

Endless War Challenges Analysis of Drone Strike Effectiveness

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INTRODUCTION

A major question for U.S. policy is whether counterterrorism strikes are effective. Efforts to measure effectiveness are challenged by how the United States' selection of expansive, unachievable objectives has given rise to endless war. This article will apply the lens of "endless war" to illustrate the various challenges that the endless character of American counterterrorism warfare poses for scholars and analysts assessing the effectiveness of U.S. counterterrorism strikes.

The United States has long sought to accomplish its unlimited objectives of destroying or defeating al Qaeda, ISIS, and other terrorist groups. These objectives appear to be beyond the United States' ability to achieve. As the United States also does not face the prospect of its own decisive defeat, the pursuit of such unlimited objectives has given its counterterrorism wars an endless character.

The presence of unachievable objectives constrains analyses of the effectiveness of counterterrorism warfare even when it comes to more limited objectives because the apparent accomplishment of limited objectives does not result in an end to the state of war. The number of strikes may decline or even pause in particular theaters, but the war and its claims of authority for violence never reach a tipping point, where the war is declared over and authority withdrawn.¹ As a result, claims that counterterrorism strikes have achieved objectives short of the unlimited objective are essentially a debate over tactics. This focus on the tactical can fuel what some strategists have identified as "an addiction to killing terrorist leaders," diverting focus from the failure to envision and implement achievable political ends.² Moreover, the war's endless character undermines many of the forms of measurement and theories that underlie assessments of the effectiveness of strikes.

Recently, academic, policy analyst, and government stakeholders have sought to square the circle by downplaying the unlimited objective of decisively defeating al Qaeda and instead focusing on the ability to achieve limited objectives. However, unlimited and limited objectives do not easily co-exist. Confusion reigns in the absence of a reckoning with the persistence of the unachievable, unlimited objectives (of destroying various terrorist groups) and more substantial

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1. Brianna Rosen, *Ending Perpetual War*, JUST SECURITY (2022), <https://perma.cc/EYT2-3QP8>.

2. DAVID KILCULLEN, BLOOD YEAR: THE UNRAVELING OF WESTERN COUNTERTERRORISM 4, 230–231 (2016).

efforts to define the limits of limited objectives (whether denying groups control of specific territories or degrading their specific capabilities), challenging efforts to apply research to policy.

Despite a long history suggesting the concept of “endless war” has meaning, there remains substantial resistance to applying the concept. Integrating a critique of “endless war” is essential to efforts to analyze the policy effectiveness of counterterrorism strikes.

This article proceeds by presenting a definition of “endlessness.” It then argues that current analysis of the effectiveness of drone strikes has not sufficiently integrated criticisms of how U.S. objectives generate endless war. It then presents a series of problems with analyses that seek to assess limited objectives while putting aside the endless character rooted in the failure to achieve stated unlimited objectives. Finally, it suggests some areas for improving analysis of effectiveness while calling for great humility about the constraints on analyzing effectiveness during an endless war.

I. ENDLESS WAR: A CONCEPT IN NEED OF DEFENSE

The concept of an “endless war”³ is simultaneously in vogue and deeply resented among those shaping and arguing over American counterterrorism policy. President Trump used the term, including when he announced a soon-aborted 2019 U.S. withdrawal from Syria.⁴ President Biden used the phrase “forever war” while discussing the Afghanistan withdrawal.⁵

At the same time, numerous commentators and analysts have dismissed the concept of “endless war” as a meaningless slogan.⁶ However, the concept has a long history that challenges claims that it is merely a political slogan tied to

3. In this article, I will treat “endless war” as a term that is largely equivalent with the concept signaled at by phrases like “forever war” and “permanent war.” However, in this author’s view, “endless war” is the superior phrase and has analytic power that “forever war” lacks. See David Sterman, *Avoiding the Time Trap*, FELLOW TRAVELERS (Dec. 6, 2021), <https://perma.cc/7KMW-V8G2> [hereinafter Sterman, *Avoiding the Time Trap*].

4. Donald Trump (@realDonaldTrump), TRUMP TWITTER ARCHIVE (Oct. 7, 2019, 7:40 AM), <https://perma.cc/T9GF-2CY2> (“. . . almost 3 years, but it is time for us to get out of these ridiculous Endless Wars, many of them tribal, and bring our soldiers home. WE WILL FIGHT WHERE IT IS TO OUR BENEFIT, AND ONLY FIGHT TO WIN. Turkey, Europe, Syria, Iran, Iraq, Russia and the Kurds will now have to . . .”).

5. President Joseph R. Biden Jr., Remarks by President Biden on the End of the War in Afghanistan (Aug. 31, 2021), (available online at <https://perma.cc/Z642-AZFG>).

