

Chapter 11

Counterterrorism and the United States in a New Era of Great Power Competition

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This chapter addresses the likely impact of Great Power competition on future counterterrorism missions by the U.S. military; it argues that the military should prioritize preventing external operations, directed or virtually planned by foreign violent extremist organizations (VEOs), against the U.S. homeland and minimizing the ability of foreign VEOs to inspire attacks by sympathizers in the West, commonly referred to as homegrown violent extremists. Yet the chapter also observes that, over the next 3 to 5 years, Great Power competition will likely constrain the ability of U.S. military forces to achieve even these more limited counterterrorism objectives. The U.S. Government, therefore, will need to cooperate closely with allies and partners to manage global terrorist threats. The military also will need to preserve its ability to conduct unilateral operations to protect the U.S. homeland. Given these requirements, this chapter recommends that the U.S. military revisit its risk threshold for small-footprint deployments, especially force protection requirements. It also should reconsider counterterrorism authorities, technologies, and other tools in light of the new realities created by Great Power competition. And, in this context, the U.S. Government should explore more ways to deter actions by surrogates and proxies against U.S. forces engaged in counterterrorism and to hold sponsors accountable.

The September 11, 2001, attacks by al Qaeda focused the attention of the U.S. national security community on the threat posed by nonstate adversaries. Since then, the United States and its allies have conducted multiple military operations to mitigate this threat: Operation *Enduring Freedom*, Operation *Iraqi Freedom*, Operation *Resolute Support*, and Operation *Inherent Resolve*, to name a few. Yet the emphasis on countering violent extremist organizations (VEOs) could not last indefinitely. Nation-state adversaries, such as China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea, also present immediate and future, and arguably greater, challenges to U.S. national security interests. A reprioritization was inevitable and, as chronicled in chapter 3a, took place with the publication of two new U.S. security documents in

2017 and 2018: the 2017 National Security Strategy (NSS) and the 2018 National Defense Strategy (NDS).¹ The 2017 NSS retained counterterrorism as an important component of protecting the U.S. homeland, rebranding this effort as “pursuing threats at their source.”² The NDS acknowledged the need to counter VEOs, such as al Qaeda’s network and the so-called Islamic State (IS), but it prioritized threats from near-peer competitors and other nation-state adversaries above counter-VEO operations.³ Together, these new strategic documents indicated that the United States would assume some increased risk from terrorism in the emerging era of Great Power competition.

These documents adjusted the U.S. strategic framework for countering VEOs. The 2018 National Strategy for Counterterrorism captured these adjustments while emphasizing the importance of future counter-VEO activities in a context of prioritization and partnerships. Two passages in this document stand out:

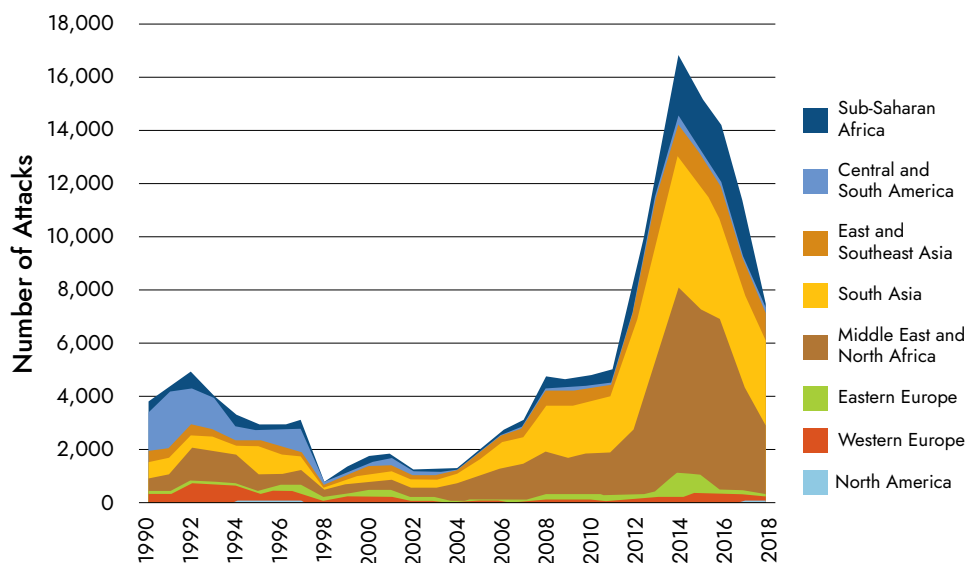
*Experience has . . . highlighted the importance of strong partnerships in sustaining our counterterrorism efforts. Whenever possible, the United States must develop more efficient approaches to achieve our security objectives, relying on our allies to degrade and maintain persistent pressure against terrorists. This means collaborating so that foreign governments take the lead wherever possible and working with others so that they can assume responsibility in the fight against terrorists.*⁴

*We will not dilute our counterterrorism efforts by attempting to be everywhere all the time, trying to eradicate all threats. We can and will, however, optimize and focus our resources to effectively prevent and counter those terrorists who pose a direct threat to the United States homeland and vital national interests.*⁵

