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Vicious Cycles

HOW DISRUPTIVE STATES AND EXTREMIST MOVEMENTS FILL POWER VACUUMS AND FUEL EACH OTHER

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Executive Summary

A strategy oriented on great-power competition and managing terrorist threats must focus on Africa and the Middle East rather than pull away from them. These regions are home to one of the world's largest and densest concentrations of Salafi-jihadi groups, including al Qaeda and the Islamic State. They have also become the epicenter of proxy and sometimes direct competition among great powers, including Russia and China, and important regional states such as Egypt, Iran, and Turkey. The interactions of these states and non-state actors create a number of vicious cycles that perpetuate and expand conflict while feeding the Salafi-jihadi movement and giving it room to expand. Embracing the need to engage in great-power competition makes sense. Pulling away from Africa and the Middle East to do so does not.

American war-weariness and retrenchment has opened a power vacuum across the Middle East and Africa. Disruptive states such as Iran and Russia, which seek to upend regional or global balances of power and fundamentally alter the current world order,[1] have aggressively filled that vacuum by intervening in conflicts in ways that erode international norms. Such interventions, especially those that become multisided proxy wars, prolong and worsen conflicts by flooding them with weapons, money, and man power, all while raising the conflict's geopolitical stakes and paralyzing the international community's response.

This prolonging and deepening of conflict also destroys responsive governance and deepens popular grievances in the host country. These are exactly the conditions that fuel extremist insurgencies, which draw strength from their ability to forge relationships with aggrieved populations.[2] Well-known examples include Hezbollah supporting Lebanon's underprivileged Shi'a and al Qaeda supporting Syrian Sunnis against Syrian President Bashar al Assad's regime.[3] Extremist insurgent groups can recover from catastrophic losses so long as their support base faces an existential threat, which protracted conflicts create.[4]

This expansion and protraction of conflict are most advanced in the Syrian and Libyan civil wars. What began as domestic conflicts have become regional proxy wars with global implications, including humanitarian disasters, mass displacement, and emerging threats to NATO's security. The Syrian and Libyan conflicts are now merging, moreover, making them even more difficult to resolve and raising the stakes even higher.

The growth of extremist movements is a catalyst, not just a result, of multisided proxy wars. Extremist movements and disruptive states form a mutually reinforcing vicious cycle. The presence of Salafi-jihadi groups provides justification and opportunity for disruptive states to intervene in a way that masks their true objectives. Russia's air campaign in Syria is a classic example. The Kremlin's "counterterrorism" campaign against the Islamic State has primarily helped Assad attack the legitimate alternatives to his rule.[5] Assad has even freed jihadist prisoners to add a veneer of truth to his accusation that all his opponents are terrorists.[6] Disruptive states and their protégés—particularly dictators and would-be dictators like Syria's Assad or Libya's Khalifa Haftar—use the language of counterterrorism to preserve a facade of legitimacy. This framing makes it easier for war-weary US leaders to stay away, arguing that someone else is taking on the counterterrorism fight.[7]

The US cannot insulate itself from the world's dangers, as the COVID-19 pandemic makes painfully clear. The US does not have a stake in every far-flung war, but Washington does have an interest in ensuring that conflicts do not become proxy battles that fuel transnational extremist movements and morph into global geopolitical crises. The Syrian and Libyan wars

are setting conditions for serious challenges to Mediterranean security and NATO for which the US is neither diplomatically nor militarily prepared.[8]

More geopolitical crises are likely. Several Middle Eastern and African states face mounting internal pressures: See the protest movements in Lebanon and Iraq, fragile transitions in Sudan and Algeria, ethnic tensions in Ethiopia, and increasingly lethal Salafi-jihadi insurgencies in Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Niger, and Nigeria.[9] The collapse of even one of these states would open another battlefield for proxy conflict and Salafi-jihadi expansion.

This increasingly chaotic world demands proactive policies. Early recognition and action yield the most effective and cheapest policy in both lives and dollars. This insight is as true for national security as it is for public health.

Breaking the vicious cycle will require Washington to pursue a strategy to seal off localized crises, stopping them from becoming larger conflicts between external players. Such a strategy needs a new policy framework that takes a long-term view of US interests and global stability and explicitly subordinates short-term political, security, and economic objectives to those ends. Proactive strategy must include early diplomatic and foreign assistance-based interventions, prioritized according to an analysis and forecasting framework that identifies the most dangerous likely hot spots. Washington should also recommit to its allies and partners—and to its ideals—recognizing that doubts about America's commitment are partly responsible for pushing states to turn to proxy war to defend their interests.

Alongside this engagement, Washington must be more willing to pressure and, if necessary, punish its partners when they engage destructively in third-party conflicts, such as in the case of Egypt's and the United Arab Emirates' military support for Libya's Haftar and aspects of Turkey's support for the internationally recognized Libyan administration. The long-term damage caused by allowing partners to wage proxy war with impunity is worse than any short-term damage to the bilateral relationship.

Foreign policy professionals should take this lesson from the COVID-19 pandemic: Better management of growing overseas threats is infinitely preferable to dealing with them at home. America's leaders need to prepare for the inevitable and prevent foreign conflicts from worsening until they force the United States into crisis mode.

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The age of counterterrorism has passed into the age of great-power competition. The US national security apparatus has been shifting its formal policies and strategies away from the former and toward the latter for several years.[10] Successive administrations have demonstrated with words and actions their determination to draw the United States out of the Middle East and Africa.[11] These shifts reflect an effort to realign US priorities with a changing world, but they unfortunately are also shaped by war-weariness and a desire by the US public and policy community alike to close their eyes to familiar and seemingly intractable problems.

The great-power competition framework falls far short of capturing the scale of the global challenge the US faces. The China and Russia challenges are subsets of a murkier and more dangerous threat: The liberal democratic world order that the US and its allies built in the aftermath of World War II is eroding, possibly permanently. The key to stopping this erosion or building a new order that is still conducive to American interests and values lies in the same places that the US policy community and public want most to set aside—the conflict zones of the Middle East and North Africa.

Declining US leadership is leaving a void that others have rushed to fill. China and Russia are the most obvious "revisionists"[12] that seek to challenge US leadership of the international order,[13] but smaller-scale revisionists, such as Iran, also seek some version of regional hegemony. Others still, such as Saudi Arabia

and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), prefer the Pax Americana but have grown nervous about America's commitment to their security and seek to secure their interests by intervening throughout their region.[14]

These players and more are intervening in Arab civil wars—particularly in Syria and Libya—and have made these conflicts more complicated, harder to resolve, and more destructive to the local social fabric. These protracted and expanding conflicts demolish institutions of governance and destroy the public's confidence in those that remain, setting the ideal conditions for the growth of violent extremist movements. Extremist movements in turn feed disorder, providing opportunities and justification for revisionist powers to degrade the world order further. Together, revisionists and extremists form a vicious feedback loop that knits together individual crises—which Western governments and publics see as distant threats—into a geopolitical nightmare.

