



# Fabian Strategy for a Twenty-First Century Hannibal

## Reinvigorating U.S. Strategy in Iraq and Syria

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After nearly sixteen years of persistent conflict, the United States has come full circle—there is yet another large, ungoverned space filled with Islamic militants intent on waging jihad against the West. The ability of the Islamic State (IS) to amass an estimated twenty thousand fighters on its way to defeating the Iraqi security forces was the final confirmation that the U.S. strategy for the Middle East has failed both to eliminate the threat presented by IS and to spread liberal democracy in that region.<sup>1</sup> An appreciation of how U.S. strategy evolved from the Bush to the Obama administrations, and why these two strategies failed, is essential to informing a new strategy for victory.

Force must play a leading role because hope of a purely diplomatic breakthrough seems naive when one side's *raison d'être* is so closely tied to the other's destruction. While a ground invasion and counterinsurgency effort may well suit such conditions, the American people

have already shunned the generational effort required.<sup>2</sup> A decapitation strategy, with its reliance on drones and special operations, has proven to be more sustainable, though the enemy's hydra-like resilience suggests the United States can do no better than share Israel's fate of endlessly "mowing the grass."<sup>3</sup> Syria's cauldron presents another way for force to take center stage.

### The Bush Administration: A Ways-Means Mismatch

The shock of 9/11 gave new life to old ideas. In the American political tradition of describing world events as the struggle of good versus evil, Islamic radicalism assumed the role communism had vacated. As with the U.S. effort in southeast Asia some five decades ago, a Manichaeian bent in U.S. foreign policy confused peripheral for vital national interests.<sup>4</sup> When Islamic radicalism anywhere became a threat everywhere, a miscalculation of the means and public will

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Illustration of George Washington in Frank Keating's *George: George Washington, Our Founding Father* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 3 January 2012). George Washington was able to defeat a larger, better equipped British force through a guerrilla-style war of attrition. This approach is known as the Fabian strategy after Roman General Quintus Fabius Maximus, who thwarted the invasion of Rome by Carthaginian General Hannibal using similar methods. (Illustration by Mike Wimmer)

necessary to defeat a global movement on the periphery of U.S. interests occurred just as it had in Vietnam. In an address to a joint session of Congress shortly after 9/11, President George Bush reintroduced this Cold War worldview to the nation: “Our war on terror begins with al-Qaida, but it does not end there. It will not end until every terrorist group of global reach has been found, stopped and defeated.”<sup>5</sup> The Bush administration’s chosen ways and means, or lack thereof, were equally clear: American military power would transform the Middle East via force, the economy would not be mobilized, and the American public would not be burdened with a tax increase to pay for the war. The Bush administration’s strategy is therefore best captured as unlimited war pursued by limited means.

An assumption of a quick military victory followed by spontaneous political revolution underestimated the probability and costs of transforming the Middle East. Although it was correct to assume U.S. military superiority, the Bush administration’s emphasis on military power prevented a clear-eyed assessment of the extent political reconciliation, let alone transformation, was even possible.<sup>6</sup> As prewar expectations of a quick victory were dashed, the realities of nation building under an insurgency exposed the limits of public tolerance for expending blood and treasure on the periphery of U.S. interests. From the beginning of the Iraq war, Baathist-enabled Islamic militant groups were in an existential fight, choosing to fight alongside jihadists rather than face a newly empowered, revenge-minded Shia majority.<sup>7</sup> In comparison, once the memory of 9/11 began to fade, and radical Islamism proved unable to threaten the American way of life, the political costs required to match the insurgency’s effort in Iraq proved to be unsustainable.<sup>8</sup>

A strategic reassessment, triggered by Iraqi domestic politics circa 2006, could have prevented this misallocation of resources. Unfortunately, the decision to surge forces was based upon maintaining credibility rather than identifying a sustainable path to victory.<sup>9</sup> Sustainability in a democracy rests on public support. Lives and money expended must roughly equate to both the public’s perceptions of the effort’s relative importance and the probability of its success. To be sure, a misalignment of this type does not doom a strategy out of hand. It does however curtail the timetable for success; victory must be swift. Otherwise, even a

correct strategic approach will be robbed of the time necessary to see it through.

