

Global Security Briefing – November 2017

## **2002 Revisited: After the War, the War**

Paul Rogers

### **Summary**

As with the eviction of al-Qaida from Afghanistan in 2001-02, the collapse of the Islamic State's self-proclaimed Caliphate in Syria and Iraq does not mean that the group's capability or the potency of its ideological challenge has been vanquished. Its legacy includes the unprecedented but barely documented Western militarisation of a frontier from the Sahel to Central Asia. Nor can the United States easily move on to push for disarmament, if not regime-change, in Iran and North Korea. As in 2002 under President Bush, the Trump administration is nevertheless redoubling its efforts to compel radical change, posing major risks for global order.

### **Introduction**

Fifteen years ago, in September 2002, Oxford Research Group published a substantial briefing reflecting on the first year of the war against al-Qaida and the Taliban and arguing that there was a risk of a lengthy conflict which required a different approach to security. Much of the analysis was based on Scilla Elworthy's work drawing together and extending the approaches being developed by many groups on new thinking on conflict prevention, especially in the face of extreme movements, but the briefing started by reviewing the events since 9/11.

At that time, there was some optimism in Western security circles that the shock of the 9/11 atrocities was receding, and the initial fear that Western states were losing control was less dominant. Indeed, the collapse of the Taliban regime and the suppression of the al-Qaida movement were allowing the Bush administration to move rapidly towards regime termination in Iraq – the first step in controlling the “Axis of Evil”. That term had been put forward eight months earlier in Bush's 2002 State of the Union Address and referred to those states intent on supporting terrorism and developing weapons of mass destruction, the lead members of the “axis” being Iraq, Iran and North Korea.

The overall perception in Washington was that the much-lauded *Project for the New American Century* was very much back on track. The United States would lead the world towards the US model of neoliberal free market democracy which was the one true way forward. Fifteen years later the Trump administration is more concerned with status than leadership, with Trump's insistence on the centrality of “making America great again”. However, his recent declaration that the war with the so-called Islamic State (IS) has

been won and that new forms of warfare show every sign of success does bear striking similarities to the situation in the closing months of 2002.

This briefing therefore looks back to that period in making a preliminary assessment of where we are now. Is the war with IS really over, are new forms of warfare effective, has the attitude to the “Axis of Evil” changed, especially in the case of Iran and North Korea, and is there still a need to consider other approaches to security?

## The 2002 Report

In assessing the state of the war in Afghanistan and al-Qaida, [The ‘War on Terrorism’: 12-month audit and future strategy options](#), (ORG, September 2002) argued that the war on terror had:

- Failed to destroy the al-Qaida organisation or apprehend its leaders;
- Made it more difficult to counter al-Qaida by dispersing it across many countries;
- Provided an excuse to governments to undertake military action in Iraq in pursuit of unrelated goals;
- Made the world a more dangerous place than a year earlier.

The report also:

- Showed the real human and geopolitical cost of a military attack on Iraq;
- Put the case for a major shift in policy;
- Discussed what else could be done - concrete, costed alternative strategies for a real investment in regional and global security.

That was hardly the view of the leadership of the states involved in the war at the time, but events have largely supported that analysis, given that the war in Afghanistan continues, offshoots of al-Qaida remain active and the war in Iraq has had disastrous consequences, as has the Western involvement in the termination of the Gaddafi regime in Libya.

## The Current State of the War

The past fifteen years have seen a progressive transition in Western military policy, which has moved away from deploying tens of thousands of troops to engage in direct warfare against paramilitary opponents towards warfare conducted by remote control with an emphasis on air power, including extensive use of armed drones, Special Forces and private military contractors. The three-year war against IS has [reportedly](#) killed over 60,000 IS supporters with, according to Pentagon [published estimates](#), fewer than 500 civilians killed in Iraq. A handful of Western military have been killed, mostly in accidents and mishaps, and while there have been substantial casualties among Iraqi, Kurdish and other forces fighting IS under the cover of Western air power, the impression is given in Western countries that this has largely been a cost-free war and therefore demonstrates clearly the way ahead.

It is certainly the case that the IS movement has lost control of its proclaimed “caliphate”, which claimed, at peak, to have a population of six million spread across northern Syria and Iraq. However, there are already early indications that the movement in these countries is returning to its insurgent origins. Elsewhere, the United States is heavily involved in combat in numerous states with extreme paramilitary groups variously linked with al-Qaida and IS. Yemen, Somalia, Libya and the Philippines are the most obvious; Niger is but the most newsworthy recent example of much wider mission creep. It is also facing a resurgent Taliban in Afghanistan, where the US Air Force is on target in 2017 to deliver three times as many bombs and missiles as last year.

The intensity of operations continues and in the past few days alone military sources have reported air attacks in Somalia that killed more than a hundred al-Shabab paramilitaries, more air strikes in Yemen against an al-Qaida linked group, and a US Air Force attack against an IS-linked group in Libya. This is all in addition to numerous raids in Iraq, Syria and Afghanistan, continued support for the Philippine government in its efforts to restore security in the southern city of Marawi, and operations in Mali, Niger and elsewhere across the Sahel.

