
Ten Years of GWOT, the Failure of Democratization and the Fallacy of “Ungoverned Spaces”

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Abstract

October 7, 2011, marked a decade since the United States invaded Afghanistan and initiated the Global War on Terrorism (GWOT). While most ten-year anniversary gifts involve aluminum, tin, or diamonds, the greatest gift U.S. policymakers can present American citizens is a reconsideration of the logic that guides America's counterterrorism strategy. Although the United States has successfully averted large-scale domestic terrorist attacks, its inability to grasp the nature of the enemy has cost it dearly in wasted resources and, more importantly, lost lives. Two of the most consistent and glaring policy flaws revolve around the concepts of filling "ungoverned spaces" and installing democracy by force.

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Abstract

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Introduction

Since the publication of the *2004 National Military Strategy*, ungoverned spaces and democratization of ill-governed areas have served as the linchpins of America's counterterrorism strategy. Many policymakers and national security professionals accept as gospel the untested and even illogical ungoverned spaces/ill-governed areas concepts.¹ To rationalize military actions in Iraq, Afghanistan, Somalia, and Libya, U.S. policymakers have asserted that ungoverned spaces and ill-governed areas serve as terrorist safe havens that pose a significant threat to America's interests. We contend that these concepts of ungoverned spaces and ill-governed

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areas are dangerous red herrings that do not serve U.S. interests, and the continued pursuit of which will only deplete resources, anger foreign populations, blemish America's reputation, and make the country less secure.

The purpose of this article is to reflect on the terrorist threat, elements of the strategy developed to respond to it, and implementation of the strategy worldwide. Although this article is not intended to serve as an exhaustive history of the past ten years, it will consider some of America's more significant actions abroad and their effectiveness. While we're critical of the country's counterterrorism policy in general, we believe certain aspects of its counterterrorism policy have been effective. The increased cooperation among federal and state agencies and local governments has been a welcome change. The achievements of America's intelligence community and special operations forces have been extremely impressive, as have the performance and dedication of U.S. service members. Despite these accomplishments and the exceptional performance of numerous dedicated professionals, we believe the country's strategic approach overseas is not only ill-conceived, but incapable of accomplishing its policy objectives. The impotence of American counterterrorism strategy is not due to the performance of those on the ground called on to implement it; rather, it is attributable to policymakers' failure to understand the enemy and accept the repercussions of U.S. actions or the limits of the country's power. Most policymakers seem unable to understand why other nations do not accept "American exceptionalism," or how some of them might view U.S. actions as imperialistic. They then choose actions or use rhetoric that are not in the country's interests—in fact, are counterproductive to its counterterrorism mission.

Who Are We Fighting?

Perhaps the most destructive handicap with which the West has had to contend since the beginning of the War on Terrorism is its inability to understand whom it needs to fight. Westerners in general and Americans in particular do not distinguish between Salafist Wahhabists and Salafist jihadist al-Qaida. In her book *Living History*, then Democratic senator and presidential hopeful Hillary Rodham Clinton wrote:

"Wahhabism troubles me because it is a fast-spreading form of Islamic fundamentalism that excludes women from full participation in their societies, promotes religious intolerance and, in its most extreme version, as we learned with Usama bin Laden, advocates terror and violence."²

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Nor do many prominent Americans distinguish between the political Salafist Muslim Brotherhood, the Shia Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC), and the Salafist jihadist al-Qaida. For instance, former Republican senator and presidential hopeful Rick Santorum told a radio audience that the Muslim Brotherhood was "as dangerous to Western civilization and the future of our country" as al-Qaida. He added that, while the Brotherhood didn't use violence in Egypt, "that doesn't mean that they aren't for all of the things that violent jihadists are for."³

