The War is Dead, Long Live the War?

Counterterrorism after the Trump Presidency

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This year, Joe Biden wrote in *Foreign Affairs* that it was 'past time to end the forever wars, which have cost the United States untold blood and treasure', and that if elected, he would 'bring the vast majority of our troops home from the wars in Afghanistan and the Middle East and narrowly define our mission as defeating al Qaeda and the Islamic State'.[1] Donald Trump also made an anti-war position a central part of his re-election campaign; as he declared in September 2020, 'I'm bringing our troops back from Afghanistan. I'm bringing our troops back from Iraq. We're almost out of almost every place'.[2] However, Trump has of course had a tenuous relationship with the truth, and his previous statements have been noticeably disconnected from the actual conduct of counterterrorism during his presidency.[3] Furthermore, as shown in Syria in particular, Trump has faced regular pushback on his desires to withdraw American troops from both members of his administration and the U.S. military. Thus, in this whirlwind of distraction and confusion, this update asks *what is the state of U.S. counterterrorism operations after nearly four years of the Trump administration*?[4]

As per a State Department report, military force was used in six countries in 2019: Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Yemen, Somalia, and Libya.[5] All these actions were under the remit of counterterrorism, and were all justified on the legal basis of the Authorisations for Use of Military Force passed during the George

W. Bush administration in 2001 and 2002.[6] This update is predominantly based around these countries, categorised here into three regions: South and Southeast Asia, the Middle East, and Africa.[7]

At the time of writing there are just over 10,000 troops deployed in the official warzones of Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria, which represents a small decrease from the numbers that Trump inherited from the Barack Obama administration.[8] The firing of Defense Secretary Mark Esper and ensuing announcements from Acting Defense Secretary Christopher Miller have made clear that this figure will continue to fall before Biden's inauguration, but to around the 5,750 mark and not to levels that would constitute a full withdrawal from Afghanistan and Iraq.[9] Furthermore, contrary to Trump's quote above, much remains the same in terms of U.S. counterterrorism. As of April 2019, there were some 65,000 military and civilian personnel deployed around the world in support of OCOs *outside of* those stationed in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria.[10] Additionally, the conduct of counterterrorism operations during the Trump administration has become increasingly secretive, at least in part resulting in the ongoing nature of these OCOs. In terms of funding, the DoD's budget request for OCOs for FY2021 is $69 billion; a decrease from the $82 billion in FY2017 and FY2018, but actually higher than the last two years of the Obama administration.[11] What's more, the counterterrorism approach adopted by the Trump administration has largely followed the politically sustainable light-footprint, by-with-and-through model established by the Obama administration.[12] This can be seen in the number of U.S. combat casualties during the Trump presidency, with 58 deaths occurring in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria between January 2017 and September 2020.[13] Especially with Biden's election, this model seems unlikely to change.

Arguably, one of the most significant changes during the Trump administration has been the rumoured adoption of the Principles, Standards, and Procedures (PSP) initiative as a replacement for the Presidential Policy Guidance (PPG) established by the Obama administration.[14] Whilst the PSP did reportedly retain the necessity of near certainty for avoiding civilian casualties as a result of air strikes and commando raids, 'the standard that a target must pose a continuing, imminent threat to U.S. persons' was abandoned.[15] Amongst other changes to the PPG, the adoption of PSP has been accompanied by an intensification and expansion of the use of airstrikes, especially during the early years of the Trump administration.[16] After this increase in airstrikes, there has been a general trend towards withdrawal as the Trump presidency has progressed, resulting in some concrete progress in the ending of the forever wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.[17] Nonetheless, the broader counterterrorism campaigns that these wars are situated within have been anything but ended, as Trump might have claimed.

SOUTH AND SOUTHEAST ASIA

Afghanistan

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After the end of Operation Enduring Freedom in December 2014, U.S. troops have been in Afghanistan under the remit of Operation Freedom’s Sentinel since January 2015. This operation has two fundamental tasks: ‘a train, advise, and assist role under the NATO Resolute Support mission’, and ‘continuing counterterrorism operations’ against al-Qaeda, its associated forces, and the Afghani branch of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL).[18] During the Trump administration, U.S. troops have been split fairly equally with regards to these two different tasks.[19] Thus, the rationale for the ongoing U.S. troop presence in Afghanistan largely follows the same rationale as the initial intervention in October 2001. As General Kenneth McKenzie, the current commander of U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM), put it in March 2020, ‘our military mission in Afghanistan continues in support of our overriding national interest: preventing terrorist attacks against the homeland from Afghanistan’.[20]

