

How to Fight the War on Terror: Civilization and Ideology

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to understand what the concept of 'victory' in the war on terror would actually mean. The traditional notion of winning a war is clear, defeating an enemy on the battlefield and forcing it to accept political terms. However, it is important to determine what does victory or defeat mean in a war on terror? Will this kind of war ever end? How long will it take?

Former U.S. President George Bush's approach to the war on terror implicated the use of offensive measures against terrorist organizations. This approach was criticized by leading Democrats who argued that it was important to conduct more and smarter diplomacy, and intensify cooperation with key allies.

Bush's critics considered that his approach to the war on terror created more terrorists than it eliminated and that it will continue to do so unless the United States, under the presidency of Barack Obama, radically changes course.

Keywords: terrorism, War on Terror, religion

After 2001 9/11 terrorist attacks, George W. Bush declared the start of a global war on terror. Since that time, there has been an intense debate about how to win it. President Bush and his supporters considered that, in order to win this war on terror, there was an urgent need to use offensive measures against terrorists, deploy U.S. military force, promote democracy in the Middle East, and give the commander in chief expansive wartime powers. However, his critics challenged this new notion of a "war on terror" and focused on the need to fight it differently. Leading Democrats agreed to use force in some cases but argued that in order to achieve success it is important to reestablish the United States' moral authority and ideological appeal, conduct more and smarter diplomacy, and intensify cooperation with key allies. As they argue, Bush's approach to the war on terror has created more terrorists than it has eliminated and that it will continue to do so unless the United States radically changes course. (Gordon, 2007, p. 53)

It is important to note that when Barack Obama took office in 2009, he stopped using one of his predecessor's favorite catchphrases. Neither the President nor his counterterrorism team publically referred to the global war on terror.

Obama explained in a February 2009 interview on CNN, "It is very important for us to recognize that we have a battle or a war against some terrorist organizations," but those organizations aren't representatives of a broader Arab community, Muslim community ... You know, words matter in this situation." (Steinmetz, 2013) According to President Obama, global war on terror is dangerously vague. Whatever conflict the U.S. has, it is with bad actors such as Al-Qaida, who may be Islamic and not Islam itself.

Obama's counterterrorist advisor John Brennan noted that the President doesn't use the phrase war on terror, because "terrorism is a tactic" and no amount of success will ever allow Obama to promise that a tactic has been defeated. The President doesn't use the descriptor global, because it supports "the misleading and dangerous notion that the U.S. is somehow in conflict with the rest of the world," (Steinmetz, 2013) and makes groups like Al-Qaida sound like super-organized, supra-national foes.

Despite the Obama Administration's public advocacy against the term, news outlets still use the terminology with abandon, too.

Researchers and intellectuals in this field, express their approaches about the war on terror. E.g. an American author, philosopher, public intellectual and neuroscientist Sam Harris criticizes Islam and considers that this religion is threatening to the world. According to Harris there are serious dangers from Muslims possessing nuclear weapons, as opposed to nice western Christians (the only ones to ever use them) or those kind Israeli Jews. "While the other major world religions have been fertile sources of intolerance, it is clear that the doctrine of Islam poses unique problems for the emergence of a global civilization. It should be of particular concern to us that the beliefs of devout Muslims pose a special problem for nuclear deterrence. Islam, more than any other religion human beings have devised, has all the makings of a thoroughgoing cult of death." (Harris, 2005) Based on this view Harris proclaims, "We are not at war with terrorism. We are at war with Islam, this is not to say that we are at war with all Muslims, but we are absolutely at war with millions more than have any direct affiliation with Al Qaeda. We, the civilized people of the west, are at war with millions of Muslims." (Harris, 2005) Harris poses a dichotomy between "civilized" people and Muslims; according to him all civilized nations must unite in denunciation of a theology that now threatens to destabilize much of the earth.

Iranian-American writer and the scholar of religions, Reza Aslan in his book "How to Win a Cosmic War" uses a new notion, "cosmic", and tries to explain how some people in the world come to view their struggles in cosmic terms. (Aslan, 2010, p. 5)

Though the 20th century's two world wars were devastating, they were only global. What if the next war we fight, or what if the war we are currently fighting, is cosmic? According to Aslan, "a cosmic war, is like a ritual drama in which participants act out on Earth a battle they believe is actually taking place in the heavens." (Aslan, 2010, p. 5) Earthly wars are fought with weapons. Cosmic wars are won or lost with jihads, occupations and forcible conversions. "There can be no

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compromise in a cosmic war. There can be no negotiation, no settlement, no surrender.” (Aslan, 2010, p. 6) Aslan goes on to propose ways not to win such a war but to make it more manageable. He wants us to bring struggles between religious outlooks down from the skies. Global jihad is one thing, it is ugly, violent, and impervious to reason. But religious nationalism, the effort to create states based on principles derived from faith, is something else. To reduce the lure of the apocalyptic, we must distinguish between the two. As much as we must oppose those who kill in the name of God, we need to understand the desperation of those who seek the strong sense of identity derived from linking the quest for God with the desire for nationhood (Wolfe, 2009, p. 1).

