

Tore Refslund Hamming

OVER-THE-HORIZON
COUNTERTERRORISM

Implications of the new Western
approach to counterterrorism

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Editor's Preface

The publications of this series present new research on defence and security policy of relevance to Danish and international decision-makers. This series is a continuation of the studies previously published as CMS Reports. It is a central dimension of the research-based services that the Centre for Military Studies provides for the Danish Ministry of Defence and the political parties behind the Danish defence agreement. The Centre for Military Studies and its partners are subject to the University of Copenhagen's guidelines for research-based services, including academic freedom and the arm's length principle. As they are the result of independent research, the studies do not express the views of the Danish Government, the Danish Armed Forces, or other authorities. Our studies aim to provide new knowledge that is both academically sound and practically actionable. All studies in the series have undergone external peer review. And all studies conclude with recommendations to Danish decision-makers. It is our hope that these publications will both inform and strengthen Danish and international policy formulation as well as the democratic debate on defence and security policy, in particular in Denmark.

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Copenhagen, April 2023
Kristian Soby Kristensen

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Abstract and Recommendations

The American withdrawal from Afghanistan and French departure from Mali represent a historic shift in the global counterterrorism effort. Since 2001 and the launch of the *global war on terror*, counterterrorism has largely been defined by large-scale operations involving thousands of ground troops. In the context of the US withdrawing its troops from Afghanistan, President Biden announced *over-the-horizon* as the future doctrine to battle terrorists abroad. Defined by targeted airstrikes with little to no ground support, “over the horizon” is not a new doctrine per se, but as the dominant counterterrorism doctrine, it represents an important shift that is likely to have an immense negative impact on counterterrorism.

This report analyses the shift in the counterterrorism doctrine, the prospects of its success in mitigating the terrorism threat, and how it impacts Denmark and other small states. Based on several case studies, interviews, and desk research, it argues “over the horizon” to be the result of a general deprioritization of counterterrorism on the global security agenda and that it is inadequate as a long-term strategy to terrorism, despite possibly having merit as a doctrine to occasionally terrorism. For Denmark and other small states, the doctrinal shift will alter the conditions for contributing to global counterterrorism, implying that Denmark must reorient its counterterrorism contribution toward alternative partners, reinventing and reinvesting in a new strategy.

Recommendations

The terrorism threat from militant Islamism against the West persists. Despite dropping in priority on national security agendas across the Western Hemisphere, upholding strong pressure on terrorist groups and individuals is imperative as a mechanism to deter, prevent, and eliminate terrorism. No matter the scope of the political objectives, only a deliberate, cohesive strategy can achieve such goals. The following rec-

ommendations addressing the international community, and Denmark specifically, are intended to provide some initial guidelines for how to define and complement contemporary counterterrorism strategy.

- **Define a *cohesive* counterterrorism strategy.** The scope of counterterrorism engagement is ultimately a political decision defined by the perceived threat to, most often, domestic security, political priorities, and available resources. Based on their definition of political objectives, Western nations should identify a viable approach to achieving those objectives and explain how the methods employed can facilitate the desired ends. Depending on the operational conditions, OTH can have a preventive impact by degrading enemy command-and-control structures and disrupting operative cells. However, there is no one-size-fits-all solution. The current application of OTH is too vague and requires extensive detailing in terms of how it works in practice, what objectives it is intended to fulfill, and how OTH might help reaching those objectives.
- **OTH is only one element of a comprehensive approach to battling terrorism.** On the military side, it will relieve pressure on terrorist groups in Afghanistan and in the Sahel. To ensure that it does not have too negative an impact, the shift must be complemented with stronger non-military measures to combat terrorism. Key among such measures is to support the ability of states to tackle terrorism within their respective territories and to provide assistance to multinational counterterrorism efforts. Denmark (and the international system more generally) should strengthen its contribution and support to states and regional institutions directly affected by militant Islamist insurgencies.
- **(Re-)build intelligence networks in Afghanistan and Mali.** With limited or no presence on the ground, the US, France, and other Western states should prioritize (re-)building local networks on the ground to enable better conditions for intelligence collection. While such intelligence structures will always be imperfect, they represent one of the only options to gain access to HUMINT. In Afghanistan, this will likely involve some degree of cooperation with factions within the Taliban. While such cooperation is a sensitive matter, Western states would benefit from nurturing relationships and testing the Taliban's ability and willingness to provide information. Through diplomatic and covert channels, Denmark should examine

the prospects for sharing intelligence with elements of the Taliban regime.

- **Establishing airbases in the region of operations.** To become an effective doctrine, OTH necessitates the presence of airbases in the immediate proximity of the theaters of operation. In the Sahel, Western nations have several military bases close to Mali, which facilitates easy access to operations over Malian territory. For almost a year, the US has worked on establishing bases in central Asian countries without success. It is imperative that a better operational structure is established in the context of Afghanistan to ease opportunities to conduct Intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) and offensive operations.
- **For Denmark, reorientation is key.** With the move toward a stronger dedication to OTH as the dominant counterterrorism military doctrine among leading Western states, Denmark and similar smaller supportive states must reorient their engagement toward alternative partners to continue contributing to global counterterrorism. Such engagement and potential partnerships can take place on four different levels: (1) through the United Nations (UN) diplomacy and sanctions mechanisms, (2) through European Union (EU) missions, diplomacy, and financing (e.g., the European Peace Facility), (3) through regional political and military fora (e.g., the Southern African Development Community), and (4) through bilateral engagement with states directly affected by terrorist activities. As part of this process, Denmark and smaller states should explore possibilities to contribute not only in a military capacity but also through financing and diplomacy to provide direct support and to push multinational actors to action.
- **Denmark should reinvent and reinvest.** It is natural for militaries and intelligence and security services to redirect their capacity to counter new alarming threats, such as Russia, China, and cyber. Nonetheless, it is of utmost importance that Denmark maintains a strong capacity dedicated to the threat emanating from militant Islamism. To make itself an attractive partner, Denmark should not just maintain its counterterrorism capacity developed over the last decade, but reinvent its capacity to contribute to global counterterrorism in the future. Such reinvention depends partly on reinvestment in capacities that are relevant for global counterterrorism and

redefining how Danish authorities approach the terrorism threat. On a diplomatic level, Denmark should strengthen the permanent dedication of resources in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Defence to counterterrorism to enable a continuous strategic dialogue on global counterterrorism efforts instead of the current ad-hoc approach. On a military level, Denmark should invest in capabilities that enable it to fulfill its defined strategic counterterrorism objectives. This could involve the acquisition of drones capable of ISR operations and military strikes. Finally, in terms of intelligence, Denmark should remain committed to the threat from militant Islamism and develop new and specialized capacities to obtain and analyze data to produce sound intelligence. This involves expanding its human (HUMINT) and role (ROLINT) intelligence. It is important that authorities across these three domains diplomacy, military, and intelligence establish and maintain close collaboration to direct and execute Denmark's contribution.

Resumé og anbefalinger

Den amerikanske og franske tilbagetrækning fra henholdsvis Afghanistan og Mali repræsenterer et historisk skifte i den globale kontraterrorindsats. Siden 2001, da den globale indledtes, har kontraterrorindsatsen hovedsageligt været defineret af større landoperationer, der har involveret tusinder af soldater på jorden. I forbindelse med den amerikanske tilbagetrækning fra Afghanistan annoncerede præsident Biden, at USA nu vil forfølge en *over-the-horizon*-doktrin til at bekæmpe terrorister på globalt plan. Over-the-horizon (OTH) er primært karakteriseret af præcisionsangreb fra luften med begrænset støtte på jorden. Doktrinen er i sig selv ikke ny, men at den adopteres som den primære kontraterrordoktrin repræsenterer et afgørende skifte, der risikerer at få en alvorlig negativ effekt på kampen mod terror.

Denne rapport analyserer skiftet i kontraterrordoktrin, mulighederne for, at OTH succesfuldt mindsker terrortruslen, og hvordan skiftet påvirker Danmark og sammenlignelige stater. Rapporten argumenterer med udgangspunkt i en række casestudier og interviews samt i deskresearch, at OTH er et resultat af en generel nedprioritering af kontraterror i forbindelse med den globale sikkerhedsdagsorden. Mens doktrinen muligvis vil kunne benyttes til at afværge fremtidige terrorangreb, vurderes det, at den er utilstrækkelig som en langsigtet strategi for at vinde kampen mod terrorisme. For Danmark og lignende stater vil skiftet i den globale kontraterrorindsats også have betydning for mulighederne for at bidrage til den globale kontraterrorindsats. Dette medfører, at Danmark er nødsaget til at reorientere sit globale bidrag til kontraterrorindsatsen mod nye partnere og investere i en ny kontraterrorstrategi.

Anbefalinger

Terrortruslen fra militant islamisme mod Vesten eksisterer fortsat. Trods et fald længere ned på vestlige staters nationale sikkerhedsdagsordener, er det afgørende at fastholde et stærkt pres på terrorgrupper og -indi-

vider som en mekanisme til både at afskrække, afværge og eliminere terrorisme. Uafhængigt af omfanget af de politiske ambitioner kan ovenstående målsætninger kun opnås ved hjælp af en gennemtænkt og sammenhængende strategi. De følgende anbefalinger adresserer det internationale samfund og Danmark specifikt med henblik på at bidrage med en række initiale forslag til, hvordan den aktuelle kontraterrorstrategi bør defineres og komplementeres.

- **Definer en sammenhængende kontraterrorstrategi.** Omfanget af et givet kontraterrorengagement er ultimativt et resultat af en politisk beslutning defineret af den opfattede trussel mod den nationale sikkerhed, politiske prioriteter og ressourcerne, der er til rådighed. Vestlige stater bør med udgangspunkt i deres politiske målsætninger identificere en tilgang, der kan realisere målsætningerne samt forklare, hvordan de benyttede metoder kan facilitere processen. OTH kan afhængigt af den operationelle kontekst have en præventiv effekt i forhold til terrortruslen ved at ødelægge kommandostrukturer og operative celler. Men det ville være en fejl at antage, at doktrinen kan løse alle udfordringer relateret til terrorisme. Den aktuelle tilgang til OTH er for løst defineret og bør udvikles og præciseres i forhold til, hvordan den skal udfoldes i praksis, hvilke målsætninger den skal resultere i, og de bagvedliggende mekanismer.
- **OTH er blot et element i en mere omfangsrig tilgang til at bekæmpe terrorisme.** OTH vil resultere i et mindsket militært pres på terrorgrupper i Afghanistan og Sahel. For at sikre, at det mindskede militære pres ikke har en for alvorlig negativ konsekvens, er det nødvendigt at komplementere skiftet til OTH med en styrkelse af ikke-militære indsatser. Et centralt element er at yde mere støtte, så stater påvirket af terrorisme bedre kan håndtere denne trussel, samt assistance til multinationale kontraterrorengagementer. Danmark og det internationale system bør generelt opjustere støtten til stater og regionale institutioner, der er direkte påvirket af militante islamistiske oprør.
- **Opbygning og genopbygning af efterretningsnetværk i Afghanistan og i Mali.** Med begrænset eller ingen fysisk tilstedeværelse på jorden bør USA, Frankrig og andre vestlige stater prioritere at opbygge eller genopbygge lokale netværk, der kan skabe bedre forudsætninger for at indsamle efterretninger. Selvom denne type efterretningsstrukturer altid vil være uperfekte, repræsenterer de en af

få muligheder for adgang til (HUMINT). I Afghanistan vil dette arbejde nødvendigvis involvere en grad af samarbejde med fraktioner inden for Taliban. På trods af den sensitive karakter af et sådant samarbejde vil vestlige stater kunne drage fordel af at udvikle relationen til Talibanregimet og afprøve udvalgte fraktioners evne og villighed til at dele information. Danmark bør derfor afsøge mulighederne for deling af efterretninger gennem diplomatiske og hemmelige kanaler.