It might surprise Americans to learn that the only people who dislike the Muslim Brotherhood more than they do is al-Qaida. Wahhabis differ from al-Qaida in two important respects. First, Wahhabism supports the sovereignty of the Saudi king, a regime that al-Qaida considers illegitimate. Second, theologically, Wahhabists contested Usama bin Laden's authority to declare jihad, believing that it is reserved to legitimate sovereigns. When Wahhabist clerics condemned al-Qaida's September 11, 2001 attacks, Usama bin Laden retaliated by denouncing them as corrupt puppets of the illegitimate Saudi king.⁴ Likewise, al-Qaida condemns the Muslim Brotherhood for foregoing jihad and instead turning to civil political processes. Then al-Qaida second-in-command Ayman al-Zawahiri admonished the Muslim Brothers for "luring thousands of young Muslim men into lines for elections...instead of into the line of jihad."⁵

The Western failure to distinguish Salafist jihadism from its less dangerous predecessors has caused the United States to establish an unacceptably high bar for winning the War on Terrorism. Setting aside America's misguided insistence on engaging in interstate war to stop international terrorism, in both Afghanistan and Iraq the United States and her allies have, simply put, picked unnecessary fights. In Iraq, besides the unavoidable fights with Ba'athists and al-Qaida in Iraq (AQI), coalition forces engaged in a long, destructive battle with the Iranian-style Shia political Salafist party, the Office of the Martyr Sadr, and its armed wing, Jaysh al-Mahdi. Our insistence on marginalizing Sadr has increased his stature in Iraq and given ammunition to conservative elements inside Iran who use U.S. aggression against Shia Iraqis to bolster their own domestic support.

The Taliban's entrenched support in Pashtun Afghanistan, combined with the Karzai government's weakness in large swaths of the same region, has hindered progress in that country as well. After its initial success in Afghanistan, the coalition has spent a decade defending a corrupt secular regime against a political Salafist Taliban insurgency. Persistent problems with the Afghan justice system, including rampant corruption and a shortage of qualified judges, have created a void that the Taliban has filled with its own, more efficient, culturally familiar shar'ia justice system.

Hamid Karzai added fuel to the persistent charges of Afghan government corruption with his own 2009 presidential election campaign; international observers concluded that as many as a quarter of the ballots cast were fraudulent.⁶ Meanwhile, our insistence on defeating a political system incapable of threatening the West has strained the U.S. relationship with nuclear-armed Pakistan to the breaking point.

Unfortunately, the U.S.-led coalition in Afghanistan has been almost as effective as the Afghan government at alienating Pashtuns. Civilian casualties caused by night raids and air strikes have been a persistent irritant throughout the war, but this problem came to a head in 2011 when, only days after protests in Kabul prompted Hamid Karzai to publically demand an end to all civilian casualties, NATO forces mistakenly shot Karzai's cousin in a night raid.⁷ It is not hard to see why Pashtuns have begun to perceive the war as one in which foreign aggressors are trying to supplant indigenous, familiar, politically Salafist Taliban rule with a corrupt and ineffective Western-backed regime. Alienating the local population in this manner has led to discontent and increased societal elements willing to support insurgent forces. And so coalition actions intended to decrease safe havens might actually be increasing them, thus contradicting the policy's intent.

Counterterrorism Strategy: Filling Ungoverned Spaces and Spreading Democracy

On December 1, 2009, President Obama reaffirmed the United States' counterterrorism strategy during his Afghanistan War speech delivered at the United States Military Academy. He defined Afghanistan as a "vital national interest" in which the "security of the United States is at stake." The president further insisted that ungoverned spaces and instability in Afghanistan will result in attacks on the United States and its allies.⁸ These assertions are widely accepted and seldom questioned in the counterterrorism strategy debate. While individuals in Afghanistan undoubtedly played a role in planning September 11, 2001, the attacks likely would have occurred without Afghanistan as a base of operations. We find it difficult to believe that in the telecommunications age, a terrorist organization would require a country like Afghanistan to plan, organize, and execute attacks. The strength of a terrorist organization is not its location, but its ability to promote its message to a distributed and receptive audience. The world is a large place with many suitable locations for terrorists to avoid the watchful eye of the United States and

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its allies. The United States does not have the resources necessary to fill the global void, and its attempt to establish democracies in ungoverned spaces can be counterproductive.