The story of the Trump administration’s strategy in Afghanistan can be summarised as deliberation, intensification, negotiation, and withdrawal. Given Trump’s previous advocacy for disengagement from Afghanistan, there were reports in July 2017 that a total withdrawal was on the cards during the policy formulation process.[21] However, in August 2017, Trump announced that contrary to his ‘original instinct’, his administration would be sending 3,500 troops to the region in order to defeat ISIL and al-Qaeda in Afghanistan whilst ‘preventing the Taliban from taking over Afghanistan’.[22] To support the increased deployment of troops which took the total figure to 14,000, the DoD would request an additional $1.2 billion funding for FY2018.[23]

> “Although once a hotbed of U.S. counterterrorism activity, this is no longer the case, and Pakistan was not mentioned in any of Trump’s biannual letters to Congress informing members as to where the American military are operating as required by the 1973 War Powers Resolution (WPR)”

In line with this troop increase, U.S. Air Force (USAF) data shows a marked increase in the total number of weapons released in Afghanistan during the Trump administration. During the last three years of the Obama administration, the average number of weapons released per year was 1,550; the equivalent for the first year of the Trump administration was 6,382.[24] Furthermore, the intensity and scale of airstrikes has generally increased throughout the Trump administration, with 7,167 U.S. airstrikes occurring in 2019.[25] Although strike data is not available for this year due to USAF stopping its practice of releasing such data in early 2020,[26] This would only have increased with the ‘maximum pressure’ campaign launched in the first quarter of FY2020 as part of the administration’s attempts to create a political agreement with the Taliban.[27]

On 29 February 2020, an agreement was signed with the Taliban which dictated that there would be an immediate withdrawal of around 4,400 American troops, with the remaining U.S. military forces to be withdrawn by April 2021 if the terms of the agreement were met.[28] Withdrawal levels were a month ahead of schedule when there were 8,600 troops in Afghanistan in June 2020, with the current figure being around 4,500.[29] Concurrently, between 1 April and 30 June 2020, the number of U.S. airstrikes conducted fell by 80 percent in comparison to the previous quarter.[30] There has also been a decline in American casualty figures, with 4 deaths and 14 wounded between January and September 2020; the equivalent figures for the same period in 2019 was 17 and 192 respectively.[31]

On 7 October 2020, Robert O’Brien—Trump’s latest National Security Advisor—suddenly announced that the U.S. troop levels would be reduced to around 2,500 by the beginning of 2021.[32] Trump then one-upped this statement, tweeting that ‘we should have the small remaining number of our BRAVE Men and Women serving in Afghanistan home by Christmas!’[33] However, at this point, senior military officials had received no

formal orders for such a withdrawal, with Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Mark Milley stating that 'Robert O'Brien or anyone else can speculate as they see fit' as the agreement with the Taliban was 'conditions based'.[34]

Nonetheless, Trump's electoral defeat has again resurged the momentum in favour of U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, particularly after Esper was relieved of his post for his views on this matter.[35] As such, Miller announced on 18 November 2020 that U.S. troop numbers in Afghanistan would be reduced to 2,500 by 15 January 2021.[36] Whilst the impact of this withdrawal on NATO's Resolute Support remains unclear, Pentagon officials have stated that these troop numbers would still allow the U.S. to carry out counterterrorism efforts in Afghanistan.[37] Even so, these announcements have been subject to bipartisan criticism, such as Republican Senator Ben Sasse's description of the policy as a 'weak retreat'.[38]

Pakistan

Although Trump's speech on Afghanistan declared that 'Pakistan often gives safe haven to agents of chaos, violence, and terror', the deployment of force in the country has been minimal and far less than the previous administration.[39] The first term of the Obama presidency marked the peak of armed drone strikes in Pakistan, with an average of 73 strikes per year.[40] For Obama's second term, the corresponding figure was 16; for the Trump administration it has been just three strikes a year, with no airstrikes since 2018.[41] Thus, although once a hotbed of U.S. counterterrorism activity, this is no longer the case, and Pakistan was not mentioned in any of Trump's biannual letters to Congress informing members as to where the American military are operating as required by the 1973 War Powers Resolution (WPR).