The leadership vacuums left by the US in Syria and Libya have enabled the current disorder, and the current trajectory of US policy increases the likelihood of worst-case scenarios with sweeping global implications. The US response to great-power competition thus far is accelerating a US shift away from the conflict zones that revisionist actors are exploiting to degrade the global order. Further US withdrawal—particularly if it includes abandoning burden-sharing partners and failing to rally allies in support of the global order—will invite opportunist malefactors and rattle those states that rely on American

steadfastness.[15] Great-power competition also risks causing US policymakers to justify backing partners whose actions enliven extremist movements for the sake of maintaining influence and keeping such states out of the Chinese and Russian orbits.[16]

Breaking this vicious cycle requires a US strategy to prevent and mitigate the internationalization of conflict zones. More broadly, it requires American policymakers and the public alike to recognize that the US withdrawal from global leadership is already making the world a more dangerous and chaotic place.[17]

American Reluctance in Syria and Libya

American war-weariness and retrenchment are partly responsible for the internationalizing of the Syrian and Libyan civil wars. US reluctance to engage created a void that other actors have filled, layering on global and regional conflicts to already complex local dynamics.

The inconsistency of US policy in Syria and its implications are clear, whatever one's judgment of the Barack Obama and Donald Trump administrations' actions and inactions. The Obama administration criticized Syrian President Bashar al Assad's crackdown on popular protests and declared a "redline" on the use of chemical weapons but ultimately decided not to retaliate militarily when Assad crossed that line.[18] Obama ended up in Syria anyway because the Islamic State exploited the existential threats that Syrian and Iraqi Sunnis faced—from both the Assad regime and Iraqi Shi'a militias—to seize a large part of eastern Syria and take over the second-largest city in Iraq.[19] The US still engaged only reluctantly and limitedly in response to the Islamic State's moves. Washington's focus on building an international coalition to fight the Islamic State helped open the field for Russia to intervene on Assad's side in 2015.

The Kremlin framed its intervention as countering the Islamic State, but its true intent—to strengthen Assad—rapidly became clear.[20] The Iranian regime had begun its extensive effort to prop up its ally Assad years earlier, but the lack of a strong American response emboldened Tehran to pursue a new and bold form of expeditionary warfare in Syria.[21] The Trump administration did strike Syrian regime targets in response to chemical weapons use and is enacting aggressive sanctions on the Assad regime, but the administration has still shied away from providing international leadership or a clear commitment on Syria.[22] President Trump's abortive 2018 withdrawal of US troops from northeastern Syria hastened the strengthening of the Islamic State and damaged America's reputation as an ally.[23] Today's US policy in Syria[24] is slowing the advances of Assad, Iran, and ISIS while intermittently addressing the humanitarian situation, but will not likely achieve an acceptable end-state on any of these fronts. US policy has done nothing to prevent the war from protracting and deepening and is not driving effectively toward ending the conflict.[25]

Syria's civil war has become a front in several global and regional conflicts. The Iranian regime seeks to build a "Shi'a crescent" across the Middle East to preserve and export the Islamic revolution, achieve regional hegemony, expel the US from the Middle East, and eliminate Israel.[26] Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan wants a new Syrian government closer to his interests and ideology; his support for Syrian opposition groups has drawn Turkish forces into the Syrian conflict, where Turkish objectives also include managing massive refugee outflows and disrupting the formation of a Syrian Kurdish statelet.[27] Russian President Vladimir Putin has found an opportunity to pursue several strategic objectives in Syria, whose Arab Spring uprising he saw as part of a tide of Western-backed efforts to collapse dictatorships like his own.[28] The Kremlin has leveraged Syria to reestablish a military footprint in the eastern Mediterranean and again make itself a power player in the Middle East, advancing long-running goals to weaken NATO and raise Russia to global-power status while diminishing the US.[29]

Russia has applied its Syria playbook to a limited extent in Libya, where a chaotic civil war paired with the West's reluctance to engage has created opportunities for the Kremlin to advance these and other wide-ranging objectives.[30] Some are simple economic and military interests, such as gaining new construction contracts and acquiring basing on the

central Mediterranean.[31] But Putin has a deeper strategic investment in Libya, too. It is an opportunity to undermine NATO on its doorstep, in a country where a NATO intervention helped rebels kill their longtime dictator, whose gruesome death was captured in a video that Putin reportedly rewatches obsessively.[32] Syria and Libya together offer Putin a variety of levers on NATO; these include reestablishing the Soviet-era military footprint and gaining a point of influence over the European and NATO states that he seeks to divide from the US and each other.

Western disinterest and disunity allowed other players—including Russia and especially regional states—to transform the Libyan conflict into a proxy war. Several Middle Eastern states have actively shaped Libya's trajectory since 2011, when they armed and funded the rebellion against Libyan dictator Muammar Qaddafi.[33] NATO's intervention also contributed to Qaddafi's fall—but the US and Europe had no interest in remaining to shape Libya's governance outcomes.[34] Egypt, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and the UAE remained and continued their influence-building,[35] laying the groundwork for Libya to become one front in a regional battle to determine the future of governance in the Muslim world.

The Arab Spring set in motion an ideologically inflected power struggle that has driven apart Sunni states and incentivized them to battle for influence across the Muslim world, often with destructive consequences. The 2011 popular uprisings raised the prospect of democracy and an organized Islamist political opposition that some Arab rulers, notably in the UAE and Saudi Arabia, saw as an existential threat.[36] This threat perception pitted them against Qatar and Turkey, whose leaders sought instead to co-opt political Islam to topple their rivals and secure their regimes. This Sunni rift crystalized in Egypt, where the anti-Islamist states backed the counterrevolution against democratically elected Muslim Brotherhood President Mohammed Morsi.[37] Tensions escalated again in 2017, when Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and their allies blockaded Qatar.