Since 2018, the NDS has become the baseline document for the U.S. military as it plans, trains, and organizes the joint force. Thus, this chapter proceeds from the perspective of the NDS that the U.S. military will prioritize its near-peer competitors as well as rogue states in defense planning. This chapter also aligns with the definition of *Great Power competition* found in chapter 1, which validates three contemporary near-peer rivals: Russia, China, and the United States. The chapter affirms that VEOs will continue to be a major security issue for the U.S. military and its allies; it focuses on the fact that over the next 3 to 5 years, al Qaeda, the IS, and their associates will continue to pursue local insurgencies and external operations against the West. The U.S. military will be presented with the choice of engaging these VEOs unilaterally, as part of a coalition, indirectly through local partners, or not at all. Whatever the U.S. counterterrorist approach, Russia and China also will weigh the threats by VEOs to their own national security and make their own choices among a range of similar options. Other countries will do the same. The United States may benefit directly from the actions taken by Russia, China, or other nation-states against VEOs. Alternatively, these interventions may exacerbate the VEO threat to the U.S. homeland. In any case, these risks will need to be managed, and counterterrorism in a new era of Great Power competition just got a lot more complicated.

Subsequent paragraphs address this complication. The chapter provides an overview of the evolving terrorist threat, not only emphasizing the United States and its allies but

Figure 11.1. Number of Successful Attacks and Failed Plots Conducted by VEOs by Region, 1990–2018



Source: National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism, Global Terrorism Database, 2018, available at <<https://start.umd.edu/data-tools/global-terrorism-database-gtd>>.

also touching on threats to Russia and China. It then delves more deeply into the U.S. military's Operation *Inherent Resolve* in Syria. Syria represents the most concrete example of how U.S. counterterrorism objectives can be undermined by the presence of other Great Powers (in this instance, Russian military forces and their proxies). Next, the chapter explores the long-lasting regional rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia. Iran has been defined as a “disruptor” state in this book (see chapter 10); nevertheless, it remains a U.S. adversary, and its competition with Saudi Arabia for regional hegemony exacerbates the threat posed by VEOs. Finally, this chapter provides a discussion of Australia's role in Southeast Asia. Australia represents an important contrast to Russia and Iran: It illustrates how allies can assist the United States in its fight against VEOs, allowing the U.S. military to shift resources away from counterterrorism missions with reduced risk. The chapter concludes with thoughts on the implications of Great Power competition for U.S. counterterrorism in this new era.

Understanding the Threat Posed by Violent Extremists

The United States faces threats from a wide range of extremist groups, including domestic right-wing terrorists, left-wing terrorists, and foreign operatives linked to al Qaeda or IS. The U.S. military retains responsibility for countering VEOs that originate abroad but not for domestic terrorist groups. Among the foreign VEOs, the greatest priorities for the United States fall under the subcategory of Salafi-jihadists.⁶ This section, therefore, provides a broad overview of global trends in terrorism over the next 3 to 5 years, but it focuses more on the evolving threat from Salafi-jihadists to the United States and its allies.

Finally, to provide greater context to the threat from Salafi-jihadists, the section concludes with a short discussion of domestic left-wing and right-wing terrorism.

Global Trends in Terrorism

Any chart depicting overarching trends in terrorist attacks worldwide tends to be alarming; figure 11.1 is no different. It displays the total number of successful attacks and failed plots by VEOs globally since 1990. The trend line reveals several fluctuations in global terrorism: a steady decline in attacks between 1992 and 2000; a gradual increase in the number of attacks, starting in 2001, until the numbers flatline between 2007 and 2011; and a dramatic spike in the number of attacks between 2012 and 2014, followed by a decline again, beginning in mid-2015 until the present. While the overarching trend since 2015 is encouraging—for example, the numbers are decreasing—it still has not reached the relatively low levels of the late 1990s and early 2000s.

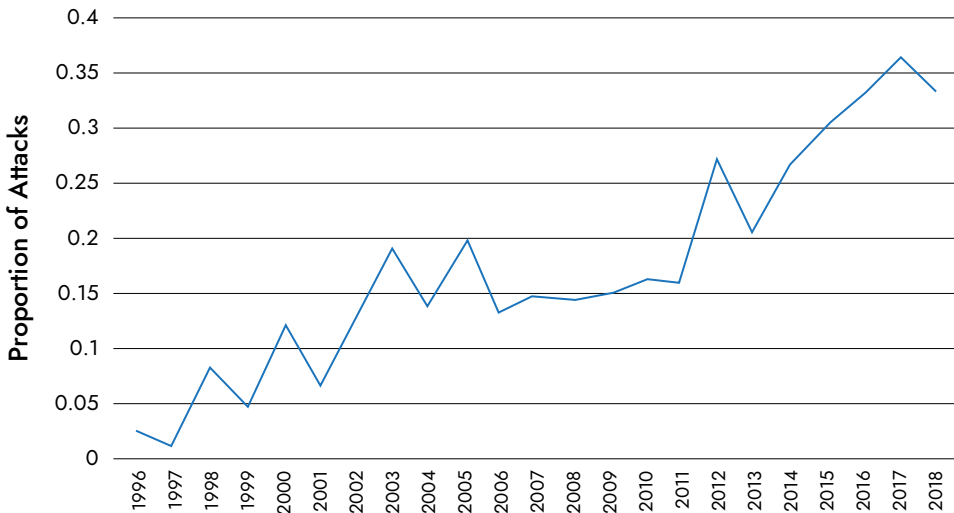
A closer examination of figure 11.1 offers a slightly more nuanced assessment. Although it is easy to assume, for example, that most attacks have taken place in the Middle East and North Africa over the past three decades, the data does not support this conclusion. Instead, the relative number of attacks by VEOs in the Middle East and North Africa, as compared with those in other regions, ranges from a low of 13 percent in 1991 to a high of 45 percent in 2016. Other regions, such as Central and South America in the early 1990s or sub-Saharan Africa at present, also experience relatively high numbers of attacks on their populations.