Philippines

As part of the U.S. Indo-Pacific Command, American troops provide 'intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance' support to the Philippines army against ISIL and other terrorist organisations as part of Operation Pacific Eagle—Philippines.[42] For example, a DoD Lead Inspector General report stated that in the last quarter, 'U.S. intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) assistance helped the Philippine security forces neutralize 2 "significant targets."'[43]

Like their broader practices regarding information in this area of foreign policy, the Trump administration stopped reporting troop numbers for this mission in December 2018, but at that time there were 271 U.S. troops stationed in the Philippines.[44] Similarly, the *New York Times* reported in October 2019 that there were around 250 U.S. troops, mostly Special Operations Forces (SOF), still deployed to the country.[45] The future of this deployment looked in doubt when President Rodrigo Duterte announced his intention to terminate the Visiting Forces Agreement, but this position was suspended in June 2020, and is likely to be reversed entirely, allowing U.S. troops to continue their presence in the Philippines.[46]

THE MIDDLE EAST

Operation Inherent Resolve

American troops are stationed in Iraq and Syria as part of Operation Inherent Resolve, the counter-ISIL operation running since June 2014. For example, as McKenzie stated in March 2020, 'we remain in Iraq … for one mission: the defeat of ISIS' (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria).[47] In both missions, U.S. forces train local forces, whilst counter-al-Qaeda operations are also conducted in Syria.[48] Operation Inherent Resolve has followed a similar pattern to Operation Freedom's Sentinel, with an initial intensification before a partial withdrawal.

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To begin with, USAF data shows that there was a 28 percent increase in the number of airstrikes from 2016 to 2017.[49] *Airwars* research shows the peak of actions occurred in August 2017, with 1,755 airstrikes occurring and 5,075 munitions dropped in that month.[50] These figures were almost exactly double the peak of the actions of the Obama administration in July 2015.[51] After the territorial defeat of ISIL in March 2019, there was a significant decrease in the number of U.S. airstrikes. Operation Inherent Resolve data showed that between January and March 2019, there were 2,158 strike releases, but there only have been approximately 420 strikes in the 20 months since then.[52]

Iraq

There were somewhat similar trends in terms of troop numbers in Iraq, with withdrawals beginning in 2020 having been consistent with the Obama presidency at the 6,000-7,000 mark prior to that point.[53] Counter-ISIL operations were 'paused' in January 2020 to focus on force protection after the Iranian counterattack which wounded over 100 American soldiers, launched in response to the assassination of General Qasem Soleimani.[54] Further, it was the strike against Soleimani that caused the Iraqi parliament to pass a non-binding resolution calling for the expulsion of U.S. troops.[55]

Thus, in April 2020, Operation Inherent Resolve transitioned its sixth base over to the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF), something that was also encouraged by the pausing in training and equipping programmes due to Covid-19.[56] In June, the U.S. and Iraq held a 'Strategic Dialogue' to determine the future of the relationship between the two countries. In press releases after this meeting, both parties stressed both the successes of counter-ISIL missions (which would lead to a reduction in U.S. forces), as well as its enduring threat.[57] On 10 September, McKenzie announced that U.S. troop levels would be cut from 5,200 to 3,000 due to his 'confidence in the Iraqi security forces' increased ability to operate independently' of U.S. assistance.[58] Currently reduced to around 3,500 troops, DoD officials announced on 18 November that this would be reduced to 2,500 by the time of Biden's inauguration, again with the capability to carry out counterterrorism operations in the area.[59] Unlike in Afghanistan, these planned withdrawals have been seen as suitable by both countries, due to the development of the ISF, the domestic political situation regarding U.S troops, and the progress in the counter-ISIL campaign.

Syria

The number of U.S. soldiers stationed in Syria became the first controversy regarding troop numbers in the Trump presidency. At the beginning of the Trump administration, there was a troop increase from around 500 U.S. soldiers to nearly 2,500 as part of an intensified counter-ISIL campaign.[60] However, in December 2018, and just a week after Special Presidential Envoy for the Global Coalition to Counter ISIL Brett McGurk had stated that 'once the physical space [of ISIL] is defeated, we can't just pick up and leave',[61] Trump unexpectedly released a video on Twitter declaring that the U.S. had 'won' against ISIL and that American troops were 'all coming back, and they're coming back now'.[62] Trump's position triggered bipartisan criticism not dissimilar to the recent reaction to announcements regarding Afghanistan and Iraq, and also caused the resignation of then Secretary of Defense James Mattis and McGurk.[63]

