needs of country's often competing factions.

The U.S. can only waste money and lose credibility by repeating such efforts. It also can only help a nation whose leaders, politics, and plans win popular legitimacy. Put simply, no one can help develop a nation unless it actively helps itself. It is not isolationism -- merely a pragmatic exercise in strategic triage -- to insist that the leaders of strategic partners do help themselves, that they make such commitments and honor them, and that their resulting progress is fast enough and honest enough to meet popular expectations -- albeit within context of what can actually be done in wartime and to move to conflict termination and then towards a stable peace.

The dollar and human cost to the U.S. will always be a legitimate issue. The U.S. not only cannot afford to be the world's policeman, it cannot afford to be the planner and funder of the civil development of failed states.

A review of the economies of the conflict states where the U.S. is now involved indicates, however, that their primary need is internal economic reform and reducing the barriers to business and development. Aid is needed, but only at the levels needed to help fund an evolutionary level of progress that can win popular support. Project and program aid can be limited to the pace of evolution actually possible, political reform and anti-corruption measures need to be equally evolutionary, and the goal of the efforts should clearly be to help the country move towards lasting stability on its own terms -- not to exercise lasting U.S. influence

The U.S. should be seen as a key partner that balances security aid with civil aid, and whose campaign is a civil-military effort and not simply a military one. At the same time, the U.S. should not be seen as the one outside force that is driving conditional aid to strategic partners and host countries. This is also a role that cannot be performed by holding conferences on aid, and must be performed on a working basis in country. At the same time, it needs to be as multinational as possible.

It is the kind of mission a World Bank field team would be far better equipped to perform than State or USAID alone. It is also one where building a truly professional UN in-country effort -- the exact opposite of the failed UNAMA effort in Afghanistan -- could provide a neutral body to plan and coordinate an international aid effort while the fighting is still underway, and then handle

the transition to conflict termination and civil efforts to create lasting stability and development programs.

The most important single issue, however, is that the U.S. must have -- and act upon -- both halves of a strategy, even as it fights. Half a strategy is not better than none.