Optimism does not equate to approval, tacit or otherwise. U.S. public optimism about Iraq reached 65 percent in late 2008, a year into the surge. Paradoxically, a CNN/ORC poll taken fifty times between 2006 and 2011 averaged a 33 percent public approval rating for the war effort, while never recording support above 40 percent or below 29 percent. And from 2006 to 2014, when CNN/ORC pollsters asked whether the outcome in Iraq justified the loss of American life, affirmative responses peaked in 2006 at only 29 percent and trended downward to 18 percent in 2014.<sup>10</sup>

The surge undoubtedly created the conditions by which the United States could exit honorably from Iraq; however, it also made clear that the public would deny policy makers the option of maintaining surge-level conditions indefinitely. Resolving the sectarian differences at the heart of the insurgency required an open-ended commitment of U.S. forces.<sup>11</sup> An enduring U.S. security buffer was needed for any hope of a Sunni-Shia power sharing agreement.<sup>12</sup> The United States should therefore have taken steps to drive down casualties to make a long-term U.S. troop commitment more tolerable to the American public. The inability to sustain such an effort helped cement the power of a Shia-dominated government, whose mistreatment of its Sunni population would make the Islamic State possible.<sup>13</sup>

The American experience in Iraq highlights the obstacles to waging protracted limited war in a democratic society.<sup>14</sup> Though a generational commitment, fueled by resolute public support for a counterinsurgency approach, makes for an interesting counterfactual, an open-ended commitment of blood and treasure at the periphery of U.S. interests rings incompatible with democratic society.<sup>15</sup> Advancing democracy for democracy’s sake has its limits. The lesson is twofold. First, force can only create the time for a political alternative to radical Islamism to take root—for which no timeline exists. Second, any subsequent strategic approach must account for the resolve of a war weary public.

## **The Obama Administration: A Ways-Ends Mismatch**

In contrast to the Bush approach, the Obama administration’s strategy regarding combatting Islamic extremism was best defined as a limited war pursued by limited

means. When compared to the view of his predecessor, President Barack Obama did not view the world as a zero-sum game between the West and radical Islam; consequently, there was a clear delineation between vital and peripheral interests. In 2013, in his hallmark national security speech, Obama emphasized, “Beyond Afghanistan, we must define our effort not as a boundless ‘global war on terror,’ but rather as a series of persistent, targeted efforts to dismantle specific networks of

names and faces of those threatening the United States; it does nothing to support the growth of moderate governments that can provide viable political alternatives to radical Islamism. The United States can neither kill itself out of the war nor mark time while it waits for the end to an Islamic reformation. Here the lesson is singular: a decapitation strategy expends a sustainable rate of effort to achieve proximate goals acceptable to the American public, but it fails to tackle the war’s root cause.<sup>21</sup>

“Beyond Afghanistan, we must define our effort not as a boundless ‘global war on terror,’ but rather as a series of persistent, targeted efforts to dismantle specific networks of violent extremists that threaten America.”

violent extremists that threaten America.”<sup>16</sup> To achieve this, the Obama administration’s strategy preference was to partner with states affected by Islamic militants to provide limited military assistance as opposed to relying on large U.S. troop deployments.<sup>17</sup>

Beginning in 2013, the crux of the Obama administration’s strategy lay in soliciting greater participation in the counterterrorism effort by legitimate governments. In theory, this would reduce political costs, shift the burden to other militaries, and bolster the legitimacy of regional allies.<sup>18</sup> But, in reality, the wars in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, and Syria together with those within the weak or failed states of Yemen, Somalia, and Pakistan precluded the administration from attaining partners of consequence. With no way of stabilizing the areas where Islamic extremist groups were thriving, the de facto U.S. approach became a decapitation strategy in which the only effective strategic choice was to attrit terrorist leadership.<sup>19</sup> Though drone strikes and clandestine raids may have eked out a modicum of temporary security at a sustainable rate, societal political deficiencies at the root of insurgent motivation were left unaddressed under the somewhat delusional assumption that Islamists might reconcile their hatred of modernity once a sufficient, yet unknowable, amount had been killed.<sup>20</sup>