6. For a selection of such commentary, see Dan Crenshaw, *The ‘Endless Wars’ Fallacy*, WALL ST. J. (Aug. 17, 2021, 12:35 PM), <https://perma.cc/3BFG-3FRA>; Steven Cook, *End the ‘Forever War’ Cliché*, FOREIGN POL’Y (Apr. 22, 2021, 7:06AM), <https://perma.cc/8FCW-S4TK>; Peter Juul, *The Empty Rhetoric of ‘Ending Endless Wars.’* LIBERAL PATRIOT (Feb. 3, 2021), <https://perma.cc/DHY8-Z6BX>; Kori Schake, Jim Mattis, Jim Ellis & Joe Felter, *Defense in Depth*, FOREIGN AFFS. (Nov. 23, 2020), <https://perma.cc/CRB9-PC3D>; Thomas Joscelyn, *Endless Jihad: The Problem with Pledging to End Our ‘Endless Wars.’* DISPATCH (Aug. 20, 2020), <https://perma.cc/V3T8-U6XH>; Paul Miller, *Ending the ‘Endless War’ Trope*, ATL. COUNCIL (Mar. 26, 2020), <https://perma.cc/HZ9V-DLZB>.

exhaustion with the war on terror.⁷ Much of this history involves theories of endlessness as a condition characterized by a belligerent's pursuit of unachievable goals—or goals that have been redefined to see the lack of an end-state as desirable—even as the belligerent itself is safe from being defeated. For example, in his novel *1984*, George Orwell wrote of the novel's permanent war as being “like the battles between certain ruminant animals whose horns are set as such an angle that they are incapable of hurting one another” as contraposed to war as understood in past ages that “almost by definition, was something that came to an end, usually in unmistakable victory or defeat.”⁸

Drawing upon the history of usage, this article defines “endless war” as a war in which two conditions are met:

1. A belligerent is pursuing objectives it lacks the capability to achieve; and
2. that belligerent is also not at risk of being defeated or denied access to the battlefield.

Where these two conditions are met, endlessness emerges insofar as the belligerent in question remains committed to waging war for an end that it cannot achieve even as its enemies are unable to force an end to the war.

One need not have a specific policy stance to recognize that endlessness has meaning. For example, President George W. Bush appeared to recognize that “endless war” meant something when he sought to distinguish the war on terror he was embarking on from an endless war by saying, “The war on terror is not over; yet it is not endless. We do not know the day of final victory, but we have seen the turning of the tide.”⁹ Nor was this a lone reference in which President Bush and other administration officials denied an accusation of endlessness by saying victory might take time but was still possible.¹⁰

Likewise, one can recognize the endlessness of current U.S. wars without determining that withdrawal is the proper policy response. For example, Katherine Zimmerman of the American Enterprise Institute writes, “The global war on terror has become an endless war because the U.S. has yet to adopt an approach that will defeat the Salafi-jihadi groups at the heart of this terror threat.

7. Serman, *Avoiding the Time Trap*, *supra* note 3; DAVID STERMAN, *DEFINING ENDLESS WARS: THE FIRST STEP TOWARDS ENDING THEM*, NEW AM (last updated Jan. 26, 2021), <https://perma.cc/7QVD-K6NY>.

8. GEORGE ORWELL, *NINETEEN EIGHTY-FOUR* 225–227 (reprt. 2022).

9. President George W. Bush, *President Bush Announces Major Combat Operations in Iraq Have Ended*, (May 1, 2003), (available online at <https://perma.cc/XNL8-YMSJ>).

10. President Bush Participates in Joint Press Availability with Prime Minister Gordon Brown of the United Kingdom, (Apr. 17, 2008, 2:43 PM) (available online at <https://perma.cc/E35B-V8VX>); Vice President Dick Cheney, Vice President's Remarks to the World Affairs Council of Dallas/Fort Worth, (Nov. 2, 2007, 12:30 PM) (available online at <https://perma.cc/Q8JL-T4R9>); Press Briefing by Tony Snow (Sept. 12, 2007, 12:38 PM) (available online at <https://perma.cc/CV5H-E2NX>).

The cycle of military deployments—costly in both American blood and treasure—will not end so long as the conditions remain.”¹¹

If one accepts that “endless war” is meaningful, the next question is whether the United States’ counterterrorism wars have taken on an endless character. This article concludes that they have.

Hal Brands and Michael O’Hanlon, two analysts skeptical of calls to end the endless wars, capture the sense of endlessness in their assessment of the state of the war on terror after two decades. In the journal *Survival*, they criticize calls to end endless wars and write, “it would still be wrong – and rash – simply to discard the GWOT [global war on terror] as a strategic failure.”¹² Even so, they write, “the strategy remains an intuitively unsatisfying ‘mowing the grass’ approach.” They continue, “By design, it must therefore be continued indefinitely, until local politics or other indigenous factors deprive future terrorists of the ability to train, recruit and organize.” Finally, they admit, “America is nowhere close to achieving the objective that key policy makers identified early on: pushing terrorism to the margins, cutting off the flow of recruits, and otherwise creating conditions that would allow Washington to declare victory and come home.”¹³ O’Hanlon explicitly frames this condition as an “endless war.”¹⁴

One does not have to look back twenty years through the lens of defenders of the war on terror to deem the war endless. Days after the 9/11 attacks, Representative Barbara Lee opposed the 2001 Authorization for the Use of Military Force, warning, “we must be careful not to embark on an open-ended war with neither an exit strategy nor a focused target.”¹⁵ In 2002, American writer, philosopher, and activist, Susan Sontag, warned that the war on terror would be an endless war, emphasizing the metaphorical nature of waging war on a feeling, tactic, or a “multinational, largely clandestine network of enemies” rather than a specific group.¹⁶

These criticisms partially filtered into major policy debates. In 2007, then-candidate for the 2008 Democratic presidential nomination Joe Biden, said that he did not believe in the concept of a global war on terror.¹⁷ In 2006, Biden had stated, “The President continues to talk about ‘the war on terror.’ That is simply wrong. Terrorism is a means, not an end, and very different groups and countries

11. Katherine Zimmerman, *The Current US Approach to Terror Is a Recipe for Forever War*, DEF. ONE (Oct. 30, 2019), <https://perma.cc/6KW2-UCUM>.