- **Etablering af luftbaser i regioner med operationer.** Hvis OTH skal være en effektiv doktrin til at afværge terrorangreb, er det afgørende, at vestlige stater har adgang til luftbaser tæt på de lande, hvor der udføres operationer. I Sahel har vestlige stater adgang til adskillige militære baser, der faciliterer nem adgang til at operere over Mali. I mere end et år har USA arbejdet på at etablere baser i Centralasien, men indtil videre uden succes. Det er derfor afgørende, at der i konteksten af Afghanistan bliver etableret en bedre operationel struktur, der muliggør bedre forudsætninger for at udføre (ISR) og offensive operationer.
- **For Danmark er reorientering helt centralt.** I takt med skiftet til OTH som den dominerende militære kontraterrordoktrin blandt ledende vestlige stater må Danmark og lignende mindre stater reorientere deres engagement mod nye partnere for fortsat at kunne bidrage til den globale kontraterrorindsats. Denne typer partnerskaber kan forankres på fire niveauer: (1) gennem FN-diplomati og sanktionsmekanismer, (2) gennem EU-missioner, diplomati og finansiering som for eksempel European Peace Facility, (3) gennem regionale, politiske og militære fora som for eksempel Southern African Development Community og (4) gennem bilateral støtte til stater, der er direkte påvirket af terrorisme. Danmark og lignende mindre stater bør som del af denne proces afsøge mulighederne for ikke kun at støtte militært, men også økonomisk og gennem diplomatiske kanaler, både for at bidrage med direkte assistance og for at tilskynde multinationale aktører til handling.
- **Danmark skal genopfinde og geninvestere.** Grundet nye alarmerende trusler såsom Rusland, Kina og cyberangreb er det naturligt for militære institutioner og efterretnings- og sikkerhedstjenester at reorientere deres kapacitet for at imødegå det nye trusselsbillede. Det er ikke desto mindre af afgørende betydning, at Danmark fortsat dedikerer ressourcer til at håndtere truslen fra militant islamisme.

For at positionere Danmark som en attraktiv partner på kontraterrorområdet er det nødvendigt ikke kun at bibeholde landets kontraterrorapparat, som er opbygget over det seneste årti, men at genopfinde en kapacitet, der gør det muligt at bidrage til den globale kontraterrorindsats i fremtiden. Denne proces er delvis afhængig af en geninvestering i kapaciteter, der er relevante i en global kontraterror kontekst, og en redefinerende af, hvordan danske myndigheder håndterer terrortruslen. På det diplomatiske niveau bør Danmark fokusere på at styrke en langsigtet prioritering af ressourcer i regi af Udenrigsministeriet og Forsvarsministeriet til kontraterrorindsatsen for at sikre en kontinuerlig strategisk dialog i relation til den globale kontraterrorindsats – i kontrast til den aktuelle ad-hoc-tilgang. På det militære niveau bør Danmark investere i kapaciteter, der gør det muligt at opfylde definerede kontraterrormålsætninger. Det kunne for eksempel være indkøb af droner til ISR og offensive operationer. På efterretningsniveau bør Danmark fortsat prioritere truslen fra militant islamisme og fokusere på at udvikle nye og specialiserede kapaciteter, der gør det muligt at indsamle og analysere data som grundlag for et godt efterretningsbillede. Det involverer en udvidelse af HUMINT og (ROLINT). Det er afgørende, at myndighederne på tværs af disse tre sektorer – diplomatiet, militæret og efterretningstjenesterne – etablerer et tæt samarbejde for at orientere og eksekvere et dansk bidrag til den globale kontraterrorindsats.

1

Introduction

The War in Afghanistan as we know it has ended—and with it the war on terror. The final, hectic withdrawal of American troops from Afghanistan in 2021 not only represented an end to the conventional war in the country, which was launched in the autumn of 2001, it also signaled a shift in the global counterterrorism strategy. For more than 20 years, U.S. and NATO forces battled the Taliban and allied terrorist groups on the ground, supported by air power, and coupled with a broad range of military and civil-capacity-building initiatives intended to strengthen the Afghan state to the extent that it would be capable of taking care of its own security. Discussions of the general successes and failures of the war aside, Afghanistan continues to host terrorist groups. And while the terrorism threat that these groups pose to the West can be debated, it remains a priority of Western nations to combat groups like al-Qaeda and Islamic State. Following recent strategic changes, however, this battle will no longer take place through a comprehensive on-the-ground troop presence but rather over-the-horizon through the sky.

But where does this shift in strategy and military doctrine leave global counterterrorism? When President George W. Bush announced the global war on terror (GWOT), it was with the explicit ambition of *defeating* terrorism. “Our war on terror,” he said, “*begins with al Qaeda, but it does not end there. It will not end until every terrorist group of global reach has been found, stopped and defeated.*”¹ The 2003 National Strategy for Combating Terrorism further declared that it was a “*strategy of di-*

1. “Global War on Terror,” George W. Bush Presidential Library and Museum, accessed August 10, 2022, <https://www.georgewbushlibrary.gov/research/topic-guides/global-war-terror>

*rect and continuous action against terrorist groups, the cumulative effect of which will initially disrupt, over time degrade, and ultimately destroy the terrorist organizations. The more frequently and relentlessly we strike the terrorists across all fronts, using all tools of statecraft, the more effective it will be.*² And in 2014, Barack Obama added to that explanation, telling the world that “*Our [the US] objective is clear: We will degrade, and ultimately destroy, ISIL through a comprehensive and sustained counter-terrorism strategy.*”³ In contrast, the objectives were initially more modest when France announced its *Operation Barkhane* in 2014, aimed at supporting the regional G5 countries’ military forces and preventing the region at large from turning into a terrorist safe haven.⁴ Six years later, however, Macron articulated a more ambitious plan for French military engagement in the Sahel in an address to the 2020 Nouakchott Summit, stating that the counterterrorism campaign in the Sahel was necessary to “*defeat terrorism.*”⁵

Despite these ambitious objectives of degrading, destroying, and defeating militant Islamist terrorist groups like al-Qaeda and Islamic State, the West, led first and foremost by the US and France, is currently in the process of revising its global counterterrorism strategy. This strategic shift is most notable in the contexts of Afghanistan and the Sahel, with the American transition from Operation Freedom’s Sentinel to Operation Enduring Sentinel and, in the case of France, its replacement of Operation Barkhane with the Takuba Task Force and the ensuing withdrawal from Mali. According to President Biden, the new strategy will be driven by an *over-the-horizon* doctrine (OTH). While OTH remains a diffuse concept, a much lighter counterterrorism engagement is expected.

When President Biden delivered a speech on August 31, 2021, declaring the end to the war in Afghanistan, he announced the American shift to an OTH counterterrorism strategy: The US “will maintain

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2. The White House, “National Strategy for Combating Terrorism,” February 2003.
 3. The White House, “President Obama: ‘We Will Degrade and Ultimately Destroy ISIL,’” September 10, 2014.
 4. Maxime H.A. Larivé, “Welcome to France’s New War on Terror in Africa: Operation Barkhane,” *The National Interest*, August 7, 2014.
 5. Felix Tih, “Macron Underlines Fight against Terror in Sahel Summit,” *Anadolu Agency*, June 30, 2020, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/africa/macron-underlines-fight-against-terror-in-sahel-summit/1895294>.

the fight against terrorism in Afghanistan and other countries. We [the US] just don't need to fight a ground war to do it. We have what's called over-the-horizon capabilities, which means we can strike terrorists and targets without American boots on the ground—or very few, if needed.”⁶ Almost a year would pass after the U.S. withdrawal before it launched its first OTH strike when al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri was allegedly killed in Kabul on July 31, 2022. While OTH has not been articulated in the context of the Sahel, the trend is largely the same, and a similar approach has long been dominant in places like Yemen and Somalia. The looming questions remain whether the *objectives* of the global counterterrorism campaign have similarly changed, how OTH might contribute to these objectives, and the extent to which it will result in increasing reliance on political rivals such as Russia and China in global counterterrorism.⁷

This report asks the question how such a light approach is capable of fulfilling Western strategic objectives to counter terrorism where comprehensive and prolonged all-of-government approaches largely failed. Focusing on the U.S. and French counterterrorism operations in Afghanistan and the Sahel, it analyzes this strategic shift in global counterterrorism, its drivers, and its chances of success. Hardly revealing too much, it suggests that OTH is a political fig leaf that is destined to fail miserably in the above-mentioned objectives while only being capable of small-scale successes in terrorism prevention. In his address to the U.S. Senate Armed Services Committee in the aftermath of the withdrawal from Afghanistan, then Chief of CENTCOM, General McKenzie, insinuated a similar conclusion. In his testimony, he warned that “If left unmonitored and unchecked, a resurgence of VEO [violent extremist organization] capabilities could manifest with new attacks on the United States and the homelands of our allies.”⁸

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6. The White House, “Remarks by President Biden on the End of the War in Afghanistan,” August 31, 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/08/31/remarks-by-president-biden-on-the-end-of-the-war-in-afghanistan/>.
 7. Katja Lindskov Jacobsen, *Russia's Showy and Shadowy Engagements in Sub-Saharan Africa* (Copenhagen: Djøf Publishing in cooperation with Centre for Military Studies, 2020).
 8. Kenneth F. McKenzie, “Posture Statement,” *Senate Armed Services Committee*, March 15, 2022, 9.

To offer a comprehensive analysis of the global shift in counterterrorism strategy, this report builds on strategy documents, policy statements, secondary sources, and ten interviews with professionals working with counterterrorism, intelligence, military operations, and policy in Denmark, France, and the US. These sources facilitate an extensive analysis of the context that the strategy revision takes place within, the motivating drivers, the “quality” of the strategy design, and its likelihood of success. Due to the sensitivity relating to some of the interviewees, all names and specific details regarding their affiliation have been anonymized.

The report begins recounting the evolution of global counterterrorism strategies and proceeds to discuss strategy as a concept and how to assess it. This section forms the foundation for the following assessment of OTH and how viable it is to combat terrorism. The ensuing section zooms in on OTH, explaining what it entails, and presents three brief case studies highlighting how it has been employed for years in various contexts and in varying iterations. It ends by examining the recent US and French revision of their respective counterterrorism strategies in Afghanistan and the Sahel with a focus on detailing the respective trajectories, motivations, and prospects. In an attempt at assessing OTH as a counterterrorism strategy, the following section identifies the most critical challenges facing the US and France and discusses the expectations we should have for OTH. The report ends with a conclusion discussing the strategic implications of the shift in counterterrorism strategy for smaller supportive nations like Denmark and where it leaves the global counterterrorism engagement in 2023.

2

Counterterrorism Strategies and How to Assess Them

The term *strategy* has always been inextricably linked to military force and war. Connecting military operations and tactics to the overall political objective of war, strategy was and remains central to any type of warfare. Without it, there is no strategic and rational guidance driving operations toward an objective. While warfare has developed over the years, strategy continues to be central but has evolved in scope. No longer exclusively referring to military engagements, it often includes non-military elements that are considered necessary to win the war.

The centrality of strategy is also prevalent in counterterrorism, although critics would likely argue that counterterrorism is often carried out without a clear, if any, strategy guiding it. While that certainly holds some truth, various counterterrorism strategies have been defined to combat the threat from especially militant Islamist groups and individuals against Western security. The Western strategy to combat modern militant Islamist terrorism abroad has evolved considerably since its beginning in the 1990s. In reaction to the al-Qaeda attacks on the U.S. embassies in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam, the US bombed al-Qaeda training camps in Afghanistan in addition to a pharmaceutical factory in Khartoum, which was mistakenly thought to be connected to Osama bin Laden's network. Those strikes, however, were in direct retaliation to the embassy terrorist attacks and were not the result of any defined counterterrorism strategy. All that changed after the 9/11 attacks and the launch of the GWoT, which kick-started a process involving a much more well-defined counterterrorism strategy largely dictated by the US and its engagement in, first, Afghanistan, and later in Iraq.

Box 1: The geographical expansion of Al-Qaeda and the Islamic state and the GWOT

The global Jihadi movement is first and foremost represented through the organizational networks of al-Qaeda and the Islamic State. Originally operating in Afghanistan and Iraq, respectively, both groups have since metastasized and now operate as global organizations through an affiliate, or province, structure. Al-Qaeda's senior leadership remains in the AfPak-region and in Iran, with official affiliates in Yemen, Somalia, South Asia, North Africa, and the Sahel. The leadership core of Islamic State is located in Syria and Iraq, and it has official provinces in Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, Somalia, DR Congo, Mozambique, Nigeria, the Sahel, Libya, Egypt, and Yemen.