Interestingly, none of the regions with Great Powers—North America, Eastern Europe, East and Southeast Asia—have experienced high levels of terrorism since 1990. Beyond these overarching numbers, it is noteworthy that foreign VEOs have not systematically targeted Russia or China in recent years.⁷ A few exceptions exist. In Egypt, IS fighters placed an improvised explosive device on a Russian airline flying from Sinai to Saint Petersburg in October 2015.⁸ The Baluchistan Liberation Army attacked the Chinese consulate in Karachi, Pakistan, in November 2018.⁹ Nevertheless, the limited number of attacks by foreign VEOs on Russian and Chinese interests explains, in part, why Moscow and Beijing tend to emphasize domestic terrorist threats over those posed by foreign VEOs.¹⁰ These realities also limit the potential areas of cooperation between the Great Powers on countering foreign VEOs.¹¹ Now and into the future, the U.S. Government is more likely to find itself hampered in its counterterrorism operations due to the expanding military, political, and economic influence of these other two Great Powers than it is to find substantial areas for cooperation.¹²

The Salafi-Jihadist Threat

Salafism offers literalist, rigid, and puritanical approaches to Islam. It emerged from political developments in the second half of the 19th century, when Muslim-majority regions were confronted with the spread of European ideas. Salafists often extol the first three generations of Muslims as well as the most geographically expansive caliphate of the 1200s.¹³ Most Salafists pursue their fundamentalist beliefs peacefully. Others advocate for a violent political revolution in the Muslim world; these individuals are referred to interchangeably as either Salafi-jihadists or *takfiris*, which is a derogatory term that means Muslims who declare others apostates and kill them. Between 1996 and 2014, al Qaeda was at the vanguard

Figure 11.2. Proportion of Attacks Conducted by VEOs in Salafi Jihadist Movement, 1996–2018



Source: National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism, Global Terrorism Database, 2018, available at <<https://start.umd.edu/data-tools/global-terrorism-database-gtd>>.

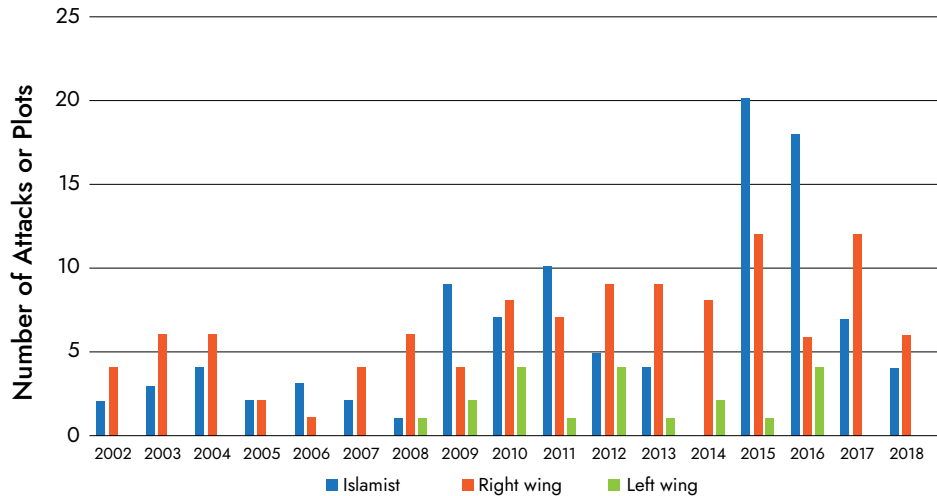
of the Salafi-jihadi movement. Al Qaeda leaders argued that their political revolution was failing because the United States propped up corrupt Arab regimes.¹⁴

The so-called Islamic State emerged in 2014—in many ways as an alternative to al Qaeda. Led by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi until his death in November 2019, IS rejected al Qaeda’s emphasis on jihad against the West and instead aimed to establish an Islamic caliphate within the territories under its control.¹⁵ That said, IS also pursued external operations, or terrorist attacks, that took place outside its territorial control, in Syria, Iraq, and other countries. In fact, IS leaders met in Tabqah, Syria, in November 2015 to plan a way forward for the IS external operations campaign.¹⁶ Since then, al Qaeda and IS leaders have fought for preeminence among Salafi-jihadists, with most VEOs taking sides.¹⁷