Beyond mere rhetoric, the concept of ungoverned spaces is a pillar of America's strategic documents. It first appeared in the *2004 National Military Strategy*, which warned of the threat posed by ungoverned spaces and spoke of the need to eliminate these areas. Since the publication of the *2004 National Military Strategy*, ungoverned spaces have been mentioned in the *2006 National Security Strategy*, the *2008 National Defense Strategy*, the *2006 Counterterrorism Strategy*, and President Obama's most recent counterterrorism strategy.⁹ Each of these documents argues that ungoverned spaces are terrorist sanctuaries serving as bases of operations to attack American interests. The documents further assert that the threat posed by the sanctuaries is so severe that America must ensure these areas are properly governed.

In 2006, fear of ungoverned spaces led the United States to support Ethiopia when it ousted the Islamic Court Union (ICU) from power in Somalia. While Ethiopia and the United States were successful in ejecting the ICU, the action only sank the country into further turmoil and confusion. The ICU certainly was not an ideal administration that valued individual rights, but it did provide a sense of stability in a country that sorely lacked basic governmental structures.¹⁰ Now, six years after the United States supported ICU's ouster, Sharif Sheikh Ahmed, former leader of the ICU, is president of Somalia as it battles al-Shabaab, an arguably more fundamentalist Islamic group with close ties to al-Qaida.¹¹ This same organization has served as a recruiting tool for U.S. youth within Somali-American communities.¹² In 2012, the United States faces a failed state in Somalia: piracy threatens local trade routes off its coast; al-Qaida is further entrenched there; and disenfranchised Somali-American youth have found a violent purpose in life. In the end, the United States' fear of ungoverned spaces probably caused what it dreaded most—greater turmoil and increased Islamic fundamentalism in Somalia. More recently, America's support in overthrowing an established government—though, granted, a deprived one—in Libya helped create a governance vacuum in which a democracy might not blossom.¹³ This action, along with the invasion of Iraq in 2003 and rhetorical support of the Arab Spring, may contradict the United States' determination to rid the world of ungoverned spaces since those actions are creating ungoverned spaces.

Confronting the Myth of Ungoverned Spaces

While U.S. officials worry about ungoverned spaces that allow terrorists to operate indiscriminately, in reality terrorist organizations can leverage technology to plan, organize, and execute attacks. They do not need a home base for these purposes. In his book *The Accidental Guerrilla*, David Kilcullen highlights how terrorist organizations use technology to recruit members and spread their message to a global population.¹⁴ Marc Sageman's book *Leaderless Jihad* explains how al-Qaida's strength is not its operational prowess or control of vast territories, but its ability to inspire would-be terrorists and the downtrodden.¹⁵ Thus, al-Qaida does not need to organize, plan, or execute terrorist attacks, but merely serve as a motivator through its numerous media outlets.¹⁶ There is a certain contradiction in the "disconnectedness" theory posed by Thomas Barnett, a prominent and influential author whose writings have persuaded many policymakers and national security professionals that ungoverned spaces are a threat.¹⁷ Other authors and researchers have shown that terrorists need a certain level of infrastructure and governance to run a transnational organization effectively.¹⁸ Terrorist organizations operating out of remote and truly ungoverned areas would have great difficulty communicating with subordinates or anyone else.¹⁹

A second pillar of America's counterterrorism strategy is democratization of ill-governed areas. The logic here is that democratic governments are more responsive to citizens' needs, less belligerent toward their neighbors and the international community, and less likely to threaten the United States. While such notions have become axioms in America's strategic documents, cited by many national security professionals and policymakers, substantial evidence shows they are mere conjecture if not outright fantasy. In truth, forced democratization is risky, and a democracy's success is not inevitable. Even if successful, a democracy could pose a terrorist threat. While we do not argue for repression and would prefer democratic governments aligned with the United States, aggressively pursuing democracy as part of a counterterrorism strategy is unproven, and we believe often ineffective and counterproductive.