While the GWoT originally focused on targeting the core leadership of these groups, their geographical expansion over time has implied that the threat landscape evolved and turned more complex. Western states could no longer concentrate their counterterrorism to a few countries but had to escalate campaigns to numerous countries across the Middle East, South Asia, and Africa to counter the threat. Due to limited resources and a strong reluctance to engage in new ground wars, this resulted in an extensive drone campaign, occasionally supported by a light footprint on the ground.

In response to the 9/11 attacks against the World Trade Center and Pentagon, the Bush administration inaugurated a “whole-of-government” approach framed through its GWoT discourse and promotion of democracy. To combat terrorism, the US and its allies developed a strategy involving conventional warfare and nation-building based on the belief that exporting democracy and freedom rights would vaccinate societies against extremism. Besides sending thousands of troops to Afghanistan and Iraq to hunt down extremists and train local security forces, the strategy was defined by efforts to promote development and liberalization and the provision of aid.⁹

It was during the Bush years that the U.S. military adopted a counter-insurgency (COIN) strategy in Afghanistan and Iraq aimed at mar-

9. Joana Cook, *A Woman's Place* (London: Hurst, 2021).

ginalizing and degrading terrorist elements among the countries' insurgencies. When the Obama administration took over, it continued the whole-of-government approach and COIN, but at the same time it also narrowed its counterterrorism focus, adopting a stronger reliance on (remote) airstrikes including drones and special forces. Counterterrorism remained a multi-departmental, multinational effort involving a broad range of tools outside the scope of military power and intelligence. Contrasting the years of the Bush administration, counterterrorism under Obama was framed differently and involved new initiatives. Distancing itself from the GWoT rhetoric, the Obama administration emphasized *countering* and *preventing violent extremism* (CVE/PVE) as a "softer" approach to combat terrorism. At the same time, however, the administration intensified its use of and reliance on targeted killings through remote controlled airstrikes using drones. While this resulted in the killing of a large number of al-Qaeda leaders, commanders, and operatives, it failed to defeat the group.

Box 2: Targeted killings and their challenges

From the outset of the launch of the GWoT, targeted killings were a central feature of global counterterrorism. High-ranking individuals were targeted either through conventional airstrikes or remote-controlled drones intended to degrade group leadership and command-and-control structures, as well as to prevent external operation planning. The reliance on targeted killings through drone strikes increased dramatically during the Obama administration, which "conducted ten times more drone strikes than the Bush administration, with an average of one strike every 5.4 days."¹⁰ Despite the relative success of targeting prioritized individuals from groups like al-Qaeda and later the Islamic State, the employment of drones has remained a controversial tactic due to continued failure to prevent civilian casualties and the ensuing blowback.¹¹ The legal and

10. Daniel Brunstetter, "Over-The-Horizon Counterterrorism: New Name, Same Old Challenges," *Modern War Institute*, November 24, 2021, <https://mwi.usma.edu/over-the-horizon-counterterrorism-new-name-same-old-challenges/>.

11. Aqil Shah, "Do U.S. Drone Strikes Cause Blowback? Evidence from Pakistan and Beyond," *International Security* 42, no. 4 (Spring 2018).

moral issues relating to the targeted killings through drone strikes were discussed in a 2022 hearing in the U.S. Senate Committee on the Judiciary.¹² While acknowledged as a precision weapon capable of reducing civilian casualties when used properly, drones still rely on sound intelligence, which is not always the case.

Despite supposedly comprehensive “whole-of-government” approaches involving military and non-military efforts, global counterterrorism has largely fallen short of achieving stated the objectives. While the reasons for this failure are obviously multifaceted and complex, we can nevertheless identify a few key problems with previous strategies. First, none of them managed to address (or even understand) the underlining root causes driving the extremism that produce terrorism or properly identify one’s own and the enemy’s center of gravity (CoG). Second, despite attempts to counter terrorism through a plethora of efforts, a military response has continuously been prioritized as the primary venue to battle terrorists. This raises important questions about what strategy is and how it may be assessed.

Since Clausewitz, military scholars have defined *strategy* in an array of different ways, most centering around a common feature; namely, that strategy at its most basic level can be defined as “the ways in which available means are employed in order to achieve desired ends”;¹³ or, in the words of Colin S. Gray, to obtain “control over the enemy.”¹⁴ Angstrom and Widen colorfully add that “Strategy is the interface between battlefield tactics—destruction, death, and demolition—and politics. It is about how politics is turned into military tasks and targets.”¹⁵ Consequently, assessing strategy is the process of assessing the extent to which the employed means and resources are helping to achieve the defined

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12. Committee on the Judiciary, “‘Targeted Killing’ and the Rule of Law: The Legal and Human Costs of 20 Years of U.S. Drone Strikes,” February 9, 2022, https://www.judiciary.senate.gov/meetings/targeted-killing-and-the-rule-of-law_the-legal-and-human-costs-of-20-years-of-us-drone-strikes.
 13. M.L.R. Smith and John Stone, “Explaining Strategic Theory,” *Infinity Journal* 4 (Fall 2011), <https://www.militarystrategymagazine.com/article/explaining-strategic-theory/>.
 14. Colin S. Gray, *The Strategy Bridge: Theory for Practice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).
 15. Jan Angstrom and J. J. Widen, *Contemporary Military Theory: The Dynamics of War* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 36.

objective; in other words, to evaluate “correlations between ends, ways and means.”¹⁶

While strategy (or strategic success) and victory are closely related, they are not the same. Strategy is the roadmap to achieving victory and having a defined theory of what represents victory, and how a specific strategy might lead to victory is necessary when assessing strategy. Only that way can we know whether a defined scheme to achieve an objective is sound. A theory of victory is essential to win wars, whether they are fought militarily or through other means. It has been argued that the reason why the US does not win its wars despite its tactical and operational superiority is because it has no defined theory of victory;¹⁷ without which strategic success becomes unlikely.

Various ideas about what constitutes victory have been proposed. According to Bartholomees, victory at its most basic level is more a matter of perception and assessment than facts, and it is politically defined.¹⁸ This differs from the more classical view of victory as a desired end-state and means that victory depends on the eye and that its underlying criteria may change over time. Adding to the complexity, it makes sense not to view victory as a binary where one can either win or lose; instead, one should see it as the combination of scales of outcomes measuring success on the battlefield and the extent to which one reaches the defined political goals.¹⁹

Box 3: Strategy and theory of victory

Most contemporary definitions of strategy build on Clausewitz’s definition as the “use of engagements for the object of war.”²⁰ This implies the utilization of military resources—broadly understood—to achieve political objectives. As Meiser et al. stress, however, while such definitions identify what a military strategy *does*, they tell little about what it actually *is*. Instead, they argue that strategy is “a theory

16. Angstrom and Widen, *Contemporary Military Theory*.

17. Brad Roberts, “On the Need for a Blue Theory of Victory,” *War on the Rocks*, September 17, 2020, <https://warontherocks.com/2020/09/on-the-need-for-a-blue-theory-of-victory/>.

18. J. Boone Bartholomees, “Theory of Victory,” *Parameters* 38, no. 2 (2008).

19. Bartholomees, “Theory of Victory.”

20. Carl von Clausewitz, *On War* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 181.

of success,” or victory, which “provide[s] an explanation of how the use of military force is going to cause preferred policy outcomes to occur.”²¹ Adopting this understanding of military strategy helps in both the development and assessment of strategies in light of the defined political objectives. If we extend this to the counterterrorism campaigns discussed in this report, none of them are characterized by a theory of victory clearly defining how military and non-military engagement will lead to success in achieving political objectives.

In extension of the discussion above on the historical evolution of counterterrorism strategies and the definition of *strategy vis-à-vis theory of victory*, it is pertinent to follow with a brief discussion on how to assess strategy. Assessing military strategy is more nuanced than simply a distinction between degrading, defeating, and destroying the defined enemy. Rather than a failure-success dichotomy, strategy is better assessed based on its components, its battlefield success, and the extent to which it fulfills its political objectives. Hence, it is also too early to settle on any definitive conclusion regarding OTH applicability as a counterterrorism doctrine. A benchmark for such future assessment must consider the following metrics:

- Is the strategy sound in terms of a defined and realistic objective, a theory of victory, and identification of CoG?
- To what extent are the employed means sufficient to achieve the defined ends successfully?
- Is the military engagement complemented by sufficient non-military elements?
- Does the strategy risk causing any negative impact that might exacerbate the situation?

Counterterrorism covers a broad range of activities, military and non-military alike, including financial sanctions and capacity-building, all of which play into the broader strategy to combat terrorist groups and individuals. When assessing the military aspect of the global coun-

21. J. Meiser et al., “What Good Is Military Strategy? An Analysis of Strategy and Effectiveness in the First Arab-Israeli War,” *Scandinavian Journal of Military Studies* 4, no. 1 (2021): 39.

terterrorism strategy, it is necessary to also consider the non-military components.

In 2014, President Obama declared that “We will degrade and ultimately destroy ISIL [the Islamic State].”²² While the global coalition against the Islamic State and national armies have partly succeeded in degrading the group and won important tactical victories against it in Syria, Iraq, and elsewhere, any claim that it has been destroyed would be erroneous. Since strategy and strategic decisions are not operating in a vacuum but are affected by the context in which they operate and by the actions of other actors, simply declaring it to be a strategic failure because the US and its allies have not succeeded in destroying the group would be too simple. Highlighting the complexity of assessing strategy, any assessment must take into consideration the evolving context within which the strategy works.

22. David Hudson, “President Obama: ‘We Will Degrade and Ultimately Destroy ISIL,’” The White House, September 10, 2014, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/blog/2014/09/10/president-Obama-we-will-degrade-and-ultimately-destroy-isil>.

3

Revising the Doctrine: The Shift to “Over the Horizon”

Biden’s declaration in August 2021 that the US would change its counterterrorism strategy to rely on an OTH doctrine in Afghanistan initially appeared to represent a clear break with the existing approach to battle terrorism abroad. Feeding a string of articles on the concept and its chances of success, OTH divided opinions among military processionals, analysts, and academics, although most were critical. The announcement also left a many unanswered questions about the nature of OTH, how it will look in practice, and its objectives. This section will cast a critical light on these elements, attempting to clarify how OTH should be understood and the extent to which it represents a *new* approach to counterterrorism. It concludes by zooming in on the contexts of Afghanistan and the Sahel.

One defining challenge with OTH as an analytical concept is that there is no consensus definition of what it covers. The Biden administration has thus far offered little clarification on what OTH precisely entails, which has led to varied speculation on its practical execution. Despite receiving little attention prior to Biden’s announcement in August 2021, the concept is not entirely new. Back in April 2021, Biden pointed to a change, saying “*we’ll [the US] not take our eye off the terrorist threat. We’ll reorganize our counterterrorism capabilities and the substantial assets in the region to prevent reemergence of terrorists — of the threat to our homeland from over the horizon.*” The strategic revision, or “reorganization of capabilities,” did not come in reaction to successes of prior strategies combatting terrorism. In fact, Biden conceded, the threat persisted and had grown, at least in its geographical scope:

Over the past 20 years, the threat has become more dispersed, metastasizing around the globe: al-Shabaab in Somalia; al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula; al-Nusra in Syria; ISIS attempting to create a califit [caliphate] in Syria and Iraq, and establishing affiliates in multiple countries in Africa and Asia.

With the terror threat now in many places, keeping thousands of troops grounded and concentrated in just one country at a cost of billions each year makes little sense to me and to our leaders. We cannot continue the cycle of extending or expanding our military presence in Afghanistan, hoping to create ideal conditions for the withdrawal, and expecting a different result.²³

OTH first began circulating as a concept during the Trump administration as a euphemism referring to an approach that was multilateral, intelligence-led, and defined by international collaboration. In fact, it was more a “repackaging of things already done” than anything new.²⁴ When President Biden announced the shift to OTH, however, there was no clear consensus on what that it entailed.