Figure 11.2 depicts the overall trajectory of attacks by Salafi-jihadists, beginning after al Qaeda leaders announced their war against “Americans Occupying the Lands of the Two Holy Mosques” in 1996.¹⁸ It was derived from the Global Terrorism Database maintained by the START Consortium at the University of Maryland. The numbers report attacks by Salafi-jihadists as a proportion or ratio of all attacks by VEOs worldwide.¹⁹ Figure 11.2 also shows that the overarching trajectory of attacks by Salafi-jihadists remains upward, despite the recent territorial defeat of IS.²⁰

Significantly, most of the attacks shown in figure 11.2 were conducted against local targets or targets within easy reach—within the same countries—of IS territorial control. They were not external operations. Only 2 percent of all attacks by Salafi-jihadists since 1996 can be considered “external operations,” and the IS has been the most aggressive VEO in this regard. Indeed, while the IS recently lost both its caliphate and its caliph (al-Baghdadi), its decisive defeat remains a remote prospect. The new IS leader, Abdullah Qardash, has vowed

Figure 11.3. Number of Successful Attacks and Failed Plots by U.S. Homegrown Extremists, 2002–2018



Source: Anti-Defamation League, H.E.A.T. Map, 2018, available at <https://www.adl.org/education-and-resources/resource-knowledge-base/adl-heat-map>.

to avenge al-Baghdadi's death and has embarked on rebuilding the group's strengths and re-energizing IS supporters and sympathizers.²¹ Most experts agree that IS retains the capacity to direct an external attack against the U.S. and allies' homelands; it also continues to target U.S. forces and citizens abroad.²²

That said, among Salafi-jihadists, homegrown violent extremists—individuals inspired by foreign VEOs, such as the IS, to conduct attacks locally—represent the most persistent threat to the U.S. homeland over the next 3 to 5 years. IS has sustained a sophisticated media campaign propagating a “long war” against its enemies.²³ This campaign includes outreach to local sympathizers in the West, urging them to execute attacks. According to the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the number of active investigations related to international terrorism in the United States has stayed about the same since 2014, hovering around 4,000. The percentage of IS-related arrests for domestic attacks, however, has continued to increase over the past 2 years, even after the IS's territorial defeat.²⁴ As of August 2019, 194 individuals in the United States had been charged with offenses related to IS. Forty percent of these cases involved traveling or attempts to travel abroad; 32 percent of the cases were plots of terrorist attacks within the U.S. homeland.²⁵ These data suggest that the IS's message continues to reach and resonate with U.S. audiences.

Other Terrorist Threats to the United States

There are terrorist risks to the United States beyond Salafi-jihadists.²⁶ Over the past decade, domestic terrorism motivated by a range of far-right and white supremacist ideologies also has increased (see figure 11.3). According to a report by the New America Foundation, between 2002 and 2018, American Salafi-jihadists killed an estimated 104 people in the U.S. homeland, while the death toll from far-right, white supremacist, and other nonreli-

gious extremist ideologies stood at 125 people.²⁷ Left-wing terrorists also have historical roots inside the United States. According to the Global Terrorism Database, the number of attacks by left-wing extremists inside the United States has dropped from more than 20 per year in 2003 to less than 5 per year in 2018.²⁸ And, for the past several years, attacks by left-wing and anarchist groups have held steady at about 3 percent of all domestic terrorism inside the United States, according to both the Global Terrorism Database and the Anti-Defamation League (figure 11.3).²⁹ Much like their jihadist counterparts, domestic terrorists are empowered by the Internet and social media platforms, where they share their ideas and resources.³⁰ Although these individuals are largely decentralized and operate in small independent cells, many take ideological cues and inspiration from broader, more global movements.³¹ Importantly, at least for the purposes of this chapter, investigative journalism and academic research indicates that Russia's disinformation campaign, directed against the West, has amplified right-wing extremist movements.³²

In summary, this threat assessment suggests that the U.S. military should prioritize preventing external operations, directed or virtually planned by foreign VEOs, against the U.S. homeland, and minimize the ability of foreign VEOs, or even foreign nation-state adversaries, to inspire attacks by sympathizers in the West, commonly referred to as *homegrown violent extremists*. This way forward accepts risk, including the possibility of terrorist attacks on our allies' and partners' homelands.³³ It also includes risks from greater local or regional instability, which may in turn weaken some of our allies or partners.³⁴ Still further, some terrorism scholars have argued that too much U.S. counter-VEO retrenchment will allow for a third generation of global jihadists and homegrown violent extremists to emerge, setting us back to where we were before September 2001.³⁵ As the United States transitions into the 2020s, its defense strategy now accepts these risks when weighed against the threats from near-peer competitors and rogue states. The next sections review how Great Power rivals are likely to constrain U.S. counter-VEO endeavors in the future and how regional state actors and partners might exacerbate or mitigate VEO risks to the U.S. homeland, its vital interests, and its allies.