Meanwhile, some indication of future plans is given by a report in the Pentagon’s house journal the [Stars and Stripes](#) that the Department of Defence “wants to pump \$143 million into upgrades at [Muwaffaq Salti] strategic air base in Jordan, more than any other overseas Air Force operation site, as the military moves to expand drone and fighter flights in the region.” This is in addition to the half-billion dollars being spent over the long-term constructing a new bespoke air base for drones in Agadez, Niger, expected to become operational next year. Together with bases in Djibouti, various Gulf States and Bagram in Afghanistan, these may be the key garrisons in the evolving air wars against IS, al-Qaida and whatever comes next.

### **Consequences of the War**

Furthermore, it is now clear that Donald Trump’s policy of devolving more authority to the US military in the wars it fights is having a much wider effect. There are two further substantial issues to examine in assessing the effectiveness of current US policy.

The first is the vexed question of the impact of supposedly “clean” warfare on civilians, since the claim of minimal civilian losses is now being [challenged](#). Groups such as Airwars and Iraq Body Count have long provided data but this is now being corroborated by independent journalists examining evidence on the ground. One major study from Iraq, published last week in the [New York Times](#), supports the view that civilian casualties have been in the many thousands and not the low hundreds. Put bluntly, this war is not clean and the huge casualties being caused will continue to foment bitterness, anger and a determination to strike back.

The second issue is whether there is any justification for Donald Trump’s view that IS has been defeated. When this was made earlier in the month with the end of IS’s control of

Raqqa, analysts were already pointing to the growing power of al-Qaida-linked groups in Syria, and the continuing Western operations across much of Africa and western Asia. These have continued and the appalling attack on the al-Rawda mosque in northern Sinai that killed over 300 people is a grim indication of the continuing power of groups linked to IS itself.

In many ways the Sinai attack is representative of the wider state of the conflict. The Sisi regime in Cairo sees repression and control, including extensive use of military force, as the right way to control revolts from the margins. It has imprisoned many thousands of people in the past four years and favours harsh control of dissent in Sinai where marginalisation has long been an issue. Its immediate response to the mosque attack was to order air strikes as the first step in further repression. The regime sees the way forward as one of absolute control, much as, in the wider context, the Trump administration is more intent on military control than its predecessor. Not only is the war not over, but it shows every sign of expansion, with the retreat of IS just one facet of a much wider conflict.

### **The Rest of the Axis**

As the US-led Western military operations continue, there is also the issue of US attitudes to North Korea and Iran. In the case of the former there is a dangerous stalemate. The North Korean regime believes that it is essential for the state to have a useable nuclear arsenal to deter the United States from terminating it, but the Trump administration is adamant that North Korea will not be allowed to have such a force. As the pace of North Korean nuclear developments has accelerated since Donald Trump was elected, it is now probable that it will reach its goal before Trump completes his first term, meaning a worrying increase in the risk of direct military confrontation by 2020. Trump made a largely symbolic gesture to tighten pressure on North Korea on 20 November by relisting it as a State-Sponsor of Terror.

A further concern for many European powers is that the Trump administration does not believe it is in US interests to abide by the agreement with Iran over its nuclear capabilities, even though that agreement is widely viewed across Europe as a notable achievement of the Obama presidency. The two issues together raise substantial concerns that we are moving into an era of greater confrontation over nuclear issues after a period of nearly three decades when Cold War-era nuclear concerns had declined.

Extending the Axis concept to the remaining countries currently listed as State Sponsors of Terror, Syria and Sudan, the implication seems to be that the Trump administration is content with accommodation rather than regime change. Despite the April US missile strikes against the Syrian Arab Air Force, in response to its repeated use of chemical weapons, and the Assad regime's close relationship with Iran and Hezbollah, Washington will not actively challenge the Assad regime as long as it is aligned against the vestiges of IS and does not resume its nuclear weapons programme. The former condition is likely to expire with the Caliphate in the coming weeks, leaving Washington with a dilemma of

how to continue or conclude a war that has greatly strengthened the influence of Iran, Russia and Hezbollah.

On Sudan, the administration has made more decisive movement away from confrontation, lifting two decade-old sanctions in October. This follows Sudan's decisive realignment away from Iran and towards Saudi Arabia since 2015, when it joined the latter's coalition fighting in Yemen. Khartoum is also understood to have committed to stop buying weapons from North Korea. Initiated by the Obama administration, the lifting of sanctions on Sudan reflects its intelligence cooperation with Washington and its allies rather than any real improvement in the regime's appalling treatment of minority peoples and opposition movements. Like Saudi Arabia and Egypt, it is now seen as a friendly autocracy.

## Conclusion

In responding to the questions posed at the beginning of this briefing, the answers all seem clear. First, while IS has lost its main territorial base, the war is most certainly not over, the devastating Sinai attack being just one indicator. Second, the new forms of warfare are problematic in that they do cause many civilian casualties and have certainly not brought the overall problem of extreme movements under control. Furthermore, the criticism of little or no public debate or even parliamentary scrutiny over these forms of warfare still exists. Thirdly, the attitude of the United States leadership towards North Korea and Iran is much more hard line than that of its predecessor, and is therefore a potential source of considerable instability.

It follows that there really is a need to consider other approaches to security, many of which were explored in the 2002 briefing. Indeed, it is reasonable to argue that the need is greater than at any time since 9/11, not least with the outlook of the current incumbent of the White House.

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### About the Author

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