Subsequently, experience has shown that a decapitation strategy cannot degrade, and ultimately defeat, IS. Despite the success of drone strikes in eliminating enemy senior leaders, a decapitation strategy only changes the

The problem of addressing the root causes of insurgent wars is now exacerbated by the fact that the West has tired of seemingly fruitless interventions in the Middle East. Consequently, it is unlikely that NATO or individual U.S. allies will demand action; and, as long as the war stays confined to Iraq and Syria, it is even more unlikely that the domestic pressure to launch a ground invasion will increase to any significant level.<sup>22</sup> It would therefore appear that U.S. strategic options are limited. On the contrary, it is the very lack of a large U.S. presence in Iraq that provides the United States with a new low-cost, high-payoff strategic option.

### Turning the Tables on the Fabian Gridlock

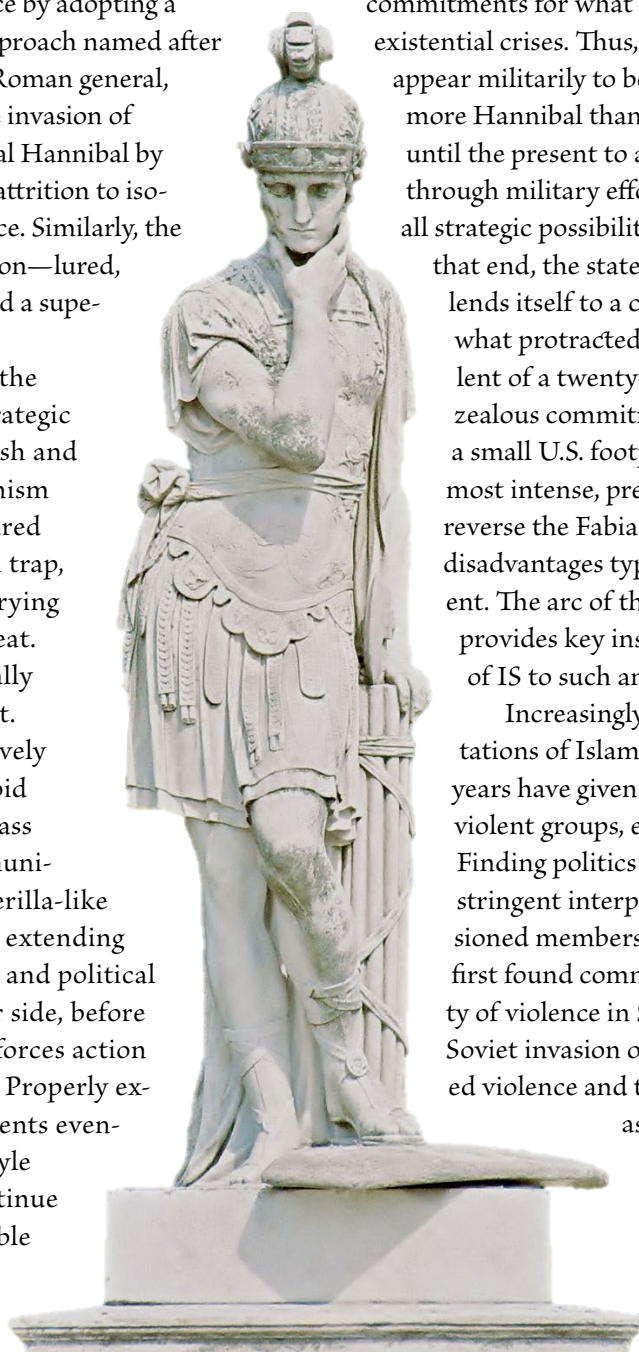
Political preferences aside, a consensus among American politicians still exists that the threat posed by Islamic extremism warrants military action. However, the political commitment required to independently bring about a military solution simply does not. The sum of events has all the hallmarks of a military misfortune, where victory seeks destruction, but the only sustainable approach accomplishes nothing beyond mowing the grass. The United States must learn, anticipate, and adapt.<sup>23</sup>

The solution lies with an innovative form of the strategy responsible for winning American independence employed by Gen. George Washington. He was able to defeat a larger, better-equipped and

better-trained British-led force by adopting a Fabian strategy, a strategic approach named after Quintus Fabius Maximus, a Roman general, who, in 221 BC, thwarted the invasion of Rome by Carthaginian general Hannibal by using a guerrilla-style war of attrition to isolate and starve the enemy force. Similarly, the American Fabius—Washington—lured, isolated, trapped, and defeated a superior British army.