Trump's stance on troop withdrawals was tempered—or at least paused—by this broad opposition. By the end of December, Trump ally Senator Lindsey Graham announced—as was later confirmed in January 2019—that the drawdown period had been extended from 30 days to four months.[64] The withdrawal of some U.S. troops and equipment began in January, but by February the White House stated that at least 200 soldiers would remain as 'a small peacekeeping group' in north-eastern Syria, and in the southeast, near the Syrian border between Iraq and Jordan.[65] In October 2019—e.g. well after the territorial defeat of ISIL that had seen a reduction in Operation Inherent Resolve's airstrikes—there were still around 1,000 troops in Syria, a far cry from Trump's December 2018 declaration that U.S. troops were 'all coming back … now'.[66] Indeed, McGurk's replacement as the special envoy in the counter-ISIL campaign recently admitted that 'we were always playing shell games to not make clear to our leadership how many troops we had there'.[67]

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Perhaps as a result of this, Trump again returned his attention to withdrawing U.S. troops from Syria in October 2019, this time ordering a withdrawal of around 50 U.S. forces from the Syria-Turkey border before ordering 'a full withdrawal'.[68] The initial withdrawal effectively greenlighted a Turkish attack on the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces who had been fighting alongside U.S. forces, but Trump was instead focused on how it was 'time for us to get out of these ridiculous Endless Wars'.[69] Again however, there were significant caveats to this 'withdrawal', as U.S. forces largely moved to protecting oil fields in northeastern Syria with Milley stating on 10 November that around 500 to 600 U.S. troops would be needed for this task.[70] This was confirmed by Esper in December, who stated that 'the number of troops [in Syria] will fluctuate around the 600-level for the foreseeable future'.[71]

Trump's June 2020 WPR letter to Congress stated that there was an ongoing 'systematic campaign of airstrikes and other necessary operations' against ISIL in Syria,[72] whilst a DoD Lead Inspector General report in the same month noted that although there was a pause in counter-ISIL operations due to Covid-19, these had now been fully resumed.[73] In August 2020, after seven U.S. troops were injured when their tank was rammed by a Russian vehicle, the DoD deployed another 100 soldiers to Syria, bringing the total number of American troops to 750—a higher figure than what Trump inherited despite his efforts and claims regarding Syria.[74]

Yemen

Speaking in June 2020, McKenzie observed that the U.S.' interest in Yemen was 'primarily counterterrorism'.[75] As per Trump's WPR letter in the same month, a 'small number' of U.S. troops remain stationed in Yemen 'to conduct operations' against al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and ISIL.[76] Until December 2019, there were also non-combat roles for U.S. troops in Yemen as part of Operation Yukon Journey, an initially

classified campaign which provided support for Saudi Arabian actions against the Houthi insurgency.[77]

Similarly to engagement patterns in other theatres, there was a significant increase in the intensity of U.S. operations in Yemen at the beginning of the Trump administration before an ensuing reduction. In March 2017, the Trump administration declared three provinces of Yemen as 'areas of active hostilities' against AQAP and an emergent branch of ISIL, which effectively made these regions 'temporary undeclared war zones where the military can launch up to six-month wars without congressional approval, and where less restrictive targeting rules apply.'[78] Consequently, in 2017 there were 129 U.S. airstrikes in Yemen, more than three times the amount in the final year of the Obama administration.[79] Once the 'areas of active hostilities' designation had expired, there were 38, 9, and 2 U.S. airstrikes in 2018, 2019, and 2020 respectively, which represents a slight decrease from the Obama presidency.[80]

Iran

The Trump administration has adopted a significantly tougher approach on Iran in comparison to the previous administration, but this has largely been led by the State Department in the diplomatic and economic realms.[81] The noticeable departures from this position have been the deployment of around 14,000 troops to the Persian Gulf in May 2019, and the aforementioned drone strike against Soleimani in January 2020.[82] Though O'Brien attempted to justify this strike under the terms of the 2002 Authorization for Use of Military Force (AUMF) Against Iraq, the administration has largely rationalised this action under the remit of self-defence.[83] Although the Trump administration has continually referred to the state-sponsored terrorism of Iran, it is precisely the inclusion of the state that makes this case so different from the rest of the cases studied here. Indeed, it is this factor that explains both the relative lack of kinetic action in comparison to other cases, as well as the lack of inclusion of Iran in documents such as the WPR letters to Congress.

