

PART III:
**LIQUIDATING MILITARY
COMMITMENTS**

VIII. Cutting Losses in Wars of Choice: Obstacles and Strategies

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Introduction

Throughout history, great powers have fought “wars of choice,” often in areas far from their home territory. Britain and France waged colonial wars against each other and against local opponents during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and both the United States and the Soviet Union engaged in a number of conflicts in the developing world during the Cold War. Sometimes these great powers triumphed quickly and relatively easily, as the United States did when it invaded tiny Grenada in 1983. In other cases, however—the American war in Vietnam and the Soviet war in Afghanistan—they eventually chose to “cut their losses” and disengage.

In general, getting out of a war of choice is harder than great powers expect when they begin them. In a number of prominent cases—the Boer War, Vietnam (for both the United States and France), Algeria, Afghanistan (for Britain, the Soviet Union, and now the United States)—the conflict lasted longer than initially anticipated and the intervening great power continued to fight even after many leaders recognized that victory might be elusive.¹ In many of these cases, it seems clear in hindsight that these states could have achieved similar results at far less cost had they managed to extricate themselves earlier.

As Fred Ikle notes, “cutting one’s losses, although a common notion in everyday life, appears to be a particularly difficult decision for a government to reach in seeking to end a prolonged and unsuccessful war.”² Or as Vice-President Hubert H. Humphrey acknowledged in a February 1965 memorandum urging President Lyndon B. Johnson to de-escalate U.S. involvement in Vietnam, “it is always hard to cut losses.”³ Johnson rejected Humphrey’s advice and sent combat troops instead, thereby confirming the validity of Humphrey’s observation.

The difficulty of cutting one’s losses is not confined to wars of choice, of course; it is in fact a problem common to many human endeavors. When should an investor dump a declining stock? At what point should a business firm pull the

plug on a new product that isn't selling well? When should an unhappy spouse stop trying to fix a troubled marriage, and head for the divorce court instead? Should a scholar or research team respond to negative results by abandoning an existing line of inquiry and attacking a research puzzle in a new way? Each of these decisions involves reaching the conclusion that investing additional resources in an existing commitment is not likely to pay off and that a different course of action is advisable.

This essay examines two different aspects of this ubiquitous problem, within the narrow context of military interventions. First, why is it hard for strong states to cut their losses in wars of choice? What are the individual, organizational, and political forces that lead states to fight these wars for longer than they should, and to pay a bigger price in defeat? Second, when great powers do disengage from wars of choice, how can they minimize costs of disengagement and thus preserve or improve their strategic position?

I begin by defining wars of choice, as distinct from "wars of necessity" or "wars of national survival." The next section considers the various obstacles that make it hard for national leaders to determine whether they should cut their losses or "stay the course," and tend to prolong such conflicts longer than is optimal. I then consider some of the strategies that states can employ when attempting to disengage, so that a failed intervention does not cost more than is absolutely necessary.

Wars of Choice

The distinction between a war of choice and a war of necessity can be somewhat blurred in practice, and both contemporaries and subsequent historians will often debate how a given war ought to be viewed. Nonetheless, a true war of choice will normally exhibit the following features.

First, the stakes in a war of choice are not immediately vital to national survival.⁴ Wars of choice are not fought to defend the nation's territory from invasion, for example, or to defend a key ally whose defeat would tilt the balance of power decisively in favor of one's enemies. Although policymakers often try to rally support for minor wars by predicting dire consequences from defeat or withdrawal, in a war of choice there is little or no chance that defeat or withdrawal would lead to the immediate subjugation of the defeated power. A war of choice is not like the Battle of the Low Countries in 1940 or the October War in 1973 (the Fourth Arab-Israeli War), in which one country is attacked by a powerful rival and has no choice but to fight or surrender.

Second, it follows that wars of choice will often be asymmetric conflicts, pitting a great power against a weak state (or in some cases, an insurgency) that it nonetheless believes is a threat to its interests. Other great powers may be

involved, of course, and such conflicts sometimes take the form of a “proxy war” motivated by larger balance-of-power considerations.⁵ Nonetheless, direct great-power-versus-great-power wars are largely excluded from this definition, because these conflicts almost always threaten vital national interests, such as control over one’s home territory.

Third, the decision to cut losses and terminate a war of choice does not occur because of military incapacity. A great power that decides to end a war of choice does so even though it still has the wherewithal to continue the fight, and may even have the capacity to escalate. Thus, to accept defeat in a war of choice is not like Egypt’s loss in the Six Day War in 1967, Germany’s collapse in September 1918, or even the Japanese decision to surrender in 1945. Rather, ending a war of choice is essentially a decision to cut one’s losses, at a time when it is clearly possible to continue the effort in the hope of securing a more favorable outcome.

Furthermore, leaders who decide to cut their losses in a war of choice do so even though continuing the war would not necessarily bring down their government (at least, not in the short term). Domestic pressure to end the war may be a factor in their calculations, but the decision to end a war of choice occurs even though the state’s leaders could continue it if they wished without provoking a military mutiny, a mass uprising, or some other immediate challenge to their positions.

In short, a great power that decides to end a war of choice does so not because it is facing imminent military defeat, a complete collapse of public support, the prospect of violent overthrow, or an immediate and overriding strategic challenge elsewhere.⁶ Rather, it is choosing to cut its losses even though it has the option of fighting on, based on the belief that further expenditure of lives and materiel will leave it in a weaker strategic position and that it is better off getting out.

Examples of wars of choice conducted by great powers might include: Russia and Great Britain in Afghanistan, the Boer War, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan (1980 to 1988), the Korean War (for both the United States and People’s Republic of China), the Indochina War (France, the United States), and the Russo-Finnish War (1940). Wars of choice fought by non-great powers include Egypt in Yemen (1962 to 1967), Israel in Lebanon (1982 to 2000), South Africa in Namibia, and the Cuban intervention in Angola and Ethiopia (1975/76 to 1988).

Why do Wars of Choice Last So Long?

Rationalist approaches to war and war termination generally frame the issue of ending a war as a bargaining problem, in which states constantly update their demands based on new information about the costs of fighting, each side’s level

of resolve, or the prospects of victory.⁷ Applied to wars of choice, the perspective implies that states will seek to disengage if the expected utility of continuing the war is lower than the expected utility of getting out, either unilaterally or via some sort of negotiated settlement.

The problem, however, is that it is impossible to forecast the impact of these different choices with one-hundred-percent confidence, because of the unpredictability of warfare itself (the “fog of war”), asymmetric information, each side’s incentives to misrepresent its capabilities and/or resolve, and the likely responses of third parties. In the real world, a decision to continue or withdraw from a war of choice ultimately depends on subjective probability estimates that cannot be known with certainty. Just as a stock may soar as soon as you sell it, a war that was going badly might have been won if one had added more troops, adopted a different strategy, or just got lucky.⁸ By the same logic, a war of choice that is going well may go south unexpectedly, so that the state misses the opportunity to get out on more favorable terms. It is equally impossible to be certain about the negative consequences of withdrawal and easy to imagine various worst-case possibilities. Even if states’ leaders were perfectly rational, in short, it would be difficult for them to identify when it is time to cut their losses and end a war.

To make matters worse, states fighting a war of choice will face a host of impediments to the rational assessment of different options, and these biases tend to prolong wars longer than necessary rather than ending them too soon. In particular, states in a war of choice are likely to overstate the prospects of securing a better outcome, understate the costs of achieving it, and exaggerate the dangers of getting out. Accordingly, wars of choice are likely to last longer than they should.

Psychological Barriers to Cutting Losses

One obvious barrier to “rational” war termination lies in how human beings process information and weigh the costs and benefits of different courses of action. An extensive literature in social and cognitive psychology has shown that human beings tend to interpret new information in light of their pre-existing beliefs, and therefore tend to update or revise their beliefs more slowly than a purely “rational” decision maker would.⁹ Humans also tend to exaggerate their own strengths, fail to conduct an impartial search for relevant evidence when making key judgments, actively overvalue evidence consistent with pre-existing beliefs, and discount evidence that conflicts with these same convictions. It follows that leaders committed to a particular course of action—such as fighting a war of choice—will be slower to revise their beliefs about the necessity of war in response to evidence suggesting that it is not going well or that the original

decision to fight was erroneous. They will therefore tend to prolong involvement longer than would be optimal.¹⁰

For example, Lyndon Johnson's willingness to escalate U.S. involvement in Vietnam and to continue the war despite growing difficulties may have stemmed in part from his underlying conviction that the world's most powerful military could not be defeated by a country of Asians "in black pajamas," as well as his belief that American credibility and domestic tranquility were on the line.¹¹ He knew that continuing the war in Vietnam threatened the domestic programs to which he was deeply committed, but it appears to have been hard for LBJ to accept that continued U.S. involvement would not produce a markedly better outcome.

Prospect theory identifies a second mechanism that could reinforce this tendency.¹² It suggests that humans place too much weight on low probability events; that is, we tend to see rare occurrences as more likely to occur than is in fact the case. Decision makers waging a difficult war of choice may therefore be prone to exaggerate the probability of two radically different but unlikely events: (1) a catastrophic collapse of their strategic position in the event of a withdrawal, or (2) total victory if the war continues. The more likely possibilities—a modest setback in the event of withdrawal and a continued stalemate if the war continues—will receive less attention in the decision makers' calculations and the case for disengagement will seem weaker to those responsible for the decision.

Prospect theory also suggests that humans tend to be "loss averse": negative outcomes affect our sense of well-being more than a positive outcome of equivalent magnitude would. As a result, "when things are going badly in a conflict, the aversion to cutting one's losses, often compounded by wishful thinking, is likely to dominate the calculus of the losing side.... To withdraw now is to accept a sure loss and that option is deeply unattractive. The option of hanging on will therefore be relatively attractive, even if the chances of success are small and the cost of delaying failure is high." Note that in this case the problem is an irrational bias that interferes with the rational calculation of utility. As discussed below, this same tendency to prolong a losing war in the hope of gaining a miraculous resurrection may also be a rational course of action when defeat threatens a leader's political or personal survival.

A third "bad reason for sticking to plans" is the familiar "sunk cost effect."¹⁴ After investing substantial amounts of blood and treasure in a war of choice, decision makers may erroneously believe that cutting losses now would be "wasteful" and that it is therefore necessary to keep going. Awareness of this problem led George W. Ball to warn against escalation in Vietnam, because "once we suffer large casualties, we will have started a well-nigh irreversible process. Our involvement will be so great that we cannot—without national

humiliation—stop short of achieving our complete objectives.”¹⁵ Ball’s analysis was essentially correct, but this common tendency nonetheless reflects fallacious reasoning. If continuing a war of choice is unlikely to produce a better outcome, then the fact that losses have already been suffered is irrelevant (from a strategic perspective) and it makes no sense to throw good money after bad, or to throw away more lives needlessly. Yet this sort of reasoning can be a powerful psychological and political tendency, which reinforces concerns about credibility and other ancillary effects.

Finally, the well-known mechanism of “groupthink” is also likely to inhibit attempts to reverse course and cut losses.¹⁶ Participants in a decision-making process may be reluctant to raise doubts about current policy so as not to disturb the group consensus, because they are actively discouraged from doing so by senior members of the group, or because they gain false confidence from the positions held by their colleagues. Alternative views may not get a fair hearing even if someone does raise them, and the fact that a few objections were voiced may even bolster the original decision by allowing group members to tell themselves that “all the options” were considered.¹⁷

In general, these various tendencies are likely to bolster hawkish arguments in favor of continuing a war. As Daniel Kahneman and Jonathan Renshon conclude in a recent distillation of this literature, “all the biases in our list favor hawks...these biases have the effect of making wars more likely to begin and more difficult to end.”¹⁸

Organizational Impediments and “Non-Self-Evaluation”

A decision to end a war of choice depends on key decision makers having access to accurate information suggesting that prospects of victory are low. Unfortunately, the normal workings of government bureaucracies make it harder for key decision makers to acquire the information that would encourage them to withdraw. There are three distinct dimensions to this problem.

First, as Stephen Van Evera and others have argued, government organizations display a marked tendency for “non-self-evaluation.”¹⁹ Government bureaucracies are generally hierarchical, and subordinates who challenge the current policy direction run the risk of being marginalized or otherwise penalized by their superiors. Subordinates may therefore tell superiors “what they want to hear”—even when they are explicitly asked to provide honest assessments—leading those who are responsible for the ultimate decision to receive overly optimistic evaluations of progress. Whistle blowers and other dissenters from the current policy are likely to be ostracized within their own agencies, further inhibiting a careful evaluation of the war effort.²⁰ Client regimes have similar incentives to overstate success and exaggerate prospects for victory in order to prevent foreign patrons from deciding to cut losses and withdraw support.²¹

These tendencies may not be a significant problem when a war is going well and there is mostly good news to report, but it will make it harder for top decision makers to realize when a war is going badly and delay recognition that it is time to either revise the existing strategy or to cut one's losses and get out entirely.²²

Second, the main architects of the war have obvious incentives to keep it going until victory is achieved, lest their own reputations and political influence suffer. Advisors who convinced a dictator, a president, or a prime minister that war was a good idea cannot easily counsel withdrawal without admitting that their earlier counsel was faulty. To put it bluntly, the people who get you into a war are not the ones who can get you out. Thus, prominent studies of war termination emphasize that some sort of regime change (or at least a major change in the "governing coalition") is usually necessary to end a war.²³ But because rearranging the governing coalition is politically costly and usually time consuming, wars of choice that are not going well are likely to continue longer than they should.

Third, the organizational incentives of the uniformed military are likely to conflict with this process as well. Even if the military leadership opposed the initial decision to launch a war of choice (as seems to have been the case both in the Soviet decision to invade Afghanistan in 1979 and the U.S. decision to attack Iraq in 2002 to 2003), its job is to achieve victory on behalf of the nation and its leaders will undoubtedly worry about the political and budgetary consequences of admitting defeat. No military organization welcomes losing, and once committed to the field, its leaders—and especially the commanders in the field—are likely to be among the most consistent voices opposing any attempt to cut losses.²⁴

This tendency is likely to be especially prevalent in an asymmetric war of choice, because in this case an objectively stronger army will be in effect admitting that it cannot vanquish a foe that looks much weaker on paper. It should not surprise us that the U.S. Army kept requesting more troops as the situation in Vietnam deteriorated, or that former commanding general Stanley McChrystal repeatedly sought an increase in U.S. forces in Afghanistan.²⁵ Powerful elements in the French military wanted to stay the course in Algeria but were eventually outmaneuvered by President Charles de Gaulle (in part because de Gaulle possessed enormous military prestige).²⁶ Mikhail Gorbachev had serious doubts about the Soviet Afghan campaign when he became general secretary, but felt he had to give the Soviet military a year to show results before moving to disengage. Only after increased effort failed to bear fruit did Gorbachev begin assembling a domestic coalition to overrule pro-war forces within the Soviet "military-industrial complex" and arrange a withdrawal.²⁷ In short, political leaders who decide to cut their losses are almost certainly going to face military resistance that magnifies the domestic political costs of disengagement.