This intra-Sunni struggle is partly ideological but is more fundamentally about power, with both sides seeking to shape the governments of third-party states to serve their domestic priorities and their regional and extra-regional ambitions.[38] Nonviolent political Islam raises its own challenges, but it is not generating the same extra-regional effects as its opponents are.[39] This Middle Eastern competition has intersected with an increased Saudi and Emirati drive to defend their security interests throughout the broader region, driven partly by doubts about America's commitment to their security with the negotiation and signing of the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (Iran nuclear deal) and the Trump administration's repeated declarations of its intent to pull back from the region.[40]

Regional players have gradually ramped up their involvement in Libya to the point that they can now pause and accelerate the conflict. This interference has occurred partly because the international community—particularly the US after the 2012 Benghazi attack—has avoided committing to Libya until threats became too obvious to ignore. For example, the US and Europe marshaled policy responses to the formation of an Islamic State stronghold on the Mediterranean coast and swelling migration into Europe.[41] The US and others contented themselves with a UN-led peace process that muddled along for years while several member states violated the arms embargo on Libya with impunity.[42]

This negligence bore fruit in April 2019. Libya appeared to be stabilizing, but not in a way that met the maximalist objectives of would-be Libyan strongman Khalifa Haftar and secured the interests of his backers, notably Egypt, Russia, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE. Haftar's backers resourced and armed him to launch an offensive on Libya's capital, Tripoli, that raged for more than a year.[43] That war brought in Turkey to defend Tripoli; the Turkish intervention proved momentarily decisive and thwarted Haftar's ambitions in May 2020.

Libya now hovers between possible futures, flooded with foreign weaponry, increasingly fragmented, and stretched between powerful rival players.[44] The Libyan conflict's broader implications became clearer with Turkey's entry. The Syrian war spilled into Libya, with Turkey and Russia facing off and Syrian mercenaries entering the Libyan

battlespace.[45] Libya, like Syria, is now at NATO's bleeding edge, with the added complication that Turkey's motivations—which include redrawing Mediterranean maritime boundaries—run afoul of fellow NATO members.[46]

Effects of Interventions

The chaotic, multiplayer interventions in Syria and Libya have warped these conflicts in ways that harm both the local social fabric and the international system. These interventions are not mere geopolitical competition or the routine pursuit of national interests. Their hallmarks include introducing new weaponry and man power to the battlefield,[47] spoiling or diverting conflict resolution efforts,[48] pursuing deniability and the use of hybrid war and "gray zone" tactics,[49] and merging conflict zones.

Critics of US foreign policy will charge that the US is equally guilty of intervening in foreign wars to disastrous effect. The invasion of Iraq and operations in Afghanistan obviously did not yield the promised or desired outcomes. The decision to invade Iraq and the execution of both wars are clearly open to criticism and argument. But the invasion of Iraq is not the original sin from which every subsequent Middle East crisis flows. The effects of the invasion must be considered alongside the outcomes of all subsequent US policies, including drawdowns, withdrawals, and reentries, and their interactions with other states' actions, global and regional trends, and local dynamics.[50]

The lesson to draw is not that US interventions inevitably fail[51] and that ceding the field to other actors will at best generate better results and at least pose no threat to American interests. The US has taken exactly this approach since 2011 with catastrophic results—Syria and Libya among them. In an ideal world, the US could skip these thorny questions and forsake its responsibility to maintain the global order on which its prosperity and security rest. But the post-2011 world shows the reality—that when American leadership wavers and recedes, adversaries and malign actors fill the void.

No viable alternative to US global leadership exists based on either power or values.[52] The US ability to project power and gather allies and partners remains unmatched. The US and its liberal democratic allies also intervene with different intent than the autocratic or autocratic-leaning states that are increasingly prominent today do.

Intent falls on a spectrum, of course, and it is wrong to attribute to the US and its allies purely altruistic intent and to US adversaries evil intent only. But it is also wrong to draw false moral equivalencies between America's actions in the world and those of, say, Putin's Russia, whose strategy in Syria includes the deliberate bombing of hospitals and schools.[53] The US and its allies are aiming to not only secure their interests but also protect human rights, promote representative governance, and avert humanitarian emergencies, however fraught the execution of these objectives may become.[54] Taking all flaws in US policymaking and execution into account, it remains the case that only principled leadership by the US and its democratic allies offers a chance of shaping a tumultuous region in a positive direction.

Syria, Libya, and the Lack of US Leadership

The Syrian and Libyan cases demonstrate how proxy interventions expand, intensify, and prolong civil wars while deforming the local society and undermining local and international conflict resolution mechanisms.

Assad's backers have prolonged the Syrian civil war by propping up the dictator and preventing the formation of an effective opposition to his regime acceptable to the international community. Assad's forces are extremely reliant on external support, including Russian air power.[55] They have relied on Iranian and Iranian proxy forces to conduct key operations as part of an integration that will grant Iran an enduring foothold in Syria.[56] Assad's backers have also provided him diplomatic cover and options, enabling him to spoil negotiations.[57] Anti-Assad players have also caused instability and created opportunity for

Salafi-jihadi groups, but at a smaller scale. Turkey destabilized northeastern Syria in 2019 and disrupted counter–Islamic State operations with an offensive targeting Syrian Kurdish forces after American troops partially withdrew.[58]

External players are also making the Syrian civil war more violent. Russia has provided air capability that supercharged Assad's brutal effort to displace civilians en masse and break the opposition's will.[59] Assad's backers are not responsible for all of his regime's brutality, including its use of chemical weapons and barrel bombs, but they provided the capabilities and man power for him to hold his position and launch new campaigns such as the bloody offensive in northwestern Syria's Idlib province in early 2020.[60] They have also repeatedly blocked efforts on the international stage to hold him accountable for atrocities such as his use of chemical weapons against his own population.[61]

The prolonging and worsening of the conflict has further torn Syria's social, economic, and institutional fabric and disrupted the local mechanisms that would otherwise facilitate conflict resolution in the country.[62] The Assad regime has employed collective punishment to discourage the formation of local governing structures that can provide an alternative to the regime.[63] This destruction of institutions also opens the door to other malign actors capable of delivering an alternative to Assad's often absent or brutal governance; see the efforts by al Qaeda–linked groups to take over Idlib's judicial system.[64]

External players, particularly Russia, are stymieing the international community's response on Syria and doing lasting harm to the global order in the process. Russian officials framed their 2015 intervention as fighting the Islamic State—a claim that was rapidly debunked but still fueled a long-running discussion in Washington, DC, about whether to cooperate with Russia against the Islamic State.[65] The Kremlin has also obstructed international fact-finding missions into Assad's chemical weapons use and worked to marginalize the UN-led diplomatic process for Syria, allowing Putin to lead an alternative negotiating track that has gained limited legitimacy but achieved only cosmetic effects.[66] Even more significantly, the

prolonging of the Syrian conflict has numbed the world to the crisis and heightened the sense that the world's leaders both cannot and will not stop an ongoing and preventable humanitarian disaster that was predictable before it grew immense.[67]