12. Hal Brands & Michael O’Hanlon, *The War on Terror Has Not Yet Failed: A Net Assessment After 20 Years*, 63 *SURVIVAL* 33, 33–34 (2021).

13. *Id.* at 39–40, 43.

14. Michael O’Hanlon, *Resigned to Endless War*, WALL ST. J., July 27, 2018, at C4.

15. Representative Barbara Lee, Speech Opposing the Post-9-11 Use of Force Act (Sept. 14, 2001) (available online at <https://perma.cc/SXV4-4U4M>).

16. Susan Sontag, *Real Battles and Empty Metaphors*, N.Y. TIMES, Sept. 10, 2002, at A25.

17. Ben Smith, *Biden Wages War on “War on Terror,”* POLITICO (May 4, 2007, 6:01 AM), <https://perma.cc/DXG2-P3BK>.

are using it toward very different goals. If we can't even identify the enemy or describe the war we're fighting, it's difficult to see how we will win."¹⁸

However, the criticism did not focus on the problems of maintaining an unlimited objective against a terrorist network. An unlimited objective can be defined, following Donald Stoker, as an objective that seeks the defeat and destruction of the enemy government while a limited objective is anything short of that.¹⁹ By the early Obama administration, the idea of a defeat of terrorism was drawing significant criticism for being too broad to be useful, and that objective was ultimately transposed into the unlimited objective of defeating al Qaeda.²⁰ The calls for defeating al Qaeda were hardly less expansive or more specific than the calls for defeating terrorism. For example, regarding al Qaeda, President Obama stated in his 2011 State of the Union speech, "we've sent a message from the Afghan border to the Arabian Peninsula to all parts of the globe: We will not relent, we will not waver, and we will defeat you."²¹ Under President Obama, the number of U.S. counterterrorism strikes increased compared to the number conducted under the prior administration, including in some countries that largely avoided them under the Bush administration.²²

This transposition of objectives did not resolve the issues with the idea of destroying terrorism as an idea or tactic. Al Qaeda, which always had a level of decentralization with regard to its operations, took on an increasingly decentralized character in the wake of the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan, which isolated the

18. Joseph R. Biden, Jr., *Five Years After 9/11: Rethinking America's Future Security* (Sep. 7, 2006) (available online at <https://perma.cc/M7A5-W3MP>).

19. DONALD J. STOKER, *WHY AMERICA LOSES WARS: LIMITED WAR AND US STRATEGY FROM THE KOREAN WAR TO THE PRESENT 5* (2019). The definition bears the marks of its derivation primarily from wars between states. However, the problems posed by the question of what the defeat or destruction of a non-state group or movement might mean have not stopped the United States from framing its counterterrorism objectives in terms of the defeat or destruction of non-state groups.

20. For a sense of this change compare the defense of an expansive vision of the war on terror in a 2003 book co-written by a former Bush speechwriter with the criticism of such a view in a book written by an Obama adviser, which even so maintains the vision of defeating al Qaeda. DAVID FRUM & RICHARD NORMAN PERLE, *AN END TO EVIL: HOW TO WIN THE WAR ON TERROR* (1st ed. 2003); BEN RHODES, *AFTER THE FALL: BEING AMERICAN IN THE WORLD WE'VE MADE* (1st ed. 2021). On the persistence of defeat in Rhodes' book even as it criticized the breadth of Bush era objectives see DAVID STERMAN, *AMERICA'S ENDLESS COUNTERTERRORISM WAR IN YEMEN*, *NEW AM.*, 46-47, <https://perma.cc/KT7V-M9HV> (last updated Apr. 4, 2022). On contemporaneous discussion of these differences see Peter Baker, *Obama's War Over Terror*, *N.Y. TIMES* (Jan. 4, 2010), <https://perma.cc/W3UD-Z88R>.

21. President Barack Obama, *Remarks by the President in State of Union Address* (Jan. 25, 2011) (available online at <https://perma.cc/A92D-85C2>).

22. Peter Bergen, David Sterman & Melissa Salyk-Virk, *America's Counterterrorism Wars: The War in Yemen*, *NEW AM.*, <https://perma.cc/QJ3W-9EH5> (last visited Aug. 13, 2020); Peter Bergen, David Sterman & Melissa Salyk-Virk, *America's Counterterrorism Wars: The Drone War in Pakistan*, *NEW AM.*, <https://perma.cc/XVD4-QHJZ>; Peter Bergen, Melissa Salyk-Virk & David Sterman, *America's Counterterrorism Wars: The War in Somalia*, *NEW AM.*, <https://perma.cc/SY2P-Y5WX>. For discussion of the history of the drone war in Yemen and the challenges of tracking it or dating when it began, see STERMAN, *AMERICA'S ENDLESS COUNTERTERRORISM WAR IN YEMEN*, *supra* note 20.