Democracy as Counterterrorism Strategy: A Flawed Approach

The impact of democracy on political violence, particularly terrorism, is an important topic for policy choices and implementation. The belief in the power of democracy to solve the terrorist problem influenced past U.S. presidential administrations and is now captured within strategy and

pursued through policy. The notion is so influential that the September 2006 *National Strategy for Combatting Terrorism* identified the advancement of effective democracies as the country's "long-term approach" to eradicating terrorism worldwide. But is the belief in democracies' ability to end terrorism justified, or are policymakers pursuing a solution for an insolvable problem? This question is critical to better understanding the causes of terrorism and the impact of the actions we take in combatting it. It is especially important in considering the use of military force to institute democracies as a counterterrorism tool.

Democracy's impact on terrorism is difficult to determine accurately through most forms of research. In one sense, democracy provides individuals the freedom to dissent and, through the election booth, a forum for it. The liberties associated with democracy—for example, freedom of speech and press and the right to assembly peacefully—also provide individuals with an outlet for being heard. We might expect that this freedom to express and resolve grievances would reduce the number of people who resort to terrorism to achieve their objectives; but the nature of democracy and the civil liberties it guarantees enable terrorist organizations to move undetected, thus exploiting the very principles thought to make terrorism less likely.

Robert Pape's research on why individuals resort to suicide terrorism offers some valuable insight into the logic of America's democratization strategy.²⁰ He found that suicide terrorism is often used to force liberal democracies to make "significant territorial concessions." Thus, one could extrapolate from Pape's findings that terrorism generally will increase when liberal democracies occupy ungoverned spaces/ill-governed areas in order to establish democracy, since an indigenous population's natural reaction will be to protect their home and compel invaders to leave. If this is true, a policy seeking to occupy ungoverned/ill-governed spaces could increase terrorism rather than eradicate it.

Mansfield and Snyder's research on "anocracies" supports this interpretation of Pape's findings. It shows that as countries transition from autocratic regimes to democracies (the authors call these transitional governments "anocracies"), civil strife often increases because the status quo has been disrupted. While introducing democracy and economic development may steer one group away from terrorism, a group that has lost status through the new order may become disenchanting and seek a return to the old one. Because their current conditions are beneath their expectations, these individuals believe they are being deprived of their rightful place in society.²¹ As a result, they will turn to whatever tactics allow them to push back against the newly established order. Since terror-

ism is a tactic of the weak, they will usually embrace it to achieve political gains or reestablish the status quo. The terrorists often will target the outside force—or its interests—that imposed democracy to compel it to withdraw. In addition, they will attack the new governing body to weaken the dominant sect and bring about political change. Sectarian violence in Iraq conducted by elements of the former Ba'ath Party and Sunni groups shows how disruption of the status quo can lead to terrorist events.

Republicans and Democrats alike understand that democracy often imposes an administration that is undesirable from their parochial perspective. The 2005 Lebanese and 2006 Palestinian elections show how promoting democracy in foreign countries does not always yield desirable results. While the United States supported free and open elections in Lebanon and Palestine, it had difficulty standing by its principles when many citizens supported Iranian-backed terrorist organizations as their parties of choice.²² Building democracies is not antithetical to terrorist organizations; witness democratic elections that empowered notorious terrorist groups like Hizbollah and Hamas. It is counterproductive for the United States to rhetorically promote democracy, but not accept election results. This unwillingness to recognize the population's choice if it is distasteful to American interests has led some to accuse the United States of imperialism, and of protecting its own interests against those of the indigenous population. It might be reassuring to believe that individuals exercising their rights will automatically embrace Western-style democracy and culture, but it is also dangerous and presumptuous.

The United States spent eight years and an estimated \$806 billion to bring stability and democracy to the people of Iraq.²³ The cost of the Iraq war, both in terms of blood and treasure, stands as testimony to the difficulty of introducing democracy in a foreign land whose history, culture, and way of life differ greatly from the American experience. While the U.S. mission in Iraq is finally over, the long-term prognosis for that country is still uncertain. If Iraq plunges back into sectarian carnage after the United States' departure, the once highly touted strategic victories will be recognized, belatedly, for what they were: tactical wins only.