Political Obstacles and Politicians' Incentives

In addition to the psychological and bureaucratic barriers to cutting losses, there are also powerful political dynamics that tend to prolong most wars of choice as well. In order to convince the public to support the war—particularly if it does not produce a rapid victory—politicians are likely to portray the enemy as especially evil and/or dangerous, and to warn of grave dangers that might arise if victory is not achieved. For example, in order to persuade the public to support a war in a country of marginal strategic importance, leaders commonly argue that the country's credibility is at stake, thereby coupling the outcome of a minor conflict to the broader defense of more important interests. If efforts to rally public support succeed, however, these same leaders will pay a larger political price if they subsequently try to reverse course, because they will appear to be inviting the very calamities about which they previously warned. Having convinced the public that the enemy is the embodiment of evil, that the nation's credibility is on the line, and that dreadful consequences will occur if they cut and run, politicians may be trapped by their own rhetoric and unable to cut losses even when they believe this is the right decision.

During the Vietnam War, for example, Lyndon Johnson reportedly worried that a withdrawal would produce a domestic political backlash akin to the McCarthy period. As he told biographer Doris Kearns Goodwin:

I knew that if we let Communist aggression succeed in taking over South Vietnam, there would follow in this country an endless national debate—a mean and destructive debate—that would shatter my Presidency, kill my administration, and damage our democracy. I knew that Harry Truman and Dean Acheson had lost their effectiveness from the day that the Communists took over in China. I believed that the loss of China had played a large role in the rise of Joe McCarthy. And I knew that all these problems, taken together, were chickenshit compared with what might happen if we lost Vietnam.²⁸

The danger here is greater than simply being trapped by rhetoric used instrumentally to rally public support. In addition, government officials may come to believe the arguments they originally invoked to mobilize the citizenry, and thus genuinely regard a change in course as potentially disastrous. Once political arguments used to build support for the war are internalized in the minds of key decision makers, then the various psychological obstacles to disengagement already discussed come into play and tend to delay disengagement even more.

At the same time, mobilizing the nation for war will discourage critics from raising their voices and make it less likely that any such voices are heard, at least initially. Those who favor ending a war of choice are likely to be accused of being insufficiently patriotic or even treasonous, and their advice is likely to be discounted by a fully aroused populace. Even in democracies with a free press, it may be more difficult for dissidents to make their views known, especially if media content is shaped (or “indexed”) by the nature of elite discussion.²⁹ It will take a significant number of setbacks to disrupt the elite consensus and legitimize dissenting voices, thereby delaying public recognition that the war is going poorly and reducing pressure on decision makers.

Paradoxically, domestic opposition to an unsuccessful war can trigger another war-prolonging dynamic: the temptation to “gamble for resurrection.”³⁰ Leaders presiding over a losing war will fear that defeat will lead to their removal from office, especially if they have convinced the public that victory is all-important. In nondemocratic societies, in fact, accepting defeat may even threaten their personal survival. A leader in this position may be tempted to fight on even when he or she knows the prospects of success are remote, because victory is the only outcome that can save them. Notice that this decision can be entirely rational from the narrow perspective of the individual leader or ruling elite (that is, it need not depend on any of the psychological biases discussed above). In other words, gambling for resurrection may be rational for an individual leader and his/her immediate associates, even if it is not in the best interest of the nation as a whole.³¹

Reputation, Credibility, and the Coupling of Commitments

By definition, wars of choice are usually fought for seemingly small material stakes, but leaders often believe that the outcome of some relatively minor conflict may have far more serious repercussions down the road. First, they may believe that cutting losses today will undermine the nation’s reputation for military prowess and affect perceptions of the overall balance of power, and thus weaken its ability to deter attacks on more vital interests. Second, they may fear that withdrawal will be taken a sign of declining resolve, thereby emboldening adversaries or leading allies to doubt their credibility. Even if the stakes in a particular war do not warrant investing additional blood and treasure, the fear that more important interests may be jeopardized by withdrawal can persuade leaders to expend additional resources for otherwise minor prizes.

Although concerns about the reputational effects of cutting one’s losses appear to be widespread, the anticipated effects are probably much less worrisome than leaders seem to think. Scholarly studies of reputation in international

politics generally find that foreign policy setbacks have only modest and temporary effects on a state's overall reputation, and do not really affect how third parties judge the reliability of other deterrent commitments. In other words, most states do not appear to draw strong inferences about an adversary's conduct in one area or issue from its behavior in other contexts.³² Furthermore, a state that liquidates a costly military commitment may actually put itself in a better position to meet the next challenge (because its resources aren't being dissipated) and it may even be more inclined to respond so as to repair the reputational damage of its earlier retreat. At a minimum, the fear that a decision to cut losses invariably undermines a state's credibility and emboldens adversaries seems simplistic.³³

Of course, a war fought in a seemingly minor arena could be vital to a state's long-run security if the outcome really did have a powerful effect on its strategic position. If defeat jeopardized access to vital resources or a key strategic location, or enabled a rival to acquire these assets, then decision makers should be reluctant to cut their losses. Yet in this instance we are not really talking about a war of choice. If the outcome of a war would have major effects on the balance of power, then it is more of a war of necessity than a war of choice and one would expect rational leaders to devote more resources to trying to win it.

Uncertainty and Staying Power

Warfare is an uncertain business, and battlefield outcomes can be frustratingly ambiguous and difficult to interpret. It didn't take the Ford Motor Company very long to figure out the Edsel was a dud, or for Coca-Cola to undo the replacement of its original formula with "New Coke"; all these companies had to do was look at sales figures and monitor consumer reaction. By contrast, national leaders fighting a war of choice will usually be bombarded with some mixture of good, bad, and ambiguous information. Is a drop in enemy activity a sign that one is winning, or does it mean that the enemy is preparing for a major new offensive? If enemy "body counts" are high, is that a sign of progress or evidence that the enemy army is growing larger and bolder? Even an unmistakable defeat or a clear victory may be misleading, if it leads one's opponent or key third parties to alter their behavior in ways that affect the overall strategic situation. In a war of choice, definitive information that it is time to quit is usually lacking, and there will usually be a plausible alternative to getting out.

Unfortunately, uncertainty and the ambiguity of information will reinforce most of the obstacles to rational assessment identified above. When information is ambiguous, leaders are even less likely to revise pre-existing beliefs and subordinates seeking to tell superiors what they want to hear will be able to spin

a favorable story without actually deceiving anyone. In warfare, unfortunately, only outright victory (or defeat) sends an unmistakable message.

The Danger of Infinite Innovation

Finally, wartime opponents are engaged in a constant process of strategic innovation and response, and great powers in a war of choice usually have ample reserves to continue the fight. Dan Reiter argues that “a belligerent will ignore bad news from the front and fight on only if it has some hope of turning the tide in the future,” but in wars of choice leaders can almost always come up with some new initiative that might turn failure into success.³⁴ Commanding generals can be replaced, more troops can be sent, the field of battle can be expanded, new weapons can be utilized, or a new strategy can be adopted, all in the hope that it will reverse the tide and lead to a better outcome.

As Britain’s brutal and ultimately successful campaign against the Boers demonstrates, sometimes a new strategy enables a great power to end a war of choice on more or less favorable terms.³⁵ In other cases, however, the key to victory remains elusive no matter what the great power does. In Vietnam, for example, U.S. leaders sent more troops, replaced General William Westmoreland with Creighton Abrams, conducted massive aerial bombings of North Vietnam and the “Ho Chi Minh trail,” invaded Cambodia to attack enemy sanctuaries there, implemented counterinsurgency strategies such as the “strategic hamlets” program and Operation Phoenix, and tried to build up their client’s forces through “Vietnamization.” Yet none of these initiatives enabled the United States to achieve the goal of an independent, noncommunist South Vietnam. In much the same way, the Soviet Union, Israel, and France all tried a variety of different commanders and various strategies in Afghanistan, southern Lebanon, and Algeria respectively. Yet even when a new strategy worked (as in Algeria), it could not overcome the larger strategic problems that each state faced.³⁶

The problem, in short, is that any time a decision maker is tempted to cut losses and disengage, there is likely to be some new option for continuing the war that might lead to a better outcome. To paraphrase Winston Churchill, a strong state that is losing a war of choice will eventually do the right thing and get out, but only after trying all the alternatives.³⁷

To sum up: there are a host of independent but mutually reinforcing reasons why it is easier to get into a war of choice than it is to get out of one (unless victory is achieved relatively quickly, of course). By the time national leaders are seriously considering cutting their losses, the available options will be unattractive and the temptation to stay the course will be hard to resist. As a result, strong states waging a war of choice will not cut their losses until they

have expended a lot of effort and tried a number of different strategies, but to no avail.

How to Get Out

Despite the obstacles just identified, strong states do eventually decide to cut their losses and end costly wars that they have not yet won. But how do they do this? Can strong states reverse course without damaging their strategic position and reputation? If so, how?

What Is at Stake

A state contemplating disengagement has two main concerns. The first concern is the direct effect of disengagement on its overall strategic position: will ending the war affect the balance of power in some significant way or create other worrisome vulnerabilities? For example, withdrawal might lead to the loss of valuable bases, and might even allow them to be taken over by an adversary (as when the Soviet Union began using the former U.S. naval base at Cam Ranh Bay). Accordingly, states seeking to end a war of choice will try to do so in a way that does not make them significantly more vulnerable in the future. As discussed above, however, the direct strategic stakes in a true war of choice are not likely to be that large, and great powers usually have several ways of compensating for any negative effects on their strategic position.

The second concern is that defeat and/or disengagement will have damaging effects on the state's reputation. In particular, leaders contemplating a disengagement often worry that acknowledgement of defeat will cause their allies to lose confidence and bandwagon with the adversary, as suggested by the Vietnam-era "domino theory." They may also believe that adversaries will become more confident and aggressive, because they view disengagement as a sign of weakness or as a lack of resolve. If these reputational effects are significant, then disengaging from a conflict that is of little direct material consequence could still have strategically significant consequences. Accordingly, a state that is trying to cut its losses will want to minimize the potential damage to its overall reputation.

To address these two concerns, great powers seeking to end a war of choice have at least three broad options.

Passing the Buck

The optimal strategy when liquidating a war of choice is to pass the buck to someone else.³⁸ In effect, the buck passer stops using its own resources to maintain its interests and hands primary responsibility over to another country.

Assuming that this is done successfully, the disengaging state's strategic interests are still protected but it no longer has to pay the costs. And the reputational consequences may be minimal, precisely because the decision can be defended as a more rational allocation of existing resources.

Classic examples of successful buck passing include Britain's decision to turn responsibility for the security of Greece and Turkey over to the United States after World War II and to give up its League of Nations mandate to govern Palestine and turn the problem back over to the newly formed United Nations. Britain's decision to withdraw its forces from east of Suez in 1968—another buck successfully passed to the United States—fits this same pattern as well. France tried but failed to pass the buck in Indochina to the United States in 1954, but the United States had in effect “caught the buck” by the end of the decade.³⁹ The EU passed the buck in Bosnia to the United States in 1995, only to have Washington pass the (greatly reduced) burden back when it withdrew nine years later.

Despite its obvious attractions, buck passing has two obvious limitations. First, there may be no “buck catcher” available to take over. Britain could pass the buck to the United States at the onset of the Cold War, but the United States had no comparable buck-catching options when it withdrew from Vietnam in 1975. Second, buck passing may fail if the buck catcher tries to shoulder the responsibility but proves unable to do so. If important strategic stakes are involved and the buck catcher falters, the disengaging state's interests will not be protected and it will pay a larger price for withdrawal.

A variation on this approach to disengagement is to rely upon a local balance of power to contain any subsequent threat. When the United States finally withdrew from Vietnam, for example, balance-of-power dynamics soon reemerged and prevented the falling dominoes that U.S. leaders had long feared. Not only did several local states develop regional balancing mechanisms, such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), but bitter rivalries soon arose between the communist regimes in Vietnam, Kampuchea, and China. Those who now call for bringing regional powers to help devise a postwar settlement in Afghanistan or Iraq are in effect looking for a way to pass the buck to local states whose interests are more directly affected and thus shift most (if not all) of the burden to them.

Compensating Countermeasures

If buck passing is not an option and disengagement may affect important strategic interests, then a state seeking to cut its losses can take direct steps to mitigate these concerns. If disengagement means the loss of an important base, for example, it can try to negotiate new base rights and redeploy its existing assets.

Losing the naval base at Cam Ranh Bay did not affect the U.S. ability to project power in the Pacific, because it had many other facilities available and Cam Ranh Bay was most useful for supplying a war effort that had ended. Disengaging states can allay concerns about the balance of power by conducting a visible arms buildup, which may in any case be necessary to redress losses produced by the war itself. States concerned about a serious degrading of their strategic position can also pursue new alliance arrangements or fight “credibility wars” to demonstrate to others that their overall capabilities have not been significantly impaired.

In most cases, reestablishing a sound strategic position should not be especially difficult for the simple reason that most wars of choice do not in fact involve large and direct material stakes. Winning such a war may be desirable but is unlikely to alter the overall balance of power very much, but by the same logic, losing such a war (or deciding to cut one’s losses and withdraw), probably won’t do enormous damage. This was the position that George Ball argued (unsuccessfully) during Vietnam; as he wrote in a prescient memorandum in June 1965, “we have tended to exaggerate the losses involved in a compromise settlement in South Vietnam...[it] should not have a major impact on the credibility of our commitments around the world.”⁴⁰

In fact, leaders who cut their losses in a timely fashion may actually place their country in a more favorable position over the longer term, precisely because they will no longer be squandering resources on a peripheral contest and can concentrate on arenas that matter. In this respect, it is sobering to realize that the U.S. war effort in Afghanistan now costs at least five times more each year than Afghanistan’s entire GDP and is consuming more and more top-level attention.

Protecting One’s Reputation

As discussed above, prior research on reputation suggests that disengagement and/or defeat usually has less significant effects on reputation than national leaders often fear.⁴¹ In the real world, dominoes do not fall very far and states rarely jump on a bandwagon, provided that the losing side still retains significant capabilities. Nonetheless, the possibility that defeat or disengagement might have ripple effects elsewhere cannot be entirely excluded. Fortunately, there are a number of strategies that states can employ to minimize adverse reputational consequences.

1. Redefining “Victory”

One obvious strategy is to redefine one’s objectives so that a seeming defeat can be portrayed as a success. Of course, if costs are mounting and outright victory

seems less likely, rational leaders should revise their expectations downward, abandoning loftier or nonessential objectives and trying to achieve only essential strategic goals.

During the Korean War, for example, the United States abandoned its original goal of reunifying all of Korea and eventually made a further concession by agreeing to re-establish the more difficult-to-defend thirty-eighth parallel as the border separating North and South. China made its own concessions in the armistice talks as well, most notably over issue of voluntary versus forcible repatriation of prisoners of war. The Bush administration abandoned its initial hopes of “regional transformation” once the occupation of Iraq went south, and eventually agreed to a timetable for withdrawal and Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) that conformed more to Iraqi preferences than to its own.⁴² One sees similar behavior in the Obama administration’s suggestion that its primary goal in Afghanistan is to deny al-Qaeda a “safe haven,” and that it is not trying to create “some sort of Central Asian Valhalla.”⁴³

Lowering one’s sights in this way thus reflects a more realistic appraisal of what is in fact achievable. At the same time, efforts to repackage failure as success may also be intended largely to save face. Such efforts may be directed primarily at one’s own citizens, to lessen the political fallout of a decision to withdraw. But it may also be intended to convey to foreign audiences that the disengaging state has not really been defeated. Such efforts typically involve trying to negotiate specific terms for disengagement, so that what might appear to be a defeat on the battlefield can be represented as a genuine bargain achieved through skill and determination.