This sense of fecklessness and hopelessness is one of Putin's general aims, since it is one way he seeks to end US-led unipolarity and reestablish Russia as a first-rate global power.[68] Syria is also a potential front for a Russian-Turkish confrontation that could invalidate NATO's collective defense provisions, though Putin has thus far played this possibility carefully to avoid escalation to higher levels than he desires.[69] The Syrian war also supports Putin's main foreign policy efforts in the former Soviet Union by providing a distraction from the Russian invasion of Ukraine and a learning ground for a new way of war.[70]

Libya, perhaps even more than Syria, demonstrates the effects of American disengagement. External actors, including Russia, have grafted their interests onto Libya's civil war and reenergized a conflict that would otherwise have de-escalated. Haftar's offensive on Tripoli in April 2019 torpedoed the UN-led peace process because it was about to codify the status quo, constraining Haftar's nationwide ambitions and preserving a UN-backed government that Haftar and his backers view as unacceptably linked to Turkey and Qatar.[71]

The war became more foreign as it raged on. On one side, Egypt, Russia, the UAE, and others provided Haftar with air power, weaponry, snipers, and Syrian and Sudanese fighters.[72] On the other side, Turkey has provided advanced weaponry, including drones, and thousands of Syrian militiamen. Haftar's coalition is particularly dependent on foreign military support and the financial backing required to preserve the fragile military state he has built in eastern Libya.[73]

The internationalization of Libya's war made it much more violent, bringing a new level of military and civilian casualties that will only deepen political and societal rifts. The arrival of Russian mercenary snipers to the Tripoli front in fall 2019 made the fight noticeably deadlier.[74] The Kremlin continues to

deny evidence of Russian private military contractors fighting in Libya.[75] Likely Emirati air strikes have struck civilian targets, including a migrant detention center.[76] The availability of mercenaries and drones has made it easier for external actors to raise the temperature of third-party conflicts for a limited cost and with little fear of domestic or international consequences.[77]

As in Syria, the prolonged and increasingly violent conflict is tearing Libya's social fabric and disrupting the mechanisms that could otherwise facilitate conflict resolution. Haftar's gradual foreign-enabled takeover of eastern Libya has been damaging in its displacement and demonization of his opponents and selected populations, and retaliatory attacks have occurred across the country.[78] Virulent propaganda campaigns, spread online by foreign trolls, are deepening preexisting divisions among Libyans and doing long-term harm to the public's ability to trust information.[79]

The prolonging of the Libyan conflict is also raising threats to the population over time, including a liquidity crisis in the banking system, worsening medical care, and frequent displacement of populations. Haftar's assault on Tripoli, which Turkish intervention ended at least temporarily in May 2020, had introduced regular air and artillery strikes on the country's most populated area. These include a strike on Tripoli's main hospital in May just as COVID-19 reached the country.[80] This economic and societal degradation risks creating desperation among vulnerable populations and may open the door to Salafi-jihadi infiltration that Libyan communities were previously able to resist.[81]

The way of war developing in Libya is rooted in deniability—both the perpetrators' ability to deny their actions and the international community's ability and willingness to accept this denial.[82] The states intervening in Libya have adopted a double-speak with which they obscure or legitimize their actions while giving reluctant Western countries the cover they need to avoid taking politically or diplomatically difficult action. Haftar's backers have long obscured their role, even as it became increasingly obvious, by maintaining superficial support for the UN-brokered political agreement that established the unity government.[83] Flagrant violations rendered a UN arms embargo nearly meaningless.[84]

Turkey, taking the opposite tack, has trumpeted the UN-backed government's legitimacy as justification for an intervention whose primary objectives include violating internationally accepted naval boundaries.[85] The Syria crisis has set precedents for Libya, including a fraught Russian-Turkish bilateral channel that sidelines the US and Europe from key discussions.[86] The effects of the Syria crisis in Europe—namely, terrorist attacks and mass migration—also widened divisions among EU states on Libya.[87] The US has been similarly reluctant to engage for its own political reasons. Taken together, these dynamics have decoupled international efforts on Libya from the ground reality and continuously reaffirmed to Libyans and those intervening in Libya that the international system has no willingness to use its power.

The Syrian and Libyan conflicts have protracted partly because geopolitical competition tends to link conflicts together, expanding the resources that can be drawn on to expand and prolong them.[88] This allows states to shift man power and weaponry from one theater to another when conflicts would have otherwise stalled for lack of capacity or will. The Turks and the Russians have brought Syrians to fight in Libya. Iran has recruited Afghans and Pakistanis to Syria.

Political cross-pollination also plays a role, particularly in constructing a facade of legitimacy for would-be dictators. Haftar has trumpeted his growing closeness with the Assad regime, a relationship that allows him to play head of state.[89] Opposition to Turkey in Libya may also partially underpin the UAE's softening toward the Syrian dictator.[90] Russia and Turkey both seek to play powerbroker in Libya but in doing so make it a bargaining chip among other interests, including the higher-priority Syrian theater, meaning that agreements on Libya will be subordinated. Libya's future is now tied to Syria's in a way that will make it more difficult to isolate and solve Libya's own problems.

Prolonged Conflicts Empower Extremists

Legitimate and responsive governance is key for societal stability.[91] External interventions are degrading this governance or preventing its formation, both by prolonging conflicts and by propping up nonresponsive governments that ultimately worsen popular grievances. Absent or abusive governance in turn enables the growth of extremist movements such as the Salafi-jihadi movement.

Salafi-jihadism is a fringe ideology that requires its adherents to wage holy war to bring about an Islamic polity, governed under an interpretation of Islamic law meant to return society to the earliest days of Islam. The movement's goals are utopian and apocalyptic—they forecast a clash of civilizations of the Muslim world against the West. The vast majority of Muslims, throughout history and today, thoroughly reject Salafi-jihadi ideology, the painful effects of which are felt most often in Muslim communities.[92]

The availability of conflict zones is crucial for the development of transnational extremist movements. The Salafi-jihadi movement needed this disorder and weakness in Afghanistan, Iraq, and now Syria to cohere its leadership and develop networks of individuals to accelerate its growth and spread. This phenomenon is not limited to the Islamic State, al Qaeda, and its ilk. Elements of the transnational white supremacy movement may be exploiting vulnerable areas, including the Ukraine conflict, as training grounds.[93]

The Salafi-jihadi movement's strength depends on its ability to forge relationships with aggrieved Sunni populations.[94] Like other insurgencies, it relies on access to a population to survive and grow.[95] Salafi-jihadi leaders tried and failed for decades to end the isolation of their fundamentally unpopular movement to develop a transnational movement in the Sunni population.