The preceding survey of the twenty-first century U.S. strategic experience by presidents Bush and Obama against radical Islamism found one administration lured into the clutches of a Fabian trap, with the other desperately trying to extricate itself before defeat. A Fabian strategy traditionally favors the weaker belligerent. Qualitatively and quantitatively disadvantaged, the weak avoid decisive engagements to harass overextended lines of communication with hit-and-run, guerilla-like tactics. Victory hinges upon extending hostilities beyond the moral and political commitment of the stronger side, before an accusation of cowardice forces action the weaker side cannot win. Properly executed, the stronger belligerents eventually succumb to Fabian-style attrition as their will to continue falters long before any tangible considerations are ever in doubt. All this is predicated upon correctly predicting sustainability of the conflict: the weaker side must be able to run a carefully calculated marathon, while the domestic circumstances of the stronger require a sprint.<sup>24</sup>

As a test of wills, a Fabian strategy may seem inappropriate at first. The United States is militarily superior to any potential foe, let alone those in Syria, and its public has already shown an aversion to long-term



The marble statue of Roman Dictator Quintus Fabius Maximus Verucosus named *Statue of Fabius Cunctator* (1773–1780), by artist Joseph Baptist Hagenau, located in the Schönbrunn Garden at Schönbrunn Palace in Vienna. Photo taken 24 January 2007. (Photo courtesy of Wikimedia Commons)

commitments for what are perceived to be less than existential crises. Thus, the United States may now appear militarily to be more Carthage than Rome, more Hannibal than Fabius. However, failure up until the present to achieve political objectives through military efforts necessitates reevaluating all strategic possibilities for the future. Toward that end, the state of play in Syria and Iraq lends itself to a contrarian conception of what protracted war can offer the equivalent of a twenty-first century Hannibal. The zealous commitment of IS, combined with a small U.S. footprint where the fighting is most intense, presents an opportunity to reverse the Fabian strategy, neutralizing the disadvantages typical of the stronger belligerent. The arc of the radical Islamic movement provides key insights on the vulnerabilities of IS to such an approach.

Increasingly more dogmatic interpretations of Islam throughout the last forty years have given rise to progressively more violent groups, eventually leading to IS. Finding politics incompatible with a more stringent interpretation of Islam, disillusioned members of the Muslim Brotherhood first found common cause with the centrality of violence in Salafism in the 1970s.<sup>25</sup> The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan then cemented violence and the concept of martyrdom

as a political instrument of change for the war's Salafijihadist veterans, who later coalesced around al-Qaida's vision of an international caliphate by the 1990s.<sup>26</sup>

The cultish adherence to martyrdom in Salafism eventually superseded al-Qaida's political ends, as personified in the schism between Osama

bin Laden and Abu Musab al-Zarqawi who gave the Iraq War its sectarian hue in 2006. This trend toward increasingly apolitical ends culminated with rise of the Islamic State and its vision of absolute violence in pursuit of an end of times prophecy.<sup>27</sup> With IS, violence

and death have become ends in and of themselves as war simply grinds away in a perpetual march toward the prophesied Islamic apocalypse.

To be sure, planting the black flag in Syria marks a low-point in the West's struggle against radical Islamism. But for IS, geopolitical considerations are secondary to ideology.<sup>28</sup> Establishing the caliphate inaugurates the war with both nonbelievers as well as Shia Muslims that will culminate with the end time.<sup>29</sup> Syria is at the center of such prophecies.