Executive director of the National Security Network, Heather Hulburt notes that “war on terror” sums up an idea in the public mind, it’s very specific and correct about what Americans wanted to defeat after 9/11 terrorist attacks. (Steinmetz, 2013) It is important to think about this issue, because it is impossible to win a war without knowing what its goal is. So, in this article we determine the concept of what “victory” in the war on terror would actually look like. What does victory or defeat mean in a war on terror? Will this kind of war ever end?

Senior Fellowship for U.S. Foreign Policy at the Brookings Institution, Philip H. Gordon argues that if we consider possible outcomes of the war on terror we can assume that it can indeed be won but only with the recognition that this is a new and different kind of war. Victory will come not when foreign leaders accept certain terms but when political changes erode and ultimately undermine support for the ideology and strategy of those determined to destroy the United States. It will come not when Washington and its allies kill or capture all terrorists or potential terrorists but when the ideology the terrorists possess and promote is discredited, when their tactics are seen to have failed, and when they come to find more promising paths to the dignity, respect and opportunities they crave. (Gordon, 2007, p. 54) It will mean not the complete elimination of any possible terrorist threat, but rather the reduction of the risk of terrorism to such a level that it does not significantly affect average citizens’ daily lives, preoccupy their thoughts or provoke overreaction. At that point, even the terrorists will realize that their violence is useless.

Gordon makes a few predictions about the war on terror with some confidence that it will end because all wars eventually do. Here we should take into consideration a serious point, the factors that drives international politics are so numerous and so smooth that no political system or conflict can last forever. Thus, some wars end quickly (the Anglo-Zanzibar War of 1896 famously lasted for 45 minutes), and others endure (the Hundred Years War lasted for 116 years). Some wars end relatively well (World War II laid the foundation for lasting peace and prosperity), and others lead to further catastrophe (World War I) but they all end, one way or another.

Very interesting and instructive lessons can be drawn from the experience of the Cold War, thus named because, like the war on terror, it was not really a war at all. Despite the fact that the current challenge is not identical to the Cold War, their similarities, as long-term, multidimensional struggles against insidious and violent ideologies, suggest that there is much to learn from this recent and successful, experience. Just as the Cold War ended only when one side essentially gave up on a bankrupt ideology, the battle against Islamist terrorism will be won when the ideology that underpins it loses its appeal. The

Cold War ended not with U.S. forces occupying the Kremlin but when the occupant of the Kremlin abandoned the fight; the people had stopped believing in the ideology they were supposed to be fighting for. Once it was possible to imagine the Soviet Union winning the Cold War, nowadays, it is also possible to consider the victory of al Qaeda. Those in the United States may not have an agreed theory of victory or a path to get there but Osama bin Laden and his confederates certainly did and do. Bin Laden’s goal was to drive the United States out of Muslim lands, overturn the region’s current rulers and establish Islamic authority under a new caliphate. The path to this goal was to “provoke and bait” the United States into “bleeding wars” on Muslim lands. Even after the death of Bin Laden, his confederates consider that, since Americans do not have the stomach for a long and bloody fight, they will eventually give up and leave the Middle East to its fate. (Gordon, 2007, p. 54)

In the long run, the United States and its allies are far more likely to win this war than al Qaeda, not only because liberty is ultimately more appealing than a narrow and extremist interpretation of Islam but also because they learn from mistakes, while al Qaeda’s increasingly desperate efforts will alienate even its potential supporters. But victory in the war on terror will not mean the end of terrorism, the end of tyranny or the end of evil. Terrorism, after all (to say nothing of tyranny and evil), has been around for a long time and will never go away entirely. From the Zealots in the first century AD to the Red Brigades, the Palestine Liberation Organization, the Irish Republican Army, the Tamil Tigers, and others in more recent times, terrorism has been a tactic used by the weak in an effort to produce political change. Like violent crime, deadly disease, etc. it can be reduced and contained but it cannot be totally eliminated (Gordon, 2007, p. 58). This is a critical point, because the goal of ending terrorism entirely is not only unrealistic but also counterproductive, just as is the pursuit of other utopian goals. Murder could be vastly reduced or eliminated from the streets of Washington, D.C., if several hundred thousand police officers were deployed and preventive detentions authorized. Traffic deaths could be almost eliminated in the United States by reducing the national speed limit to ten miles per hour. Illegal immigration from Mexico could be stopped by a vast electric fence along the entire border and a mandatory death penalty for undocumented workers but no sensible person would propose any of these measures, because the consequences of the solutions would be less acceptable than the risks themselves. Similarly, the risk of terrorism in the United States could be reduced if officials reallocated hundreds of billions of dollars per year in domestic spending to homeland security measures, significantly curtailed civil liberties to ensure that no potential terrorists were on the streets and invaded and occupied countries that might one day support or sponsor terrorism. Pursuing that goal in this way, however, would have costs that would vastly outweigh the benefits of reaching the goal, even if reaching it were possible.

