

COUNTER-TERRORISM

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ISSUES

- The threat posed by jihadist terrorism and ideology has never been more diverse, globally distributed, better experienced, or present in so many conflict theaters. Far from defeating terrorism, the U.S. and allies have won many battles, but we are losing the war.
- ISIS's territorial defeat in Syria and Iraq and the killing of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi may have been significant accomplishments, but there are already signs that it is in the initial stages of a slow, but methodical recovery, while it also remains an under-appreciated and expanding challenge elsewhere across the Middle East, North Africa, South Asia, and beyond.
- The proliferation of local conflict and the re-assertion of dictatorial governance across much of the region have empowered al-Qaeda affiliates, whose existence has become increasingly entrenched and driven by local dynamics. Some, like Tanzim Huras al-Din in Syria or al-Shabab in Somalia, are also focusing anew on external attacks in 2021.
- While the apparent disconnect between al-Qaeda's global leadership and these fluid theaters might appear to be a counter-terrorism success, it has encouraged affiliates to make their own decisions and become smarter, more flexible, and thus more challenging and enduring adversaries.
- Within an environment in which fatigue with foreign conflict is an inescapable reality, the U.S. has a clear interest in continuing to support its regional allies to withstand ongoing and future terrorism challenges.
- As instability looks set to endure and potentially worsen in multiple areas, the U.S. must work to prevent any form of terrorist ideology from gaining widespread traction.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Acknowledge the crucial policy importance of terrorism's root causes and drivers, few if any of which have anything to do with ideology, but are instead defined by local issues relating to politics, governance, corruption, the economy, the family, and society.
- Focus on capacity building, good governance, stabilization, and development, and when operating kinetically, operate by-with-and-through representative and credible local partners.
- Maintain an effective and sustainable counter-terrorism mission against ISIS in Syria and Iraq, preventing the group's resurgence or any renewal of external attack plotting.
- Sustain pressure on al-Qaeda leadership wherever it is present, while ensuring through multilateral action that al-Qaeda affiliates are at minimum contained and preferably uprooted from their expansive areas of operation.
- Where the U.S. is militarily active in countering terrorism, we should avoid premature withdrawals or drawdowns that risk crippling local partners and/or leaving behind vacuums into which terrorists will step.

US INTERESTS

- Nearly two decades on from the attacks of 9/11, the U.S. remains a principal target of jihadist groups, whether in regions like the Middle East or in the U.S. homeland.
- The U.S. has a clear interest in preventing terrorist groups from acquiring safe havens and/or territorial entities from which to plot and conduct attacks and sow instability.