What can be inferred from public statements and military sources thus far is that OTH refers to a doctrine involving airstrikes carried out without any permanent (or at least limited) ground presence. As such, it is an approach relying exclusively on (remote-controlled) airstrikes and which is based on various forms of intelligence gathering, but generally absent of human intelligence (HUMINT). OTH is a *light footprint* approach largely intended to reduce the operational risk to troops and suited for targeted killings in the right context. The primary focus is, thus, to target senior leaders, operatives, and commanders in order to weaken command-and-control structures and to obstruct ongoing attack planning. If that sounds familiar, it is because such an approach is far from new, having been employed to varying degrees for years in places like Somalia, Yemen, and Syria. While such a comprehensive shift in approach might be new in the contexts of Afghanistan and the Sahel, on

23. The White House, “Remarks by President Biden on the Way Forward in Afghanistan,” April 14, 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/04/14/remarks-by-president-biden-on-the-way-forward-in-afghanistan/>.

24. Author’s interview.

a more general level, the new OTH discourse should partly be viewed as a rebranding of the dominant counterterrorism narrative.²⁵

The revised strategy is undoubtedly driven by the changing environments in Afghanistan and Mali, which forced changes to existing operations, as later sections in this report will discuss further. The argument I wish to make here is that the commitment to an OTH approach should be viewed as a long-coming culmination of the “re-prioritization of national security concerns” in the West, with counterterrorism now being considered a secondary threat to issues like Russia, China, Cyber, and even right-wing extremism.²⁶

The U.S. administration is also honest that the change is not the result of past strategic success (defeating the enemy) or objectively waning threat levels. In July 2021, Biden explained that “Today, the terrorist threat has metastasized beyond Afghanistan. So, we are repositioning our resources and adapting our counterterrorism posture to meet the threats where they are now significantly higher: in South Asia, the Middle East, and Africa.”²⁷ Instead, this is a clear policy choice involving a change in *objectives*. No longer is it the priority to “defeat and destroy” actors posing a militant Islamist terrorism threat to the West, but in the case of the US more modestly to prevent terrorist attacks and “protect the homeland.”²⁸

The three following case studies on Somalia, Yemen, and Syria highlight how OTH is not a new strategy. The three case studies are chosen because they represent some of the most central counterterrorism campaigns targeting militant Islamists, and they exemplify how OTH has been employed and how the various geographical contexts differ from one another.

25. Brunstetter, “Over-The-Horizon Counterterrorism.”

26. Bruce Hoffman and Jacob Ware, “January 6, the Afghanistan Withdrawal and the Future of U.S. Counterterrorism,” *Lawfare Blog*, January 9, 2022.

27. The White House, “Remarks by President Biden on the Drawdown of U.S. Forces in Afghanistan,” July 8, 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/07/08/remarks-by-president-biden-on-the-drawdown-of-u-s-forces-in-afghanistan/>.

28. White House, “Remarks by President Biden.”

3.1. Case One: Somalia

The U.S. military involvement in Somalia began in the early 1990s but has varied tremendously over time, both in terms of engagement and troop presence on the ground. After the so-called “Black Hawk Down” incident in 1993, U.S. presidents turned hesitant to deploy troops to the country. On occasion during the 2000s, however, a limited number of U.S. special operations forces occasionally deployed to Somalia, but otherwise the counterterrorism engagement in the country was run as a secret CIA campaign. With the local al-Qaeda affiliate, al-Shabaab, conquering territory and the launch of the AMISOM mission, the US started to send military advisors and eventually embarked on launching airstrikes in support of AMISOM forces.²⁹

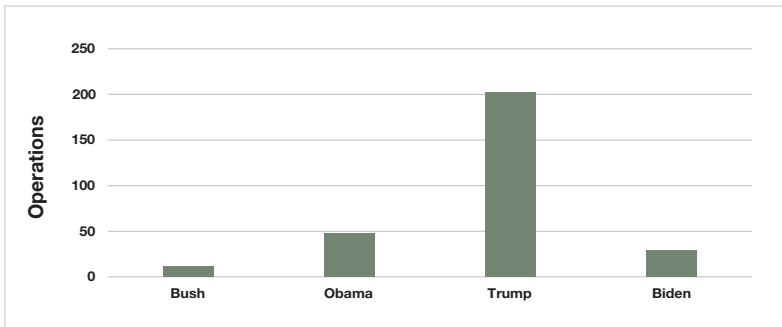
In 2016, under the Obama administration, the US intensified its counterterrorism campaign in Somalia with an increasing number of airstrikes targeting al-Shabaab leaders and operatives.³⁰ The US had previously utilized airbases in the Seychelles and Ethiopia to deploy drones for ISR and lethal airstrikes, but it would later mainly rely on bases in Djibouti.³¹ Immediately after President Trump took office, the targeted airstrikes in Somalia intensified, the Trump presidency carrying out four-times more targeted airstrikes in Somalia than its predecessor.

29. Oona Hathaway and Luke Hartig, “Still at War: The United States in Somalia,” *Just Security*, March 31, 2022, <https://www.justsecurity.org/80921/still-at-war-the-united-states-in-somalia/>.

30. The White House, “Report on the Legal and Policy Frameworks Guiding the United States’ Use of Military Force and Related National Security Operations,” December 2016.

31. Remote Horizons, “Expanding use and proliferation of military drones in Africa,” *Pax For Peace*, February 2021, https://paxforpeace.nl/media/download/PAX_remote_horizons_FIN_lowres.pdf.

Figur1: Targeted US operations in Somalia per administration

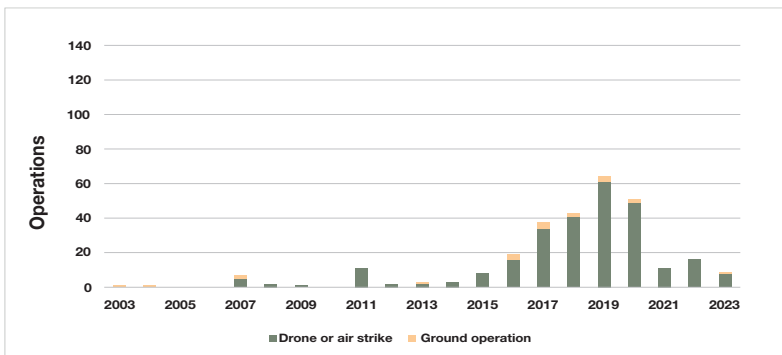


Source: New America Foundation, “The War in Somalia.”³²

Note: Data per March 1, 2023.

Note: Total number of operations (n) = 290

Figure 2: Targeted US operations in Somalia 2003–2023



Source: New America Foundation, “The War in Somalia.”³³

Note: Data per March 1, 2023.

Note: Total number of operations (n) = 290

The intense air campaign carried out by the Trump administration was accompanied by the deployment of military advisors and occasionally special forces to conduct targeted ground raids. Prior to leaving office,

32. *New America Foundation*, “The War in Somalia,” <https://www.newamerica.org/international-security/reports/americas-counterterrorism-wars/the-war-in-somalia/>.

33. *New America Foundation*, “War in Somalia.”

however, Trump ordered the withdrawal of U.S. military forces from Somalia as part of a global counterterrorism disengagement and a further shift toward a more “clean” OTH strategy. The head of AFRICOM, Army General Steven Townsend, told the U.S. Senate in March 2022 that U.S. forces are now less effective in countering the terrorism threat from al-Shabaab. Ever since leaving Somalia, U.S. forces have deployed from their base in neighboring Djibouti. According to Townsend, this is resulting in U.S. forces being unable to exert sufficient pressure on al-Shabaab.³⁴ During the same testimony, the head of AFRICOM elaborated that “due to a lack of effective governance and counterterrorism pressure, al-Shabaab has only grown stronger and bolder over the past year as seen in recent coordinated, multi-target attacks in Mogadishu.”

As the data above indicates, the U.S. counterterrorism strategy in Somalia has largely been defined by a targeted air campaign with limited numbers of troops on the ground occasionally conducting ground operations. While this certainly qualifies as OTH, the number of ground operations conducted in Somalia is relatively high compared to the Yemen campaign. Despite the on-the-ground troop presence generally having been low, it has likely been key to supporting the air campaign, both in terms of intelligence collection and verification, and to establish cooperation with local actors. That said, U.S. forces have mainly cooperated with AMISOM rather than with Somali authorities, which are generally viewed as lacking the necessary stability, legitimacy, and competencies to be a reliable partner.

Contrasting trends in places like Yemen, Syria, and Afghanistan, in May 2022 President Biden allegedly authorized the deployment of several hundred special operations forces to Somalia to support the air-led counterterrorism campaign against al-Shabaab.³⁵ With the group growing in strength, the deployment of special forces is a clear signal of how a targeted air campaign without ground support has limited potential.

34. Karoun Demirjian, “U.S. Less Effective at Countering Terrorist Threats in Afghanistan and Somalia since Troop Withdrawal, Generals Warn,” *Washington Post*, March 16, 2022.

35. Charlie Savage and Eric Schmitt, “Biden Approves Plan to Redeploy Several Hundred Ground Forces into Somalia,” *The New York Times*, May 16, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/05/16/us/politics/biden-military-somalia.html>.

3.2. Case Two: Yemen

In Yemen, the U.S. counterterrorism strategy has been defined by an OTH approach since 2009. Operating from its airbases in the region and Ramstein Air Base in Germany, the US has employed its air capacity with only a limited number of special operations forces on the ground to target, first, al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula and later also the Islamic State Yemen Province.³⁶ According to then commander of CENTCOM, General McKenzie, the US “retains a small, tailored CT footprint in Yemen, supported by a regional CT headquarters that enables regional partner CT forces to monitor and disrupt these VEOs [violent extremist organizations].”³⁷

Targeted airstrikes in Yemen were particularly prominent during the Obama and Trump administrations, and they succeeded in severely degrading the local al-Qaeda and Islamic State leadership structures and targeting key operatives. These include successive al-Qaeda leaders Nassir al-Wuhayshi and Qassim al-Rimi, the infamous ideologue Anwar al-Awlaki, and al-Qaeda bomb maker Ibrahim al-Asiri. Despite these tactical successes, the air campaign fell short of destroying either group. What it did do, however, was to aggravate public sentiments about the U.S. military involvement in Yemen due to the large number of civilian casualties.³⁸ Since February 2021, the US has stopped all offensive operations in Yemen, including targeted airstrikes.³⁹

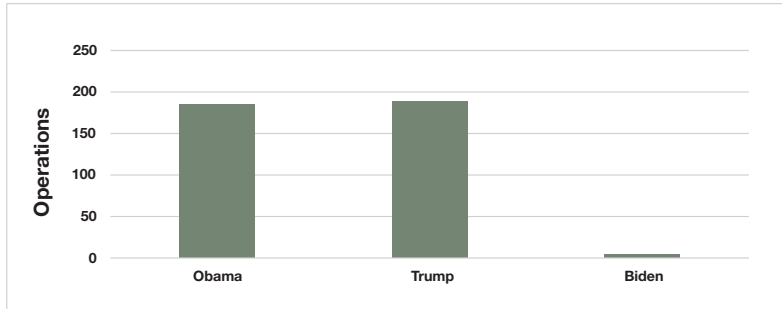
36. The White House, “Letter to the Speaker of the House and President Pro Tempore of the Senate Regarding the War Powers Report,” December 7, 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/12/07/letter-to-the-speaker-of-the-house-and-president-pro-tempore-of-the-senate-regarding-the-war-powers-report-2/>.

37. McKenzie, “Posture Statement.”

38. “License to Kill: Why the American Drone War on Yemen Violates International Law,” *Al Karama*, 2013, https://www.alkarama.org/sites/default/files/2016-12/ALK_USA-Yemen_Drones_PublicReport_EN.pdf

39. The White House, “Remarks by President Biden on America’s Place in the World,” February 4, 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/02/04/remarks-by-president-biden-on-americas-place-in-the-world/>

Figure 3: Targeted US operations in Yemen per administration

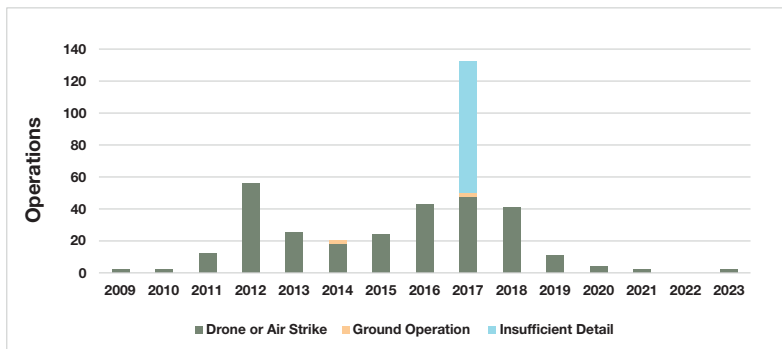


Source: New America Foundation, “The War in Yemen.”⁴⁰

Note: Data per March 1, 2023.