David Frum and Richard Perle in their book “An End to Evil” argue that there is “no middle ground” (Frum & Perle, 2004, p. 254) and that “Americans are not fighting this evil to minimize it or to manage it” (Frum & Perle, 2004, p. 7). The choice, they say, comes down to “victory or holocaust.” (Frum & Perle, 2004, p. 7)

Philip Gordon assumes that the United States and its allies will win the war only if they fight it in the right way, with the same sort of patience, strength, and resolve that helped win

the Cold War and with policies designed to provide alternative hopes and dreams to potential enemies. According to Gordon, the war on terror will end with the collapse of the violent ideology that caused it, when bin Laden's cause comes to be seen by its potential adherents as a failure, when they turn against it and adopt other goals and other means. Communism, too, once seemed vibrant and attractive to millions around the world, but over time it came to be seen as a failure. The ideology will not have been destroyed by U.S. military power, but its adherents will have decided that the path they chose could never lead them where they wanted to go. Like communism today, extremist Islamism in the future will have a few adherents here and there but as an organized ideology capable of taking over states or inspiring large numbers of people, it will have been effectively dismantled, discredited and discarded. (Gordon, 2007, pp. 59-60)

Furthermore, there are good reasons to believe that the forces of globalization and communication that have been unleashed by changing technology will eventually produce positive change in the Middle East. This will especially be true if there is successful promotion of economic development in the region, which would produce the middle classes that in other parts of the world have been the drivers of democratization. Even in the absence of rapid economic change, the increasingly open media environment created by the Internet and other communications technologies will prove to be powerful agents of change. Although only around ten percent of households in the Arab world have access to the Internet, that percentage is growing rapidly, having already risen fivefold since 2000. Even in Saudi Arabia, one of the most closed and conservative societies in the world, there are over 2,000 bloggers. (Gordon, 2007, pp. 63-64)

The point of imagining the end of the war on terror is not to suggest that it is imminent but to keep the right goals in mind, so that leaders can adopt the policies most likely to achieve those goals. If they fall prey to the illusion that this is World War III, and that it can be won like a traditional war, they risk perpetuating the conflict. (Gordon, 2007, p. 65)

If, on the other hand, Americans accept that victory in the war on terror will come only when the ideology they are fighting loses support and when potential adherents see viable alternatives to it, then the United States would have to adopt a very different course. It would not overreact to threats but instead would demonstrate confidence in its values and its society, and the determination to preserve both. It would act decisively to reestablish its moral authority and the appeal of its society, which have been so badly damaged in recent years. It would strengthen its defenses against the terrorist threat while also realizing that a policy designed to prevent any conceivable attack will do more damage than a policy of defiantly refusing to allow terrorists to change its way of life. It would expand its efforts to promote education and political and economic change in the Middle East, in the long run will help that region overcome the despair and humiliation that fuel the terrorist threat. It would launch a major program to wean itself from imported oil, freeing it from the dependence that constrains its foreign policy and obliging oil-dependent Arab autocracies to diversify their economies, more evenly distribute their wealth, and create jobs for their citizens. It would seek to end the large U.S. combat presence in Iraq, which has become more of a recruiting device for al Qaeda than a useful tool in the war on terror. It would stop pretending that the conflict between Israel

and its neighbors has nothing to do with the problem of terrorism and launch a diplomatic offensive designed to bring an end to a conflict that is a key source of the resentment that motivates many terrorists. It would take seriously the views of its potential allies, recognize their legitimate interests, and seek to win their support and cooperation in confronting the common threat. If the United States did all that, Americans would have good reason to be confident that in the long run they will prevail. Ultimately, extremist Islamism is not an ideology likely to win enduring support. Terrorism is not a strategy with which Muslims will forever want to be associated, and eventually it will create a backlash within Muslim societies. With time and experience, and if the United States and its allies make the right choices, Muslims themselves will turn against the extremists in their midst. (Gordon, 2007, p. 66) The agents of change might come from above, like Gorbachev, who used his position at the top of the Soviet hierarchy to transform the Soviet Union and end the Cold War or they might rise up from below, like the protesters in 1989 in Budapest, Gdansk, and Leipzig, who stood up against tyranny and reclaimed their future. If the United States is strong, smart, and patient, they will come and they, not the West, will transform their world, and ours.

Conclusion

Thus, we can conclude that there will be no compromise, no negotiation, no settlement and no surrender in the war on terror. As Philip Gordon claims, this war will end because all wars eventually do. Here is a critical point, because the goal of ending terrorism entirely is not only unrealistic but also counterproductive. Gordon assumes that the United States and its allies will win the war only if they fight it in the right way, with the same sort of patience, strength and resolve that helped win the Cold War and with policies designed to provide alternative hopes and dreams to potential enemies. According to Gordon, the war on terror will end with the collapse of the violent ideology that caused it, when bin Laden's cause comes to be seen by its potential adherents as a failure, when they turn against it and adopt other goals and other means.

However, victory in the war on terror will not mean the end of terrorism, the end of tyranny or the end of evil. Terrorism, after all (to say nothing of tyranny and evil), has been around for a long time and will never go away entirely.

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