group's members from its leader and scattered jihadists who had previously been co-located in Afghanistan.²³

Whether the objective of defeat was directed against "terrorism" or al Qaeda (and since late-2014 its breakaway affiliate ISIS), the United States was still fighting the kind of clandestine network of multiple groups that had stoked Sontag's criticism and still operating under the 2001 AUMF criticized by Representative Lee. Al Qaeda had begun to establish formal franchises and affiliates as early as 2003, a strategy it expanded upon in part as a response to American counterterrorism's success in weakening the core group via expanding strikes among other tactics.²⁴

In at least some cases al Qaeda's affiliates also saw their own processes of decentralization and fragmentation. For example, with regard to al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), Yemen scholar Elisabeth Kendall writes, "Defining who or what constitutes AQAP is more challenging today than it was a decade ago. As Yemen's internationalized civil war has fragmented, different AQAP splinters have emerged, some of them no more than mercenary gangs," later adding, "It is possible that some of the fighters themselves are unsure precisely whose grand design they are part of, and they may not even care, as long as they are fighting their immediate enemies and earning a wage."²⁵

Decentralization cannot be reduced to a mere matter of identifying certain characteristics that can facilitate a terrorist organization's resilience to total defeat. It also structures the question of what gets labeled an al Qaeda attack and thus enters the kind of data that is commonly used to analyze the effectiveness of counterterrorism, for example databases on attacks carried out by various groups.²⁶ Further, it structures the very definition of the organizations in question. As a result, decentralization shapes targeting strategies and research on organizational survival or attack patterns at a fundamental level. As Sarah Phillips, another scholar examining the case of AQAP, argues, American counterterrorism policy in Yemen truncates the local, more fluid understanding of what al Qaeda is (including the view that there are multiple al Qaedas and that it is an appendage of elite politics) in order to make it legible as a rational and bounded organization and thus targetable by counterterrorism methods.²⁷ This truncated understanding poses a particular issue for the unlimited objective of destroying al Qaeda. As

23. MITT REGAN, DRONE STRIKE – ANALYZING THE IMPACTS OF TARGETED KILLING 191–202 (2022); NELLY LAHOUD, THE BIN LADEN PAPERS: HOW THE ABBOTTABAD RAID REVEALED THE TRUTH ABOUT AL-QAEDA, ITS LEADER AND HIS FAMILY 54 (2022).

24. For an examination of al Qaeda's approach see BARAK MENDELSON, THE AL-QAEDA FRANCHISE: THE EXPANSION OF AL-QAEDA AND ITS CONSEQUENCES (2016).

25. Elisabeth Kendall, *Twenty Years After 9/11: The Jihadi Threat in the Arabian Peninsula*, 14 CTC SENTINEL 63, 66 (2021), <https://perma.cc/C22T-FN5N>.

26. *Id.*

27. Sarah G. Phillips, *Making al-Qa'ida Legible: Counter-Terrorism and the Reproduction of Terrorism*, 25 EUR. J. INT'L RELS. 1132 (2019).

Phillips notes, “destroying one of its coexisting meanings will not defeat the group because other opaque relationships inevitably survive it.”²⁸

The Failure to Integrate a Critique of Endlessness

Analyses of the effectiveness of counterterrorism strikes have insufficiently integrated the issue of endlessness into their assessments. Instead, the issue of endlessness and its roots in seemingly unachievable unlimited objectives is treated not as a stumbling block but as a minor inconvenience that can be side-stepped by turning to other measures of success.

For example, in his excellent meta-analysis of studies of drone strike effectiveness, Mitt Regan raises the issue of the seeming inability of the United States to achieve unlimited objectives of defeating terrorist groups. He writes, “if effectiveness is defined as the elimination of a terrorist group, US targeted strikes have been ineffective. [al Qaeda] continues to exist and to be active in various locations.”²⁹ Yet Regan downplays the challenge the citation of unlimited objectives poses to efforts to assess the impact of drone strikes with regard to more limited aims, continuing, “It seems reasonable, however, to assume the goals of U.S. strikes have been, in order of priority, to weaken the ability of [al Qaeda] to conduct attacks” in seven areas.³⁰ In order of importance those are:

- (1) In the United States;
- (2) Against U.S. targets outside the U.S.;
- (3) In the West, where most close U.S. allies are located;
- (4) Against Western targets outside the West;
- (5) In allied countries outside the West, especially Pakistan because of the risk of instability to a country with nuclear weapons;
- (6) That do not fall within the first four categories but are international in nature, that is, conducted by a group outside its region;
- (7) In other countries, conducted by an [al Qaeda] affiliate or associate in those countries.³¹

Brands and O’Hanlon go further in their net assessment of the war on terror. They seek to defend the overall war on terror from accusations of being a “strategic failure” by separating the seeming success of more limited objectives from the failure to accomplish unlimited objectives, writing, “The good news, then, is that America has gradually developed a sustainable approach to denying or disrupting terrorist safe havens. The bad news is that this approach promises little rest for the weary.”³²

28. *Id.* at 1146.

29. REGAN, *supra* note 23, at 116.

30. *Id.*

31. *Id.* at 116, 185.