We also question America's contention that democratic principles and individual rights are an effective tool in controlling ungoverned spaces. As many authors—including those of the Defense Department's own *Ungoverned Areas Project*—have noted, increased individual rights and protections from government tyranny can actually increase ungoverned spaces and the threat of terrorism.²⁴ America's twin goals of increasing democracies and gaining control over ungoverned spaces could therefore be at odds with each other. The country's promotion of democracy and individ-

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ual rights and its fear of ungoverned spaces pose a contradiction. As globalization breaks down barriers and provides individuals with avenues of expression outside the glaring eyes of government authorities, individuals and organizations with malign intentions find it easier to hide in ungoverned spaces.²⁵ As the United States counters what it sees as the root causes of terrorism (lack of freedom and human dignity) by helping increase freedom of religion, conscience, speech, assembly, association, and press, it enhances the ability of terrorist organizations to recruit and hide among the masses. Of course, no one advocates stripping individuals of their liberties as a tactic. Yet, one must acknowledge that increased freedoms in an open society make it more difficult to monitor and control citizens' behavior.

Perception Is Reality

Constructivism holds that nations have contrasting perceptions and realities because of culture, history, and experience.²⁶ These differences affect how a country perceives the actions or intentions of other individuals and nations. This in turn brings into question the assertion that greater freedoms throughout the Middle East will reverse the United States' poor reputation among the Arab masses. Other nations perceive U.S. actions based on their history and culture, not on what America intends to portray. Americans tend to view their country as a white-hatted cowboy trying to right wrongs and bring justice to the downtrodden. But other nations see U.S. history through a different set of lenses, and so have a contrary perspective. For example, while the United States views its Cold War actions as countering Soviet influence, countries like Iran view them much differently.

Americans also have difficulty understanding how a people can embrace strict Salafism rather than Western-style democracy. From the U.S. perspective, the latticework of rights (based on John Locke's "natural rights" to life, liberty, and property) that shield the individual from government excesses are infinitely preferable to an ideology that subordinates the individual to a body of sometimes brutally enforced absolute laws that dictate every facet of one's life.²⁷ But from a constructivist perspective, it's not difficult to see how a people with a history of arbitrary rulers, whose only authority is their capacity to do violence, might find the absolute rule of a divine authority very appealing. In other words, the West faces a decidedly uphill battle in compelling Afghan Pashtuns to reject familiar, comfortable strict Salafism and embrace what they perceive as an exotic foreign alternative.

Schizophrenic Strategy

Well-known military strategist Bernard Brodie once stated that strategic thinking was nothing if not pragmatic, and the important question when deciding strategy is whether an idea will work.²⁸ Part of the pragmatism involved in developing strategy is identifying the resources required to achieve one's objectives and, more importantly, deciding whether the objectives are worth the estimated costs. Allocating resources to a particular strategy is a zero-sum game, which means that allocating resources for one option takes available resources away from other options (or further increases the national debt). As President Eisenhower said in his farewell address, good judgment seeks balance and progress; lack of it eventually finds imbalance and frustration.²⁹ The United States' current financial state, its ambitious domestic recovery plans, and its desire to establish government-run health care—all while waging two wars—has created imbalance and frustration. America should understand competing interests, prioritize policy options, and conduct a cost-benefit analysis to determine the appropriate policy. All too often American grand strategy tries to accomplish everything while sacrificing nothing. The United States embarked on the Global War on Terrorism by dismantling two regimes, but failed to grasp how their collapse would empower Iran, the other declared enemy in the region.