As David Edelstein has emphasized, however, efforts to save face in this fashion rarely succeed.⁴⁴ Most observers will be well aware when a great power has scaled back its objectives or accepted peace terms that it had previously rejected, and its ability to guarantee the terms of its withdrawal tends to diminish as disengagement proceeds. Thus, even if it manages to reach a negotiated settlement that seems to protect some of its interests, its capacity to enforce the agreement may be small once it is gone. Few observers were fooled by Nixon’s claim that he had achieved “peace with honor” in Vietnam, and Washington’s ability to enforce the terms of the 1973 peace accords vanished as soon as U.S. forces were withdrawn. Although Lester Grau credits the Soviet Union with a plan for withdrawal from Afghanistan that was “masterfully executed,” and says that it “provides an excellent model for disengagement,” he recognizes that the Soviet Union could not permanently protect the government of President Mohammed Najibullah after disengaging. Once the USSR itself collapsed and its subsidies to Najibullah ended, a coalition of warlords and mujahedin quickly toppled the demoralized government in Kabul.⁴⁵

2. Reframing the Problem

A closely related strategy is for leaders to redefine the nature of the main challenge facing the nation so that disengagement from a losing war looks like an intelligent strategic adjustment rather than a military defeat. Thus, the Ehud Barak government in Israel justified withdrawal from southern Lebanon in 2000 by arguing that the original purpose of the invasion—to expel the PLO—had long since been achieved, and that a continued presence was in fact making a new threat (Hezbollah) more popular and thus more dangerous. An even clearer example is President Obama's efforts to shift the focus of the U.S. "war on terror" from Iraq to Afghanistan. The Bush administration had repeatedly called Iraq "the central front" of the war on terror, but Obama ran for president arguing that Iraq was diverting attention from al-Qaeda, and that the United States should be focusing on Afghanistan or Pakistan. In short, this strategy seeks to make *continuing* a particular war look like the principal threat to the nation's security, and to make getting out look like the obvious solution. Disengagement is not defeat; it is simply a prudent realignment of one's forces to meet the real threat.

3. Decoupling Commitments

A third and more promising way to limit reputational damage and/or preserve deterrent credibility is to find convincing ways to "decouple" the war of choice from which a state is disengaging from the commitments it is determined to maintain.⁴⁶ In many cases, in fact, a state can differentiate the conflict from which it is withdrawing from other strategic commitments, in order to explain why the outcome in one arena conveys no information about the country's likely behavior elsewhere. The greater the objective differences between two commitments (for example, geographic separation, regime type, material interests, etc.), the easier such efforts will be. In effect, anything that makes it harder to link two commitments (for credibility purposes) makes it easier to decouple them.

The credibility of the U.S. commitment to NATO was not affected by withdrawal from Vietnam, for example, because the two arenas were on opposite sides of the world and it was obvious that Vietnam was of little intrinsic strategic value, while Western Europe was a major center of industrial power that was important to keep out of Soviet hands.

This example suggests that states can limit reputational damage by taking concrete steps to reinforce credibility elsewhere, such as sending more troops to defend critical areas or engaging in a military buildup.⁴⁷ Getting out of Vietnam enabled the United States to rebuild its army and strengthen its defenses in Europe, which if anything made the U.S. commitment there more credible. Similarly, if the United States were worried about security in the

Persian Gulf following a withdrawal from Iraq and/or Afghanistan, it could rebuild the Rapid Deployment Force and establish deeper links with regional allies such as Qatar, Bahrain, and Kuwait, in order to make clear that it was still committed to upholding a balance of power in the region.

This line of argument may also explain why disengaging may be harder for some states than for others. Because it lacks fully established borders and at various times has occupied a number of adjacent territories (Gaza, the West Bank, the Golan Heights, and southern Lebanon), Israel may find it harder to withdraw from one area without encouraging its adversaries to believe that additional concessions may be achievable in the future. In particular, it may be more difficult for Israel to draw a clear distinction between its presence in southern Lebanon between 1982 and 2000 and its current military presence on the Golan Heights and the West Bank: if Israel can be driven out of the former, its adversaries may assume it can eventually be forced to give up the latter.⁴⁸ In general, the more a given war of choice resembles other military commitments, the greater the danger of reputational damage in the event of a withdrawal.

Reputational damage can be limited further by disengaging at the behest of one's allies. Such a request could come from the clients on whose behalf one is fighting, or from other allies in more important strategic contexts. If this sort of justification can be arranged, then the decision to withdraw can be portrayed as either a simple decision to honor a request from one's local partner, or as a "strategic adjustment" intended to keep more important allies happy. Among other things, allies elsewhere are even less likely to question one's future credibility when a disengaging power is essentially doing what its allies requested.

4. Finding a Scapegoat

Finally, states can also minimize the reputational consequences of withdrawal by finding a convincing scapegoat. New leaders can blame defeat on their predecessors, or argue that the war should never have been undertaken in the first place, because their own reputations are not bound up in the prior decision. (This is yet another reason why the termination of a war often requires the election of new leaders or the appointment of new advisors.) Alternatively, a great power seeking to disengage can try to pin the blame on its allies and partners. If the Obama administration wanted to disengage from Afghanistan, for example, it could announce that the Karzai government is simply too corrupt and incompetent to merit additional U.S. support, thereby pinning the blame for failure on indigenous forces rather on its own shortcomings.⁴⁹

Indeed, letting an incompetent client fail might even have positive reputational consequences. In particular, if other states hoping to elicit a great power's protection infer that they must prove themselves worthy of support, they will work harder at being capable partners.

Necessary Conditions: A Coalition for Change and a New “Theory of Victory”

As Elizabeth Stanley and others have noted, decisions to end a war usually require major shifts in the governing coalition in one or more of the warring parties. This may occur because key leaders die, resign, leave the cabinet, etc., thereby shifting the preferences of one or more of the belligerents so that each side’s “bargaining space” overlaps, thereby making a negotiated settlement possible. Shifts within governing coalitions may also alter the information environment available to leaders and/or publics, making the case for disengagement clearer.

It follows that leaders seeking to end a war of choice must assemble a governing coalition to support their effort. Politicians trying to extricate themselves from a costly commitment will have to search for support within military ranks, rearrange their cabinets and/or governing coalitions behind the decision, and convince key international allies to endorse the new policy as well. Even when a war is going badly and prospects for success are bleak, disengagement is an intensely political process requiring skill, persistence, and even good luck.⁵⁰

Finally, disengaging from an unsuccessful war of choice probably requires formulating an alternative “theory” of national security that makes disengagement seem like the smart strategic choice. Given the barriers to cutting losses discussed in the first half of this paper, advocates of disengagement cannot simply point to the costs of the war or the dim prospects for success and expect to carry the day in political debate. Instead, their efforts will be enhanced if they can develop a coherent account of the state’s interests that explains why disengagement will not jeopardize vital interests and is in fact necessary to preserve them. Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon used this basic approach to justify the removal of Israeli settlements from Gaza, arguing that retaining them threatened Israel’s status as a Jewish-majority state. His successor, Ehud Olmert, justified the need to pursue a two-state solution on similar grounds, saying that failure threatened Israel’s very existence.⁵¹ In effect, each leader was positing a “theory” of national security that downplayed Israel’s traditional emphasis on territory and focused instead on the number of Palestinians under Israeli control.

Exploiting Opportunities

Last but not least, politicians seeking to disengage should remain alert for catalytic moments that may facilitate a policy shift. Incontrovertible evidence that it is time to quit may never be available, but especially vivid or dramatic events may have disproportionate effects on public attitudes and provide opportunities for new policy initiatives. The 1968 Tet offensive played a critical role in Johnson’s deliberations about the Vietnam War (and his decision not to run for re-election),

even if the actual military consequences were misinterpreted.⁵² Similarly, a helicopter crash in February 1997 that killed seventy-three Israeli soldiers riveted public attention on its continued presence in southern Lebanon and led Ehud Barak to make withdrawal a campaign issue in the upcoming election. Positive events—such as the death or capture of a key enemy leader—may also provide opportunities to disengage from a position of strength, if leaders choose to use it in this way. If the United States were to capture Osama bin Laden, for example, it would provide an ideal moment to declare victory and come home.

Conclusion

Paradoxically, ending wars of choice may be especially difficult, because it is almost always possible to continue them and because the case for disengagement may never be completely compelling. Psychological, bureaucratic, and organizational barriers will make it harder for leaders to realize that it is time to cut their losses and quit, and may make it politically costly to do so even when they suspect that disengagement is in fact the better choice.

The good news is that ending a war of choice is usually less costly than leaders commonly fear. The direct stakes are rarely large, the reputational consequences are likely to be minor, and great powers usually have many ways to compensate for any material setbacks and to minimize reputational damage. The hard part is deciding to end a war of choice and finding the political will to disengage; the easy part is living with the consequences.

Notes

- 1 U.S. leaders' recognition that Vietnam would be difficult to win is the central theme of Leslie H. Gelb and Richard K. Betts, *The Irony of Vietnam: The System Worked* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 1979).
- 2 See Fred C. Ikle, *Every War Must End* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1971), 83.
- 3 Quoted in Campbell Craig and Fredrik Logevall, *America's Cold War: The Politics of Insecurity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), 234.
- 4 According to Richard Haass, "wars of choice tend to involve stakes or interests that are less clearly 'vital,' along with the existence of viable alternative policies, be they diplomacy, inaction, or something else but still other than the use of military force." See his discussion in *War of Necessity, War of Choice: A Memoir of Two Iraq Wars* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2009), 10.
- 5 Examples of recent proxy wars include the Soviet war against the Afghan mujahedin (who were backed by the United States and others), the Angolan Civil War (which involved outside interference by the United States, Cuba, and South Africa), or the Middle East Wars of 1956, 1967, and 1973.

- 6 Of course, a great power waging a war of choice might well decide to end (or at least to downgrade) some peripheral conflict if a major challenge arose elsewhere and it concluded that the new threat was more serious. As discussed later in the essay, this is one scenario where issues of credibility and reputation are less germane and cutting losses is likely to be easier.
- 7 Key works in this literature include: James D. Fearon, "Rationalist Theories of War," *International Organization* 49, no. 3 (Summer 1995); Dan Reiter, *How Wars End* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009); Paul Pillar, *Negotiating Peace: War Termination as a Bargaining Process* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983); Darren Filson and Suzanne Werner, "A Bargaining Model of War and Peace: Anticipating the Onset, Duration and, Outcome of War," *American Journal of Political Science* 46, no. 4 (October 2002); Robert Powell, "Bargaining Theory and International Conflict," *Annual Review of Political Science* 5 (June 2002); and Branislav L. Slantchev, "The Principle of Convergence in Wartime Negotiations," *American Political Science Review* 97, no. 4 (November 2003).
- 8 In the Seven Years' War (1757 to 1763), Prussia's declining fortunes were rescued when Russian Empress Elizabeth died unexpectedly in February 1762. Her successor, Tsar Peter III, withdrew the Russian forces, allowing Prussia a reprieve that ultimately led to victory. In the latter stages of World War II, Joseph Goebbels reportedly sought to console Adolf Hitler by reading Carlyle's account of this incident aloud to him. See Joachim Fest, *Hitler* (New York: Vintage, 1975), 734.
- 9 See Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976); and also Richards J. Heuer Jr., *Psychology of Intelligence Analysis* (Washington, D.C.: Center for the Study of Intelligence, 1999), chapter 9.
- 10 According to Jonathan Baron, "in any war in which one side clearly loses, the loss is apparent before it occurs, but both the government and people of the losing side continue to believe they can see victory just around the corner." See Jonathan Baron, *Thinking and Deciding* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2nd ed., 1994), 282.
- 11 See Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam: A History* (New York: Viking, 1983), 320.
- 12 See Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky, "Prospect Theory: An Analysis of Decision under Risk," *Econometrica* 47 (1979). Applications to international politics include Rose McDermott, *Risk-Taking in International Politics: Prospect Theory and American Foreign Policy* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1998); Daniel Kahneman and Jonathan Renshon, "Why Hawks Win," *Foreign Policy* 154 (January 2007); and Barbara Farnham, ed., *Avoiding Losses/Taking Risks: Prospect Theory in International Conflict* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994).
- 13 Kahneman and Renshon, "Why Hawks Win," 38.
- 14 The phrase is Jonathan Baron's. See his *Thinking and Deciding*, 507 (see note 10).
- 15 George W. Ball, "Memorandum for the President: A Compromise Solution in South Vietnam," in *The Pentagon Papers*, Senator Gravel edition, vol. 4 (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971), 617–19.

- 16 Irving L. Janis, *Groupthink: Psychological Studies of Policy Decisions and Fiascos*, 2nd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1982).
- 17 See Alexander L. George and Eric Stern, "Harnessing Conflict in Foreign Policy Making: From Devil's to Multiple Advocacy," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 32, no. 3 (June 2006).
- 18 Kahneman and Renshon, "Why Hawks Win," 36 (*see note 12*).
- 19 Stephen Van Evera, "Why States Believe Foolish Ideas: Non-Self-Evaluation by States and Societies," (unpublished ms., 2002, available at http://web.mit.edu/polisci/research/vanevera/why_states_believe_foolish_ideas.pdf); and Aaron Wildavsky, "The Self-Evaluating Organization," *Public Administration Review* 32, no. 5 (September/October 1972).
- 20 During the Iraq War, for example, a mid-level army officer (Lieutenant Colonel Paul Yingling) published a scathing but convincing critique of senior officer leadership, based on his own combat experience in the field. Although many of his criticisms helped produce important changes in the Army's counterinsurgency strategy, his candor did not enhance his own prospects for advancement. See Lieutenant Colonel Paul Yingling, "A Failure of Generalship," *Armed Forces Journal*, May 2007.
- 21 As a South Vietnamese general told an American official, "Your Secretary of Defense loves statistics. We Vietnamese can give him all he wants. If you want them to go up, they will go up. If you want them to go down, they will go down." Quoted in John Lewis Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of American National Security Strategy During the Cold War*, rev. ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 253.
- 22 Given this tendency, it should not surprise us that the main instigators of the so-called surge in Iraq in 2007 came from outside the regular chain of command and included both retired officers and a number of prominent civilians. See Thomas Ricks, *The Gamble: General David Petraeus and the American Military Adventure in Iraq, 2006–2008* (New York: Penguin, 2009).
- 23 See Ikle, *Every War Must End*, chap. 4 (*see note 2*); Elizabeth Stanley, *Paths to Peace: Domestic Coalition Shifts, War Termination, and the Korean War* (Stanford, CA.: Stanford University Press, 2009); Elizabeth Stanley, "Ending the Korean War: The Role of Domestic Coalition Shifts in Overcoming Obstacles to Peace," *International Security* 34, no. 1 (Summer 2009); and Robert Rothstein, "Domestic Politics and Peacemaking: Reconciling Incompatible Imperatives," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 392, no. 1 (November 1970).
- 24 See in particular Morton H. Halperin, "War Termination as a Problem in Civil-Military Relations," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 392 (November 1970), especially 88–89, 92–93.
- 25 It may have been easier General Matthew Ridgeway to recommend that the United States *not* intervene to rescue the French effort in Indochina in 1954 simply because U.S. military forces had not yet been committed and the prestige and bureaucratic clout of the army was not at stake.