32. Brands & O’Hanlon, *supra* note 12, at 40.

The Biden administration appears to be implementing this theoretical move in the policy space, adopting a “sustainable counterterrorism” framework. The Administration’s vision of sustainable counterterrorism is most directly articulated in a 2021 speech by Assistant to the President for Homeland Security Liz Sherwood-Randall.³³ That speech, like other Biden administration strategy documents, avoids the language of defeat while emphasizing the language of degrade and disrupt.³⁴

The exact contours of sustainable counterterrorism remain underspecified, but a core aspect is a move away from the objectives of destroying and decisively defeating al Qaeda or other groups and toward a policy of management of threat. Matthew Levitt writes in his examination of sustainable counterterrorism and its history that “Counterterrorism efforts should not be viewed in terms of victory or defeat, but rather as an ongoing effort—short of both war and peace.”³⁵

Despite attempts to move beyond the seemingly stalled objective of destroying al Qaeda (and other groups) to focus on other objectives, the United States has not explicitly abandoned its unlimited objectives. Rather than an explicit reframing of objectives and authorities, the Biden administration appears to prefer quieter reductions in the pace of wars that avoid public debate.³⁶ Moreover, the objective of defeat remains operative at a global level through the counter-ISIS war’s continued use of the frame.³⁷ In addition, in Somalia, the United States’ partners have embraced the objective of defeating al-Shabaab (al Qaeda’s Somali affiliate), and in the apparent absence of explicit directions to abandon the language of defeat as an objective, the United States appears to be re-adopting the objective of defeating al-Shabaab in its press releases regarding U.S. strikes in Somalia.³⁸ Meanwhile, the 2001 AUMF that enables a global war on terror without geographic or temporal limitation remains in place and continues to be cited

33. Liz Sherwood-Randall, Assistant to the President for Homeland Sec., Remarks as Prepared for Delivery by Assistant to the President for Homeland Security, Dr. Liz Sherwood-Randall on the Future of the U.S. Counterterrorism Mission: Aligning Strategy, Policy, and Resources (Sept. 9, 2021) (available online at <https://perma.cc/E8CA-MP52>).

34. THE WHITE HOUSE, INTERIM NATIONAL SECURITY STRATEGIC GUIDANCE (2021), <https://perma.cc/HRA7-EVVS>; David Sterman, *Is the New National Security Strategy Ending or Merely Pausing ‘Forever Wars’?*, RESPONSIBLE STATECRAFT (Mar. 9, 2021), <https://perma.cc/P298-ZU7A>; Matthew Levitt, *Rethinking U.S. Efforts on Counterterrorism: Toward a Sustainable Plan Two Decades After 9/11*, 12 NAT’L SEC. L. & POL’Y 247, 253 (2021).

35. Levitt, at 271.

36. Matthew Duss & Stephen Wertheim, *A Better Biden Doctrine*, THE NEW REPUBLIC, Jan. 2023, <https://perma.cc/SY62-5FW5>; Luke Hartig, *The Biden Drone Playbook: The Elusive Promise of Restrained Counterterrorism*, JUST SECURITY (2022), <https://perma.cc/6V33-6AX5>; STERMAN, AMERICA’S ENDLESS COUNTERTERRORISM WAR IN YEMEN, *supra* note 20, at 80.

37. David Sterman, *Abandoning the Language of Defeat is Harder Than You Think*, NEW AM., (2022), <https://perma.cc/DK28-7PUW> [hereinafter Sterman, *Abandoning the Language*].

38. *Somali Forces Engage al-Shabaab Insurgents*, U.S. AFR. COMMAND (Dec. 23, 2022), <https://perma.cc/H8C5-DWAM>; *Federal Government of Somalia Combats Terrorists*, U.S. Afr. Command (Dec. 18, 2022), <https://perma.cc/99RX-E84Y>; Sterman, *Abandoning the Language*, *supra* note 37.

to justify strikes, keeping the ups and downs of specific wars contained within a seemingly endless state of war.³⁹

II. THE PROBLEMS WITH ANALYZING EFFECTIVENESS AMID ENDLESSNESS

The presence of unachievable, unlimited objectives constrains analysis of the effectiveness of U.S. counterterrorism strikes. Unlimited and limited objectives do not easily coexist—and to the extent they do it suggests confusion regarding strategic ends. Confusion about the strategic ends of strikes impinges on the ability to operationalize strikes as a tool to achieve strategic ends and on the ability to analyze their effectiveness at achieving those ends.

Following Stoker's theory, unlimited and limited objectives are mutually exclusive—one involves the defeat or destruction of the enemy and the other something less than that. Stoker, for example, writes regarding President Obama's September 10, 2014 speech announcing the authorization of strikes in Syria and the objective of degrading and destroying ISIS, "[T]he stated objectives are mutually exclusive (do you want to degrade—whatever that means—or destroy?)." ⁴⁰ This mutual exclusivity should act as a warning of an unresolved confusion.

It is possible that objectives other than destruction are simply sub-objectives of the main unlimited strategic objective. In other words, in order to destroy a group, one needs to degrade it first. However, such a response requires a continued case for why the unlimited objective is actually achievable. Otherwise, the reference to the unlimited objective sustains the incoherency of putting forward mutually exclusive objectives.