Counterterrorism and the Impacts from Great Power Competition: Syria

Syria represents the best, most concrete example of counterterrorism in the new era of Great Power competition. Recent experiences in Syria underscore the likelihood that the U.S. military will no longer be able to execute counterterrorism operations with little to no interference in the near future. It will face direct or indirect opposition from other nation-states. To be successful, the U.S. military will need to adjust its authorities, technologies, and other resources accordingly.

Operation *Inherent Resolve* is a counterterrorism mission begun in late 2014 against the Islamic State and led by the United States. Between 2015 and 2018, IS leaders used Syrian cities such as Tabqah, Raqqah, and Ayn al-Arab (Kobani) to orchestrate external terrorist operations against the West. IS media campaigns and other outreach to local sympathizers further exacerbated this threat. The U.S. national security community determined that the only way to halt the IS external operations campaign was for the U.S. military to reduce IS control over territory in Syria. It initially chose to accomplish this mission through a

combination of precision strikes and working by, with, and through local Kurdish militias, renamed the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). This approach allowed the United States to pursue its military objectives with a limited footprint, approximately 2,000 U.S. Soldiers, Sailors, and Airmen. Beginning in late 2019, the Trump administration reduced the U.S. force level in Syria even more, although counterterrorism operations continue at present.

But U.S. interests in Syria—narrowly focused on counterterrorism—clash with those of Russia, Iran, and Turkey, all of which view the conflict more broadly through the lens of their own geopolitical influence. Since 2011, Syrian president Bashar al-Asad and his security forces have struggled greatly against a wide range of opposition forces, even going so far as to deploy chemical weapons in this campaign.³⁶ During both the Obama and Trump administrations, the U.S. Government has articulated its opposition to the Syrian regime often and repeatedly, thereby assuring that Asad has no interest in U.S. military forces on the ground in Syria. Asad did, however, welcome—and count on—the presence of Iranian, and later Russian, military and paramilitary assistance in the fight. Turkey also was a critical party to the Syrian civil war, with its own unique mix of strategic interests and objectives. Initially an opponent of Asad and a supporter of anti-Asad insurgents, Turkey's involvement has proved fluid and its motives far from fully aligned with those of the United States. Ankara's longstanding battle against domestic Kurdish antigovernment militias made Turkey incredibly wary of Kurdish ethnic forces operating in Syria. Turkey's direct proximity to Syria meant that Turkish forces and their proxies had a serious impact on the U.S. counterterrorism mission against IS. The presence of Russian, Iranian, and Turkish forces and their proxies has complicated the U.S. counterterrorism mission. Indeed, the intermixing of cross-cutting Russian, Iranian, Turkish, and U.S. strategic aims during a time of reemerging Great Power competition has made *Inherent Resolve* a poster child for the complexities that U.S. counterterrorism missions will likely face in the future. The following paragraphs explore these experiences in greater detail.

President Vladimir Putin's Russia has three primary interests in the Syrian conflict: It prefers to see President Asad retain power in the country; it wants to reduce the threat posed by returning foreign fighters, primarily from Chechnya and the Caucasus; and it wishes to establish Putin as an alternative “broker” to the United States in the Middle East and North Africa.³⁷ Putin's Russia has sent as many as 4,000 soldiers and military advisors to Syria—along with rotary-wing aircraft, heavy weapons, and artillery—to bolster the Asad regime.³⁸ The Russian air force (RuAF) also has conducted airstrikes in support of regime forces and sent airborne intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance platforms to Syria: unmanned aerial vehicles, Il-20 Coots, and Tu-214R.³⁹ As noted in chapter 3b, Syria became a testing ground for some of the new Russian military capabilities heavily invested in by Putin since the mid-2000s. The RuAF has used the conflict in Syria to test its stealth bombers (T-50s) and fighters (Su-57s) against U.S. forces.⁴⁰ In a pattern begun with Russian operations in Chechnya in 2014, at least 2,500 Russian mercenaries have fought on behalf of the Syrian regime, demonstrating an often-overlooked capability critical to the strategic reach of Russia in its rivalry with the United States.⁴¹

Likewise, Iran—a regional hegemon with both animus toward the United States and hatred of IS—has played a key role in the Syrian conflict. Syria and Iran have a longstanding alliance. Iran has provided financial and military aid to Asad. It also has sent military advi-

sors from the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps–Qods Forces (IRGC-QF) to work with regime security forces. Specifically, IRGC-QF advisors oversee approximately 25,000 fighters from Lebanon (primarily Hizballah), Iraq, and Afghanistan, who have reinforced Asad’s forces in his fight against opposition troops.⁴² To make the situation even more complicated, Russian military advisors reportedly have trained Hizballah and IRGC-QF personnel to call in RuAF airstrikes, in an effort to reduce fratricide for its close air support.⁴³

Unlike Russia and Iran, Turkey opposes Asad and his regime. President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has provided approximately 15,000 opposition forces within Syria with weapons and other forms of support.⁴⁴ Turkey also has deployed its own security forces into Syria as part of two military operations: Euphrates Shield (August 2016) and Olive Branch (March 2018). Turkish leaders did this to eliminate Syrian Kurds’ control over territory close to the Turkish border. Turkey views Syrian Kurds as closely tied to a Turkish VEO, referred to as the Kurdistan Workers Party. In addition, Erdogan has accused Syrian Kurds of small-scale cross-border attacks with mortars.⁴⁵ Unfortunately, these Syrian Kurds are the same militias that form the backbone of the SDF and have partnered with the U.S. military to fight against IS. U.S. counterterrorist operations against IS had to factor in not only Russian and Iranian motivations and presence but also complex Turkish grievances against a major U.S.-allied, anti-IS militia.