Africa

In May 2020, head of U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM) General Stephen Townsend stated that there were approximately 5,000 U.S. troops stationed in Africa.[84] AFRICOM has six 'lines of effort' (LEO) which guide its policy, three of which directly concern counterterrorism operations, suggestive of the importance that this rationale plays in U.S. interventions in Africa, much like engagement in the Middle East.[85]

Libya

One of AFRICOM's six LEOs is to 'contain instability in Libya', but engagement has been fairly limited throughout the Trump administration.[86] Although DoD data shows there was an increase to 123 troops stationed in Libya between March and June 2017, by September of that year this figure had been reduced to 8, and 'AFRICOM has not had a physical presence in Libya since April 2019' due to the security environment of the Libyan civil war.[87]

Regarding the use of force, Trump's WPR letters have referred to airstrikes throughout his presidency against ISIL forces in Libya, as well as an associated force of al-Qaeda.[88] Between 2017 and 2019, there were an average of 11 U.S. airstrikes per year, which closely resembles the figures during the Obama administration except for 2016 when Operation Odyssey Lightning launched around 500 airstrikes in support of the internationally recognised Government of National Accord in Libya.[89]

East Africa

Trump's WPR letters refer to counter-terrorism forces being present in Somalia, Kenya, and Djibouti.[90] The goal in these countries 'is to degrade … violent extremist organizations',[91] but Townsend stated in January 2020 to Congress that "violent extremist networks are expanding in Africa at a rapid pace".[92] Primarily, counterterrorism in this region focuses on al-Shabaab in Somalia, especially after the organisation's declaration in November 2019 that "publicly identified Americans and U.S. interests worldwide as priority targets".[93] This is reflected in one of the six LEOs of AFRICOM: to 'develop security in Somalia'.[94]

Like in Yemen, in March 2017, the Trump administration designated large sections of Somalia as 'areas of active hostilities', meaning that offensive airstrikes could be conducted against members of al-Shabaab even if they did not provide an 'ongoing and imminent threat' to U.S. national security.[95] Again, this resulted in an increase in the number of U.S. airstrikes in comparison to the Obama administration. Unlike in Yemen, however, airstrike figures in Somalia have shown little year-by-year variance. On average, the number of airstrikes per year during the second term of the Obama presidency was 8; the comparative figure for the Trump era is 47.[96] Furthermore, this has remained so in 2020, with 49 strikes occurring before September of this year.[97] Indeed, Townsend argued in April that "while we might like to pause our operations in Somalia because of the coronavirus, the leaders of al-Qaeda, al-Shabaab, and ISIS have announced that they see the crisis as an opportunity to further their terrorist agenda."[98]

Recently however, the momentum towards withdrawal from Somalia has increased. The last U.S. airstrike occurred in late August, making this current period of time the longest stretch in which American forces have not launched a lethal airstrike in several years.[99] Furthermore, in December 2020 the Pentagon announced that 'virtually all' of the 700 U.S. troops in Somalia—most of whom are SOF– would be withdrawn.[100] Like the planned withdrawal from Afghanistan, this has prompted bipartisan criticism.[101] Crucially though, this withdrawal is more nuanced than it might appear, as many of these troops will be 'repositioned' to Kenya, which is where drone strikes against Somalia are launched from.[102]

According to Trump's WPR letters, Djibouti acts as a base 'for counterterrorism and counter-piracy operations' in the Horn of Africa and the Arabian Peninsula,[103] but *official* DoD data shows a significant decline in troop numbers in the country from 4,694 in September 2017 to 136 in June 2020.[104] The momentum of counterterrorism operations

in Kenya seems to be heading in the other direction. The WPR letters state that U.S. forces are stationed in Kenya 'to support counterterrorism operations in East Africa',[105] but there were reports in September 2020 that AFRICOM was 'pressing for new authorities to carry out armed drone strikes' in the country.[106] This was because of a January 2020 attack by al-Shabaab on a Kenyan military base that killed three U.S. personnel (one soldier and two contractors), as the military realised they had no legal grounding to launch a counterattack.[107] Alongside this potentially expanding remit, there was a troop increase in Kenya in the name of force protection.[108]