They failed to penetrate most Arab societies deeply until 2011, when exogenous events delivered the conditions that the Salafi-jihadi vanguard had long sought: disorder, conflict, and grievance that would allow Salafi-jihadis to gain popular support from desperate and coerced populations. The Arab Spring aligned popular objectives with those of the Salafi-jihadi movement; both sought to collapse and replace regimes, albeit in very different ways.[96] The collapses that occurred generated real and perceived threats to Sunni populations that Salafi-jihadi fighters offered to protect against. This situation created nonideological incentives for communities to permit Salafi-jihadi presence, or even governance, in return for help in survival and self-defense.

In Syria and Iraq, the Islamic State took over populations that were already fighting the brutal Assad regime or wracked with sectarian violence. In Libya, Islamic State militants exploited the seams of the civil war to seize the isolated and undefended city of Sirte.[97] Other Salafi-jihadi groups are succeeding under the policy radar elsewhere by focusing on governance where Sunni populations are vulnerable. In West Africa's Sahel region, for example, Salafi-jihadis present themselves as the solution to absent or predatory states and rising ethnic violence.[98]

Any foreign intervention in states with sizable Muslim populations that causes or perpetuates governance collapses therefore sets conditions beneficial to the Salafi-jihadi movement. External interference that protracts conflicts compounds the rending of the social fabric over time and makes eventual reconciliation and stability even harder to achieve. Al Qaeda–linked groups' aforementioned infiltration of the judicial system in Syria's Idlib province is one example.

In Syria and Iraq, the weakened Islamic State is growing more established and confident, demonstrating its ability to exploit disruptions in counterterrorism pressure and political infighting.[99] In Libya, the disintegration of the Qaddafi-era security services, the disorganization and disunity of anti-Qaddafi factions, and the general deterioration of order in Benghazi during and after 2011 allowed Salafi-jihadi groups in Benghazi to recruit from vulnerable communities and partner with nonideological armed groups against common enemies.[100] Salafi-jihadi groups in Libya have not yet recouped their losses from military pressure in 2014–17 but will strengthen in the coming years if Libya remains unstable and fragmented.

Interventions on Behalf of Autocratic Rulers

Foreign intervention that adds matériel, fighters, money, and diplomatic cover to prolong and expand wars creates conditions favorable to extremist movements, even if the intervener seeks to install a representative government. But foreign backers do particular damage when they prop up a real or aspirational autocrat. Such support for autocracies may be intended to preserve an ally in regional competitions or to prevent a change to a governance model that threatens the backers' own model. Democratic states may also support autocrats in the hopes that a strong leader can deliver security. Unfortunately, this trade-off eventually destroys the potential for legitimate and responsive governance.

Autocracies provide security only temporarily and worsen grievances while they do so.[101] By attempting to crush popular dissent, they instead lay the groundwork for insurgencies. Autocrats make this situation worse by targeting the most broadly palatable parts of the opposition, which are most threatening to their rule. They leave behind the more extreme wings and use them to discredit all opposition as extremists. Take anti-Islamist autocrats' crackdowns on political Islam for example.[102] By closing space to a peaceful expression of Islamist opposition, such crackdowns reinforce the arguments of Salafi-jihadis themselves, who claim that the system does not allow peaceful change and that therefore bullets, not ballots—to borrow an al Qaeda leader's turn of phrase—deliver results.[103]

Crackdowns can create the problem they seek to solve by forcing the government's opponents into survival mode, driving networks underground and in some cases toward militarization. When autocracies fall, extremist organizations are often the ones to benefit. The chaos of a regime collapse and the low bar for governance favors actors who come prepared with a plan and can generally quash their internal divisions, a dynamic that favors extremist organizations over diverse and representative oppositions. This dynamic played out in Tunisia, where Salafi-jihadi activity exploded after its longtime

president's 2011 ouster and yielded both a domestic terrorism challenge and Tunisia's high foreign fighter outflows to Syria.[104]

Highly repressive governance can also favor extremist groups by forcing opposition groups that would normally resist Salafi-jihadis to cooperate tactically against their common enemy to survive, creating space for Salafi-jihadis to attempt to enforce their ideology over time. These dynamics played out during Haftar's 2014–17 campaign to seize Benghazi. His blanket targeting of populations—including displacing civilians of certain tribal and ethnic backgrounds—created an opportunity for Salafi-jihadi groups to form coalitions with other militias, masking their presence and opening a conduit to resources.[105]

Some regimes empower extremists deliberately. Assad and his backers have targeted moderate opposition forces that posed the most serious threat to Assad's regime. More egregiously, the Assad regime took deliberate steps to strengthen extremist groups by freeing Salafi-jihadi prisoners and covertly transferring weapons to anti-Assad protesters.[106] These actions sought to prove domestically and internationally that Assad's opponents were terrorists. This strategy worked in a fashion: The international community rallied to fight the Islamic State threat, leaving the Assad regime to focus on establishing its control in priority areas of the country. This strategy was also a boon to al Qaeda and related Salafi-jihadi groups that gradually infiltrated the opposition in parts of the country. Assad's control of Syria is tenuous, even as he tries to present his rule as fait accompli, and Syria has become a base for the Salafi-jihad movement for the foreseeable future.[107]

An autocrats' success at crushing, buying off, or neutralizing dissenters at home is unlikely to translate to similar success in another country. Regimes that have the resources and savvy to secure their domestic interests struggle to implement this model when intervening in countries that lack the necessary resources, leadership, infrastructure, and level of social control.

The repercussions of autocrats' interventions are all the more dangerous because autocratic regimes tend to extend conflicts by pursuing maximalist objectives

that are grounded in regime security. They therefore struggle to accept compromises because the implications of those compromises threaten core interests, such as the legitimacy of the state. This results in a pursuit of objectives that appear out of step with the state's apparent security and economic interests.

For example, the UAE's support for Haftar's offensive in Tripoli appeared out of scale with the UAE's relatively limited security and economic interests in Libya. But the level of Emirati engagement makes more sense as part of the UAE's ongoing regional battle against real and perceived Islamists, which Emirati leaders consider a threat to regime security.[108] This does not mean that autocrats pursue existential objectives in all foreign activities to include interventions, but it does mean that they can be more destructive when core interests are at stake; see the significance of Russia's intervention in Ukraine compared to its comparatively low-stakes deployment to Mozambique.