Note: Total number of operations (n) = 376

Figure 4: US operations in Yemen 2009-2023



Source: New America Foundation, “The War in Yemen.”⁴¹

Note: Data per March 1, 2023.

Note: Total number of operations (n) = 376

In support of its air campaign, the US has cooperated extensively with regime and regional actors. As in Somalia, however, the local Yemeni authorities are seen lacking stability and legitimacy in addition to being

40. New America Foundation, “The War in Yemen,” <https://www.newamerica.org/international-security/reports/americas-counterterrorism-wars/the-war-in-yemen/>

41. New America Foundation, “War in Yemen.”

caught up in a domestic war, which renders it an unreliable partner. Easing the situation for the US, the country has easy access to military bases in the region, enabling it to launch drones and fighter planes to strike in Yemen. Finally, the US has maintained a small yet important footprint on the ground capable of helping with intelligence collection and verification.

3.3. Case Three: Syria

The Syrian case differs slightly from the others but is nonetheless important to highlight the spectrum of OTH and the importance of an (albeit minimal) on-the-ground presence and friendly relations with domestic actors. The counterterrorism campaign in Syria distinguishes itself from the campaigns in Yemen and Somalia because it was part of a multinational coalition. Nonetheless, from the very outset, the campaign was US-led and it was always clear that its future scope of engagement would be US-formed. It started in September 2014 as a clear OTH operation with U.S. airstrikes conducted without ground troops. That changed quickly, however, with a mid-sized contingent of U.S. troops being deployed.⁴²

While there is no available proportional data on the number of airstrikes vis-à-vis ground operations in Syria, Airwars reports that the coalition has thus far conducted a massive 19,904 airstrikes in Syria. This air campaign was supported from the beginning by a mid-sized contingent of U.S. ground troops. In late 2019, after the territorial defeat of the Islamic State's caliphate, President Trump originally began withdrawing troops, later deciding (in response to criticism) to keep approximately 900 U.S. soldiers in Syria to support the counterterrorism campaign.⁴³

Since 2019, after the territorial defeat of the Islamic State, the US-led counterterrorism campaign in Syria has primarily targeted senior leaders

42. Tess Bridgeman and Brianna Rosen, "Still at War: The United States in Syria," *Just Security*, April 29, 2022.

43. Stacie Pettyjohn, "Over-The-Horizon Does Not Have to Mean Next Door," *Lawfare Blog*, November 7, 2021; Matthew Ayton, "US Military Exit from Syria Unlikely Anytime Soon, Officials Say," *Al Jazeera*, October 26, 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/10/26/will-us-leave-syria>

and operational planners from the local al-Qaeda affiliate or from the Islamic State with great success. From an OTH perspective, it is relevant to highlight how the US has maintained a ground-troop presence to support the continued air campaign and how it enjoys collaboration with local and regional actors. While cooperation with the Assad-regime is not possible, the US enjoys good relations with Kurdish forces in north-east Syria and with Iraqi authorities. It is through such collaboration that the US has been able to target several high-ranking militants in recent years, including the leaders of the Islamic State. In the process of reducing its own footprint on the ground, the Kurds and Iraqis thus represent useful partners for future OTH campaigns and actors whose counterterrorism capacity the Western states should support.

3.4. “Over the Horizon” and Counterterrorism in Afghanistan

*For the United States, conducting CT operations in Afghanistan from “over the horizon” remains difficult, but not impossible. The loss of collection following the withdrawal of U.S. forces has exacerbated gaps in our intelligence. This limits the intelligence community’s ability to provide indications and warning of VEO threats from Afghanistan. Also limited is the United States’ ability to fix and finish those threats we are able to find. The resultant reductions in consistent CT pressure potentially could enable VEO groups to pose increased threats to the United States and our allies, assuming the Taliban is unwilling or unable to do so itself. Presently, CENTCOM relies on the Operation ENDURING SENTINEL Over-the-Horizon Counter-Terrorism (OTH-CT) Task Force and a finite number of UAS sorties to develop and potentially strike terrorist targets in Afghanistan.*⁴⁴

General McKenzie

The new counterterrorism strategy in Afghanistan directly resulted from the withdrawal of U.S. troops from the country, the February 2020 peace

44. McKenzie, “Posture Statement.”

deal with the Taliban,⁴⁵ and the ensuing Taliban capture of territorial and political control. These events prompted the replacement of Operation Freedom's Sentinel with Operation Enduring Sentinel on October 1, 2021, which represents the culmination of a lengthy process to "end the war in Afghanistan." While the shift in Western military involvement in Afghanistan was expected and evolved step-by-step, the nature of particularly the U.S. counterterrorism involvement in the country post-withdrawal was never clear and has eventually taken a radically different form due to the domestic political developments in the country.

The replacement of a comprehensive whole-of-government strategy to combat terrorism with a *light* OTH strategy is not driven by prior strategic success in defeating and destroying militant Islamist groups in Afghanistan. Despite spending more than \$2 trillion and deploying 100,000 troops, including the entire range of Western military technical capabilities, the West failed to win the war against the Taliban and to destroy its associate, al-Qaeda. In fact, the militant Islamist landscape has only grown stronger and become more diversified since the war erupted in 2001. The Taliban has remained a unified and powerful force despite its internal differences, and after more than twenty years of war, its leadership and cadres now also have vast military and political experience. From the perspective of international terrorism, the nationalist-focused Taliban is arguably not posing any overwhelming threat. The situation, however, is different when it comes to al-Qaeda and the local Islamic State affiliate known as the Islamic State in Khorasan Province (ISKP).

Al-Qaeda's presence in Afghanistan was the original motivating cause for the war. Although the U.S. and coalition forces have managed to take out a wealth of al-Qaeda leaders, including its founder, Osama bin Laden, and key operatives, this degradation of human resources and its command-and-control structure has not translated into strategic victories, never mind actually destroying the group. Arguably, al-Qaeda now has a stronger presence in Afghanistan compared to the situation in 2001 due to the establishment of a local al-Qaeda affiliate in the Indian subcontinent. However, that should not obfuscate the fact that the global al-Qae-

45. "Joint Declaration between the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and the United States of America for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan," February 29, 2020, <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/02.29.20-US-Afghanistan-Joint-Declaration.pdf>

da leadership has become more decentralized and that Afghanistan does not function as the same central hub it once did.

In addition to the presence of al-Qaeda, the Islamic State has entrenched itself since late 2014 in Afghanistan and in the wider South Asia region. In that time, ISKP has grown into a serious regional threat despite continuously being targeted by the US and the Taliban. After experiencing severe leadership decapitation and a loss of territorial control throughout 2019, ISKP briefly surged after the Taliban takeover with the release of more than a thousand of its members from Afghan prisons. According to the U.S. intelligence establishment, ISKP “is attempting to exploit an influx of funds and personnel from prison breaks to undermine the Taliban and build an external attack capability if it can withstand Taliban pressure.”⁴⁶ While ISKP cannot be associated with any executed terrorist attacks in the West so far, it is expected that the group is prepared to increasingly focus on external operations, rendering it the most serious contender in the region to represent a militant Islamist terrorism threat against the West.

Box 4: Evolution of military operations in Afghanistan

On October 7, 2001, the US launched Operation Enduring Freedom with the stated objective to “topple the Taliban regime and eliminate al-Qaeda.”⁴⁷ Less than two years later, on May 1, 2003, the Bush administration ceased major combat operations and the operation transitioned to a dedicated counterterrorism operation targeting al-Qaeda and helping to rebuild Afghan state institutions, including its military. After suffering high numbers of battlefield casualties, the US announced a troop surge taking place between 2010 and 2011, growing the total troop figures to more than 100,000. On January 1, 2015, Operation Enduring Freedom was

46. Office of the Director of National Intelligence, “Annual Threat Assessment of the U.S. Intelligence Community,” February 7, 2022.

47. Lead Inspector General Report to the United States Congress, “Operation Enduring Sentinel: Operation Freedom’s Sentinel,” January 1, 2022–March 31, 2022, <https://media.defense.gov/2022/May/17/2002998795/-1/-1/1/LEAD%20INSPECTOR%20GENERAL%20FOR%20OPERATION%20FREEDOM%20SENTINEL%20AND%20OPERATION%20ENDURING%20SENTINEL%20-%20JANUARY%201,%202022%20-%20MARCH%2031,%202022.PDF>

replaced by Operation Freedom’s Sentinel, which co-existed with NATO’s Resolute Support Mission. The most recent evolution of the U.S. military operations in Afghanistan took place on October 1, 2021, with the launch of Operation Enduring Sentinel representing U.S. military engagement in the country post-withdrawal.⁴⁸ When the mission was being planned, however, it is unlikely to have taken the operational circumstance of a Taliban-controlled Afghanistan into account.

In the Interim National Security Strategic Guidance from March 2021, the section on national security priorities states that

*The United States should not, and will not, engage in ‘forever wars’ that have cost thousands of lives and trillions of dollars. We will work to responsibly end America’s longest war in Afghanistan while ensuring that Afghanistan does not again become a safe haven for terrorist attacks against the United States. Elsewhere, as we position ourselves to deter our adversaries and defend our interests, working alongside our partners, our presence will be most robust in the Indo-Pacific and Europe. In the Middle East, we will right-size our military presence to the level required to disrupt international terrorist networks [...] We will work with our regional partners to deter Iranian aggression and threats to sovereignty and territorial integrity, disrupt al-Qaeda and related terrorist networks and prevent an ISIS resurgence.*⁴⁹

Evidently, this ambition is much more defensive in nature and far from the objectives of *defeating* and *destroying* groups posing a terrorism threat. Not only does it tell a story about war fatigue but arguably more importantly, it is a clear testament that counterterrorism has tumbled down the national security priority list below threat issues like Russia, China, cyber, and racially motivated violent extremism (RMVE, also referred to as domestic terrorism). As the following sections highlight,

48. The institution in charge of conducting the counterterrorism campaign in Afghanistan is the “Over-The-Horizon Counterterrorism Headquarters,” which is located in Doha, Qatar, and occupied by a staff of approximately 100.

49. The White House, “Interim National Security Strategic Guidance,” March 2021.

this is not unique to the US but a broader trend in the West. The White House has communicated a similar devaluation of objectives, stating that

the DoD began Operation Enduring Sentinel (OES) as the new U.S. mission to contain terrorist threats emanating from Afghanistan and protect the homeland by maintaining pressure on those threats. Similar to Operation Freedom’s Sentinel (OFS), which ended in September, OES aims to counter terrorist threats to the U.S. homeland and interests abroad, including al-Qaeda, ISIS-K, and other terrorist organizations. However, unlike OFS, the new counterterrorism mission will be conducted from locations outside Afghanistan, or ‘over the horizon.’⁵⁰

President Biden added that “We [the US] will maintain the fight against terrorism in Afghanistan and other countries. We just don’t need to fight a ground war to do it. We have what’s called over-the-horizon capabilities, which means we can strike terrorists and targets without American boots on the ground—or very few, if needed.”⁵¹ And according to how the OES defined its objective, the mission is intended to “to protect U.S. national interests by disrupting violent extremist organizations and their external operations that threaten the U.S. homeland, partners, and allies from Afghanistan.”⁵²

According to the new commander of USCENTCOM, Michael Kurilla, the main challenge lies in the difficulty of reaching Afghanistan, a landlocked country. “Without a presence on the ground, the DoD relies on aviation assets to collect intelligence, surveil terrorist targets, and carry out airstrikes on terrorist targets. The DoD therefore requires overflight agreements with another bordering nation to enter Afghan airspace. Regarding overflight options, General McKenzie said that the DoD remained reliant on Pakistan, and there is currently no other way to get into Afghan airspace.”⁵³ This presents a serious obstacle in terms of conducting reconnaissance, collecting intelligence, and, should intelligence be verified, launching a strike. The OES report covering Octo-

50. White House, “Security Strategic Guidance,” 8.

51. White House, “Remarks by President Biden on the End of the War in Afghanistan.”

52. Lead Inspector General Report to the United States Congress, “Operation Enduring Sentinel: Operation Freedom’s Sentinel.”