In the midst of these crosswinds, U.S. forces have had to execute missions against IS in the thick of a highly complex operational environment, one not seen in the post–Cold War world prior to the return of Great Power rivalry. Despite efforts to deconflict ongoing operations, the presence of Russian, Iranian, and Turkish security forces, along with their proxies, has reduced U.S. military effectiveness. The following are some concrete examples of what happens to U.S. forces when they attempt to execute counterterrorism missions in the midst of Great Power competition:

- In October 2015, reports emerged of Russia jamming U.S. military communications equipment, navigation systems, and aircraft in Syria. The former commander of U.S. Special Operations Command subsequently described Syria as the “most aggressive [electronic warfare] environment on the planet.”⁴⁶
- In May 2017, Iranian-backed Shia militias stationed near the outskirts of At-Tanf garrison, Syria, entered the deconfliction zone, threatening U.S. forces and their partners (an Arab militia called Maghaweir al-Thowra). Russian jets provided the Shia militias with close air support.⁴⁷
- In November 2017, a Russian jet flew an unsafe flight profile—dangerously low—over U.S. forces in the Euphrates Valley. Two U.S. Air Force F-22s reportedly warned off the Russian jets by releasing infrared flares.⁴⁸
- In February 2018, approximately 300 Russian mercenaries attacked U.S. forces and their SDF partners near Dar el-Zour.⁴⁹ U.S. forces called for close air support, and F-15E Strike Eagles responded, killing approximately 200 of the mercenaries.⁵⁰
- In October 2019, Turkish-based opposition forces threatened U.S. Soldiers as they withdrew from Ain Issa, Syria. F-15E Strike Eagles responded with a show of force.⁵¹

In summary, American experiences in Syria illustrate how Great Power competition could complicate a narrowly defined U.S. counterterrorism mission. Over the next 3 to 5 years, the U.S. military should expect Russia and China to continue to position themselves as alternatives to the United States—not only in the Middle East and North Africa but also in other regions.⁵² Thus far, China appears less likely to use military forces outside East and Southeast Asia. But the presence of Russian ground forces and their proxies, combined with close air support provided by RuAF to these forces, will indelibly complicate the U.S. military's ability to conduct counterterrorism operations. Great Power rival use of electronic or cyber warfare also will likely constrain U.S. military options.

Regional States and VEO Risk Exacerbation or Mitigation

Salafi-jihadists have directed most of their violence against local and regional targets, not the United States or the West. Thus, it makes sense that other Great Powers and regional states will have their own calculations about the threat posed by local, regional, and global VEOs; they also will decide whether to intervene directly against VEOs or counter them with proxy forces. This dynamic exists in many areas, including the Middle East, North Africa, Central Asia, and South and Southeast Asia. In some places, the interventions by regional powers will likely reduce the threat of VEOs to the U.S. homeland, but in other areas, regional states will likely intervene in such a way that they exacerbate the threat of foreign VEOs to the United States and its interests abroad. These risks will need to be managed, even as the U.S. military prioritizes Great Power competition. The following are two distinct and contrasting examples of this dynamic, underscoring the complex requirements of countering VEOs in this new era of Great Power competition.

Saudi Arabia vs. Iran in the Middle East as VEO Risk Exacerbators

The escalating proxy war between Saudi Arabia and Iran represents the best example of how regional powers can strengthen VEOs—either directly or indirectly—in their pursuit of dominance. The competition between Saudi Arabia and Iran has played out in various theaters across the Middle East, North Africa, and into South Asia. For the United States, Saudi Arabia is a valued ally and Iran is an adversary. But their proxy war elevates the risks of unleashing empowered VEOs with international reach as well as adding to the volatility of many nation-states around them, many of which host either IS or al Qaeda fighters. This Saudi-Iranian confrontation has been stoking conflicts in Iraq and Yemen; they offer two instructive examples of how regional power competition can create environments hospitable to VEOs.

The rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran is not new. It started off as a cold war between regional competitors, both surviving on petrodollars while adhering to two different shades of Islam that have historically been at odds. Both of these world views—Shiism in Iran and Sunni-Wahhabism in Saudi Arabia—have been revolutionary in essence, highly political in orientation, and particularly zealous in proselytization. Over time, the competition between Saudi Arabia and Iran has turned into a balance-of-power game.⁵³ As of 2020, this competition has not yet led to a direct military confrontation.⁵⁴ However, Saudi Arabia and Iran have targeted each other's core national security interests, and these efforts have included the use of proxies and all actions short of war.⁵⁵

Within the past decade, Iraq has been at the center of this rivalry. In Iraq, the Saudi footprint has been less visible than Iran's. Since the United States toppled Saddam Hussein from power in Iraq in 2003, Iran has used its relationship with Iraq's Shia population to garner influence within its neighbor. To do this, Iran has focused attention on solidifying its influence in the Iraqi south, where pilgrimage routes in and around Shia-dominated Najaf and Karbala have religious significance. Iran also was able to take advantage of IS expansion and control over territory within Iraq between 2014 and 2019. Iran overtly sponsored several of the Hashd Al-Shaabi, or Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) in Iraq, which emerged after Iraqi Shia Ayatollah Ali al-Seestani's 2014 fatwa encouraging Iraqis to assist government forces as they attempted to push back the Salafi-jihadist IS. The PMF played an important role in confronting IS fighters in Iraq between 2014 and 2016, in a parallel effort to *Inherent Resolve* in Iraq, led by U.S. forces. PMF success, in turn, reinforced Iranian influence in Iraq.

For Saudi Arabia, Iran's expanding influence in Iraq has been a grave concern. More sympathetic to Iraq's minority Sunni population, Riyadh has been trapped between IS expansion into Sunni-dominated areas of Iraq on one side and Iranian influence on the other. While Riyadh has been somewhat concerned about the regional threat posed by IS fighters and operatives, it has been equally worried about its waning influence in Iraq. Iraq's political leadership routinely has sympathized with Iranian interests against Saudi Arabia over the past decade. For Saudi Arabia and Iran, everything in the region is a zero-sum game, and so their competition for influence in Iraq only feeds into brewing instability in the wider Middle East.⁵⁶

Yemen offers an even more severe example of the consequences of this poisonous rivalry. Yemen has been in the midst of a civil war since early 2015. Its main factions are those loyal to the more formalized government of exiled President Abd-Rabbu Mansour Hadi, supported by Saudi Arabia, and the minority Shia-affiliated Huthi rebel movement, supported by Iran. Beyond these factions, al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) has retained control over some territory in Yemen, as has its competitor Salafi-jihadist outfit, IS in Yemen. AQAP remains the most threatening terrorist outfit to the United States and its allies, plotting multiple attacks over the years, including a foiled attack against Northwest Airlines 253 in Detroit (December 2009), a series of plots that prompted the U.S. Government to close 22 Embassies worldwide (August 2013), and a successful attack against the *Charlie Hebdo* newspaper in Paris (January 2015). AQAP also claimed responsibility for a December 2019 attack by a Saudi military officer at a U.S. base in Pensacola, Florida.⁵⁷

For Iran, Yemen represents a launching pad to target the Saudi military through proxies. The IRGC-QF has provided weapons, ammunition, communications equipment, and other support to Huthi rebels in Yemen's ongoing civil war. In December 2019, for example, the U.S. Government sanctioned the ESAIL Shipping Company and Mahar Air for smuggling weapons to Yemen on behalf of the IRGC-QF.⁵⁸ Many other materials have made their way from Iran to Yemen via well-established criminal smuggling networks.⁵⁹ Saudi Arabia and its close ally, the United Arab Emirates, have responded with airstrikes against Huthi targets. The resulting war has displaced more than 3.3 million people and has exacted an estimated death toll ranging from approximately 7,000 to more than 65,000 people.⁶⁰ Yemen stands destroyed, and it will take decades to rebuild its infrastructure.

The Yemen conflict also has posed direct challenges for the U.S. military. Huthi rebels have used weapons provided by IRGC-QF to attack U.S. military targets and personnel in the region, some of which are there for the explicit purpose of countering the threat posed by AQAP to the United States and its allies.⁶¹ For example, in June 2019, Huthi fighters shot down a U.S. MQ-9 Reaper drone as it flew over western Yemen, an area with local popular support and freedom of movement for AQAP fighters. U.S. Central Command subsequently stated the MQ-9 was shot down by a SA-6 and accused Iran of enabling the attack.⁶² The Huthis responded by threatening to attack any future drones that fly outside of AQAP territory, viewing them as a direct threat.⁶³

The Saudi-Iranian struggle will likely continue to motivate both sides to invest in destabilizing each other—and search for new proxies to serve their interests.⁶⁴ These proxies, as we have seen in Yemen, are inextricably linked to weapons-smuggling networks in the region. Furthermore, Salafi-jihadists have taken advantage of this instability to threaten the United States and its allies.⁶⁵ Granted, from a contemporary U.S. policy perspective, Iranian-backed proxies may be worse than those spawned by Sunni-led governments, but the net result of their mutual hostility continues to make space for VEOs that threaten the U.S. homeland, U.S. and allied military units, and vital U.S. interests. Washington must continue to manage the Saudi-Iranian rivalry in a manner that offsets that contest's ongoing potential to exacerbate the risks from truly dangerous VEOs in the era of Great Power competition.