Repressive governance benefits the Salafi-jihadi movement over time as grievances deepen. This creates a long-term danger for repressive states, but one they de-prioritize for near-term gains. This trade-off is heightened because the real or assumed presence of Salafi-jihadi militants can be a near-term benefit for intervening states seeking cover or justification for subversive intensions.

Extremists and the Vicious Feedback Loop

Revisionist powers capitalize on real and imagined Salafi-jihadi threats to pursue other objectives while making actually combating the Salafi-jihadi threat more difficult. External powers in Libya and Syria have touted military interventions as counterterrorism while focusing their attacks on political rivals instead of, and sometimes to the benefit of, Salafi-jihadi groups. Claiming the language of counterterrorism hinders international responses to revisionist actions and is ineffective, disruptive, and causes long-term damage to actual counterterrorism objectives.

Revisionist states can claim the counterterrorism mantle to legitimize themselves and shape the

international system to their benefit. Russia's claim to be fighting the Islamic State in Syria was cover for its intervention to prop up Assad and establish a beachhead on the eastern Mediterranean.[109] But Moscow also sees subtler opportunities to use international counterterrorism missions to legitimize Russian-led security organizations in support of an overarching effort to use regional and international organizations to build a "constellation of alliances and friendly states."[110]

States may also claim terrorist attacks as justification for operations that they seek to carry out anyway. Egypt responded to domestic terrorist attacks in 2017 by conducting retaliatory strikes against the Islamic State in Libya, but the strikes actually targeted anti-Haftar Islamist militias that were not responsible for the attacks in Egypt.[111]

Intervening states may also conduct counterterrorism operations but often do so in ways that backfire and worsen grievances. Russia has deployed mercenaries[112] to several African conflicts as part of its effort to expand influence on the continent, but these deployments also represent the export of a militarized counterterrorism strategy that is more likely to inflame insurgencies than address their causes.[113] In other cases, counterterrorism interventions may disrupt Salafi-jihadi groups in the near term while setting conditions for long-term instability. The Emirati counterterrorism mission in Yemen has disrupted al Qaeda's franchise there but has also led to greater fragmentation and a potential future conflict in southern Yemen due partly to Emirati patronage-building among secessionist groups.[114]

Even if intervening states do not engage in counterproductive counterterrorism efforts or directly undermine counterterrorism, their progress toward their objectives can make it harder for other actors to carry out a bare minimum of counterterrorism actions.

Current US counterterrorism efforts are insufficient to contain, much less defeat, the Salafi-jihadi movement.[115] However, certain counterterrorism actions—such as high-value targeting, direct military action to disrupt Salafi-jihadi operations, and intelligence sharing—have near-term effects that can

disrupt Salafi-jihadi attack planning and slow groups' growth. The prolonging and expanding of conflicts can block or interrupt these efforts.

Most concretely, revisionist powers are conducting military buildups and operations that threaten US freedom of movement, including the ability to sustain current counterterrorism operations. Stand-offs between American and Russian forces in northeastern Syria in February 2020 are an obvious case.[116] Turkish operations against Kurdish forces, the primary US counterterrorism partner in Syria, have also disrupted the fight against the Islamic State.[117] In Yemen, the Iranian regime has delivered weaponry to the al Houthi movement for targeting Saudi Arabia, but that weaponry is also capable of shooting down US drones and military aircraft engaged in counterterrorism.[118] Foreign intervention in the Libyan war poses the same risk.

Russian mercenaries shot down a US drone over Tripoli in November 2019.[119] The introduction of more advanced systems by Russia, Turkey, or the UAE may make it difficult for the US to continue the limited strikes that have slowed the Islamic State's rebuilding in the country—particularly if the Department of Defense moves ahead with potential plans to shutter a drone base in neighboring Niger, leaving the US more dependent on European bases.[120] Finally, China's first overseas military base in Djibouti has already been used to disrupt US military operations.[121] A future expansion into the Gulf of Guinea, where China has already begun counter-piracy efforts, would extend this risk to Africa's Atlantic coast.[122]

Regional squabbles enabled by the weakening of the global order also disrupt governance and undercut counterterrorism initiatives. This effect is most obvious in the Syrian, Libyan, and Yemeni wars but also occurs at a diplomatic level that nonetheless weakens already fragile states. Somalia's federal government, which relies heavily on foreign aid, has been caught between the Saudi-Emirati and Qatari-Turkish axes since the schism in 2017. A competition over Somalia's allegiance—in the context of the militarization of the Horn of Africa—has disrupted foreign security and training missions in the country and

even escalated to brawls in the Somali parliament.[123] The UAE has intensified its support for Somali federal member states, weakening the already extremely fragile federal government and incentivizing the diversion of resources from fighting al Shabaab.[124] This competition is happening as al Shabaab increases its attacks on Americans and seeks to train pilots for international terrorist attacks.[125]

Challenges to US alliances and partnerships can also disrupt counterterrorism coordination. For example, states' adoption of Chinese telecommunications technology may harm intelligence sharing.[126] The weakening of the global order and reduced US leadership will make building coalitions, such as the 82-country Global Coalition to Defeat Daesh, even more difficult.

Current Trends Lead to More Conflict

The trajectory is bleak if current trends hold and the US continues to withdraw from global leadership. Civil wars in which external forces fight each other by proxy will continue to emerge and expand. These conflicts will spiral more widely, drawing in more players and merging more zones of instability as the US withdraws further and international coordination declines. The current trajectory of several conflict zones, paired with the state of the Salafi-jihadi movement, creates opportunities for major expansions of mutually reinforcing geopolitical disasters and violent extremist attacks in the coming years.

Global and regional power competition will likely yield greater state-on-state conflict in the next five to 10 years. One likely theater is the increasingly contested Mediterranean Sea. This crisis may surprise Washington when it arrives, but it should not; the pieces of a Mediterranean war are already falling into place. The Syrian and Libyan wars will continue to expand and merge, heightening all of their overlaying regional and international conflicts and drawing in more firepower. Both the Syrian and Libyan conflicts are already endangering NATO due to Turkey's stand-offs with Russia and its tensions with other NATO members in the eastern Mediterranean.[127]

New conflicts will also emerge, creating opportunities for both proxy interventions and the Salafi-jihadi movement alike. Inter-state conflicts are possible. Another spike in tensions between Iran and Saudi Arabia, like in fall 2019, could spill into a larger conflict;[128] hostilities could spike between India and Pakistan, both nuclear-armed states, over the disputed Kashmir region.[129] India and China clashed over a disputed border in June 2020 and may be preparing for more operations.[130] Which wars will break out remains unclear, but they will break out as the US-led world order declines and states seek to secure their interests in an uncertain environment.