53. Inspector General, “Operation Enduring Sentinel,” 10.

ber-December 2021 confirmed that no strikes had been launched in that period, and the ensuing report covering January-March 2022 further explained that no strikes had taken place since August 2021. In his testimony to the U.S. Congress, Kurilla recommended that "the U.S. Government needed to rebuild some of the human intelligence capability that was lost during the withdrawal."⁵⁴ The CENTCOM commander even confessed that "he would be open to the possibility of sharing intelligence with the Taliban on a case-by-case basis." It would take almost a year before the first strike in Afghanistan took place when a U.S. drone targeted and allegedly killed al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri in his safe house in Kabul on July 31 using a Hellfire R9X "Ninja" missile. While the attack was quickly framed as an OTH success, such a conclusion is dangerous and misleading. Rather, it should be viewed as a stand-alone success, and the lack of any strikes since confirms how difficult it is to strike targets with little intelligence.

Thus far, the experience with OTH in the context of Afghanistan offers few positive prospects for the immediate future. Despite President Biden presenting it as a capable counterterrorism strategy, the military establishment has been less optimistic from the outset. General McKenzie warned that the U.S. military needed to exercise strong pressure on terrorist groups in region. If the pressure was eased, the threat from both al-Qaeda and Islamic State would grow, with the latter capable of establishing an external attack capability within twelve to eighteen months.⁵⁵

The problem now facing the U.S. military is how the new political and territorial reality in Afghanistan impacts the possibility to conduct an effective OTH strategy. The shift in strategy involves a change in the driver of global counterterrorism efforts. OTH is increasingly *intelligence*-driven, compared to previous years where counterterrorism was led by military operations but supported by intelligence. Consequently, access to intelligence is a decisive feature of a successful OTH strategy.⁵⁶ With the current environment in Afghanistan, the conditions for collecting and verifying intelligence are abysmal. With an extremely limited on-the-ground covert presence, the US and other Western nations are

54. Inspector General, "Operation Enduring Sentinel."

55. McKenzie, "Posture Statement," 9-10.

56. Author's interview.

likely to depend on some sort of collaboration with local actors, including the Taliban. While some Western nations are already engaging the Taliban to explore the feasibility of intelligence cooperation, the US will likely be more hesitant.⁵⁷ However, the fact that senior Taliban leaders are open to engagement and collaboration could potentially open doors for future intelligence-sharing should the U.S. political establishment change its mind.

3.5. “Over the Horizon” and Counterterrorism in the Sahel

*Armed violence is likely to continue apace or even increase following the Western withdrawal from Mali. Despite Operation Barkhane’s inability to alter the strategic trajectory of the conflict, the operation’s raids, targeted strikes, and other military operations, which have served as tactical and operational disruptors to militant groups, will now be absent. This decrease in military pressure comes as militancy is on the rise in Mali.*⁵⁸

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France’s counterterrorism mission in the Sahel began in January 2013 in Mali with Operation Serval. The mission was renamed over time and expanded in terms of geography and scope. As recently as February 2020, it even saw the addition of 600 troops, adding to a contingent of several thousand French forces spread throughout the border region between Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso to counter the growing success of militant Islamists.⁵⁹ France has substantially reversed its posture since and, instead of expanding the mission in the Sahel, it is now scaling it down and increasingly relying on targeted airstrikes, especially launched by remote-controlled drones.

57. Steve Szymanski and Mike Marchman, “Over-The-Horizon Operations’ in Afghanistan,” *Lieber Institute West Point*, September 8, 2021, <https://lieber.westpoint.edu/over-the-horizon-operations-afghanistan/>; Author’s Interview.

58. Marielle Harris, Catrina Doxsee, and Jared Thompson, “The End of Operation Barkhane and the Future of Counterterrorism in Mali,” *CSIS*, March 2, 2022.

59. Denis M. Tull, “Operation Barkhane and the Future of Intervention in the Sahel,” *SWP Comment* 5, January 2021.

Box 5: The evolution of counterterrorism operations in the Sahel

The French counterterrorism mission in the Sahel was launched in early 2013 in reaction to the nationalist rebellion that erupted the year prior but which was quickly hijacked by militant Islamists with connections to al-Qaeda. The first mission, *Operation Serval*, lasted for a year and a half and was successful in reconquering territorial control in northern Mali. It was eventually replaced with *Operation Barkhane*, a dedicated counterterrorism operation with a heavy footprint and the objective of defeating the militant Islamists, including al-Qaeda and later the Islamic State. In March 2020, a joint EU operation known as *Takuba Task Force* was incorporated into Barkhane but with the objective to advise and assist local G5 security forces. Just a few months later, President Macron announced the end of Barkhane with the intention of continuing French counterterrorism engagement in the region through Takuba and its targeted air campaign.

At no point has France referred to the shift in counterterrorism strategy in the Sahel as the adoption of an OTH strategy. Yet in practice, it resembles the approach the US is increasingly pursuing. Macron took the first step in June 2020, announcing the end of the Barkhane mission and replacing it with the French-led but EU-orchestrated Takuba Task Force. Later, Macron explained that France would reduce its military presence in the Sahel from 5,000 to approximately 2,500, adding that it stopped "as an external operation to allow instead for an operation of support and cooperation with the armies of the countries of the region that so wish."⁶⁰ The logic behind the transition from Barkhane to the Takuba Task Force was to have a much lighter footprint on the ground and rely more on targeted airstrikes. Since December 2019, when France added three Reaper drones to its mission, an increasing number of its operations have been executed by such remote-controlled airstrikes.⁶¹ In early 2021, more than 40% of the airstrikes launched by the French

60. Charles Millon, "France's Strategy in the Sahel," *GIS*, January 25, 2022, <https://www.gisreportsonline.com/r/france-military-sahel/>.

61. "Sahel: les drones peuvent-ils vaincre les jihadistes?" *APA News*, May 28, 2022.

military in the region came from drones, a number that has likely grown considerably.⁶²

Since announcing the transition from Barkhane to Takuba, the operational conditions have exacerbated considerably, which further pushes toward OTH. After a year of growing tensions between the French administration and Malian military junta, mainly centering on the issue of engaging in dialogue with local militants, the French announced on February 17, 2022, that it left Mali entirely.⁶³ And on February 19, 2023, France was also forced to cease operations in neighboring Burkina Faso. France explained that it would close its bases in Mali over a four-to-six month period, instead redeploying its troops to neighboring countries, with Niger identified as the main country. In May, future operations in Mali turned even further challenging as the military junta announced its withdrawal from the regional G5, including its cooperation on counterterrorism. Instead, Mali has recently turned to Russia, and particularly the infamous Wagner Group, to acquire help to fight domestic instability.⁶⁴

While a small contingent of French troops and the Takuba Task Force remain present in the Sahel region, the withdrawal from Mali represents a serious counterterrorism obstacle, as Mali continues to be the regional terrorist activity hotspot. It also highlights the volatility of the situation and how political instability can impact counterterrorism strategies. Comparable to the situation in Afghanistan, the militant Islamist movement in the Sahel has only grown in strength since the launch of a large, multinational counterterrorism mission. This growth is not the result of the mission, but it has been incapable of preventing it. Historically, the regional al-Qaeda affiliate, al-Qaeda in the Maghreb (AQIM), mainly operated in the Algerian desert, but it subsumed Jama'a Nusrat ul-Islam wa-l-Muslimin (JNIM) into its ranks in 2017, a conglomerate of militant groups operating in the Sahel. Al-Qaeda activities thereafter grew in intensity, particularly in Mali but later spreading to neighboring Niger and Burkina Faso. Around the same time, a new Islamic State affil-

62. Tull, “Operation Barkhane.”

63. Tull, “Operation Barkhane.”

64. Michael Shurkin, “Russia in the Sahel: Towards a Worsening of Security and Political Situations,” *Network for Strategic Analysis*, May 26, 2022.

iate, known as the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara, announced itself, adding further instability to an already contested region. The borderland area between the three countries is now heavily affected by militant Islamist activity.

The scope of the political objectives behind the Barkhane mission has evolved over the years. The original objective was framed as an operation to "prevent terrorists from establishing a territorial caliphate or using Mali as a springboard for expanded threats abroad, whether in Europe or against Western interests in the Maghreb and West Africa."⁶⁵ President Macron later expressed that the French ambition was to defeat terrorism, adding in February 2021 that reducing troop size would be a mistake, as it would result in releasing the pressure on terrorist groups.⁶⁶ Nonetheless, that is exactly what France is doing. As in Afghanistan, the operational conditions in the Sahel have only become more complicated after the withdrawal from Mali, and although it might not have a similar critical impact on intelligence collection, it will undoubtedly result in a more limited access to information and place restrictions on future operations. Obtaining intelligence in an area as vast and deserted as the Sahel was always a challenge, as emphasized by the French reliance on US ISR capabilities and its drone capacity, but it will only become more complicated without a presence in Mali or cooperation with the authorities.⁶⁷ The obvious risk is that terrorist activities will increasingly go undetected and that intelligence-verification issues will cause more

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65. Louis Dugit-Gros, "Mali and MENA: The Future of Counterterrorism in the Sahel and Maghreb," *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, March 7, 2022, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/mali-and-mena-future-counterterrorism-sahel-and-maghreb>.
66. Sylvie Corbet and Sam Mednick, "France, West Africa Step up Counterterrorism Efforts," *AP News*, February 16, 2021, <https://apnews.com/article/mauritania-chad-counterterrorism-paris-niger-a96f688f58304bd9c8375435333a79da>.
67. Stavros Atlamazoglou, "The Killing of a Terrorist behind the Death of 4 US Troops Sheds Light on France's Quiet but Intense Fight in Africa," *Business Insider*, October 13, 2021, <https://www.businessinsider.com/french-strike-highlights-counterterrorism-fight-in-africa-sahel-region-2021-10?r=US&IR=T>; Abraham Mahshie, "France Stresses Need for Continued American ISR in African Sahel," *Air Force Magazine*, July 9, 2021, <https://www.airforcemag.com/france-stresses-need-for-continued-american-isr-in-african-sahel/>; Maya Kandel, "Hand in Hand and Eye to Eye? US–French Counterterrorism Cooperation in the Sahel in the Trump–Macron Era," in *Alliances and Power Politics in the Trump Era*, ed. Maud Quessard, Frédéric Heurtebize and Frédéric Gagnon (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020).

civilian casualties.⁶⁸ One avenue to explore to mitigate the intelligence gap would be to increasingly engage in collaboration with local actors to obtain information, including elements within the militant milieu.

Box 6: High-profile targets

Despite failing on a strategic level, Operation Barkhane achieved important tactical victories, including the neutralization of senior al-Qaeda and Islamic State leaders and commanders. The success of these strikes and ground raids often resulted from the on-the-ground French presence and its collaboration with Malian military and intelligence sources. The list of high-profile targets includes Islamic State leader Adnan Abu Walid al-Sahrawi, AQIM leader Abdelmalek Droukdel, AQIM senior commander Ba ag Moussa, and Abu Ammar al-Jazairi, AQIM’s head of finance and logistics.

Like in the US, the French decision to revise its global counterterrorism strategy is partly driven by changing national security priorities. Adding to that, the Barkhane mission was an economic burden and, despite its remarkable success in targeting senior al-Qaeda and Islamic State leaders and commanders, the mission was unable to translate such tactical successes into more decisive strategic progress, for not to say victory. The imminent departure from Mali is likely to make future tactical and strategic successes ever more challenging, especially as it remains uncertain whether airstrikes will continue over Malian territory.⁶⁹

68. The French have already experienced their own share of challenges with verifying intelligence used for targeted airstrikes. In January 2021, an airstrike killed 19 civilians attending a wedding in the desert in central Mali; see Paul Lorgerie, “French Air Strike Killed 19 Civilians at Mali Wedding Party, U.N. Says,” *Reuters*, March 30, 2021.