- 26 On de Gaulle's intricate maneuvers to extricate France from Algeria, see Ian Lustick, *Unsettled States, Disputed Lands: Britain and Ireland, France and Algeria, Israel and the West Bank-Gaza* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), chap. 7.
- 27 On Gorbachev's policy toward Afghanistan, see Lester W. Grau, "Breaking Contact without Leaving Chaos: The Soviet Withdrawal from Afghanistan," *Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 20, no. 2 (April–June 2007); Sarah E. Mendelson, "Internal Battles and External Wars: Politics, Learning and the Soviet Withdrawal from Afghanistan," *World Politics* 45, no. 3 (April 1993); and Sarah E. Mendelson, *Changing Course: Ideas, Politics, and the Soviet Withdrawal from Afghanistan* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998).
- 28 See Doris Kearns, *Lyndon Johnson and the American Dream* (New York: Harper and Row, 1976), 252–53.
- 29 Recent research on media coverage in wartime suggests that media organizations "index" their handling of these topics in response to elite opinion. If elites are largely united, then there will be few authoritative voices challenging the war and media organizations will tend to ignore opposing views. Only when the elite divides do media organizations begin to disseminate information and opinion challenging the case for war. See Lance W. Bennett, "Toward a Theory of Press-State Relations in the United States," *Journal of Communication* 40, no. 2 (1990); and John Zaller and Dennis Chiu, "Government's Little Helper: U.S. Press Coverage of Foreign Policy Crises, 1945–1999," in Brigitte L. Nacos, Robert Y. Shapiro, and Pierangelo Isernia, eds., *Decisionmaking in a Glass House: Mass Media, Public Opinion, and American and European Foreign Policy in the 21st Century* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000).
- 30 On this phenomenon, see Hein E. Goemans, *War and Punishment: The Causes of War Termination and the First World War* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000); and George W. Downs and David Ročke, "Conflict, Agency, and Gambling for Resurrection: The Principal-Agent Problem Goes to War," *American Journal of Political Science* 38, no. 2 (May 1994).
- 31 The tendency to gamble for resurrection varies across regime types and according to the type of conflict, and it may be a less powerful factor in a war of choice than in a war of national survival, simply because the danger of an unsuccessful leader's being ousted and/or killed will be reduced when the stakes are small. One might hypothesize that democratic leaders are more likely to prolong wars of choice than secure dictators are, simply because the latter won't worry as much about the political consequences of defeat. On the general phenomenon, see Goemans, *War and Punishment*.
- 32 Studies suggesting that concerns about reputation and credibility are exaggerated include Jonathan Mercer, *Reputation in International Politics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996); Daryl Press, *Calculating Credibility: How Leaders Assess Military Threats* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005); and Ted Hopf, *Peripheral Visions: Deterrence Theory and American Foreign Policy in the Third World, 1965–1990* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994).

- 33 Hakan Tunç suggests that a premature U.S. withdrawal from Iraq would be a major boon to Islamic terrorists such as al-Qaeda, who would undoubtedly portray this as a triumph that confirmed their claims that United States was either a paper tiger or a “weak horse.” See his “Reputation and U.S. Withdrawal from Iraq,” *Orbis* 52, no. 4 (Fall 2008). Similar arguments are now being made regarding the war in Afghanistan as well, but it is not clear how seriously one should take them. Islamic radicals would no doubt proclaim a great victory and try to use it to rally support (just as Soviet ideologues saw Vietnam as a triumph for international communism), but removing the U.S. military presence would also eliminate one of the main justifications for jihad. The net effect on their recruitment efforts is thus far from obvious.
- 34 Reiter, *How Wars End*, 38 (see note 7).
- 35 On the Boer Case, see Ivan Arreguin-Toft, *How the Weak Win Wars: A Theory of Asymmetric Conflict* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), chap. 4.
- 36 On Algeria, see Gil Merom, *How Democracies Lose Small Wars: State, Society and the Failures of France in Algeria, Israel in Lebanon, and the United States in Vietnam* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); and Lustick, *Unsettled States, Disputed Lands* (see note 26).
- 37 There is an obvious selection effect here: if a strategic innovation leads to victory (or at least an acceptable political outcome), then the need to cut losses vanishes. Thus, the whole problem of cutting losses arises only in those cases in which victory is proving elusive.
- 38 General discussions of “buck passing” include Barry R. Posen, *The Sources of Military Doctrine: France, Britain, and Germany Between the Wars* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984); Thomas Christensen and Jack L. Snyder, “Chained Gangs and Passed Bucks: Predicting Alliance Patterns in Multipolarity,” *International Organization* 44, no. 2 (Spring 1990); and John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2001), 157–63 and chap. 8.
- 39 Note that in this case France had given up its own claims in Indochina, and its only strategic interest was a diffuse concern that communism not spread further.
- 40 Ball, “Memorandum for the President” (see note 15).
- 41 See Mercer, *Reputation in International Politics* (see note 32); Press, *Calculating Credibility* (see note 32); and Hopf, *Peripheral Visions* (see note 32).
- 42 On this point, see Patrick Cockburn, “America Concedes,” *London Review of Books*, 30, no. 24 (December 18, 2008).
- 43 In a speech to the Veterans of Foreign Wars in August 2009, President Obama said of Afghanistan, “This is not a war of choice. This is a war of necessity. Those who attacked America on 9/11 are plotting to do so again. If left unchecked, the Taliban insurgency will mean an even larger safe haven from which al Qaeda would plot to kill more Americans.” For a dissenting view, see Stephen M. Walt, “The Safe Haven Myth,” at http://walt.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2009/08/18/the_safe_haven_myth.

Secretary of Defense Robert Gates had previously sought to lower expectations of U.S. goals by saying, "If we set ourselves the objective of creating some sort of central Asian Valhalla over there, we will lose, because nobody in the world has that kind of time, patience and money." See Ann Tyson, "Gates Predicts Slog in Afghanistan," *The Washington Post*, January 28, 2009.

- 44 See David M. Edelstein, "Exit Strategies, When, How and Why Do States End Military Interventions," paper presented at the annual meeting of the International Studies Association, San Francisco, California, March 26, 2008; David M. Edelstein, "Trap Doors: Exiting Military Interventions and the Logic of Saving Face," unpublished ms., Georgetown University, 2009.
- 45 Grau, "Breaking Contact Without Leaving Chaos."
- 46 On the general phenomenon of "decoupling," see Robert Jervis, *The Logic of Images in International Relations* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970), chaps. 6 and 7.
- 47 Jervis refers to such actions as "indices," which he defines as "statements or actions that carry some inherent evidence that the image projected is correct," as opposed to mere "signals" which are actions intended to convey a particular image but which "do not contain inherent credibility." A verbal statement of commitment is a signal, but sending troops to reinforce a commitment would be an index, especially if it involved high costs. "Indices" are virtually identical to the concept of a "costly signal." See Jervis, *Logic of Images*, 18–19.
- 48 Interestingly, Israel has tried to distinguish between these various commitments in a number of ways. When withdrawing from Lebanon, for example, the Barak government emphasized that it was retreating across a recognized international border, and went to some lengths to make sure the border was delineated properly. By contrast, there is no official border between Israel proper and the West Bank (the pre-1967 "Green Line" was only an armistice line). Similarly, Israel has officially extended Israeli law to the Golan Heights (an act of de facto annexation), thereby placing it in a slightly different category as well.
- 49 A more Machiavellian approach would be to set a firm deadline for a set of unrealistic internal reforms (in the expectation that they would not be met), and then use the local government's failure to meet these goals as a pretext for withdrawal.
- 50 This theme is especially evident in Lustick's account of de Gaulle's lengthy campaign to extricate France from Algeria. See *Unsettled States, Disputed Lands*, chap. 7 (see note 26).
- 51 Sharon told a French audience in 2005 that "The future of the Jewish people depends on the nature of Israel as a Jewish and democratic state.... In this spirit we initiated the disengagement plan...[t]hat would secure the Jewish majority in the land of Israel." See Aluf Benn, "Trading Spaces," *The Washington Post*, August 14, 2005. In November 2007, Olmert told interviewers that "If the day comes when the two-state solution collapses, and we face a South African-style struggle for equal voting rights...then, as soon as that happens, the State of Israel is finished." See Aluf Benn, David Landau, Barak Ravid, and Shmuel Rosner, "Olmert to *Ha'aretz*:"

Two-State Solution, or Israel is Done For,” *Ha’aretz* (online), November 29, 2007, available at <http://www.haaretz.com/news/olmert-to-haaretz-two-state-solution-or-israel-is-done-for-1.234201>.

- 52 The offensive was a major military setback for the North Vietnamese, but the scale of the attack contradicted official claims that the U.S. was winning and raised new doubts about the wisdom of the war itself. According to Dan Hallin, “Before Tet, editorial commentary by television journalists ran nearly four to one in favor of administration policy; after Tet, two to one against. Before Tet, of the battles journalists ventured to describe as victories or defeats, 62% were described as victories for the United States, 28% as defeats, and 2% as inconclusive or as stalemates. After Tet, the figures were 44% victories, 32% defeats, and 24% inconclusive.” See his *The Uncensored War: The Media and Vietnam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 161–162.

IX. A U.S. Military Withdrawal from the Greater Middle East: Impact on Terrorism

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Some pundits and analysts have argued that a withdrawal of U.S. military forces from the Middle East would decrease the threat of anti-U.S. terrorism from Islamic extremist groups such as al-Qaeda.¹ After all, the U.S. military presence in the Middle East is part of what drives al-Qaeda, especially the core of the organization that surrounds its leader, Osama bin Laden, to attack U.S. targets and the U.S. homeland. Elements of this argument are valid, but its simplistic application misses much of the picture—even when broader U.S. interests are excluded, and counterterrorism concerns alone are examined. Clearly, the U.S. military presence in the Middle East is a tremendous source of anger for the al-Qaeda core, and many other Muslims also oppose it. Yet even for the core of the organization, the U.S. military presence is only one motivating factor for anti-U.S. terrorism, and for the many al-Qaeda-affiliated organizations and sympathizers, the U.S. presence in the Middle East is even less important. Moreover, the definition of withdrawal for al-Qaeda is broad: combat troops are the most important component of the U.S. presence to al-Qaeda members, but as part of the desired withdrawal, they would add U.S. trainers and intelligence personnel, and in some cases even the entire U.S. diplomatic and cultural presence. In some cases, a U.S. withdrawal would carry dangers to U.S. allies, particularly those at risk of destabilization from terrorism. In the case of Pakistan, allowing a terrorist haven there to continue without hindrance risks not only greater strife in Pakistan and associated dangerous regional consequences but also the increased possibility that al-Qaeda would be able to orchestrate anti-U.S. attacks from its base there. In the end, the withdrawal of U.S. military forces from the region would likely have mixed results on the threat of terrorism, some of which are difficult to predict with certainty and a few of which could prove exceptionally dangerous.

This essay first briefly reviews the argument that the withdrawal of U.S. forces from the Middle East would aid counterterrorism, including several key

distinctions to consider when evaluating this argument. It then discusses the limits to this argument, such as several risks that U.S. withdrawal would bring to U.S. allies. It concludes by noting some broader implications of this argument for U.S. policy.

The Case for Withdrawal and Key Distinctions

When discussing the impact of withdrawal on al-Qaeda, it is vital to recognize that the term *al-Qaeda* is used to refer to different things and even distinct groups, and the effects of a withdrawal would vary considerably by component. The components can be broken down as follows, though in reality these groups overlap:

- ***The small core around bin Laden.*** Probably numbering in the hundreds or low thousands, al-Qaeda has a group of dedicated and mostly skilled operatives who have sworn loyalty to bin Laden. They see themselves as a vanguard, an elite group that understands the Muslim community's true interests and would serve as the point of the spear for a revolution in the Muslim world.² This group often focuses on high-profile terrorist attacks and has carried out many attacks that were centralized in their direction and planning, such as the September 11, 2001, strikes in the U.S. and the bombing of U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in 1998.
- ***Active jihadists trained by al-Qaeda.*** Al-Qaeda has run training camps in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Sudan, and elsewhere since the late 1980s. Tens of thousands of men have attended these camps—a RAND study that examined a trove of documents discovered in Afghanistan and elsewhere estimated that twenty thousand fighters have gone through al-Qaeda camps;³ other reports place the number much higher. Some of the trainees fought or are fighting in wars in the countries where they trained, while others have gone back to their home countries to wage jihad. Still others have died, been arrested, dropped out, or otherwise are no longer active in al-Qaeda. The men who have trained at al-Qaeda camps are often known to al-Qaeda, both bureaucratically and individually, and many are sympathetic to at least some aspects of the movement.⁴
- ***Jihadist-linked insurgencies.*** Al-Qaeda supports a Salafi-jihadist credo, elements of which were or are shared by a range of full-blown or proto-insurgencies around the Muslim world. Examples have included Egyptian Islamic Jihad; the Islamic Army of Aden-Abyan in Yemen; the Islamic Army in Iraq; the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan; Jemaah Islamiyah in Indonesia; Lashkar-e-Taiba in Pakistan; and the Taliban in Afghanistan and Pakistan. After negotiating terms with the al-Qaeda core leadership,

a number of these organizations have taken on the al-Qaeda brand name, including al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, and al-Qaeda in Iraq. Other groups have some sympathy for al-Qaeda and links with some individual fighters, such as the Shebab in Somalia, the Islamic Group in Egypt, and various Chechen groups in Russia and Chechnya. Some members of these groups at times cooperate with al-Qaeda on terrorism. For example, Islamic Army of Aden-Abyan fighters reportedly cooperated with al-Qaeda in the attack on the USS *Cole* in 2000 and the subsequent attack on the *Limburg*.⁵ The density of the links to al-Qaeda, the command relationship, and other important factors vary by group and historical period. Many of the ties are personal as well as organizational.

- **Local jihadists.** Some recruits embrace al-Qaeda's ideology and take up its call to act but have not gone to Afghanistan and Pakistan or perhaps even met a member of the al-Qaeda core. Although the impact of these home-grown jihadists is often exaggerated, nonetheless they are quite real and at times have proven deadly. In these instances, *al-Qaeda* is more an ideology than a distinct movement.⁶

Although these categories are analytically discrete, in practice they overlap considerably. A local jihadist may over time join a jihadist-linked insurgency, travel to Pakistan for training at the hands of al-Qaeda, or both. While in Pakistan, or perhaps even in his own country, he may meet a member of al-Qaeda and receive some instruction. Some operatives may go back and forth between local groups and al-Qaeda, cooperating because of past personal connections forged in training camps or ideological sympathy. Thus to different degrees, al-Qaeda, its affiliates, and sympathetic individuals have a presence in dozens of countries. One of bin Laden's successes by the late 1990s was to bring these different components of jihad into a greater degree of harmony and cooperation; this coherence, however, has varied since 9/11, as discussed below.