State collapses may also open new battlegrounds for external actors to enter. Several linchpin African states that contain or neighbor Salafi-jihadi insurgencies are fundamentally unstable. Egyptian President Abdel Fatah al Sisi's regime faced a notable burst of dissent in 2019[131] and may struggle to maintain its chokehold on the country's burgeoning population. Ethiopia, another African powerhouse, faces instability, political uncertainty, and potential violence.[132] An unresolved dispute between Egypt and Ethiopia over a Nile dam could also destabilize northeastern Africa.[133] Algeria and Sudan remain fragile after mass popular movements ousted top leadership and, in Sudan's case, enabled a military coup. But the potential for counterrevolution remains high, as does renewed and more violent unrest should the 2019 revolutions reverse or fail.[134] In the Middle East, Lebanon and Iraq face persistent anti-regime protests amid abysmal misgovernance.[135] The leadership vacuum left by the US will limit the international community's ability to address or prevent these crises.

The COVID-19 pandemic introduces significant uncertainty and raises the likelihood of previously extremely unlikely but game-changing scenarios. Analysts have argued that the pandemic could be either a catalyst to China's global rise or its Chernobyl.[136] The pandemic also compounds already serious challenges to the stability of the Iranian regime, though the most likely scenario is not regime collapse but the empowering of hard-liners.[137]

There are alternatives to the above forecast. Potential counter-indicators to spreading conflict and its exploitation include instances of successful local conflict prevention and resolution, non-coerced reductions of foreign support for militias in conflict zones, and instances of effective resistance to Salafi-jihadi expansion in unstable and poor-governance environments. These alternatives are sufficiently unlikely, and the aforementioned conflict and state collapse scenarios are sufficiently likely, that the most practical course requires preparation and a proactive approach. A policy based on sealing off conflicts from external meddling also prevents several of the worst escalation paths.

The US approach to great-power competition thus far risks encouraging or reinforcing proxy wars rather than deterring them. Initial US actions indicate a narrow view of asset and budget re-prioritization, even though US strategy documents take a multifaceted view of great-power competition. A notable case is the Department of Defense's weighing of a drawdown in Africa to shift assets against China and Russia, even though the relatively low-cost American military footprint delivers greater relative value in Africa.[138] Removing US forces from counterterrorism missions—particularly those in which a light footprint is having a significant impact—disrupts not only the mission but also the counterterrorism partnership, itself a valuable tool in great-power competition.[139]

Great-power competition is also reinforcing a problematic US unwillingness to shape the behavior of autocratic partner states, particularly those whose regional activities are fueling conflicts and state collapse, out of fear of losing these partners to others' orbits. The US risks repeating a Cold War error of backing autocratic partners that are themselves counterproductive out of a fear that they will turn to China or Russia instead.[140] This fear is overstated and does not account for the scale of US economic, political, and security leverage over these partners, notably the Gulf states. This short-term calculation also does long-term strategic damage to both the global order and the fight against the Salafi-jihadi movement.

Under any of the above circumstances, disorder will increase on a level that will deliver unprecedented resources and opportunity to the Salafi-jihadi movement. The Salafi-jihadi movement's growth requires

exogenous events to imperil Sunni populations and turn them against their states. The Arab Spring delivered one such shock wave. Global and regional competition may deliver the next. And this time, it will likely be worse because foreign involvement has made local conflicts more lethal and interconnected and has compounded the popular grievances that already existed in 2011.

What Comes Next for the Salafi-Jihadi Movement

Salafi-jihadi groups are well aware of global power and political dynamics and will seek to exploit them. They will likely take advantage of global focus being elsewhere to consolidate and expand their control of populations. Some Salafi-jihadi groups, particularly in the al Qaeda network, have learned to operate under the West's policy radar by empowering local affiliates and prioritizing winning the local governance competition. This adaptation reflects Western pressure but, more importantly, reflects lessons learned by Salafi-jihadi leaders in pursuit of the group's ultimate goal of transforming governance in the Muslim world.[141] In a world where the West has either retreated, divided, or focused on a narrow definition of great-power competition, swathes of territory may be effectively ceded to the Salafi-jihadi movement. Salafi-jihadi groups are already quietly building statelets in eastern and western Africa, and Islamic State cells are beginning to reestablish social control in southeastern Syria.[142]

Salafi-jihadi groups may already be reading the trajectory of US posture and seeking to hasten the US withdrawal from the Muslim world. A renewed emphasis by African al Qaeda affiliates on attacking US personnel in early 2020 signals a concerted effort to raise the costs of the US force presence at a time when the US is already extremely sensitive to overseas casualties and the Department of Defense is looking to move resources elsewhere.[143]

Washington also cannot assume that Salafi-jihadi activity in the West will not surge. Some Salafi-jihadi groups have eschewed conducting major external attacks as a matter of strategy, but there is no ideological firebreak to prevent them from attacking as soon as they assess the moment is right. Take al Qaeda, which has been emphasizing the local fight but now appears to be placing a renewed emphasis on attacking the West.[144] Upcoming leadership changes and generational shifts in the Salafi-jihadi movement also make it difficult to assess how a new generation will act.[145] Disruptions to global counterterrorism infrastructure may open gaps that Salafi-jihadi groups, when under less pressure, find and exploit.

Such a surge of attacks would have political effects in the West. Attacks in Europe are intended to cause polarization and heighten the alienation of European Muslims to the benefit of the Salafi-jihadi movement.[146] Localized Salafi-jihadi groups use this same strategy of inciting backlash against the populations that they in turn claim to defend.[147] The Salafi-jihadi presence can also enflame conflicts and cause or heighten displacement, feeding into refugee flows at a level that the Western political system has not been able to absorb.

An uptick in Salafi-jihadi attacks would likely worsen dysfunction in the West to the benefit of revisionist adversaries. The Salafi-jihadi movement's greatest danger to the West is not physical destruction; no reasonable analyst forecasts the movement approaching its apocalyptic goal. However, the Salafi-jihadi movement is an existential threat because it can cause "the peoples of the West to turn against one another, to fear and suspect their neighbors, to constrain their freedoms, and to disrupt their ordinary lives."[148] Put differently, the Salafi-jihadi movement cannot destroy the United States, but it can help Americans destroy themselves. This danger is much greater when the world order is already declining, because of both the West's own divisions and identity crisis and the efforts of revisionist powers. Salafi-jihadi attacks can reinforce Western countries' current impulse to turn inward, undermining the global leadership, openness, and alliance-building that are required to sustain and strengthen the liberal international order.