The presence of an unlimited objective can fill in as the end point of supposedly limited objectives, even if it is not stated explicitly. This potential makes it important that strategists and policymakers explicitly and publicly abandon unlimited objectives rather than simply ceasing references to them. For example, an objective of degrading a group's capabilities, could constitute a limited objective, but this requires one to know the answer to the question: degrade to what level? If the answer is to a level that essentially requires the group's destruction, then that's still an unlimited objective.

Similarly, an objective of denying safe haven to a terrorist organization could constitute a limited objective. However, safe haven is relative, and thus for it to be a limited objective requires spelling out what constitutes an unacceptable level of safe haven.⁴¹ The only way to ensure an un-delimited absence of safe haven is to destroy the group in question.

39. Andrew Desiderio & Lara Seligman, 'A Very Dangerous Precedent': Democrats Take Aim at Biden's Somalia Airstrikes, POLITICO (July 27, 2021, 2:54 PM), <https://perma.cc/75RR-PTSE>; Gregory D. Johnson, *60 Words and A War Without End: The Untold Story of The Most Dangerous Sentence in U.S. History*, BUZZFEED (Jan. 17, 2014), <https://perma.cc/M8BT-QDFK>.

40. STOKER, *supra* note 19, at 15.

41. EDMUND J. HULL, HIGH-VALUE TARGET: COUNTERING AL QAEDA IN YEMEN xxi-iv (1st ed. 2011); Paul Pillar, *The Safe Haven Notion*, NAT'L INT. (Aug. 29, 2017), <https://perma.cc/FGM7-HQ4X>; STERMAN, AMERICA'S ENDLESS COUNTERTERRORISM WAR IN YEMEN, *supra* note 20, at 53.

These issues are apparent in the Biden administration's discussion of the killing of al Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri. President Biden's speech and a background briefing floated what could be limited objectives: preventing Afghanistan from becoming a safe haven for those plotting external attacks and degrading al Qaeda's capabilities.⁴² Yet the administration did not lay out the contours of these objectives and what would constitute sufficient degradation or denial of safe haven to end the use of military action.⁴³

By simply removing references to defeat, but not setting limits to the potential new limited objectives, the administration ends up returning to the original frame of the war on terror that helped generate endlessness in the first place—a vision of ongoing use of military force to counter terrorism as a tactic or broader condition of threat rather than to target a specific group to destroy it or degrade it to a level determined to constitute a “tipping point” after which the objective can be declared achieved and the war over.⁴⁴ President Biden, for example, states, “I made a promise to the American people that we’d continue to conduct effective counterterrorism operations in Afghanistan and beyond. We’ve done just that,” proceeding to cite another operation in Syria that killed the leader of ISIS, a group that split away from al Qaeda and harshly criticized Zawahiri.⁴⁵ Despite Biden's 2007 caution about the framing of the war on terror, he stated, “As Commander-in-Chief, it is my solemn responsibility to make America safe in a dangerous world. The United States did not seek this war against terror. It came to us.”⁴⁶

The return to talk of an overarching war on terror holds the potential to eventually re-energize dreams of a decisive defeat. The decision process around the initiation of the counter-ISIS war, in which limited objectives of protecting Americans in specific areas and breaking the siege on Mt. Sinjar quickly gave way to a goal of degrading and destroying ISIS, shows how unlimited objectives can overtake limited objectives during moments of crisis.⁴⁷ Even in today's quieter environment, “defeat” continues to be the overarching objective of the counter-ISIS strategy. For example, President Biden's June 2022 War Powers Resolution Letter states, “As part of a comprehensive strategy to defeat ISIS, United States Armed Forces are working by, with, and through local partners to conduct operations against ISIS forces in Iraq and Syria and against [al Qaeda] in

42. Press Release, The White House, Remarks by President Biden on a Successful Counterterrorism Operation in Afghanistan (Aug. 1, 2022) (available online at <https://perma.cc/7R7H-NZTU>); Press Release, The White House, Background Press Call by a Senior Administration Official on a U.S. Counterterrorism Operation (Aug. 1, 2022) (available online at <https://perma.cc/CH67-YFNZ>).

43. Craig Martin, *What was the International Legal Basis for the Strike on al-Zawahiri?*, JUST SEC. (Aug. 9, 2022), <https://perma.cc/9NR2-PAJY>.

44. On the dangers of moving away from a vision of a tipping point see Rosen, *supra* note 1.

45. Remarks by President Biden on a Successful Counterterrorism Operation in Afghanistan, *supra* note 42.

46. *Id.*

47. David Sterman, *Decision-Making in the Counter-ISIS War: Assessing the Role of Preventive War Logic*, NEW AM. (last updated Nov. 15, 2019), <https://perma.cc/M5LQ-9JNX>.

Syria to limit the potential for resurgence of these groups and to mitigate threats to the United States Homeland.”⁴⁸

The lack of clarity also impinges on the ability to effectively analyze objectives beyond the destruction of a targeted group. As Christopher Kolenda, an adjunct senior fellow at the Center for a New American Security,⁴⁹ argues, the United States “has no definition or doctrine for this seemingly critical aspect of war. Options other than decisive victory do not exist in the national security lexicon.”⁵⁰ As a result, when the government abandons unlimited objectives without defining new limited objectives, confusion reigns.