The al-Qaeda core considers the U.S. military presence in the Middle East an outrage, and most of the pro-withdrawal arguments focus on this grievance.⁷ Starting in 1996, the organization openly cited the U.S. presence as justification for attacks on U.S. military forces and, in 1998, this was part of its rationale for calling for attacks on U.S. civilians as well—a threat that was soon made good when al-Qaeda bombed the U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania and, two years later, bombed the USS *Cole* while it was in port in Yemen. Al-Qaeda's opposition to U.S. troops has wide support from the citizens of every Arab country, as well as in such non-Arab countries as Pakistan, where the U.S. military presence is extremely unpopular. So even beyond motivating current group members, the U.S. presence inspires some new members to join up, helps

the group raise money, and makes governments more hesitant to crack down on terrorism.

A withdrawal of the U.S. military presence would reduce the number of potential targets. U.S. military bases, visiting naval craft, and personnel all would be less exposed if they were not in terrorist hotbeds such as Iraq and Pakistan, among others. Moreover, much of the U.S. presence in noncombat zones such as Qatar only supports the U.S. presence elsewhere and could be reduced if the U.S. withdrew from other parts of the region. This presence is often located in remote, well-guarded parts of the host countries. Nevertheless, in 1996, Iranian-backed terrorists successfully attacked the remote and well-guarded Khobar Towers complex, killing nineteen Americans.⁸ In 2000, the USS *Cole* was attacked by a suicide bomber on a boat. Americans in Kuwait, Jordan, and elsewhere have also been killed in jihadist-linked killings. As opportunity often guides terrorist targeting, reducing the numbers of targets would also reduce the likelihood of an attack (or, more accurately, would often lead terrorists to attack less well guarded targets).

Limits to the Withdrawal Logic

Clearly the U.S. military presence in the Middle East angers members of the al-Qaeda core, but the organization has a host of grievances against the U.S. that go beyond the absence or presence of troops in various countries. Reducing al-Qaeda's embrace of anti-U.S. terrorism to one factor is mistaken, and misses much of the organization's essence. (Other commentators often posit U.S. support for Israel in a similarly mistaken monocausal explanation for al-Qaeda's hostility.)

Al-Qaeda has several other grievances against the U.S. in addition to its emphasis on U.S. troops. Al-Qaeda is hostile to Israel, and it correctly sees the U.S. as Israel's most important patron—even though U.S. military forces play at most a minor role in this relationship, which is primarily economic and diplomatic. (The U.S., of course, is a major arms supplier to Israel as well as a provider of billions in aid each year.) Indeed, one of the bombers responsible for the July 7, 2005 attacks in London did so because of British "oppression" in Palestine and "British support of the Jews," a description that would surprise many Israelis. Another major grievance is U.S. support for various pro-Western regimes in the Middle East, such as Jordan, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia, among others. Some of these regimes have hosted U.S. forces (for example, Saudi Arabia), others are home to important U.S. logistics bases (for example, Egypt), and still others are simply allies that have an important intelligence relationship with the U.S. Al-Qaeda's rhetoric paints all these countries as U.S. puppets, claiming that U.S. backing is what keeps them in power. Indeed, for much of the organization these regimes are the true problem, and there are many members

who want to focus on fighting guerrilla struggles against them—members who act, in Daniel Benjamin and Steven Simon's words, as "quartermaster[s] for jihad."⁹

The limits to the impact of a U.S. military withdrawal are even clearer when we go beyond the al-Qaeda core and other jihadist groups. A number of countries have hosted large numbers of U.S. troops; some, such as West Germany, experienced limited terrorism that was only partially directed at U.S. forces, while others did not experience anti-U.S. terrorism at all. At the same time, al-Qaeda has a presence and has conducted terrorist attacks in countries such as Algeria against international targets, even though the U.S. diplomatic and economic role in Algeria is small and there is no significant military presence or relationship there.

Part of the explanation for analysts' overreliance on the U.S. military presence as a causal factor in explaining anti-U.S. terrorism is the story that al-Qaeda has told to justify its own actions—a story that is not backed up by our current understanding of the organization's true history. Observers commonly point to the U.S. deployment to Saudi Arabia after the 1990 Iraqi invasion of Kuwait as what led bin Laden to turn against the U.S. In this version, the causality is clear: the deployment of a massive number of U.S. troops to the region's religious heartland fundamentally changed bin Laden and like-minded fighters. Although the U.S. deployment did anger bin Laden, it did not have a decisive impact on his thinking; he had been somewhat hostile to the U.S. before, and he does not seem to have turned against the U.S. as his primary target until 1994 or perhaps even 1995—years after the initial U.S. deployment and decision to stay on after the war ended. Before that, his organization focused first on Afghanistan and then, as the anti-Soviet jihad turned into brutal internecine fighting, considered India, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, and Sudan as other priorities.¹⁰ Bin Laden even applied for a British visa in order to go into exile in the U.K., from which he would probably have waged a propaganda war against the Saudi kingdom. Much of al-Qaeda's energies went into supporting various local jihads in the Muslim world. Other men who came to play key roles in the organization had long been involved in anti-regime struggles in places such as Egypt.

For the jihadist movement in general, a particularly important distinction is between U.S. forces that are actively involved in campaigns against Muslims (for example, in Iraq today) and those that are playing a more defensive role (U.S. troops in Saudi Arabia in the past or in Qatar today). Jihadists like bin Laden have long argued that the U.S. is an aggressive Christian power that seeks to subjugate Muslims; in his eyes, any U.S. presence in the region is an affront as it collectively serves the purpose of subjugating Muslims. This argument, however, has had limited influence outside radical circles. For example, with regard to his criticism of U.S. forces in Saudi Arabia, many establishment

religious leaders criticized the U.S. role, but they did not believe that it delegitimated the regime or made the U.S. a proper target of a religious war.¹¹ The U.S. invasion and occupation of Iraq, however, was a different category: like the Soviet invasion and occupation of Afghanistan that spawned the modern jihadist movement, the U.S. action was seen by many mainstream clerics as a transgression that required all Muslims to take up arms or otherwise support the fight. The U.S. presence in Afghanistan, where the U.S. is working with the national government and where Americans are seen by many as victims of an attack, has not led to the same broad opposition, though it is still widely criticized (it probably falls between the U.S. presence in Iraq and the current presence in Qatar).

Beyond this theological disagreement, the different U.S. efforts are not equally sensitive politically. Iraq, which lies in a storied region in Islamic history and was for many years the Arab world's strongest power, has captured the imagination of Muslims worldwide, at times as much as the Israel-Palestine conflict has. Afghanistan, in contrast, is still important but does not have the emotional resonance of Iraq. In the Arab world, the Pashtun, Tajik, Hazara, Uzbek, and other communities do not excite a sense of ethnic and national identity as does Iraq's Arab population. In addition, Afghanistan is more remote from Islam's heartland and in general has captured less media attention. The al-Qaeda core is nonetheless motivated by the presence of U.S. forces in these countries, but this feeling is not shared equally beyond the core.

The impact on the zeitgeist has considerable effects on fundraising and recruitment. Iraq was a boon for al-Qaeda and the jihadist movement in general, helping them raise money and attract new members to the fight. Chechnya, Kashmir, and other causes too have motivated young men to fight. These hot wars, however, are quite distinct from the simple presence of U.S. military forces. This presence often generates opposition and anger, but not the same outrage as the use of U.S. forces against Muslims in combat. This is particularly so when we move from considering the al-Qaeda core to sympathizers or others at the edge of the current organization.

Indeed, al-Qaeda's priorities and targeting logic can often better be understood by looking at organizational dynamics rather than rhetoric and supposedly strategic ambitions. Core parts of al-Qaeda's cadre before 9/11 came from Egyptian Islamic Jihad (EIJ), and after 9/11 groups such as al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb and al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula formed. All these groups, when they formally joined al-Qaeda, had anti-U.S. and broader anti-Western goals. However, EIJ did not embrace this global agenda until it had been effectively defeated in Egypt: it was EIJ's inability to go after the near enemy, rather than any particular change in U.S. policy, that led some of its members

to embrace al-Qaeda's global agenda with its focus on the far enemy, the U.S. Similarly, al-Qaeda of the Islamic Maghreb came about after its predecessors, such as the Armed Islamic Group and the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat, had failed to defeat the Algerian regime and found themselves relegated to a minor role. In these circumstances, ties to the al-Qaeda core offered resources, prestige, and a new narrative that these groups could embrace—all of which helped the organizations endure after being defeated in their original mission.

The trajectory of bin Laden's deputy, Ayman al-Zawahiri, is instructive with regard to these organizational dynamics. After he raised the banner of jihad, Zawahiri claimed, "Jerusalem will not be conquered unless Cairo is conquered and the battle in Egypt and Algeria is won."¹² When he first connected with bin Laden, he simply sought to use the Saudis' money to help his cause in Egypt. He even may have instructed a key follower, Ali Mohamed (a.k.a. Ali Abdul Saoud Mohamed), to offer his knowledge of al-Qaeda to U.S. intelligence in 1993 as a way of penetrating U.S. services in order to help EIJ. This attachment to bin Laden grew as EIJ suffered a series of devastating blows in Egypt, and several bases overseas, such as Pakistan, became less open as the regime cracked down in response to Egyptian pressure after the terrorist attacks there.¹³

To survive as an organization, particularly outside Egypt, EIJ found itself financially dependent on bin Laden.¹⁴ In particular, Zawahiri was under pressure to pay the salaries of his members and to take care of the families of "martyrs" (whether killed or in jail) in Egypt itself.¹⁵ In this period, Zawahiri still seemed primarily focused on Egypt and, in 1996, attempted to travel to Chechnya to establish a base there, as opposed to joining bin Laden in Afghanistan.

Zawahiri's failure to establish a base in Chechnya appears to be a turning point in his relationship with al-Qaeda. After being imprisoned for several months by Russia, he returned to Afghanistan in 1997. EIJ suffered further blows with the disruption of an EIJ cell in Azerbaijan in 1998.¹⁶ This setback in turn led the Egyptian security services to round up many militants whom they did not know about before. The reported 1998 rendition of several EIJ cell members in Albania, like the raid on the Azeri cell, also led the Egyptian regime to make further arrests in Egypt itself and to reduce the effectiveness of the overseas network.¹⁷

Bin Laden had long pushed for EIJ to embrace a more global agenda. Zawahiri and much of EIJ—broke, devastated in Egypt, and harassed by the U.S.—was finally open to this message. In 1997, EIJ's own bulletins began to call for attacks on the U.S.¹⁸ In 1998, Zawahiri signed on to the al-Qaeda-backed declaration of the "World Islamic Front for Combat against Jews and Crusaders," marking what the U.S. government argued was effectively a merger between the two.¹⁹ In June 2001 Zawahiri's group formally merged with al-Qaeda.

This shift was justified rhetorically and strategically by blaming the U.S. for Egypt's problems and emphasizing other U.S. iniquities—but in fact a host of organizational problems were the primary causes of the shift.

The Uncertain Meaning of Withdrawal

Of course, large numbers of U.S. troops, particularly when they are in a combat role as they are in Iraq and Afghanistan today, anger and energize al-Qaeda. However, because of the propaganda value that the presence of U.S. forces has for al-Qaeda, the organization often claims that troops are deployed in places where they are not truly present or exaggerates their numbers and the importance of their role.

Al-Qaeda is also critical of U.S. security assistance measures. Part of al-Qaeda's far-enemy logic is that the U.S. props up its local allies: without U.S. backing, these governments would fall. Security assistance, of course, is often at the heart of this support. In addition, many jihadists have had firsthand experience with the brutal security services of their own countries, with some (such as Zawahiri) becoming further radicalized in the process. Even U.S. intelligence liaison, which involves sharing information, training, and other forms of exchange, is thus a sensitive issue for them.²⁰

Part of what inhibits al-Qaeda's operations in the Pakistan haven are strikes from U.S. drones, such as the Predator and the Reaper. Whether relying upon them instead of on ground troops constitutes "withdrawal" depends upon the definition of the word. U.S. drone strikes have killed Abu Khabab al-Masri, who ran al-Qaeda's WMD programs, and one of the few serious studies of the strikes found that "since the summer of 2008 U.S. drones have killed dozens of lower-ranking militants and at least ten mid- and upper-level leaders within al-Qaeda or the Taliban."²¹ In addition to the short-term disruption caused by the loss of leadership cadre, then CIA chief Michael Hayden contends, "we force them to spend more time and resources on self-preservation, and that distracts them, at least partially and at least for a time, from laying the groundwork for the next attack."²² Clearly, the U.S. program is only a limited success; nevertheless, it inhibits al-Qaeda operations in Pakistan and beyond.

Also important is the U.S. political relationship with governments in the area. Zawahiri has regularly criticized the U.S.-Egypt relationship, for example, claiming that the Mubarak government is a slave to Washington and Jerusalem. Zawahiri's criticism is not based on the presence of U.S. military forces in Egypt, but rather on the diplomatic relationship between the two countries.

For some jihadists, particularly outside the al-Qaeda core, economic and cultural relationships with the West matter. Mohammad Bouyeri's 2004 attack on the Dutch filmmaker Theo Van Gogh or the violent demonstrations over

the cartoons ridiculing the prophet Mohammed in a Danish newspaper are, for many European Muslims, more salient issues than U.S. support for corrupt regimes in the Arab world. (The al-Qaeda core is trying to reach out to these would-be affiliates. Although bin Laden has historically focused on policy more than values, Zawahiri released a videotape in March 2006 that railed against Danish cartoons mocking the prophet Mohammed.) The Taliban in Afghanistan and Jemaah Islamiyah in Indonesia are concerned about the penetration of Western popular culture, as suggested by its attack on the Bali discotheque. Protests ensued immediately after *Playboy* went on sale in Indonesia, even though the Indonesian version lacked unclothed women. In Southeast Asia and Egypt, insurgents burn churches and attack Christian businesses. Sectarian issues stir more passions than bin Laden's global, U.S.-focused agenda.

To be clear, however, all these forms of support are less aggravating than the presence of U.S. military forces, particularly if they are in a combat role against Muslim populations. Al-Qaeda core members in particular will still criticize the U.S. for these roles and justify attacks because of them. However, their justifications will have less popular support if the U.S. presence is lower profile, limited to such tasks as training or the provision of intelligence. In addition, other possible priorities—other foreign countries, such as India or Russia, or other causes, such as sectarian fighting or the struggle against a local regime—are more likely to rise to the fore.

Risks to U.S. Interests and Allies

From a counterterrorism perspective alone, a U.S. withdrawal carries with it several risks to U.S. interests and perhaps also to the U.S. homeland.

One clear risk is that of diversion: that al-Qaeda and its affiliated groups might shift from a focus on the U.S. to other states in the region. On the surface, diversion appears to be entirely desirable from a U.S. point of view, as it means that citizens of other countries would be in the crosshairs rather than Americans. And to some degree this is true. However, the U.S. has at least some interest in the security of the citizens of U.S. allies, such as the U.K., Canada, Germany, and Israel—to name only a few.