69. Author’s interview.

4

Identifying Challenges and Assessing Strategy

Having outlined the transition to OTH as the primary counterterrorism strategy and having discussed its various expressions across geography, the relevant remaining questions are whether the current iteration of OTH offers a cohesive counterterrorism strategy and if it is suited to fulfill defined objectives. Addressing these questions, this section identifies the primary challenges related to the shift in strategy before proceeding to assess OTH as a counterterrorism strategy. By no means exhaustive, a list of three primary challenges related to OTH are identified: Access to on-the-ground intelligence, operational restrictions, and finally enhanced risk to civilians and judicial complications.

- **Access to on-the-ground intelligence:** The limited on-the-ground presence in Afghanistan and Mali will critically limit the abilities of Western nations to collect and verify intelligence relating to terrorist groups and individuals. In both countries, this is aggravated by the animosity between Western states and local state actors. Arguably the most serious problem for the US in Afghanistan and France in the Sahel is going to be the absence of HUMINT as a source of intelligence collection and verification. This is critical not only to identifying and locating targets, but also as a source to inform other intelligence disciplines. This importance of HUMINT in the counterterrorism intelligence cycle appears to be generally underappreciated in relation to targeted airstrikes. The challenge is that “Technology like this does not work in an information vacuum. Human agents provide selectors such as phone numbers, email ad-

dresses, social media identities, and more, which enable the various technological platforms to find and correctly identify their targets either to collect intelligence, which is what U.S. intelligence community drones spend most of their time doing, or to conduct kinetic operations.⁷⁰ The U.S. military is open about its loss of access to intelligence, and OES confirmed that such an intelligence gap was a major reason why it had not carried out any strikes in Afghanistan since August 2021. If alternative strategies to collect intelligence are not developed, there is a high risk that strikes will become infrequent and entail a high risk of civilian casualties.

- **Operational restrictions:** In the Afghanistan case, the US currently has no military bases in the vicinity from which it can conduct its OTH campaign. Instead, it depends on distant bases in the Gulf, which complicates its operations. Having to navigate around Iranian airspace, the drones have limited time to operate in and around Afghanistan, which impacts its ability to carry out ISR missions and offensive strikes.⁷¹ While the U.S. military is currently working to establish bases in countries neighboring Afghanistan, a solution has yet to be found and the volatile relation to the countries in the region makes it challenging to find stable hubs from which to conduct operations.⁷² The situation in the Sahel is different, because although French troops have left Mali, they can still operate in neighboring countries. There is no clarification yet, however, when it comes to how and if France will launch missions in Malian territory.⁷³
- **Enhanced risk to civilians and legal complications:** A growing reliance on targeted airstrikes coupled with limited access to intelligence will likely result in a higher risk of civilian casualties and comes with complex judicial complications. While targeted airstrikes are considered a precision weapon, they have been heavily associated with civilian casualties. This is not least the case because such targeted strikes rely on intelligence that is often difficult to verify. Since

70. Douglas London, "The Overhyping of Over the Horizon," *Just Security*, October 13, 2021, <https://www.justsecurity.org/78582/the-overhyping-of-over-the-horizon/>.

71. Inspector General, "Operation Enduring Sentinel," 11.

72. Jonathan Schroden, "New Ideas for Over-The-Horizon Counterterrorism in Afghanistan," *Lawfare Blog*, May 8, 2022.

73. Author's interview.

the intelligence verification process is only becoming harder, the risk of “bad intelligence” becomes more likely, and it takes little imagination to foresee new scandals from strikes hitting innocents who were not sufficiently identified prior to the strike.⁷⁴ In an effort to limit the risk to civilians, the US has since 2017 employed a modified Hellfire missile to strike high-value targets in Syria and in Afghanistan. The missile, known as Hellfire R9X “Ninja,” does not kill through explosion but through direct impact together with numerous metal blades that unfold before hitting the target. The R9X Ninja does not solve the intelligence issue but does reduce the risk of collateral damage and civilian casualties.

With these challenges in mind, the question is whether OTH is a viable doctrine to reach defined counterterrorism objectives. From the perspective of the strategic *design*, the new counterterrorism strategy adopted by the US and France is inadequate at best. The stated objectives are vague and ill-defined, which leaves considerable ambiguity in terms of what the ambition is: Is it still to defeat and destroy the terrorist threat? Or more modestly to degrade it and prevent attacks against homeland security?

The stated objective of the US in its Interim National Security Strategic Guidance is to “disrupt al-Qaeda and related terrorist networks and prevent an ISIS resurgence.” The report only mentions al-Qaeda and the Islamic State once, while Russia and China are mentioned on five and 15 occasions, respectively.⁷⁵ Adding to that, in the National Strategy for Counterterrorism from October 2018, it defines one of the counterterrorism objectives as that “The terrorist threat to the United States is eliminated.”⁷⁶ The strategy document proceeds to elaborate and define the following “strategic objectives”:

- The capacity of terrorists to conduct attacks in the homeland and against vital United States interests overseas is sharply diminished;

74. Katherine Zimmerman, “Relying on ‘Over-The-Horizon’ Counterterrorism Increases Risk to Civilians,” *The Hill*, September 5, 2022; Brunstetter, “Over-The-Horizon Counterterrorism.”

75. White House, “Strategic Guidance.”

76. The White House, “National Strategy for Counterterrorism of the United States of America,” October 2018, 1.

- The sources of strength and support upon which terrorists rely are severed;
- Terrorists' ability to radicalize, recruit, and mobilize to violence in the homeland is diminished;
- Americans are prepared and protected from terrorist attacks in the homeland, including through more exacting border security and law enforcement actions;
- Terrorists are unable to acquire or use Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD), including chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear weapons and other advanced weaponry; and
- Public sector partners, private sector partners, and foreign partners take a greater role in preventing and countering terrorism⁷⁷

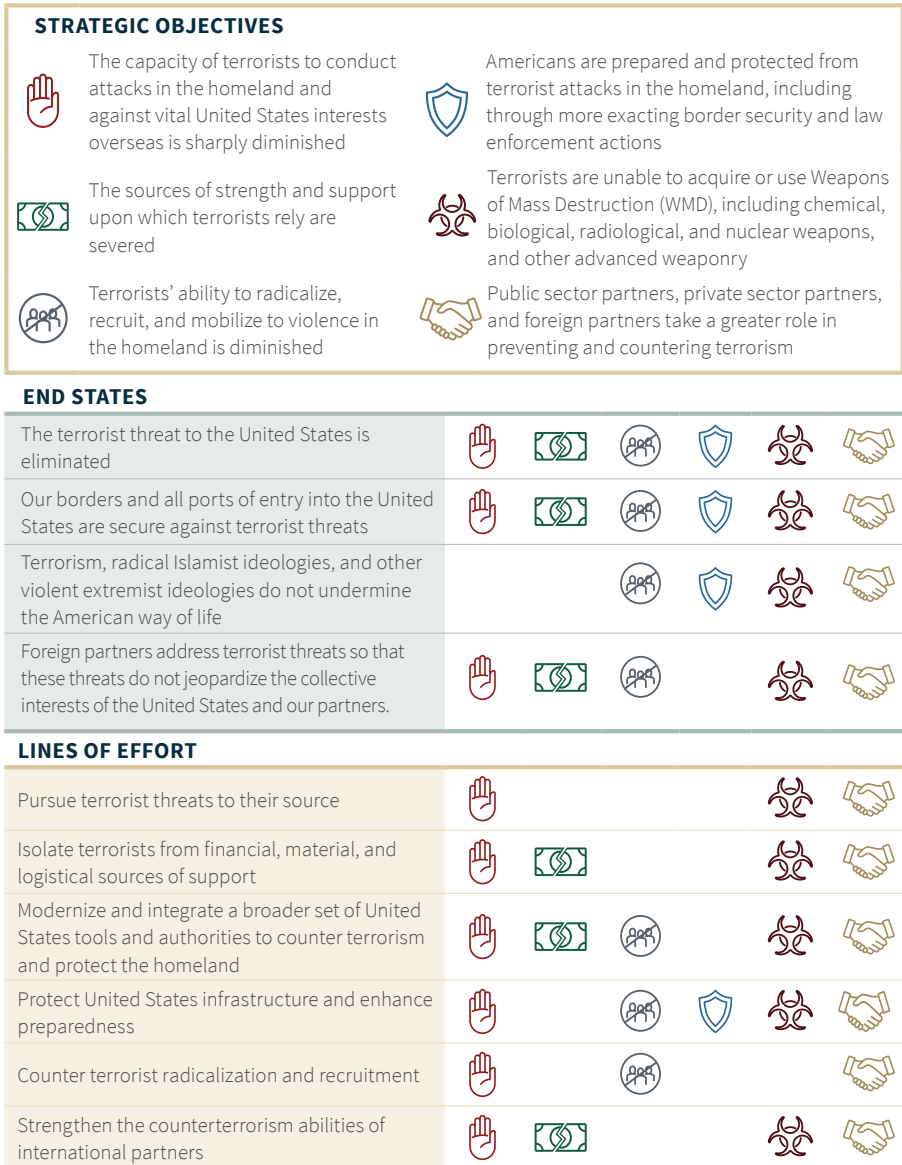
As a doctrine, OTH is intended to kill key individuals, including leaders and operational planners. While such operations might prevent specific attacks or degrade the short-term operational capacities of groups, it does not represent a CoG in terms of their existence and the longer-term threat that they pose. Here, a relevant distinction is between *individuals* and *groups*, which appears to be confused in the reliance on OTH considering the objectives of defeating groups, for not to speak of terrorism. Leadership decapitation has been a central feature of Western counterterrorism strategies for decades, and while it may have crippled first al-Qaeda's and later the Islamic State's ability to, or interest in, conducting external terrorist attacks, it never threatened group existence nor prevented their resurgence. In terms of the West's own CoG, this includes winning popular support, developing partner capacity, and mitigating political and socio-economic tensions that function as key drivers of radicalization and recruitment. Assessing OTH, however, there is little indication that the doctrine will have a positive impact on any of these CoGs.⁷⁸

77. White House, "National Strategy for Counterterrorism," 3.

78. John T. Kuehn, "Thoughts on Clausewitz, Strategy, and Centers of Gravity: When Jargon Meets Reductionism," in *Addressing the Fog of COG: Perspectives on the Center of Gravity in US Military Doctrine*, ed. Celestino Perez (Kansas: Combat Studies Institute Press, 2012); NATO, "NATO Standard AJP-5 Allied Joint Doctrine for the Planning of Operations," Edition A Version 2, May 2019.

Figure 5: Overview of the US national strategy for counter-terrorism

The strategic objectives are critical to reaching the desired end states, and the lines of effort are the means for achieving them.



Source: The White House, "National Strategy for Counterterrorism of the United States of America," October 2018: 5.

As illustrated in the figure below, OTH is not the exclusive tool applied in the counterterrorism toolbox. Other measures are also employed, including sanctions to counter terrorist financing and the strengthening of partner capacities. Yet with waning military pressure, complementary components are expected to increase in strength or scope to remain effective. The US, UN, and EU have already established elaborate sanction schemes targeting groups like al-Qaeda and the Islamic State, including key individuals. While new individuals are occasionally added to the list, there is no sea change in sanction initiatives or implementation. And as discussed in the case studies and the sections on Afghanistan and the Sahel, the US and European states are either incapable of or unwilling to support local and regional actors in their counterterrorism engagement, while their capacity building is extremely limited.

