

WIN WITHOUT WAR

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The Takeaway:

- The United States has gradually reduced its deployment of troops and use of air strikes.
- It is important not to attribute these changes primarily to the shift from a particularly violent Trump administration to the Biden administration.
- The newly formalized rules on counterterrorism operations come with a variety of exceptions that reveal the persistence of the War on Terror.
- The combination of this lack of clarity and an open-ended authorization for the war on terror creates the potential for counterterrorism wars that appear to be in decline to quickly snap back during times of crisis.

America's Counterterrorism Wars in a Time of Transition

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The War on Terror – and its [various component wars](#) – have entered a period of transition. The United States has gradually reduced its deployment of troops and use of air strikes. Meanwhile, an approach to the war that emphasizes lower cost operations has reached new heights of influence, and President Biden has instituted constraints on counterterrorism strikes outside areas of active hostilities. Yet, these changes have not translated into an end to the war.

Winding Down U.S. Strikes and the New Paradigm

For many, the understanding of what constitutes American counterterrorism warfare was shaped by the large-scale counterinsurgency campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan and the heights of the drone wars under presidents Obama and Trump. Today, however, the War on Terror looks very different, and it presents new challenges for analysts and for activists working to bring the war to an end.

The most obvious example of this change is the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan. The number of U.S. troops in Afghanistan [reached](#) more than 100,000 in 2010-11. Now the U.S. has withdrawn its troops from the country. Even before the withdrawal, the U.S. had reduced the number of troops significantly. In Pakistan, U.S. drone strikes [peaked](#) in 2010, and then fell in a pattern that largely mirrors the fall in troop numbers in Afghanistan. There has not been a U.S. strike in Pakistan since 2018. [For all his violent rhetoric](#), President Trump never came close to returning the war in Pakistan to the heights it hit under Obama.

In Iraq, U.S. troop numbers remained at or above 100,000 [for years](#) until 2010, leading into the 2011 withdrawal. While U.S. troops returned to fight ISIS, the U.S. relied primarily on air strikes supporting

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local forces. As a result troop numbers remained low compared to the years of the U.S. occupation and surge. In turn, U.S. air strikes in Iraq and Syria [declined substantially](#) as ISIS lost its territorial holdings.

In Yemen, Trump [escalated](#) the drone war in 2017 to unprecedented levels, but then the number of strikes fell each remaining year of his term, ending at a lower level than he was handed by Obama. U.S. strikes in Yemen now appear to be paused. When the Biden administration released its assessment of civilian casualties in U.S. military strikes during 2021, Yemen [was not included](#) as “a declared theater of active armed conflict,” a [change](#) from the report on civilian casualties in 2020.

It is important not to attribute these changes primarily to the shift from a particularly violent Trump administration to the Biden administration. A close look at the timing of escalations and de-escalations in strikes challenges such a claim. However, it is clear that there have been substantial [declines](#) in direct U.S. strikes [across a range](#) of locations.

These declines should be understood as connected to longer-term shifts in the U.S. approach to the war on terror. As Matthew Levitt, of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy carefully tracks, the United States government and counterterrorism community have been trending towards a so-called “[sustainable counterterrorism](#) posture” that claims to move away from “binary win-or-lose terms” and seeks to “rationalize” the expenditure of funds and effort on counterterrorism at least since the Obama administration. The Biden administration has embraced this framework to an unprecedented extent, but it is the culmination of a long-term trend.

On October 7, President Biden [approved and disseminated](#) a new classified order, formalizing the temporary requirement that the targets of strikes outside of conventional war zones be approved by the president among other restrictions. The *New York Times* described the move as suggesting that the administration “intends to launch fewer drone strikes and commando raids away from recognized war zones.”

The War on Terror’s Persistence

While major changes are afoot, they do not constitute an end to the War on Terror.

The newly formalized rules on counterterrorism operations come with a variety of exceptions that reveal the persistence of the War on Terror. For example, the rules only apply outside “areas of active hostilities” – a label that has historically been [difficult](#) to pin down. When U.S. counterterrorism strikes started surging in the late Obama administration in Somalia, Yemen, Iraq, and Syria, administration officials began to relabel zones where they wanted to use drones as being areas of active hostilities. The Obama administration labeled [part of Libya](#) such a zone for a period, and Trump labeled [Somalia](#) and [parts of Yemen](#) as areas of active hostilities - though they are longer so-classified. Even today Iraq and Syria continue to be viewed as areas of active hostilities, where the new order does not apply.

Moreover, the presidential-approval requirement [does not apply](#) to strikes in self-defense or in the defense of partner forces. This is a notable exception because, of the nine U.S. strikes in Somalia in 2022, the military described all [but one](#) as falling under that category - even when the defensive strikes supported [major offensive operations](#). This same exception helped smooth the path from the Obama administration’s initial escalation in Somalia to the increases under Trump.

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In addition, little prevents the administration from simply authorizing large numbers of targets. The *New York Times* [previously reported](#) that Biden had approved standing authority to target about a dozen al-Shabaab leaders in Somalia. Although the Biden administration has largely shed the language of unlimited objectives of destroying and defeating al Qaeda and other terrorist groups (notably the effort against ISIS [retains](#) the defeat moniker), it has not replaced these unlimited objectives with new clearly stated, limited objectives.

As Christopher Kolenda has [argued](#), the Defense Department “has no definition or doctrine for this seemingly critical aspect of war. Options other than decisive victory do not exist in the national security lexicon.” In failing to fill the proverbial hole with new, limited, and achievable objectives, sustainable counterterrorism [risks](#) fueling continued endless war in pursuit of ill-defined and shifting objectives.