Much depends on which country is at risk. For all Western countries, terrorism is a risk to the lives of citizens, but not to the basic survival of a form of government or to the continuation of a leadership that is basically pro-American in orientation.²³ On the other hand, key al-Qaeda targets include the governments of Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt. Others, such as India, Iraq, Indonesia, Algeria, and Jordan, are also of concern. Fortunately, so far all these regimes have shown that they can survive a high level of terrorism. Their security services are strong, and in general the population has not rushed to embrace the terrorist cause.

Pakistan today and Iraq in 2003 to 2004, however, show how terrorism can pose a deeper danger. The continuation of terrorism can, over time, erode confidence in the state to provide the basic function of security. This in turn can give rise to a host of other actors. At times these may be legitimate opposition parties, but often they are ethnic, sectarian, or religious groups. These groups can create chaos in a country through guerrilla war as well as terrorism. In addition, some have strong anti-U.S. agendas. Thus terrorism can snowball and produce truly destabilizing violence.

The U.S. presence in Iraq is also worth examining in the context of threats to U.S. allies. Many Muslims came to Iraq to expel the U.S. from Muslim lands; many Iraqis took up arms for the same reason. In the course of the conflict, however, their agendas grew broader. Exposed to hardened terrorists such as Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, their ambitions and grievances went beyond Iraq, expanding their agenda to embrace goals closer to the core of al-Qaeda ideology. The war also served a Darwinian function for jihadist fighters: those who survived ended up better trained, more committed, and otherwise more formidable than when they began. Unfortunately, the skills they picked up in Iraq—IED design, the routine use of suicide bombing, sniper tactics, experience in urban warfare, an improved ability to avoid enemy intelligence, and use of man-portable surface-to-air missiles—are readily transferable to other theaters as well as (to a lesser degree) to the U.S. homeland. Stephanie Kaplan finds that jihadists exploit wars in the Islamic world, such as the war in Iraq, both to gain valuable skills that help them conduct terrorist attacks and guerrilla war elsewhere when the war ends and to mobilize new recruits and resources for the cause.²⁴

The greatest immediate danger is to Iraq's neighbors, which include several close U.S. allies. Bergen and Cruickshank argue that Iraq's effect on terrorism is partially a function of geographic proximity, the level of exchange between Iraqi and domestic groups in the other country, and how much the local population identifies with Iraqi Arabs.²⁵ For all of Iraq's neighbors, particularly in the Arab states, these conditions hold, even though the current danger is less than it was in 2006. Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) would be particularly likely to reach out to strike Saudi Arabia, given the long, lightly patrolled border between the two countries and bin Laden's well-documented interest in destabilizing the al-Saud family, which rules the heartland of Islam. Ties among Islamists on either side of the border are tight: resistance groups in Iraq have at times turned to Saudi religious scholars to validate their activities.²⁶ A great many of the Arabs fighting in Iraq are Saudis. As Reuven Paz notes, "The Iraqi experience of these mainly Saudi volunteers may create a massive group of 'Iraqi alumni' that will threaten the fragile internal situation of the desert kingdom."²⁷ The turmoil in

Iraq has also energized young Saudi Islamists, who see it as emblematic of broader problems facing the Muslim world. Many Saudi Salafi extremists decided to fight in Iraq, in part because doing so is a clearer defensive jihad than struggling with the al-Saud family. If the U.S. were to leave Iraq, the balance would shift from Saudis helping Iraqi fighters to Iraqi fighters helping Saudis. Such a development is not likely to lead to the collapse of the Saudi government, but even a few dozen terrorists operating from Iraq could foster civil strife, attack Saudi Arabia's oil infrastructure, and otherwise cause unwelcome unrest in a critical ally with many existing internal problems. A particular risk is that the anti-Shi'a sentiment of AQI members could lead to concerted attempts to sow sectarian strife in the kingdom, preying on Saudi Arabia's own domestic tensions. European intelligence services are also intensely concerned about Iraq, since dozens, perhaps hundreds, of European Muslims have gone and continue to go to Iraq to fight. So far, these fighters have not returned to Western Europe, but European officials believe that it is only a matter of time before they do. Although the Iraq war has clearly been a net loss from a counterterrorism perspective,²⁸ it did serve one purpose later claimed by the Bush administration as desirable: diversion. In particular, the war diverted fighters from Saudi Arabia at a particularly dangerous time in 2003 to 2005, when the regime was facing a low-level proto-insurgency there. Dozens, perhaps hundreds, of fighters preferred to go to Iraq, in part because it was seen as an easier operational environment and because the anti-U.S., anti-Shi'a cause there was widely applauded throughout Saudi Arabia, while the struggle against the al-Saud family was supported domestically only by a minority. Pakistan is probably the most dangerous field of jihad—and, at the same time, the one that today offers the most probable prospect for jihadist success. Pakistan combines a wide range of dangerous elements: a nuclear program of uncertain security; bitter sectarian violence between Sunni extremists and Shiites; widespread ethnic violence among a range of groups; staggering corruption; economic weakness; and chauvinistic democratic leaders. Ongoing border tension with India, particularly over Kashmir, and the increasing civil war in Iraq compound these problems. Although a jihadist takeover remains far off, greater instability in Pakistan could be disastrous. In addition, jihadist elements in the military are robust and, though reporting on their influence and numbers is scarce, perhaps getting stronger.

In addition to the risk to U.S. interests via allies, a second concern of withdrawal is direct risk to U.S. targets overseas and the U.S. homeland. Al-Qaeda was at its most dangerous when it had a functional haven in which to operate. When the Taliban governed Afghanistan, al-Qaeda had a haven in which to build a miniature army. From that haven, they could organize and recruit on a vast scale. In addition, they could orchestrate plots around the globe and build

an organization that had branches in dozens of countries. The haven for the leadership in Afghanistan was vital to all of this.

Al-Qaeda's haven in Afghanistan is gone, and for several years the organization was on the run. This situation has changed remarkably in the last several years. Al-Qaeda's biggest success since 9/11 has been in Pakistan. Most important, Pakistan is now a base for al-Qaeda, replacing the Taliban's Afghanistan in many ways. In addition, Pakistan itself is now a central theater of conflict in the jihadist world. Despite the offensive that it launched in 2009, the Pakistani army is shut out of parts of its own country, and areas such as Swat—once a peaceful tourist destination—are now hotbeds of insurgency. Pakistan has a large, powerful army, nuclear weapons, and an ongoing border dispute with India. Unrest there is perhaps more terrifying than in any other country in the world.²⁹

Today, Pakistan is the center of the global jihad. Active groups today include the Pakistani Taliban, Lashkar-e-Taiba, Lashkar-e-Jhangvi, Jaish-e-Mohammed, Hizb-ul-Mujahidin, and many other small groups (many groups also operate under various names). In addition, a variety of more mainstream Islamist organizations support these groups, both in terms of direct financial and logistical support and indirectly by promulgating teachings that are in accord with these violent groups' goals. Many of these organizations focus on Pakistan itself or on India, some have a sectarian focus, while others share some of al-Qaeda's global objectives. Even when the groups do not carry out al-Qaeda-style attacks, they often share fundraising, training, logistics, and safe houses with al-Qaeda. A number of al-Qaeda operatives have been caught at facilities linked to these groups.

From Pakistan, the al-Qaeda core enjoys the benefits of a haven and can support operations in the Muslim world and attacks in the West and in Asia. As former CIA official and terrorism expert Bruce Riedel writes about the core, "Like a large corporation, it has a central headquarters in South Asia with affiliates and franchises around the Islamic world from which it can stage raids into the Christian and Hindu worlds beyond."³⁰ In the West, al-Qaeda has a wide potential range of individuals to call on; several thousand Europeans have received training in al-Qaeda camps.³¹

Al-Qaeda appears to have organized, coordinated, or otherwise played a major role in the foiled 2004 attacks in the U.K. on a nightclub or a shopping mall; plans to bomb economic targets in several American cities; and the 2006 plan to simultaneously blow up several airplanes as they flew from the U.K. to the U.S.³² Hoffman, who was involved in expert testimony in the U.K., found that al-Qaeda was actively involved in virtually all major terrorist plots in the U.K. since 2003.³³ Press reporting indicates that operatives with links to Pakistan played a role in the spring 2009 Manchester plot that British security services disrupted.³⁴

Outside the U.K., German government officials claimed that they disrupted a plot to attack U.S. and German targets in Germany in 2007 involving three men, none of whom were of Pakistani origin, who trained at camps in Pakistan.³⁵ The Danish government also reported a disrupted plot linked to Pakistan in 2007. Hoffman and Riedel also note that there is growing evidence that al-Qaeda may have played some role in the devastating 3/11 attacks in Spain (the March 11, 2004, bombing of four commuter lines into Madrid, which killed 190 people and wounded 1,800).³⁶

However, in these cases, the level of command appears to vary at least somewhat from that of the 1998 embassy and 9/11 attacks, with local leaders enjoying more discretion. In Pakistan, individuals are trained and given direction and probably approval for an attack, but there seems to be less back-and-forth between operatives and the al-Qaeda core compared to pre-9/11 attacks, because of concerns about operational security. Yet al-Qaeda from its beginning has used multiple command operations, so this shift is not as difficult as it might be for other organizations.

Several official government statements and documents support this assessment. The unclassified key judgments of the 2007 U.S. National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) “The Terrorist Threat to the U.S. Homeland” contend that “al-Qaeda is and will remain the most serious terrorist threat to the Homeland, as its central leadership continues to plan high-impact plots, while pushing others in extremist Sunni communicates to mimic its efforts and to supplement its capabilities.” The NIE further estimates that al-Qaeda has protected or regenerated key aspects of the organization in Pakistan.³⁷ In the 2009 iteration of the annual threat assessment that the Director of National Intelligence (DNI) gives to the U.S. Congress, DNI Dennis Blair declared that “al-Qaeda remains intent on attacking U.S. interests worldwide, including the U.S. Homeland” and that the organization’s core in tribal parts of Pakistan is its most dangerous component. Blair further contends that the primary threat from Europe-based extremists stems from those “who return from training in Pakistan to conduct attacks in Europe or the United States.”³⁸

Cuts to, or the termination of, U.S. security assistance programs would be a particular problem for governments fighting jihadist-linked insurgents. Much of this depends on the definition of “withdrawal” of U.S. military forces. But if large-scale training were cut, these governments would find it more difficult to fight on their own.

Other U.S. Interests

The discussion above, of course, addresses only a small part of a larger question about the role of U.S. military forces in the greater Middle East. To protect the

Arab world, there is little need for extensive U.S. forces to handle many of the crises that could occur in the region. The region's two top military powers, Israel and Turkey, are close U.S. allies. Other countries with considerable military forces, such as Egypt, Pakistan, and Saudi Arabia, are also U.S. allies. Indeed, in the Middle East the conventional military threat comes down to a finite number of U.S. adversaries, particularly Iran. Iran's conventional military forces, however, are weak and do not pose a major threat to its neighbors, with the possible exception of Iraq. Iran's nuclear program might soon produce an operational nuclear weapon, but the operative concept for countering this is a strategic umbrella or perhaps small numbers of U.S. forces used to signal commitment, rather than a large-scale presence. It is plausible that a nuclear weapon could lead Iran to be more aggressive with its conventional forces (as Pakistan was during the Kargil War of 1999, which followed its first nuclear tests in 1998). This would be a reason, however, for the U.S. to build up local forces and arrange for a rapid response to reinforce them: a large-scale U.S. presence is not necessary for this contingency.

Implications for U.S. Policy

An axiom of counterinsurgency holds that local forces are always key. At times foreign forces can augment local forces, and indeed at times a government might collapse without this assistance. Even in these extreme cases, however, the goal is usually to return to a situation in which local forces can sustain the counterinsurgency by themselves. In Iraq in the coming year, for example, this transition is occurring, though it is a long way off in Afghanistan.

The U.S. must often stay in the background when dealing with potential insurgencies. Since the best cause for insurgents to harness is usually nationalism, direct and open U.S. support can undercut the legitimacy of a government. The U.S. can, however, provide behind-the-scenes training and advisory programs, particularly if the programs are conducted outside the country. These programs should focus on improving indigenous capabilities rather than on substituting U.S. roles for them.

To minimize the need for U.S. forces, more effort should be put into building up local forces, particularly police, before insurgencies break out. Historically, American efforts to help other governments enhance their domestic policing and intelligence capabilities by improving their internal defense forces have met with only weak support from within the U.S. federal bureaucracy. Unlike Italy, with its Carabinieri, or Spain, with its Guardia Civil, the U.S. does not have a national police with a paramilitary component of its own, making it difficult to identify an obvious American bureaucratic counterpart for such an important training mission. The State Department is too small to provide a massive training program, so the foreign internal defense mission tends to fall

upon the Department of Defense, which historically has resisted it.³⁹ A U.S. bureaucratic home for police training is necessary, as is a robust program that has high-level support.

U.S. programs to improve the rule of law, reduce corruption, encourage local economic development, and other nonmilitary measures are often underfunded and understaffed. The weak-state problem is here to stay, and U.S. bureaucratic capabilities need to be augmented as a result.

Difficulty of Prediction

Many of the assumptions of the consequences of a U.S. withdrawal from the Middle East are based on a limited focus on a few of the many factors contributing to anti-U.S. terrorism. Reducing the U.S. presence would logically reduce some anti-U.S. terrorism, but it also raises the possibility of a host of other issues coming to the fore. Many potential disasters, such as spillover from civil wars or the possibility of a mass-casualty attack emanating from Pakistan may not occur—indeed, the odds may be against them—but the likelihood of these events increases depending on the nature of the U.S. withdrawal.

Much depends on which policies come after a U.S. withdrawal. Diplomatic and nation-building successes that limit the various fields of jihad would have a huge beneficial impact, for example. Similarly, removing the al-Qaeda core presence from Pakistan would be tremendously advantageous.

Notes

- 1 Robert Pape, *Dying to Win* (New York: Random House, 2005), 244.
- 2 The vanguard concept emerges in the first discussion of al-Qaeda in *Al Jihād* magazine. For the text, see Peter Bergen, *The Osama Bin Laden I Know* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2006), 75.
- 3 See Kim Cragin, Bruce Hoffman, *et al.*, *The Early History of Al-Qa'ida* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, forthcoming).
- 4 Cragin, Hoffman, *et al.*, “The Early History of Al-Qa'ida”; Bruce Hoffman, “Is Al-Qaeda on the Run or on the March?” *Middle East Policy* 14, no. 2, (Summer 2007): 44–58; Bruce Hoffman, “Challenges for the U.S. Special Operations Command Posed by the Global Terrorist Threat: Al Qaeda on the Run or on the March?”; written testimony submitted to the House Armed Services Subcommittee on Terrorism, Unconventional Threats, and Capacities, 110th Cong., 1st sess., February 17, 2007; “Summary of Evidence for Combatant Status Review Tribunal—Husayn, Zayn al Abidin Muhammad [Abu Zubaydah], March 19, 2007; and “Al-Qaeda Camps ‘Trained 70,000’” *BBC News*, January 5, 2005, available at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/4146969.stm>. See also Lawrence Wright, *The Looming Tower: Al-Qaeda and the Road to 9/11* (New York: Knopf, 2006), 298.