Australia in Southeast Asia as a VEO Risk Mitigator

Australia represents an important contrast to the proxy warfare risks generated by the struggle between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Counterterrorism in Southeast Asia is a distant priority for the United States in an era of Great Power rivalry, well behind coping with a rising and more assertive China, freedom of navigation operations, alliance management, and the denuclearization of North Korea. Given these U.S. priorities, it is reasonable to expect that within the Indo-Pacific region, U.S. counterterrorism efforts will remain focused on the Philippines, where a number of pro-IS, al Qaeda, and other Salafi-jihadist groups continue to spread the poorly resourced Philippine military thin. For the rest of the region, including Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore, the United States will likely maintain a smaller intelligence and law enforcement engagement.

Australia, therefore, represents a critical partner in combating terrorism in the Indo-Pacific region during the dawning era of Great Power competition. Australia has paid far closer attention to Indonesia than the United States and has legitimate concerns about what it considers the “arc of instability” to its immediate north. Australian Federal Police have worked actively with their Indonesian counterparts, and they have been at the forefront of the Jakarta Centre for Law Enforcement Cooperation. The United States should be confident in both Australia's leadership and approach. For no other reason than proximity, Australia has taken the threat of terrorism in Southeast Asia more seriously than the United States.

Australia also has increased its bi- and multilateral engagement with the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP). During the 5-month-long siege of the Philippine city of Marawi by pro-IS militants in mid-2017, Australia deployed two AP-3C Orion aircraft to provide intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance support to the Philippine

military.⁶⁶ The Australian Defence Forces have conducted urban warfare training with the AFP. Australia also has assisted the Philippine police with forensic instruction, an improvised explosive device database, and other training. In 2019, Australian aid to the conflict-plagued Philippines was \$85 million, with a large portion of that money going to support the peace process between the government and the largest Islamist secessionist movement, the Moro Islamic Liberation Front.⁶⁷

Moreover, Australia has been an important backer of the trilateral maritime patrols established in 2017 among the Philippines, Indonesia, and Malaysia. In some ways, Australia is better poised to assist in the maritime component of counterterrorism, as Malaysia and Indonesia have largely resisted the involvement of the U.S. Navy. Australia is seen as a more acceptable partner, as U.S. Naval presence—and in particular its freedom of navigation operations—is often viewed as provocative. While the trilateral patrols have been going on for more than 2 years already, there is still no fusion center, and intelligence is shared on an ad hoc basis. Australia has been reluctant to join any freedom of navigation operations in the South China Sea, yet the United States wants Canberra to play a greater maritime role in the region. Australia also has been able to leverage its multilateral task force experience from the Persian Gulf and the Gulf of Aden.

Finally, while Australia has every reason to take a leadership role in countering VEOs in Southeast Asia, it has its own domestic IS challenge. On a per capita basis, Australia had one of the highest rates of foreign fighters in Iraq and Syria.⁶⁸ Additionally, there have been a number of IS-inspired attacks in Australia, including the 2014 cafe siege and a 2017 shootout in Melbourne. A plot to import weapons and explosives for a campaign against churches and embassies was thwarted in July 2019; it was the 16th alleged mass casualty attack to have been foiled in Australia since 2014.⁶⁹ So Canberra feels the need to play defense overseas as well. These actions reinforce Australia as a willing and able partner for countering VEOs, with longstanding commitment and credibility in Southeast Asia. In this sense, Australia exemplifies the opportunities presented by partner regional states becoming more engaged in countering VEOs, even as the United States devotes more of its resources to Great Power competition.

Implications

The cases reviewed in this chapter imply several realities for U.S. counterterrorism in the new era of Great Power competition. First, U.S. national security officials should assume that Putin's Russia will continue to undermine U.S. counterterrorism objectives, either directly or indirectly. Moscow will likely do this by fomenting right-wing and other home-grown violent extremists indirectly through a media campaign. Russia also will confront U.S. forces, especially in the Middle East and North Africa, as they attempt to mitigate VEO threats to the U.S. homeland. For the former, Syria will likely be the model, with Russia combining diplomatic initiatives, proxy warfare, and electronic warfare to foil U.S. military dominance.⁷⁰

The U.S. Government, therefore, should reconsider its counterterrorism authorities, technologies, and other tools in light of the evolving realities created by Great Power competition. The U.S. military also should revisit its risk threshold for small-footprint deployments, especially force protection requirements in areas with active proxies. In this

context, the U.S. Government should explore more ways to deter actions by proxies against U.S. forces and hold all sponsors accountable.

Finally, U.S. national security officials should assume that regional states will continue to pursue their own counterterrorism objectives. Sometimes they will deploy their forces in a manner that the U.S. Government will find unacceptable. Sometimes they will utilize proxy forces in a destabilizing manner. In other instances, important regional states will have objectives, ways, and means that align with U.S. aims for countering VEOs. The best way to mitigate the risk of regional states acting in an unruly manner is to be involved—even to a minimal degree if necessary—and then truly leverage U.S. influence with them. That said, U.S. military defense priorities outlined in the 2018 NDS make regional power struggles, including their potential to exacerbate some VEO threats, an area where the U.S. Government will accept some additional risk.

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