The combination of this lack of clarity and an [open-ended authorization](#) for the war on terror creates the potential for counterterrorism wars that appear to be in decline to [quickly snap back](#) during times of crisis, as occurred in 2014 with the initiation of the counter-ISIS war.

While analysts should be wary of equating the character of the [crises](#) that [enabled](#) ISIS’ growth with the continuation of more prosaic clashes and attacks, it would be a [deep error](#) to assume systemic conditions cannot worsen again. As long as authorizations for the War on Terror remain in place, the war will not end and its scale will be determined by the whims of whoever sits in the Oval Office.

Indeed, we may be witnessing the scaling up of part of the U.S. drone war right now. Drone strikes in Somalia are down from the high pace under Trump, but [ticking up](#) compared to the start of Biden’s term – amid [expanded offensive operations](#) by partner forces and evidence that the U.S. perceives a [growing threat](#) from al-Shabaab.

In just the past month, the U.S. has conducted two strikes in Somalia. One on October 1st, reportedly [killed](#) a senior al-Shabaab leader. The other on September 18, [killed](#) “27 al-Shabaab terrorists,” according to AFRICOM in support of the aforementioned offensive operation.

Meanwhile in Syria, on October 6, the U.S. [conducted](#) a rare helicopter raid into a part of the country held by Syrian government forces, and then [conducted](#) an airstrike against ISIS leaders. That the number of strikes in Syria is down from its peak when the U.S. was militarily rolling back ISIS’ territorial holdings is not evidence that the war is ending rather than [transitioning](#) to a different kind of war.

While direct U.S. strikes and troop presences appear to have declined in many areas, the U.S. has also increasingly emphasized the use of partner forces to “[maintain the fight against terrorism](#)” without directly involving U.S. troops. The value of U.S. strike and troop numbers as measurements of American warfare may be in decline, as responsibility for violence abroad is [concealed](#) or blurred via the use of [partner](#) forces and [strategies of proxy warfare](#).

Thinking Through Policy and Advocacy in an Interregnum

The current moment of transition in the war on terror raises significant challenges for analysts and those who wish to bring the wars to an end. It is important to recognize the down-shift and changing frameworks of the war without obscuring the potential for future escalation. In this moment of

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transition, it is ever more important that the American public and their representatives demand the clarification of U.S. objectives and war authorizations with regard to specific conflicts and [not get trapped by the trickery](#) that seeks to equate the necessary efforts to end endless war with the ups and downs of troop numbers or strikes.

BURIED LEDES

The US is considering easing sanctions against Venezuela as a migration and global energy crisis worsens. With OPEC+ deciding to cut exports last week and a spike in Venezuelan migration through Central America to the US, the Biden administration is [facing pressure](#) to cut a deal with the Maduro government in Caracas. Over the past year, the US has intercepted 150,000 Venezuela migrants. A more stable Venezuelan economy could ease this. One idea is to allow Chevron, the only US energy company allowed to work in Venezuela, to resume exports where the funds are placed in a trust to finance humanitarian activities only, while relieving the global energy strain.

China's zero-Covid strategy is [under strain](#), as regular mass PCR testing has failed to prevent China's biggest outbreaks. There are 200 million Chinese under some kind of Covid lockdown, causing financial strain for the government, including local authorities who have diverted public projects to fund pandemic monitoring and control. China has failed to create an updated vaccine, while workers have lost enthusiasm to process test results correctly, leading to an ineffective strategy.

The International Monetary Fund has [downgraded](#) its 2023 world economic outlook, citing Russia's invasion of Ukraine, inflation, and China's property market. Last year, world growth reached 6%, but prospects for next year have dropped to 2.7% (down from 2.9% prediction in July). Specifically, the US is supposed to drop to 1% growth and Germany and Italy are expected to contract. However, President Biden [said](#) "I don't think there will be a recession," claiming "every six months they say this." The recent OPEC+ decision, led by Saudi Arabia, to cut energy output has deepened global recession fears.

Israel and Lebanon have [reached](#) a maritime agreement to settle a dispute over major oil and gas fields in the Mediterranean sea. The deal was brokered by the US, with Lebanese President Michel Aoun claiming it "preserved Lebanon's rights of this natural wealth" and Israeli Prime Minister Yair Lapid calling it an "historic achievement that will strengthen Israel's security." Lebanon and Israel are technically at war with Beirut insisting that this deal should not be viewed as a treaty or a step towards normalization. The negotiation involved the Karish oil and gas field and a region known as the Qanaa prospect. Israel said its working with French energy company Total to start work "immediately."

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Ukraine's outdated air defense system is [unable to keep up](#) against Russian missile barrages, including an indiscriminate aerial onslaught this week that mostly consisted of air-launched cruise missiles. NATO defense ministers gathered in Brussels this week to discuss plans on how best to protect Ukrainian infrastructure from future Russian missile attacks - especially as depleted stocks force Russian to use less accurate but equally brutal weapons. Although Ukraine [received](#) the first of four powerful German IRIS-T air defense systems, allies generally have few air defenses available for immediate donation. Israel is [refusing](#) to send Kyiv its Iron-Dome missile defense system, claiming it's not the right match for Russian ballistic missiles, but Ukraine insists it would still be a critical tool for a plethora of Russian projectiles its cities are facing.

Despite [protests](#) from subscribers like yourself regarding our last debrief's [prediction](#), Win Without War was again right on the issues as Manchester United faced a recent [6-3 shellacking](#) against Manchester City. To their great credit, they [squeaked](#) by 12th place Everton last weekend. In our ongoing World Cup coverage: Henry Kane, team England's captain, plans on [wearing the "onelove" armband](#) despite violating FIFA rules. The arm band symbolizes anti-discrimination that is prevalent in international soccer, while advocating for LGBTQ+ rights.