Yet the military side of counterterrorism strategy remains a key feature. President Biden's rhetoric in July 2021 also highlights the shift to a defensive approach aiming to defend the homeland. Even though he acknowledges that the terrorism threat has "metastasized," he ensures that the "military and intelligence leaders are confident they have the capabilities to protect the homeland and our interests from any resurgent terrorist challenge emerging or emanating from Afghanistan. We [the US] are developing a counterterrorism over-the-horizon capability that will allow us to keep our eyes firmly fixed on any direct threats to the United States in the region, and act quickly and decisively if needed."⁷⁹

A second issue is how vaguely OTH has been defined. Great uncertainty therefore remains about what forms it takes in practice, since neither the Biden nor the Macron administration has offered an elaborate explanation for the future counterterrorism strategy in Afghanistan and in the Sahel.⁸⁰ This has left military and intelligence professionals frustrated and critical of the ability of OTH to counter the threat.⁸¹ In Afghanistan and Mali, the US and France, respectively, have been left surprised about

79. White House, "Remarks by President Biden on the Drawdown of U.S. Forces in Afghanistan."

80. London, "Overhyped Over the Horizon."

81. Jonathan Swan and Zachary Basu, "Red Flags for Biden's 'Over-The-Horizon' Strategy," *Axios*, September 12, 2021, <https://www.axios.com/2021/09/12/afghanistan-counterterrorism-over-horizon-biden>; Tore Refslund Hamming and Colin P. Clarke, "Over-The-Horizon Is Far below Standard," *Foreign Policy*, January 5, 2022.

the operational restrictions resulting from the Taliban conquest and the Malian regime's aggressive posture. Consequently, both countries are thus planning on the fly, so to speak, as admitted by the OES mission:

During the quarter [October-December 2021], the DoD reported that it continued to refine its capability to monitor and target terrorists from over-the-horizon and to strengthen regional relationships in Central Asia with the goal of expanding its capability to disrupt transregional terrorist groups operating in Afghanistan. USCENTCOM said that as of this quarter, it was still working through the details of how it would conduct future counterterrorism operations under OES, including negotiations with regional allies and partners about potential resources, operational locations, and other support options. USCENTCOM said that the over-the-horizon counterterrorism mission will allow U.S. forces "to defend the homeland from any terrorist threats in the region" but did not provide specific details on what form such over-the-horizon strikes might take.⁸²

The third and final issue is that there is no defined strategy for victory. Neither the US nor France have sufficiently detailed how OTH will lead to achieving the vaguely defined objectives. Will OTH help to degrade, defeat, or destroy terrorist groups? Can it realistically be expected to achieve the defined objective? How will the strategy adapt to the challenging operational conditions? No answers have been provided to these questions.

With the abundance of challenges and no coherent strategy, it is highly unlikely that OTH will develop into an effective counterterrorism weapon over the longer term. Depending on the precise counterterrorism objectives and operational conditions, this could potentially change in the future. However, the two August 2021 strikes in Afghanistan are telling about what we should expect. In retaliation to the August 26, 2021, ISKP attack at the Kabul airport, the US successfully targeted operational planners based in the eastern province of Nangarhar.⁸³ Two

82. Inspector General, "Operation Enduring Sentinel," 10.

83. Idrees Ali, "U.S. Strikes Islamic State in Afghanistan after Deadly Kabul Attack," *Reuters*, August 28, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/us-drone-strike-targets-islamic-state-planner-afghanistan-2021-08-28/>.

days later, it carried out another strike, this time killing ten civilians in Kabul based on misleading intelligence.

It is as mentioned particularly the intelligence deficit that will grow increasingly problematic over time, to the extent that former head of CENTCOM, General McKenzie, even voiced his doubt whether OTH can succeed.⁸⁴ In the immediate aftermath of its withdrawal, the US might have been able to utilize its existing agent-and-informer networks to supply information, but the complex nature of the country's deteriorating security environment is over time likely to render such networks less useful. The vivid result is already tangible, with General McKenzie confessing that "We're [the US] probably at about 1 or 2 percent of the capabilities we once had to look into Afghanistan."⁸⁵

Interviewees were generally pessimistic about the chances of OTH becoming an effective counterterrorism strategy. Stressing the conditions of the human terrain in Afghanistan, one interviewee with a past in the U.S. administration said "it is impossible" that OTH becomes a success. "You just have to look at a map," the person explained, highlighting problems with the absence of human intelligence, cooperation with the Taliban, and problematic relations with Afghanistan's neighbors. The result, the person argued, is that the terrorism threat from Afghanistan will only grow in the future.⁸⁶ Another former senior U.S. counterterrorism official was similarly frank when assessing OTH as a strategy "destined to fail," since decapitation as the primary kinetic tool is unlikely to degrade and certainly not destroy or defeat the opponent. In fact, the official argued that OTH should not be confused with a strategy at all but simply an attempt by the administration to "keep the counter-terrorism apparatus together with a rubber band" at a time when other threats are prioritized.⁸⁷ And U.S. Ambassador Nathan Sales was similarly clear in a Senate hearing, saying that "of course drones cannot solve the problems of terrorism on their own."⁸⁸

It remains too early to assess actual results in countering terrorism in Afghanistan and in the Sahel after the change in military doctrine.

84. Hamming and Clarke, "Over-the-Horizon."

85. Hamming and Clarke, "Over-the-Horizon."

86. Author's interview.

87. Author's interview.

88. Committee on the Judiciary, "Targeted Killing."

Yet it is remarkable how, before the strike that killed al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri, no strikes had taken place in Afghanistan since August 2021, despite continuous assessments that both al-Qaeda and Islamic State are rebuilding their external attack capability. Nonetheless, it would be a mistake to believe that OTH can *defeat* or *destroy* terrorist groups. Leading Western states did not revise the counterterrorism strategy because they were convinced that OTH represents a more effective weapon against groups like al-Qaeda and Islamic State; rather, the new strategy should be viewed as a fig leaf intending to show continued engagement to tackle global terrorism, while in reality it is an indication of how militant Islamism has tumbled down the list of priorities of the Western national security agenda.⁸⁹ That said, OTH can have some merit as a short-term doctrine intended to disrupt command-and-control structures and ongoing operational planning. At the same time, however, it still carries the risk of aggravating the situation due to the intelligence gap.

89. Illustrating this change of priorities, in the White House's Interim National Security Strategy, al-Qaeda and Islamic State are mentioned only once, while Russia and China are mentioned on five and fifteen times, respectively; see White House, "Strategic Guidance."

5

Conclusion

5.1. The Strategic Implications for Small Supportive States

Leading Western states rarely change their military strategy without derived effects for smaller states, like Denmark. This is also the case with the stronger dedication to OTH as the preferred doctrine to combatting terrorism. Historically, smaller states have taken a *supportive* role in comprehensive multinational missions, either by providing human resources, including technical expertise, or military equipment and machinery. If OTH implies entirely leaving comprehensive multinational counterterrorism missions in favor of intelligence-driven targeted airstrike campaigns, it risks sidelining supportive states in their counterterrorism contribution. This section offers a brief discussion of how this might impact smaller supportive states like Denmark.

Denmark has contributed in various capacities to the counterterrorism missions in Iraq, Afghanistan, and in the Sahel. While such contributions are of a relatively minor scale, they nonetheless represent an important aspect of multinational missions. Shifting to OTH implies a decreasing demand for police and military trainers, medical specialists, and transport helicopters. What is needed is targeted airstrike capability, technical and human capacity to collect intelligence, and access to operational infrastructure in close proximity to OTH missions. And these are generally not capacities or access that smaller states can contribute.

For states like Denmark, contributing to multinational counterterrorism missions has two purposes. First, it is driven by Western solidarity to mitigate the terrorism threat and prevent attacks against Danish

interests and the homeland. Contributing to the weakening of terrorist networks and their external attack capabilities makes it less likely that terrorists can strike in the West, including in Denmark. Secondly, it is part of small states' alliance politics intended to obtain political capital. It is an investment in multinational military cooperation that places Denmark in a favorable light in international political and military fora. At worst, a new operational environment presents a risk of smaller countries losing important capital and goodwill; and, at best, it requires a rethinking of their international contribution.

Where all this leaves smaller states depends on how dominant OTH will become as a go-to counterterrorism doctrine. The following two scenarios describe two possibilities: one where OTH is dominant and the other where global counterterrorism operations will continue as a combination of OTH and large-scale multinational missions.

Scenario one: OTH becomes the dominant counterterrorism strategy

This scenario falls in extension of the current trend moving toward a counterterrorism engagement characterized by a light footprint and mainly carried out through targeted airstrikes with a limited on-the-ground troop presence. In this scenario, global counterterrorism will almost exclusively be driven by leading Western military nations, including the US, France, and the UK. Smaller states like Denmark will only contribute on an irregular basis and in limited scale whenever they can provide specific capacities in demand. This is most likely going to be in the form of access to networks or intelligence.

Scenario two: Combination of OTH and large multinational missions

In this scenario, the global counterterrorism engagement will continue as a combination between OTH and large multinational missions. The primary difference from the trend witnessed in recent years is that multinational missions are likely to be conducted through new international fora, such as the EU. In this scenario, smaller states will have a better chance of contributing to countering terrorism abroad, whether through a military professional capacity or non-military capacity-building.

In recent decades, Denmark has preferred to orient toward US-led missions as part of the country's ideological and strategic alignment. In the future, however, it will become central from a Danish perspective to increasingly orient toward alternative multinational diplomatic and military fora to get a seat at the table and remain a respected and relevant military contributor to global counterterrorism.⁹⁰ Taking an active part in the EU's defense cooperation will most certainly develop to become a key avenue for such future engagement and should be considered an attractive option. Denmark could also engage with regional or national governance bodies directly affected by terrorism. Examples include the Southern African Development Community, which is involved in a counterterrorism campaign in Mozambique, or the Somali government that battles a strong al-Shabaab insurgency. The Danish military and intelligence service could contribute with equipment, technical expertise, capacity building, and training of local forces.

Alternatively, the Danish Defense and intelligence establishment should prioritize pursuing new ways to become a valuable partner in global counterterrorism. Avenues to do so could involve developing a stronger intelligence focus, including the development of extensive HUMINT channels or becoming a diplomatic liaison and helping to secure important local access. Establishing strong HUMINT capacity is a considerable undertaking that does not happen overnight, but it comes with a substantial return. Investment in a strong drone capacity is another (but expensive) option, and there is a risk that states like the US and France are unwilling to rely on other states' drones for ISR and targeted killings.

90. Author's interview.

5.2. Where Does This Leave Global Counterterrorism?

After the change in counterterrorism strategy and military doctrine in Afghanistan and the Sahel, a clear trend appears to be emerging among leading Western military nations. Tired of “forever wars,” suffering from budgetary pressure, changing national security priorities, and facing new challenging operational conditions, they seek to explore “new” ways of combatting terrorism. As this report details, the preferred strategy is to withdraw forces and rely on targeted over-the-horizon air campaigns to degrade the enemy to the point where it poses a minimal threat to the domestic security of Western nations. The ambition is no longer to defeat terrorist groups but rather to minimize the threat they and their supporters pose.

Revising how we fight terrorism on a global scale is certainly much needed, as is critical reflection on how we employ military power. A strong military engagement was never a solution in and of itself to successfully win the war on terrorism. That said, military involvement *is* a requisite to sustain pressure on terrorist groups. While years-long comprehensive military campaigns have proven insufficient to defeat and destroy terrorists, there is no indication that OTH can meaningfully replace them. On the contrary, an OTH strategy will likely result in favorable conditions for militants to exploit, which is particularly the outlook in those contexts (e.g., Afghanistan and Mali), where the operational conditions place overly severe restrictions on how OTH is carried out. As an isolated military component, OTH thus carries little potential. One way to look at the current state of counterterrorism is that it has shifted from long-term to short-term objectives with no end-state in sight. Put differently, global counterterrorism appears on pause while other security issues considered more acute receive attention.

Despite the occasional successful targeting of terrorist leaders and senior figures, we should expect the strength of militant Islamists groups to increase in the years to come; and with it, the long-term terrorism threat. To mitigate the negative consequences, it is imperative that Western states maintain a strong military, intelligence, and security counterterrorism apparatus rather than redirecting all resources to new threats. In the meantime, the West would be smart to allocate resources to build local and regional partner capacity and invest in mitigating some of the root causes driving radicalization and extremism.

“The danger, now” as Bruce Hoffman and Jacob Ware write in their outlook for 2023, “is that in its prioritization of other national security issues, the United States becomes complacent in its counterterrorism fight.”⁹¹

91. Bruce Hoffman and Jacob Ware, “The Terrorist Threats and Trends to Watch Out for in 2023 and Beyond,” *CTC Sentinel* 15, no. 11 (November/December 2022), <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/the-terrorist-threats-and-trends-to-watch-out-for-in-2023-and-beyond/>.

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