- 5 Global Security, "Aden-Abyan Islamic Army," available at <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/para/aden-abyan.htm>.
- 6 Marc Sageman emphasizes the importance of homegrown "leaderless" jihad. See his *Leaderless Jihad: Terror Networks in the 21st Century* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008). For a critique I find convincing, see Bruce Hoffman, "The Myth of Grass-Roots Terrorism," *Foreign Affairs* (May/June 2008), available at <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/63408/bruce-hoffman/the-myth-of-grass-roots-terrorism>.
- 7 See "Text of Fatwa Urging Jihad Against America," February 23, 1998, available at <http://www.fas.org/irp/world/para/docs/980223-fatwa.htm>; Harmony Project, *Cracks in the Foundation: Leadership Schisms in Al-Qa'ida from 1989–2006* (West Point, NY, 2007); see also the August 2001 al-Qaeda videotape that addresses what bin Laden and others describe as the evil influence of Jews, as described in Bergen, *The Osama Bin Laden I Know*, 291.
- 8 Iran sponsored Saudi Hezbollah, which carried out the bombing, and also trained cell members. One suspect detained by the FBI and later deported to Saudi Arabia noted that the Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) had recruited him and that an IRGC leader directed several operations in the kingdom. The suspects also worked with the Iranian Embassy in Damascus for logistical support. See "Attorney General Statement," June 21, 2001, available at <http://www.fas.org/irp/news/2001/06/khobar.html>. See also Elsa Walsh, "Louis Freeh's Last Case," *The New Yorker* (May 14, 2001).
- 9 Daniel Benjamin and Steven Simon, *The Age of Sacred Terror* (New York: Random House, 2002), 113.
- 10 Wright, *The Looming Tower*, 154 (see note 4); Coll, Steve, *Ghost Wars: The Secret History of the CIA, Afghanistan, and bin Laden, from the Soviet Invasion to September 10, 2001* (New York: Penguin, 2007), 221–222; Cragin, Hoffman, et al., *The Early History of Al-Qa'ida* (see note 3).
- 11 For a review, see the International Crisis Group, "Saudi Arabia Backgrounder: Who Are the Islamists?" 21 September 2004.
- 12 Montasser al-Zayyatt, *Ayman Zawabiri as I Knew Him* (Cairo, 2002), 117.
- 13 Zawahiri, Ayman, "Knights Under the Prophet's Banner," in *His Own Words: A Translation of the Writings of Dr. Ayman Al Zawabiri*, ed. and trans. and with analysis by Laura Mansfield (Old Tappan, NJ: TLG, 2006); Wright, *The Looming Tower*, 182–184 (see note 4).
- 14 Andrew Higgins and Alan Cullison, "Terrorist's Odyssey," *Wall Street Journal*, July 2, 2002, A1.
- 15 Gerges, Fawaz A., *The Far Enemy: Why Jihad Went Global* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 121; Wright, *The Looming Tower*, 185 (see note 4).
- 16 Gerges, *The Far Enemy*, 169. Gerges notes that Mabruk himself opposed the EIJ–Al-Qaeda alliance.

- 17 Wright, *The Looming Tower*, 336 (see note 4).
- 18 Cragin, Hoffman, *et al.*, *The Early History of Al-Qa'ida* (see note 3).
- 19 United States of America *v.* Usama bin Laden, *et al.*, S(9) 98 Cr. 1023, p. 6.
- 20 Pre-positioning is also a form of military assistance and suggests that the actual presence of U.S. forces is being planned for.
- 21 Peter Bergen and Katherine Tiedemann, "The Drone War," *The New Republic*, May 18, 2009, available at <http://www.peterbergen.com/bergen/articles/details.aspx?id=384>.
- 22 Bergen and Tiedemann, "The Drone War."
- 23 The spectrum here is not, say, between two parties in Germany that favor U.S. policies to different degrees. Rather, it is between regimes like those in the developing world in which one set of leaders may openly cooperate with the U.S. on a range of issues while another is far more critical and at times actively opposes the U.S.
- 24 Stephanie Kaplan, "The Jihad Effect: How Wars Feeds the Global Jihadist Movement" (MIT: unpublished PhD dissertation, forthcoming).
- 25 Bergen, Peter, and Paul Cruickshank, "The Iraq Effect: War Has Increased Terrorism Sevenfold Worldwide," *Mother Jones* (March/April 2007), available at <http://motherjones.com/politics/2007/03/iraq-101-iraq-effect-war-iraq-and-its-impact-war-terrorism-pg-1>. Another factor these authors cite is whether the countries in question have troops in Iraq, which would not apply to neighboring states.
- 26 International Crisis Group 2006, 10 (see note 11).
- 27 Rueven Paz, "Arab Volunteers Killed in Iraq: An Analysis," *Project for the Research of Islamist Movements Occasional Papers* 3, no. 1 (March 2005): 6.
- 28 Daniel Byman, "Iraq and the Global War on Terrorism," Columbia International Affairs Online (Summer 2007), available at <http://www.ciaonet.org/casestudy/ciao10022/index.html>; and Daniel Byman, "Who Wins in Iraq: Al Qaeda," *Foreign Policy* (January 2007), 38–51, available at http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2007/02/13/who_wins_in_iraq?page=0,2.
- 29 For work on militancy in Pakistan, see Yoginder Sikand, "The Islamist Militancy in Kashmir: The Case of the Lashkar-e-Taiba," in Aparna Rao, *et al.*, eds., *The Practice of War: Production, Reproduction and Communication of Armed Violence* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2007), 215–38; and Bruce Riedel, "The New Epicenter of Terror," *The Daily Beast*, June 9, 2009, available at <http://www.thedailybeast.com/blogs-and-stories/2009-06-09/the-new-epicenter-of-terror/>.
- 30 Riedel, Bruce, *The Search for Al Qaeda: Its Leadership, Ideology, and Future* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2008), 125.
- 31 Hoffman, "Challenges for the U.S. Special Operations Command," 12 (see note 4).
- 32 Hoffman, "Challenges for the U.S. Special Operations Command," 11, 13–14 (see note 4); Richard Greenberg, Paul Cruickshank, and Chris Hansen, "Inside the

Terror Plot that ‘Rivalled 9/11’” Dateline NBC, September 14, 2009; available at http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/26726987/ns/dateline_nbc-the_hansen_files_with_chris_hansen/.

- 33 Hoffman, “Challenges for the U.S. Special Operations Command,” 11 (*see note 4*).
- 34 Sarah Lavelle, Richard Norton-Taylor, and Vikram Dodd, “Student Visa Link to Terror Raids as Gordon Brown Points Finger at Pakistan,” *The Guardian*, available at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2009/apr/10/student-visa-terror-arrests-link>.
- 35 Craig Whitlock, “Germany Says It Foiled Bomb Plot,” *The Washington Post*, September 6, 2007; available at <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/09/05/AR2007090500209.html>.
- 36 Hoffman, “Challenges for the U.S. Special Operations Command,” 11 (*see note 4*). Riedel points out that one of the reported masterminds was later killed in Saudi Arabia in an al-Qaeda safe house. Riedel, *The Search for Al-Qaeda*, 131–32.
- 37 National Intelligence Council, “National Intelligence Estimate: The Terrorist Threat to the U.S. Homeland,” unclassified key judgments (July 2007), 1.
- 38 Dennis C. Blair, “Annual Threat Assessment of the Intelligence Community for the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence,” February 12, 2009, 5–6.
- 39 William Rosenau, “The Kennedy Administration, U.S. Foreign Internal Security Assistance and the Challenge of ‘Subterranean War,’” *Small Wars and Insurgencies* 14, no. 3 (Autumn 2003): 65–99.

x. How Damaging are Worst-Case Scenarios in the Persian Gulf?

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The American military presence in the Persian Gulf, which dates back to the end of World War II but grew substantially in the period after the Iranian Revolution of 1979, has been premised on the idea that the free flow of oil could be endangered by domination of the region by any power other than the U.S. This paper takes two extreme scenarios—that the United States, wearied from its Iraq adventure, returns to a pre-1979 military posture (withdrawal “over the horizon”) for the region and that Iran develops in the very near future a substantial and publicly declared nuclear weapons capability—and examines the potential consequences for regional international politics and energy flows of those scenarios. In neither case am I saying that I think these scenarios are likely, but examining their potential consequences can help us to understand the dynamics of Gulf international politics. I critically assess the implicit assumptions of bandwagoning by Arab oil producers that underlie the fears generated by the Iranian nuclear program and by the drawdown of American military forces in Iraq. (“Bandwagoning” is the international relations term of art meaning alignment with the strongest or most threatening power, usually motivated by fear of the consequences of not doing so. The complementary term is “balancing,” or aligning with other states *against* the strongest or most threatening state.) I find that the negative consequences of either scenario are much exaggerated, though a combination of the two (Iranian nuclear breakout occurring simultaneously with American withdrawal over the horizon) would increase the likelihood of both bandwagoning dynamics among smaller Gulf States and proliferation incentives for major regional powers.

Scenario I: An American Military Withdrawal from Iraq, or from the Gulf as a Whole

Since the Iranian Revolution, the need for an American military presence in the Persian Gulf region has been an article of faith among U.S. administrations and across the partisan divide in the U.S. The Carter administration proclaimed the Gulf an area of vital national interest, established the Rapid Deployment Joint

Task Force (which later became CENTCOM) and negotiated an access agreement with Oman. The Reagan administration upgraded Omani facilities and, in 1987, sent the largest American naval force assembled since Vietnam into the Gulf. George H. W. Bush fought Gulf War I and presided over the sea change in America's military relations with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states. In his administration the U.S. established military bases in Kuwait and Qatar, vastly expanded the headquarters of the U.S. naval force in the Gulf in Bahrain (what would become in the mid-1990s the Fifth Fleet), stationed a combat air wing in Saudi Arabia for the first time since the early 1960s, and expanded American access to port and air facilities in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). The Clinton administration maintained and expanded this new American military infrastructure in the Gulf in order to carry out its "dual containment" policy aimed against Saddam Hussein's Iraq and the Islamic Republic of Iran. There is no need to review the dramatic increase in the American military presence in the Gulf during the administration of George W. Bush. While the Obama administration seems determined to end the presence of American combat forces in Iraq, it appears willing to maintain a large American military force in the country for training, air support, and other duties.

What would be the consequences of a drastically reduced American military role in the Gulf region? There are two immediate and reasonable fears about the consequences of an American withdrawal over the horizon: (1) that Iraq would descend into a civil war that would present al-Qaeda with new opportunities there and eventually draw in other regional states, possibly threatening oil production and oil flows; and (2) that Iraq and the GCC states, faced with the threat of Iranian power, would bandwagon with Iran on strategic issues and possibly allow Iran to dictate their oil policy. While I would not reject these possibilities out of hand, the evidence of the past indicates that they are not likely to occur.

The presence of American forces in Iraq is no guarantee against civil conflict in that country. While the surge of 2007, combined with a new strategy for deploying American forces and with developments on the ground in Iraq, certainly helped to reduce the level of violence in the country, the frightening level of violence sustained during 2006 and the first half of 2007 occurred with more than a hundred thousand American troops in Iraq. The American military presence could not prevent Iran from extending its influence into Iraq, through bilateral relations with the Iraqi government, through patron-client ties with a number of Iraqi parties and groups, and through economic investment in the south and the Shi'a pilgrimage cities. The surge seems to have given Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki the confidence to confront his Sadrist rivals in Basra and Baghdad in 2008, and that might eventually come to be seen as the necessary

step in restoring a credible central government in Baghdad, but those moves do not seem to have significantly reduced Iranian influence in the country.

American military withdrawal from Iraq could very well be accompanied by increased domestic violence. However, the likelihood of a “spillover” of that violence into the region more generally, in a way that could threaten oil production levels (outside Iraq; domestic Iraqi violence will certainly affect Iraq’s production) seems small. Horrific levels of violence in Iraq in the mid-to-late 2000s raised sectarian tensions throughout the region, but the regional governments were able to contain that problem and none felt the need to intervene directly in Iraq. Iraqi violence basically stayed in Iraq. Undoubtedly the presence of American forces there must have been a deterrent to direct military intervention by other states, but there are no indications that any regional state was looking to intervene.

In the absence of American forces in Iraq, the disincentives to military intervention there would certainly decline, but would the incentives increase? Iran has no particular reason to send its military into Iraq. It has what it wants in the country—a Shi’a government friendly to Tehran and substantial influence with both that government and various Iraqi groups. Only the prospect of the collapse of the friendly Baghdad government to hostile (Sunni) forces could potentially bring Iran into Iraq militarily, and that prospect is very slight, given the success of Shi’a forces in the Battle for Baghdad of 2006 to 2007. Turkey could have an incentive to intervene militarily in the Kurdish areas of northern Iraq if it thought that the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) were set to declare independence. However, if the U.S., the patron of the Kurds since 1991, were to withdraw from Iraq, it seems less likely that the KRG would be able to take that final step toward independence. Moreover, Ankara is developing very close economic and even political relations with the KRG as a means of increasing Turkish influence (which would be exercised against independence) in Iraqi Kurdistan. Other military interventions—by Syria, by Jordan, by Saudi Arabia—seem farfetched. The Syrian army is untested in battle since 1973 (and when confronted with minor tests in Lebanon, in 1982, it did not do very well); the Jordanian army is well trained but small and untested for decades; the Saudi army is neither large nor particularly formidable. In each case, it is hard to see what political goal would lead any of these countries to intervene militarily.

This is not to say that Iraq’s neighbors will not interfere in Iraq’s internal politics to advance their interests. They will, through client relations with Iraqi politicians and groups. Iraq is now, and will be for some time to come, a playing field in the Middle East balance-of-power game. But that has been the case even with a large-scale American military presence. American forces cannot prevent this dynamic, because it is played out through relations of patronage and ideological affinity, not through direct military intervention. American withdrawal

from Iraq will not change that dynamic for the better, but it is unlikely to make it substantially worse.

Increased levels of civil violence in Iraq thus are unlikely either to spread outside Iraq's borders or to suck Iraq's neighbors militarily into the vacuum. They might, however, increase the chances that al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) could reconstitute itself as a significant player in Iraqi politics. That would certainly not be a good result for the U.S., but the prospects of AQI being able to re-establish itself to the extent that it did in 2004 to 2006, when it controlled cities in western Iraq, seems unlikely. The backlash against AQI in the Sunni Arab community, which generated the Awakening Movements (al-Sahwa), means that AQI would face more local opposition than it had in the earlier period. The expansion of Iraqi government forces means that Baghdad itself could be better able to deal with any AQI threat on its own.