Lake Chad Basin and Sahel Region

The December 2019 WPR letter refers to U.S. forces being present in Cameroon, Chad, Niger, and Nigeria.[109] U.S. policies in Niger were briefly thrust into the limelight when four SOF troops were killed by ISIL fighters in October 2017, with congresspeople—including those on the Senate Armed Services Committee—being unaware that American troops were in the country.[110] The June 2020 WPR letter states that American troops 'conduct airborne intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance operations', alongside providing 'support' to both African and European partners in counterterrorism. [111] Noticeably, the same letter included a general caveat at its beginning for the first time, noting that although 'the majority' of U.S. counterterrorism missions did not involve 'routine engagement in combat … the security environment' in some of these locations was 'such that … military personnel may be required to defend themselves against sporadic terrorist threats or attack'.[112] This appears to be in response to the events in Niger and Kenya during the Trump presidency.

'Support partners in the Sahel and Lake Chad region' is one of AFRICOM's six LEOs and largely consists of bilateral security force assistance and

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cooperation with French counterterrorism operations.[113] Thus, AFRICOM's goal in this region is to 'contain' terrorist organizations, in contrast to East Africa where the aim is to 'degrade' such groups.[114] According to Townsend in January 2020, the primary threats in this region are 'al-Qa'ida's Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM) and ISIS networks'.[115] Similarly to the picture in East Africa, AFRICOM stated in early 2020 that these groups 'were neither degraded nor contained'.[116]

This deteriorating security picture has coincided with the DoD's 'Blank Slate Review' of all combatant commands which began towards the end of 2019, which attempted to align resources with the objectives of the 2018 *National Defense Strategy*.[117] As Esper put it in January 2020, 'my aim is to free up time, money and manpower around the globe' to be directed towards Asia or return to America.[118] This situation, along with the reduction of goals in this region from 'degrade' to 'contain' led to media reports 'that U.S. military interest in the Sahel could be waning'.[119] When probed on this matter, the U.S. Ambassador to Mauritania attempted to dispel such rumours, stating 'we have absolutely not abandoned the fight against terrorism in West Africa or in the Sahel, or frankly, anywhere in the world'.[120] Certainly, Townsend has attempted to align counterterrorism with the shift associated with the *National Defense Strategy*, arguing that American counterterrorism efforts were "a key component of global power competition" by preventing African partners cooperating with American competitors.[121] Thus, at least for Townsend (and also McKenzie at CENTCOM), the rationale for U.S. counterterrorism campaigns still remains.

CONCLUSION

To summarise the Trump administration's counterterrorism campaigns, troop numbers and the use of force in each theatre have generally been marked by an initial intensification from the Obama presidency before a reduction to below these inherited levels. This pattern can be seen in Operation Freedom's Sentinel, Operation Inherent Resolve, and counterterrorism operations in Yemen, with Somalia being the most notable exception. The counterterrorism approaches in these countries might have followed the path trodden by the Obama administration, but these escalations can be seen as a departure in the strategy deployed by the Trump administration in an attempt to create changes on the ground to allow for the withdrawal of American troops, as per Trump's instincts towards withdrawal.

More generally, however, this update has revealed the extent to which the idea that the Trump administration has ended the so-called forever wars belies a more nuanced picture, even in the context of recently announced troop withdrawals regarding Iraq and Afghanistan. That is, it is expected that counterterrorism capabilities will still exist in these countries. Similarly, the forthcoming withdrawal of American troops in Somalia is unlikely to affect the American ability to employ lethal drones in the country. Put another way, a reduction in troop numbers does not necessarily amount to the end of

U.S. counterterrorism campaigns as some congressional reactions may suggest. Furthermore, despite Trump's repeated efforts, 750 U.S. troops are still stationed in Syria (which is higher than the number Trump inherited), with troop numbers also increasing in Kenya. Finally, whilst the shape of counterterrorism operations in the Lake Chad Basin and Sahel region seem unclear in the context of the DoD's 'Blank Slate Review', it is noticeable that Townsend has continued to argue for the relevance of counterterrorism as part of great power competition.