Additionally, involvement by Iran and Russia must now be factored into the Syrian conflict. Tehran's special relationship with the Assad regime and desire for regional hegemony have made for de facto Iranian involvement in Syria. And, whether Putin's involvement in Syria is linked mainly to Russia coveting Tartus as a warm water port on the Syrian coastline, or is merely a tool for domestic distraction, IS stands in his way. Irrespective of ends, two U.S. adversaries—Russian and Syria—have willfully tied themselves to breaking the largely Sunni Islamic State's apocalyptic drive. Consequently, the time for the United States to exact a pound of flesh has come.

## A New Strategy for Victory

A new U.S. strategy is needed to simultaneously contain the war within Iraq and Syria while attempting to protract it with the aim of pitting the will of IS against Iranian and Russian regional ambitions. The United States should exert the current, sustainable rate of effort to exact incremental costs on overly invested adversaries. This new strategy would effect a reversal of the Fabian strategy (e.g., the stronger side playing not to lose, but exhausting its weaker foes in the process). As with the Anbar Awakening, political compromise could be expected to occur when the adversaries will to continue is sufficiently exhausted.<sup>30</sup>

To effect such a change in strategy, an overt operational shift would be unnecessary. A small number of U.S. special operation forces would continue to train and assist the moderate opposition, reducing U.S. exposure to the costs of direct combat. Air strikes would complement the moderate opposition's ground campaign, effectively compensating for their tactical deficiencies. Arms shipments would continue as well, in an attempt to offset Russian air and Iranian ground support. Under such circumstances, there would be no need to align with the Russian cause or

covertly support a less than moderate opposition. The distinction lies with intent.

The official position of the United States would continue to call for the destruction of IS and the removal of the Assad regime. Rather than pursue such objectives offensively, the United States would shift to a defensive mindset. The goal of which would be to deny any side a decisive advantage, thus protracting the war. By simultaneously depleting Russia and Iran, whatever political compromise emerges will have no other choice but to lean westward, leaving the United States in a position to leverage reconstruction aid for liberal reforms.

Negotiations provide the playbook for the most effective method of ensuring a protracted conflict. As they have already shown no intent of abiding by international norms, the operational pause that accompanies negotiations allows Assad and his benefactors to recover from potentially catastrophic setbacks. The military alternative, or the proactive method of ensuring a protracted conflict, would be to pursue indecisive lines of operations in the style of Gen. George McClellan, the civil war general infamous for his indecisiveness. The means of prolonging the conflict are flexible, as there are an infinite number of ways to keep an already wounded opponent bleeding.

To mitigate the risks of protracting the war in Iraq and Syria, the United States will need to sequence efforts in other theaters and account for the influence of the United Nations. First, the decapitation strategy should continue in Yemen, Somalia, and Pakistan, as an attack on the U.S. homeland would end any hopes of keeping the war in Iraq and Syria at a distance. Next, the United States should sustain current troop levels in Afghanistan to maintain the status quo. Finally, the United States must control the narrative of the humanitarian crisis. The United States could either fund the \$669 million required to implement the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees' plan to stem the refugee crisis in Europe or provide Turkey with direct aid.<sup>31</sup> Regardless, preventative action should be taken to fend off calls for an intervention under the Responsibility to Protect or to stem refugee flows.<sup>32</sup> If any of these efforts are compromised, there should be an immediate reassessment of whether containment and protraction remains viable.

The last sixteen years have been a referendum on wars of choice in the Middle East. The American people

appeared to have concluded that the generational effort required for democratization of the Middle East by force is unacceptable. A decapitation strategy gives all appearances of being acceptable, but is insufficient in scope to bring about a self-sustaining peace. Protracting the war merges the necessary with the acceptable, seizing upon the sustainability of a decapitation strategy to achieve ends only once thought possible with a commitment to population-centric counterinsurgency.

## Conclusion

In Syria sits a bubbling cauldron of secular interests and messianic prophecy. Iran and Russia have since leapt into the fray, seeking to prevent this witches' brew from boiling over. And, while the United States is certainly not unaffected by these developments, the changing circumstances have opened doors to strategic options heretofore inconceivable: a large contingent of U.S. ground forces no longer serves as a common target. Replaced with a mixture of proxies, special operations forces, and air power,

a light footprint pursues ends at an acceptable rate. Sustainability provides strategic flexibility.