Withdrawal from Iraq would undoubtedly be seen regionally as a victory for Iran and would, at least somewhat, increase Iranian influence in Iraq in the short to medium term (though that influence, as mentioned above, is already considerable despite the presence of American forces in Iraq). Would increased Iranian power lead the Arab Gulf states to bandwagon with Tehran, enabling Iran to influence their strategic decisions regarding relations with the U.S., their disposition toward Israel, and oil? That is very unlikely in the case of Saudi Arabia. Riyadh has balanced against regional adversaries since the Hashemites ruled in Iraq. The Saudis sought to counter the Nasserist effort to dominate the Arab world, not to bandwagon with it. They opposed revolutionary Iran in the 1980s and Saddam Hussein when he invaded Kuwait in 1990, despite the domestic political risks that inviting American troops onto their territory entailed. With regional players such as Egypt and Jordan, not to mention Israel, also acting against Iran in the background, the Saudis would hardly be left on their own. And, even if the U.S. did not have a major military presence in the Gulf region, it would still have interests in the area and would still be an ultimate guarantor of Saudi security against cross-border military threats.

The smaller Gulf States would be a different matter, if a withdrawal from Iraq were accompanied by the deconstruction of the American military base infrastructure built up since 1991 in these states—a full withdrawal “over the horizon.” Kuwait and Bahrain would probably seek refuge within a Saudi-Egyptian Arab alignment, as both have Shi'a populations (in Bahrain, the majority) whom their leaderships see as potential allies in Iranian efforts to destabilize them domestically. The UAE has an ongoing territorial dispute with Iran over the islands of Abu Musa, Greater Tunb, and Lesser Tunb, but that has not precluded businesslike relations with Iran in the past. The UAE, Qatar, and Oman would probably be more attentive to Iranian desires if the U.S. were to exit the Gulf altogether.

Advocates of an over the horizon American role in the Gulf point to the domestic costs for the hosts of American military forces. That is certainly the case in Saudi Arabia, where the American deployments of 1990 to 1991 helped mobilize domestic Salafi-Wahhabi opposition to the regime, resulted in bombing attacks on American facilities in 1995 and 1996, and served as Osama bin Laden's major rallying cry against the Al Saud. It would undoubtedly be so in Iraq as well, with any remaining American military presence subject to attacks by extremists of every stripe and serving as a stick with which its domestic and regional opponents could beat whatever government is ruling in Baghdad, on both nationalist and Islamist grounds. In the big regional countries, foreign military presences are lightening rods of opposition and create serious problems for host governments.

That is not the case, however, in the smaller states of the Gulf. There has not been a serious attack on any American military facility in Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, the UAE or Oman, even during the unpopular attack on Iraq in 2003. During the low-level uprising against the Bahraini government by the Shi'a opposition in the mid-1990s, there were no attacks on or even demonstrations in front of the gates of the headquarters of the Fifth Fleet. (There was a large demonstration at the U.S. embassy in April 2002, protesting Israeli military actions in the West Bank.) No American servicemen or women, who are ubiquitous on the streets and in the malls of Manama, the capital of Bahrain, were attacked. The American military presence is popular in Kuwait, understandably so given Kuwait's experience of Iraqi occupation from August 1990 to February 1991. During the recent parliamentary election in May 2009, not one candidate campaigned on a platform of getting the U.S. out of Kuwait. In the other states, while the U.S. might not be as popular as in Kuwait, the American military presences have not been targets of terrorists or mobilizing issues for opposition groups. Perhaps it is because the small size and population of these countries make them easier to manage for security forces; perhaps it is because their populations are accustomed to foreign forces from their long histories as British protectorates. But the domestic political costs for regimes in the smaller Gulf States of hosting American military forces are slight, if they exist at all.

Withdrawal from Iraq would certainly entail risks to American interests (and to the implicit moral obligations the U.S. has taken on through its presence in Iraq), most notably in the prospects for even more Iranian influence in Iraq and in the prospects (though not the certainty) of a return to intense levels of civil violence in Iraq. Withdrawal even further, from the Gulf itself to an over the horizon position, could lead to a pro-Iranian realignment in the foreign policies of some of the smaller Gulf States. However, withdrawal from Iraq also offers potential benefits, besides the obvious ones of conserving American blood and treasure. Iran has been able to play second fiddle in the country, with the

U.S. bearing the costs of putting into power and protecting a pro-Iranian regime. With the U.S. gone, Tehran would have to pay greater costs for supporting the friendly government in Baghdad and would inevitably get caught up in the frustrations of managing the conflicting ambitions of its Iraqi clients. If the U.S., with its power and wealth, could not successfully manage Iraqi politics, it is unlikely that Iran, which is poorer and less powerful, could do so, even with its cultural and sectarian connections (which are not a completely positive factor in Iraq). The results of the 2010 Iraqi parliamentary elections presage some of the difficulties Iran will face. Their Shi'a allies split into two competing lists, the State of Law list headed by Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki and the Iraqi National Alliance list, which combined the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq and its longtime rival, the Sadrist movement. These two lists split the Shi'a vote, allowing former Prime Minister Iyad Allawi's Iiraqiyya list to win the largest number of seats.

Moreover, an American withdrawal from Iraq would put the onus on Saudi Arabia to take a more active role in Iraqi politics, finding local actors to support against the Iranians and, perhaps, inducing the Saudis to take a more realistic view of the Maliki (or a successor Shi'a) government. The Saudis have been able to stay on the sidelines in Iraq, confident that the U.S. would prevent complete Iranian dominance of the country. Saudi involvement could have costs if Riyadh were to support extremist Sunni groups and thus encourage a resurgence of AQI, but since the Saudis have been fighting al-Qaeda at home since 2003, that is a less likely result than it would have been in previous periods. Saudi Arabia's active support for Allawi's Iiraqiyya list in the 2010 elections and its reception in Riyadh, in the postelection period, of a number of delegations from across the Iraqi political spectrum, are indications that the Saudis are already starting to increase their role in Iraqi politics.

Scenario II: Iran Goes Nuclear

If Iran were to develop a nuclear weapons capability, would American interests in the Persian Gulf region be harmed? For the sake of this thought experiment, I will set aside the high probability that either Israel or the U.S. would take preventive military action against Iranian nuclear assets, a course of action that would have questionable likelihood of successfully destroying the Iranian nuclear program and would certainly lead to Iranian reactions against American interests. There are three possible results of an Iranian nuclear breakout that could affect American interests in oil production and transit: (1) an emboldened Iran behaving in a more aggressive and disruptive way in the region as a whole, including toward Israel; (2) the Gulf States bandwagoning with Iran, which would give Iran influence in their oil production decisions; and (3) a proliferation

cascade in the Middle East that might increase the chances of nuclear war in the Gulf, with the attendant disruptions to oil production and shipping.

The logic of nuclear possession might lead Iran into a more aggressive foreign policy, but that logic could equally work in reverse. An Iran with nuclear weapons could become more risk averse, fearing that a confrontation with Israel or the U.S. could escalate to nuclear exchange. We have no way of knowing a priori which of these logics would dominate in Tehran. But what we do know is that Iran without nuclear weapons has, on occasion, acted in a most aggressive manner. In the 1980s Iran actively worked to overthrow the governments of some of its neighbor states, including Iraq, Kuwait, Bahrain, and Saudi Arabia. It perpetuated a conventional war with Iraq when it could have declared victory and accepted an end to the conflict after it had expelled Iraqi forces from its territory in the spring of 1982. Iran also created Hezbollah in Lebanon at the same time, encouraging if not ordering it to confront the U.S. and Israel in Lebanon. More recently, Iran did not restrain its allies Hezbollah and Hamas from engaging in rocket attacks on Israel in the summer of 2006 and from December 2008 to January 2009. It does not appear that Iran has been waiting for nuclear weapons to take the gloves off in its foreign policy. The record shows that Iran without nuclear weapons has acted very aggressively at times and at other times much more cautiously. Clearly there are dynamics other than possession of nuclear weapons that drive the ups and downs in Iranian foreign policy. This is not to say that possession of nuclear weapons would not affect overall Iranian foreign policy. When other factors encourage Iranian aggressiveness internationally, possession of nuclear weapons might make decision makers in Tehran even more likely to accept risks. But that is not an inevitable result.

I discussed the prospects of bandwagoning dynamics in the Gulf above. There is no reason to doubt that Saudi Arabia would seek to counter the threat posed by a nuclear Iran. The Saudis are already exploring the prospects of their own nuclear program, though they are at the very beginning of the effort. The Saudi program must, at least in part, be a response to Iran's. In all probability, an Iranian nuclear breakout would drive the Saudis, and the smaller Gulf monarchies, into an even closer relationship with the U.S. (if they were confident in the credibility of U.S. protection—an issue to which I will return below). But even a nonnuclear Saudi Arabia would be difficult for Iran to coerce through nuclear blackmail. Except in the most extreme situations, threats of a nuclear first strike are simply not credible. It is highly unlikely that Iran could credibly threaten to use nuclear weapons against the Saudis on oil issues (*Lower your production or we will nuke you*). It is difficult to see how an Iranian nuclear weapons program could make Iranian conventional threats more credible either (*Lower your production or we will launch a conventional strike against Ras Tanura*,

and you cannot respond because we have nuclear weapons). The Saudi air force, not to mention those American forces that are, at most, “over the horizon,” might be able to defend against Iranian air attacks on Saudi oil facilities (although not against missile attacks) and could certainly respond with similar conventional strikes on Iranian oil facilities, far below the threshold that would elicit an Iranian nuclear response. It is impossible to rule out any scenario, but it seems extremely unlikely that a nuclear Iran would be able to turn the nuclear threat into practical leverage in Saudi oil decisions.

A nuclear Iran might have better luck in inducing bandwagoning behavior from the smaller Gulf States. The two most important oil producers in that group, Kuwait and the UAE, are already vulnerable to Iranian pressure in various ways. The Kuwaiti government after Gulf War I (1990 to 1991) looked to Iran as a useful counterweight to Iraq and, since 2003, has seen Iran as a potential agent of restraint on a Shi’a-dominated Iraqi government, should such a government threaten Kuwait. While the Kuwaiti Shi’a community is well integrated into Kuwaiti society, there is a persistent worry among the Sunni leadership that it could act as a fifth column against the Kuwaiti regime, as occurred during the Iran-Iraq War. The UAE has its long-standing territorial dispute with Iran over the Gulf islands, and Iran has in the past been willing to throw its weight around in that area to get its way. The UAE Shi’a community is less politically mobilized than its Kuwaiti counterpart, but it does exist. In other words, Iran can easily create serious problems for both countries. Thus a nuclear Iran would be seen as a more challenging regional actor, and the impulse to buy Iranian goodwill through bandwagoning, even on oil issues, could increase. Much would depend on the Gulf States’ relations with the U.S. and, to a lesser extent, with Saudi Arabia. If the smaller states perceived that the American commitment to their security were reduced, they would be more susceptible to bandwagoning dynamics.

The third hypothesized result of an Iranian nuclear breakout is a proliferation cascade in the Middle East, such that other regional states would scramble to obtain their own nuclear forces. In such an atmosphere of mutual distrust, conflict, and insecure second-strike capabilities, some observers think that the risk of nuclear war, with its attendant consequences for the world oil market (not to mention the consequences for the local populations), would increase dramatically. Again, this is not the only conceivable logic of regional nuclear proliferation; it could instead produce a stable “balance of terror” in which each actor is deterred from aggression by the enormous anticipated costs of conflict. But clearly the preferable result of an Iranian nuclear breakout, given the huge costs of a nuclear war in the oil patch, would be no proliferation.

The three most likely regional proliferators in the wake of an Iranian nuclear breakout, given their size, their resources and their regional roles, are

Turkey, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia. Both Egypt and Saudi Arabia have recently announced that they are interested in developing civilian nuclear programs under IAEA oversight. Fortunately, the U.S. has significant leverage with each of these states, if it plays its cards right.

Turkey: As a member of NATO, Turkey already has an explicit defense guarantee from the U.S. and its other NATO allies. While the momentum for Turkish accession to the EU has slowed, the remarkable Turkish economic turnaround is predicated on access to EU and, to a lesser extent, American markets. The combination of assurance provided by NATO membership, the incentive of economic and political cooperation with the Western powers and the threat of loss of access to their markets seems to be a potent set of tools with which to dissuade Ankara from a proliferation decision.

Egypt: The U.S. provides Egypt with between \$1.5 and \$2 billion in aid every year. The Egyptian military has completely restructured its weapons procurement protocol and is now dependent upon American aid and arms to maintain itself. Egypt did not go nuclear in the face of Israel's nuclear program, which raises the question of why the Egyptians would view a nuclear Iran, a thousand kilometers away, as a threat so much more serious than nuclear weapons are a necessary response. (However, it is true that Israel would have had a much better chance of destroying an Egyptian nuclear weapons program than Iran would.) Given that the decision to proliferate would mean a fundamental break with the U.S., the country with which the current Egyptian regime has staked its future, it seems unlikely that Egypt would take that step. A replacement regime would likely be more Islamist, and thus less likely to see Iran as a threat, though more likely to view Israel as one.

Saudi Arabia: The Saudis would be the regional power most directly challenged by a nuclear Iran, given their rivalry with Tehran in the Gulf, in the broader Middle East, and over the right to speak for Islam in international affairs. Of the three states discussed here, Saudi Arabia has the weakest indigenous technical capability to generate a domestic nuclear program, but the most ready cash to buy one off the shelf. Given the strong relationship between Saudi Arabia and Pakistan, including rumored Saudi financial support for the development of Pakistan's nuclear weapons program, the most likely scenario for Saudi proliferation would be to buy part of, or somehow share in, Pakistan's nuclear force. But the Saudis have always looked to the U.S. as their ultimate security guarantor. Even when they have adopted policies that ran counter to American interests (such as the 1973-to-1974 oil embargo) and when relations have looked particularly rocky (post-9/11), the Saudis have always quickly acted to repair and restore their ties with the U.S. If Riyadh were confident of American support in the face of a more powerful Iran, Washington's influence on its proliferation decision would be substantial.

Conclusion: Simultaneous Scenarios

What might happen if the two scenarios discussed above occurred simultaneously—if Iran had a nuclear breakout at the same time that the U.S. was drawing down its military presence in the Gulf?

I have tried to make the case that either one of these events—American withdrawal or Iranian nuclear breakout—would not have enormously negative consequences for American interests if managed correctly. However, if they happen at the same time, the likelihood of negative results for the U.S. in two areas increases. First, if the U.S. were to dismantle the military infrastructure it has built up over the past two decades in the smaller Gulf States (in other words, if it were to truly withdraw over the horizon) at the same time that Iran went nuclear, the chances that the smaller Gulf States would bandwagon with Iran increases substantially. The perceptions of increased Iranian power and declining American commitment and credibility would have a profound effect on the foreign policies of the smaller Gulf States, all of which have attached themselves to the U.S. since 1991. Second, the chances of Saudi proliferation would increase in this scenario as well, and for the same reasons. If Riyadh saw the U.S. leaving the Gulf just as Iran was going nuclear, the arguments for obtaining its own nuclear deterrent force would be much stronger.

This conclusion would argue for an American withdrawal from Iraq and for a relatively sanguine view of Gulf security prospects despite the perceived short-term increase in Iranian power that this would entail, but not a full-scale withdrawal from the Gulf as a whole. The costs of the American military presence in the smaller Gulf monarchies is not very great, and it could provide the reassurance for the GCC necessary to prevent bandwagoning with Iran (among the smaller states) and proliferation in the case of Saudi Arabia, if and when Iran does go nuclear.

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