As the WPR letters make clear, it is still the case that the American deployment of force is still intimately intertwined with the premise of counterterrorism. Whilst this could change in the future, this has not changed after nearly four years of a Trump presidency, and the broader infrastructure of U.S. counterterrorism campaigns around the globe remains in place. As Trump has discovered, the "endless wars" that he has decried have remained endless, and this is ultimately what Biden will inherit come January 2021. Given Biden's previous positions on counterterrorism strategies and the announced members of the incoming administration, counterterrorism campaigns are likely to continue as part of a narrowly focused light-footprint approach. Thus, the key issue for the new administration is how to manage the expectations of ending 'endless wars', as Biden has also promised. Put another way, the Biden administration will need to find a politically feasible way to maintain a relatively small number of American troops in certain countries. Given how the issue of troop numbers—and debates about counterterrorism campaigns more broadly—was often sparked into life by Trump's impulsive personal decisions, a more coherent policy making process would go most of the way to avoiding these conflicts becoming a primary political issue. Because of the nature of these campaigns, there is simply not a significant degree of political attention to U.S. overseas counterterrorism policies unless the executive branch draws attention to them. Furthermore, as the reaction to Trump's withdrawal efforts—both from the military and Congress—shows, ending the 'endless wars' does not seem worth the political capital. Thus, for better or worse, the path for continuing the forever wars has already been set, should the Biden administration wish to do so. ■

ENDNOTES

1 Joseph Biden, "Why America Must Lead Again: Recusing U.S. Foreign Policy after Trump," Foreign Affairs 99, no. 2 (2020): 72.

2 Mike Crowley, "Trump Boasts of Withdrawing Troops, but Thousands Remain in Harm's Way," New York Times, October 12, 2020.

3 Jonny Hall, "In Search of Enemies: Donald Trump's Populist Foreign Policy Rhetoric," Politics, 2020, doi:10.1177/0263395720935377.

4 In answering this question, this update focuses solely on counterterrorism operations from an American perspective. For an update on the issue of civilian casualties caused by counterterrorism operations during the Trump presidency, see the recently published data in conjunction with U.S. military officials from "The Credibles," Airwars, 2020,

5 "Report on the Legal and Policy Frameworks Guiding the United States' Use of Military Force and Related National Security Operations," Department of State, 2020,

For 2020, I would expect this to be the same.

6 Ibid.

7 Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey, and Cuba are the only countries mentioned in these WPR letters that are not discussed in this update. In all cases barring Cuba (which concerns Guantanamo Bay), troops are deployed to support counterterrorism missions in host or nearby nations. Jordan is the country with the most American military cooperation, with 3,145 troops being stationed there in June 2020 'to support Defeat-ISIS operations, to enhance Jordan's security, and to promote regional stability', but no U.S. strikes are deployed in the country.

Donald Trump, "Text of a Letter from the President to the Speaker of the House of Representatives and the President pro Tempore of the Senate," The White House, 2020,.

8 Crowley, "Trump Boasts of Withdrawing Troops.", 2020

9 Christopher Miller, "Acting SECDEF Announces OSD Changes at Fort Bragg, NC," Department of Defense, 2020, h.

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11 Sean O'Donnell, "FY 2021 Comprehensive Oversight Plan Overseas Contingency Operations," Department of Defense, 2020, vii,

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14 See Charlie Savage and Eric Schmitt, "Trump Poised to Drop Some Limits on Drone Strikes and Commando Raids," New York Times, 2017,

15 Luke Hartig and Stephen Tankel, "Part II: The Muddy Middle: Challenges of Applying Use of Force Policy Guidance in Practice," Just Security, 2019, .

16 See Steve Niva, "Trump's Drone Surge: Outsourcing the War Machine," Middle East Research and Information Project, 2017,

17 The phrase "forever war(s)" comes from Joe Haldeman, The Forever War (London: Orbit, 1974).

18 "Operation Freedom's Sentinel: Lead Inspector General Report to the United States Congress," Department of Defense, 2020, 9,

19 Hartig and Tankel, "Part II: The Muddy Middle: Challenges of Applying Use of Force Policy Guidance in Practice."

20 Kenneth McKenzie, "Statement of General Kenneth F. McKenzie, Jr. on the Posture of U.S. Central Command - HASC Hearing Mar 10, 2020," U.S. Central Command, 2020,

21 Dion Nissenbaum, "White House Looks at Scaling Back U.S. Military Presence in Afghanistan," Wall Street Journal, 2017,

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The War is Dead, Long Live the War? Counterterrorism after the Trump Presidency

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In his re-election campaign, Donald Trump repeatedly claimed to be ending America's 'endless wars'. In this Strategic Update, Jonny Hall examines this claim by reviewing the Trump administration's counterterrorism policies over the last four years, showing that although there has been recent concrete progress towards withdrawal, this does not constitute an ending the so-called 'forever wars'.