If one is not able to achieve unlimited objectives, three other options for war termination remain: a negotiated agreement between the warring parties to cease fighting, transition of responsibility to another actor combined with a renunciation of a war footing, or surrender (that is decisive victory but for the enemy).⁵¹ Surrender is unlikely to be an acceptable option for American policymakers. That leaves negotiation and transition.

When it comes to ending a war via negotiation, failing to define the limits of one’s objectives risks signaling to the enemy that their continued existence in any form is unacceptable for those objectives are unlimited precisely because they demand the destruction of the enemy. As a result, it suggests that negotiations are either in bad faith or little more than a temporary condition produced by the United States’ weakness. By blurring the line between when the United States is at war and when it is not, the United States risks providing evidence confirming al Qaeda’s narrative that any form of Islamist governance will eventually face U.S. military action, thus incentivizing continued hostility to and even attacks targeting the United States.⁵²

Confusion as to whether one wishes to destroy or negotiate with the enemy also muddles the decisions regarding which figures should be targeted with strikes. One of the key ways drone strikes theoretically achieve limited objectives is by degrading or disrupting the organization or network behind attack plotting and its ability to control or direct its members. Yet this exact undermining of command and control also risks undermining the ability of the targeted organization to negotiate and enforce any agreement that might be made.

For example, a 2010 conference summary by the Strategic Studies Institute at the U.S. Army War College raised a caution, writing, “A decapitated insurgency or terrorist movement may be degraded or fragmented but it cannot participate in

48. Letter from Joseph R. Biden, Jr., President, to Speaker of the House and President Pro Tempore of the Senate Regarding the War Powers Report (June 8, 2022) (available online at <https://perma.cc/3M6T-GGKN>).

49. Christopher D. Kolenda, Center for a New American Security, <https://perma.cc/5CLQ-Z3JY>.

50. CHRISTOPHER D. KOLENDA, ZERO-SUM VICTORY: WHAT WE’RE GETTING WRONG ABOUT WAR 4 (2021).

51. *Id.* at 52–54.

52. STERMAN, AMERICA’S ENDLESS COUNTERTERRORISM WAR IN YEMEN, *supra* note 20, at 81; Hassan Hassan, *What the Global War on Terror Really Accomplished*, NEW LINES MAG. (Sept. 9, 2021), <https://perma.cc/EF7W-ZP9K>.

a peace settlement or enforce the terms of the settlement on its followers. Ultimately, [Martin] van Creveld suggested, the ensuing anomie and endless war may prove worse than a peace negotiated with and enforced by the leadership of an enemy organization.”⁵³

Regan writes regarding a non-U.S. case, “Efforts to assess the impact of targeted killing during the Second Intifada must also consider that this period was only one phase in a conflict between Israel and the Palestinians that has lasted many decades,” adding, “Even if Israel used targeting for a relatively narrow objective during the Second Intifada, that tactic necessarily would have had broader effects on the course of the conflict that are difficult to identify and measure.”⁵⁴ The challenges of measurement become even more substantial when a belligerent cannot determine for itself whether it is pursuing unlimited or limited objectives or whether it seeks a negotiated end to war or something else.

Failing to define the limits of new objectives and the resulting implicit continuation of unlimited objectives also undermines the ability to seek an end to war via transition. It is difficult to prepare the public and others to accept transition if the government has not clearly abandoned its unlimited objectives or refuses to publicly define or defend new limited objectives. The criticism President Trump received for asserting that ISIS was 100 percent defeated illustrates this point. Trump’s claim received criticism in part because Trump’s own rhetoric about destroying ISIS had signaled broader aims, even if at times he sought to suggest that only meant the group’s territorial destruction.⁵⁵

Critics are not wrong to be skeptical of Trump’s usage of “defeat” regarding ISIS. There is a long history of premature declarations regarding the ending of wars.⁵⁶ According to some analysts, ISIS in particular draws power from its skill at moving between different organizational forms - from a terrorist group to an insurgency to a quasi-state and back.⁵⁷ Truncating the understanding of ISIS’ defeat to be the equivalent of the limited objective of denying it territory undermines the strategic thought necessary for a successful transition of the counter-ISIS war by obscuring debates about the extent of ISIS’ capability to resurge and partners’ ability to contain ISIS without relying upon U.S. military action. The more recent

53. STEVEN METZ & PHILLIP CUCCIA, *DEFINING WAR FOR THE 21ST CENTURY* 4 (2011).

54. REGAN, *supra* note 23, at 59.

55. STERMAN, *Defining Endless Wars*, at 25. On the claim and its fact checking see Katie Rogers, Rukmini Callimachi & Helene Cooper, *Allies Dispute Trump Boast of Seizing All of Caliphate*, N.Y. TIMES, Mar. 1, 2019, at A6; Ellen Mitchell, *16 Times Trump Said ISIS was Defeated, or Soon Would be*, HILL (Mar. 23, 2019, 5:13 PM), <https://perma.cc/83MZ-JHGC>; Press Release, The White House, Text of a Letter from the President to the Speaker of the House of Representatives and the President Pro Tempore of the Senate (Nov. 1, 2020) (available online at <https://perma.cc/2PPV-FE48>); President Donald J. Trump, Remarks by President Trump on the Death of ISIS Leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi (Oct. 27, 2019) (available online at <https://perma.cc/3PZD-8CCX>).