The US Needs a New Policy Framework

America cannot engage with the world on only the terms it prefers. At minimum, the US government should develop a strategy for preventing and mitigating the transformation of conflict zones into expanding proxy conflicts. Achieving this objective will require not only a new policy framework but also an analytical framework to identify and prioritize the developments that are most likely to spark inter-state conflict and catalyze extremist movements.

The US objective should be to seal off local conflicts from becoming larger conflagrations between external powers. The US has a greater chance of mobilizing allies and the international community to address crises if external actors that are more interested in fighting each other than solving the crisis are excluded.

In some places—especially Syria and Libya—many players are already deeply embedded. The US goal should therefore be to limit external actors' ability to prolong and deepen the conflict through both military action and information operations. This engagement should coincide with efforts to slow down the erosion and collapse of local structures that are trying to keep society functioning and resisting Salafi-jihadi infiltration.

These efforts must be paired. Washington has tried to strengthen local governance without taking serious steps to end the war responsible for degrading it. The US Agency for International Development has had some success shoring up municipal governance in Libya, for example, mitigating some of the effects of the long war and helping inoculate communities against Salafi-jihadi groups.[149] But this work is only a delaying tactic when the war, stoked and fueled by foreign money and arms, has continued to tear those structures apart.

Such a strategy would require a fundamental reframing of US policy that subordinates short-term objectives to long-term goals and seeks to prevent crises rather than react to them. Earlier lower-cost foreign assistance interventions—as have already been proposed in a strategy to defeat the Salafi-jihadi movement[150]—should preempt the need for later large-scale military interventions like the multiyear campaign to destroy the Islamic State's territorial caliphate.

First, Washington must choose its partners carefully and be willing to use its leverage to shape the behavior of states that worsen conflicts and fuel the Salafi-jihadi movement. This requirement complicates the US government preference for partnering with host countries to fight insurgencies because the host countries' actions and interests may fuel the conditions conducive to insurgency.[151] The US and its allies likely need to apply more pressure and offer more support to counterterrorism partners whose security forces are contributing to radicalization. The partnership challenge extends to the regional and international levels. Washington should be more aggressive in shaping the behavior of partners that worsen and prolong conflicts. A clearer and more consistent American commitment to global stability should also limit partner states' motivation to participate in regional conflicts in a bid to secure themselves.

Second, the US needs a way to analyze the most likely and most dangerous threats and prioritize responses. The Salafi-jihadi movement succeeds in a fairly narrow set of conditions—most importantly when local conflict or other exogenous effects have weakened communities—and defeating the movement does not require a global campaign to solve poverty and state fragility.[152] Katherine Zimmerman proposes[153] developing baseline assessments and indicators to measure communities' resilience or vulnerability to the Salafi-jihadi movement and the movement's relative strength. This model should be synthesized with another: assessments and forecasts of conflict trajectories and their effects. The synthesis of these two analytic models will enable policymakers to rank and prioritize overlapping threats to US national security interests to inform early action: strategic-level nexus targeting.

Such a forecasting exercise would almost certainly rank Syria and Libya as urgent and worsening threats, and the US should take immediate action to prevent the further fraying of the world order and stem the expansion of the Salafi-jihadi movement through these conflicts.

These recommendations, and the overarching strategy, advance US objectives in the great-power competition with Russia and China. The conditions that could invalidate this recommended strategy include a significant conventional military escalation with either state.

In Syria, the US should broaden its diplomatic effort to constrain Assad and his backers.[154] The war is not won, and the Syrian people need not be consigned to choose governance by either Assad or Salafi-jihadi groups.[155] The US can lead an effort to stop the worst of the current fighting and create time and space and support the development of an alternative source of governance, recognizing that the situation has deteriorated badly enough that there is no current path to force Assad to end the violence quickly. Sustaining the effective, light-footprint US military presence in eastern Syria is key to this effort, but not sufficient.[156]

In Libya, the US should fill the leadership vacuum and rally international support for the enforcement of the UN arms embargo. The US administration must therefore clarify its policy and define and enforce penalties for states—including partners—that violate the embargo to fuel the Libyan war, including using existing sanctioning authorities.[157] American and European policymakers should also overcome their unwillingness to consider a limited international security mission in Libya.[158] Historical precedent indicates that the civil war is unlikely to end without external security assistance.[159]

Today's world was growing chaotic and frightening before a pandemic swept the globe. Shouldering the mantle of global leadership is more daunting now than ever, and Americans are frustrated with the failings of the post-9/11 wars that have left them with a sense of impotence and inevitable failure abroad. But the lessons Americans should take away are not that there is nothing to be done and that they should retreat behind their moat. America's leaders and the public must recognize that the liberal democratic world order is more fragile than they hoped and that they have both a requirement and a responsibility to uphold it. The best way for the United States to face this reality is to change the course of disasters while they are still over the horizon.

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Acknowledgments

About AEI's Critical Threats Project

The Critical Threats Project (CTP) at the American Enterprise Institute seeks to inform and educate policymakers, the intelligence and military communities, and all interested citizens who need to understand the nuance and scale of threats to America's security. The project conducts intelligence analysis on unclassified information to produce continuous assessments of threats to the US and our allies. It develops these assessments into concrete plans for action using best practices drawn from the US military, intelligence community, and diplomatic corps. It provides the executive branch, Congress, the media, and the general public its assessments and recommendations on a nonpartisan basis. Like AEI, CTP accepts no money from the American government or any foreign government. CTP is directed by AEI Resident Scholar Frederick W. Kagan. Its two analytical teams focus on the threats posed by Iran and the Salafi-jihadi movement, especially in Yemen, the Horn of Africa, Libya, and West Africa.

About Our Technology Partners

The conclusions and assessments in this report do not reflect the positions of our technology partners.

Neo4j is a highly scalable native graph database that helps organizations build intelligent applications that meet today's evolving connected data challenges including fraud detection, tax evasion, situational awareness, real-time recommendations, master data management, network security, and IT operations. Global organizations such as MITRE, Walmart, the World Economic Forum, UBS, Cisco, HP, Adidas, and Lufthansa rely on Neo4j to harness the connections in their data.

Ntrepid is a mission-driven provider of cutting-edge managed attribution technology solutions that allows organizations to discreetly and safely conduct sophisticated cyber operations in the most hostile online environments. We leverage our deep experience in the national security community to anticipate our customers' needs and provide solutions before the requirements are expressed. Our heavy investment in R&D allows us to stay ahead of the rapidly changing internet landscape. Ntrepid's innovative solutions empower advanced online research, analysis, and data collection, while obscuring organizational identity and protecting your mission.

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