Before the country's 2001 invasion of Afghanistan, the Taliban and Iranian governments were at odds. During her November 2007 congressional testimony, Hillary Mann Leverett, then director for Iran and Persian Gulf Affairs within the National Security Council, testified that Iran largely cooperated with America regarding al-Qaida, Iraq, and Afghanistan. She also stated, "Iran hoped and anticipated that tactical cooperation with the United States would lead to a genuine opening between our two countries."³⁰ The American inability or unwillingness to prioritize between the counterterrorism mission and countering Iran created strategic friction. America ignored an opportunity to leverage U.S. and Iranian mutual interests within the region to find common ground and bring the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan to a successful close. Instead, it placed Iran within the "axis of evil," thus alienating a country that had mastered the use of proxies to wreak havoc and gain strategic advantage.³¹ For America to find common ground with Iran after 9/11 would not have required the two countries to become full-fledged allies. The suspicion and contempt between them runs deep, and mutual interest alone may not have alleviated the tension. However, the United States' failure to find mutual interest with Iran has resulted in a more painful struggle that has cost America both lives and money. The U.S. decision to wage two wars, while simultaneously refusing to engage Iran before the resolution

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of the countries' nuclear disagreement, was a schizophrenic strategy that ensured the United States would not achieve its policy objectives.

Conclusion

The United States has spent the past eleven years and over \$1.2 trillion on the Global War on Terrorism, believing it can shape the world into a democratic bastion of bliss and peacefulness through force.³² Although we have expended large sums of blood and treasure in this pursuit, we have failed to grasp the difficulty, if not impossibility, of reaching our objective. America's military forces and their interagency partners have performed superbly and done a yeoman's job in pursuit of unclear and often unachievable policy objectives. Although these dedicated professionals have performed well, we are afraid their achievements are ephemeral and, sadly, not worth the financial and personal toll the country has paid. Similarly, while U.S. national security institutions have learned from this experience, the cost has been too high.

While the United States' GWOT, including its decision to send a sizable conventional force into Middle Eastern countries, has been less successful than originally hoped for, the country has successfully executed other aspects of its strategy. The increased coordination among local, state, and federal agencies, increased resourcing of intelligence capabilities, and improved ability to protect the homeland (demonstrated by ten years without a terrorist attack) is a testament to the hard work and dedication of the counterterrorism community. The United States must exploit these successes and continue to refine its strategy to ensure continued homeland security.

It is time for the current administration to review the failures and successes of the past ten years and determine where to allocate resources for the counterterrorism fight. This assessment must be holistic and consider other government priorities in order to determine how to allocate its finite resources so the nation is adequately protected. The United States cannot hope to defeat Salafist jihadism through warfare. Fortunately, it does not have to; all it must do is protect itself from the physical threat of Salafist jihadism—that is, from international terrorism. Trying to do more, given the limited resources at its disposal, will be worse than futile; it will be counterproductive. Informed by the lessons of the past ten years, the United States must set aside post-9/11 emotions and update its counterterrorism strategy by considering the limits of its power and by using a more holistic approach to allocating its resources. Clearly more research is needed in this area.

About the Authors

Pat Proctor is a U.S. Army field artillery lieutenant colonel with over 16 years' active service. In 2007, he served in Iraq as a member of the Joint Strategic Assessment Team under General David Petraeus and Ambassador Ryan Crocker, mapping the future for post-surge Iraq. Pat recently returned from his second tour, in Northern Iraq, as a battalion operations officer in the 1st Infantry Division. He is the author of *Task Force Patriot and the End of Combat Operations in Iraq*. He holds master's degrees in military arts and sciences for strategy and theater operations from the U.S. Command and General Staff College and the School of Advanced Military Studies, respectively. He is a doctoral student in history at Kansas State University. Pat's recent publications include "Message versus Perception during the Americanization of the Vietnam War," *The Historian* (Spring 2011); "Fighting to Understand: A Practical Example of Design at the Battalion Level," *Military Review* (March–April 2011); and "The Mythical Shia Crescent," *Parameters* (Spring 2008) and *Iran International Times*, May 23, 2008.

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- 31 The U.S.-supported overthrow of Iranian Prime Minister Mossadegh in 1953 and the 1979 Iranian hostage event are a couple of reasons these two countries mistrust each other.
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