56. Mary L. Dudziak, *This War Is Not Over Yet*, N.Y. TIMES (Feb. 15, 2012), <https://perma.cc/WQ4G-GMCQ>.

57. OMAR ASHOUR, *HOW ISIS FIGHTS: MILITARY TACTICS IN IRAQ, SYRIA, LIBYA AND EGYPT* (2021); Haroro J. Ingram & Craig Whiteside, *In Search of the Virtual Caliphate: Convenient Fallacy, Dangerous Distraction*, WAR ON THE ROCKS (Sept. 27, 2017), <https://perma.cc/E2LT-49FV>.

use of phrases like “the effort to maintain the lasting defeat of ISIS”⁵⁸ or “commitment to maintaining the enduring defeat of Daesh, preventing its re-emergence and protecting our homelands”⁵⁹ suggest that the U.S. government is worried about the potential for resurgence and is far from confident in its declarations of defeat or its ability to sustain the potentially limited objectives regarding territorial denial. Efforts to jettison unlimited objectives without stating the new limits tend to produce a *mélange* of –ing words and processes without end points that fill in for an actual strategy.

Moreover, failing to delimit U.S. objectives can blur the line between the actions of the United States and its partners, and thus undermine the meaningfulness of an attempted transition. When the Biden administration says it will “maintain the fight against terrorism in Afghanistan from over the horizon—just as we will do in other countries across the world—working with partners, with tools that are commensurate with the threat, and without an American military presence on the ground,” it raises the specter that the United States may simply continue its wars, just using partner forces.⁶⁰

Even if the United States views itself as having transitioned responsibility, others may not perceive it that way—an issue made difficult when authorizations for force persist and limited objectives are not defined. For example, the United States may have viewed the strike on Zawahiri as a special case. Yet given the United States’ history of covert strikes⁶¹ and its emphasis on working with partners to continue the fight, reports of strikes (or other explosions) in Afghanistan that may be the work of others can generate cycles of speculation about a potential U.S. role that are difficult to evaluate let alone dispel.⁶²

These cycles of speculation can reshape political conditions in ways that disrupt the effective transition of responsibility, and which are difficult to measure. The ambiguity regarding responsibility that enables the speculation also introduces uncertainty into data tabulating U.S. strikes. It therefore also introduces uncertainty into analyses comparing strikes and their effects by blurring the question of whether strikes were conducted by the United States, by someone else at the United States’ behest, or by someone else without American support.

58. Press Release, CJTF-OIR Public Affairs, Coalition Leaders Condemn Ineffective al-Tanf Garrison Attack (Aug. 15, 2022), <https://perma.cc/RB8Q-QZ8Y>.

59. Press Release, CJTF-OIR Public Affairs, Advise, Assist, Enable Key to New OIR Campaign (Feb. 4, 2022), <https://perma.cc/WHB2-3RNL>.

60. Sherwood-Randall, *supra* note 33.

61. STERMAN, AMERICA’S ENDLESS COUNTERTERRORISM WAR IN YEMEN, *supra* note 20, at 45.

62. Daud Khattak, *Killing Of Senior TTP Commanders In Afghanistan Strikes Blow To Militants, Possible Peace With Pakistan*, GANDHARA (Aug. 9, 2022), <https://perma.cc/B3PN-H43M>; Bilal Sarwary (@bsarwary), TWITTER (Aug. 10, 2022, 08:35 AM), <https://perma.cc/7BCD-8DP2> (“#AFG A drone strike targeted Dahooz village in Wattapooar district in Pech valley in Kunar . Initial reports suggest, home of a TTP comamnder targeted in the strike. Area has long been a hotbed for AQ fighters including Katar Gambir that was targeted by US drone strikes in past.”).

CONCLUSION

Studies of the effectiveness of counterterrorism strikes are valuable. However, the conditions of endlessness that prevail in American counterterrorism war challenge analyses of their effectiveness. Analysis of effectiveness that seeks to move beyond the apparent inability to achieve unlimited objectives of destroying al Qaeda and other terrorist groups risks becoming trapped in debates over tactics divorced from analysis of strategic ends. Efforts to analyze effectiveness regarding alternative limited objectives must address the fact that the United States has not clearly set out limited objectives, and that partial discussion of objectives short of the total defeat of the enemy can spur rather than ameliorate strategic confusion. This is especially the case where analysis refuses to acknowledge the meaning of endless war in the first place.

This is not to argue that analysis of effectiveness is a dead-end. Instead, analysis of the effectiveness of counterterrorism strikes should increasingly draw upon the strategic studies literature and foreground the question of what objectives are being sought in a counterterrorism campaign, whether those objectives are achievable, and the conditions that would be required for them to be achieved. Analysts should be wary about discussions that replace detailed descriptions and comparisons of desired end states (and their conditions of possibility) with either vague references to an eventual total defeat of the enemy or with a generalized reference to reduced capabilities or a process of degradation. Analysts should also be wary of theories of ends that continue to use or retain standing authority for the use of force.

Yet even with greater attention to these issues, policy analysts should maintain a stance of humility regarding the constraints on analyzing the effectiveness of counterterrorism strikes when the state conducting the strikes is mired in an endless war. Recognizing the overall strategic failure of the war on terror named by the claim of endlessness is a necessary first step towards meaningfully analyzing and acting upon the strategic ends that can still be achieved.