However, despite a window of opportunity opening, strategic orthodoxy is squandering an opportunity for force to achieve universal ends against radical Islamism. The strong ought to exploit the superior will of the weak. In this reversal of the Fabian strategy, the United States permits the apocalyptic drive of IS to fuel the conflict; uses adequate military power to extend it; and traps Iran and Russia inside. The United States has waged war in the Middle East for far too long on the assumption that anything other than complete exhaustion of its adversaries could produce victory. Force has consequently blundered along unable to achieve the desired political ends for nearly a generation. In turning the tables of the Fabian strategy upon the enemy, force and policy can align to bring about a self-sustaining peace. ■

*The opinions expressed here are the author's alone and do not reflect those of the U.S. Army, the Department of Defense, or the U.S. government.*

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## Notes

1. Peter R. Neumann, "Foreign Fighter Total in Syria/Iraq Now Exceeds 20,000; Surpasses Afghanistan Conflict in the 1980s," The International Center for the Study Radicalization and Political Violence website, 26 January 2015, accessed 19 June 2017, <http://icsr.info/2015/01/foreign-fighter-total-syriairaq-now-exceeds-20000-surpasses-afghanistan-conflict-1980s/>.

2. Gary C. Jacobson, "A Tale of Two Wars: Public Opinion on the US Military Interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 40, no. 4 (December 2010): 591–95. As can be seen from Jacobson's data, public support for both the Iraq and Afghanistan wars have declined as the wars dragged on. Once the political narrative was no longer acceptable to the American public, the belief that U.S. military efforts in Iraq were worthwhile and capable of achieving success waned drastically. Americans ostensibly want to eradicate the terrorist threat, but when political leadership cannot attach a satisfactory narrative to the prolonged loss of blood and treasure, democratic popular support for war cannot hold out, as can be seen in the steady decline in approval for the Afghanistan war in Jacobson's figures.

3. For an analysis of Israeli strategy see Efraim Inbar and Eitan Shamir, "Mowing the Grass: Israel's Strategy for Protracted Intractable Conflict," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 37, no. 1 (January 2014): 65–90.

4. Manichaeism refers to Manichaeism, a religion founded in the third century, which stressed moral dualism or simply life as the struggle between good and evil forces.

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7. William McCants, *The ISIS Apocalypse: The History, Strategy, and Doomsday Vision of the Islamic State*, 1st ed. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2015), 10, 127, and 157. For an analysis of what drove former Baathists to the insurgency, see Amatzia Baram, *Saddam Husayn and Islam, 1968–2003: Ba' thi Iraq from Secularism to Faith* (Washington, DC: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014); Baram defends his position in "Saddam's ISIS: Tracing the Roots of the Caliphate," *Foreign Affairs* online, 8 April 2016, accessed 19 June 2017, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/iraq/2016-04-08/saddams-isis>; and again with "Saddam and the Rise of ISIS: The Faith Campaign's Long Aftermath," *Foreign Affairs* online, 5 June 2016, accessed 19 June 2017, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/iraq/2016-06-05/saddam-and-rise-isis>.

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9. Bob Woodward, *State of Denial: Bush at War, Part III*, 1st ed. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2006), 423–27.

10. For historical polling data on the Iraq War, see <http://www.pollingreport.com/iraq.htm>.

11. For an analysis of the surge, see Stephen Biddle, Jeffrey A. Friedman, and Jacob N. Shapiro, "Testing the Surge: Why Did Violence Decline in Iraq in 2007?," *International Security* 37, no. 1 (Summer 2012): 7–40.

12. For the relationship between war popularity and casualty sensitivity, see Scott Sigmund Gartner and Gary M. Segura, "War, Casualties, and Public Opinion," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 42, no. 3 (June 1998): 278–300; Christopher Gelpi, Peter D. Feaver, and Jason Reifler, "Success Matters: Casualty Sensitivity and the War in Iraq," *International Security* 30, no. 3 (Winter 2005/06): 7–46.

13. McCants, *The ISIS Apocalypse*, 157; Peter D. Feaver, "Anatomy of the Surge," *Commentary* online, 1 April 2008, accessed 25 July 2017, <https://www.commentarymagazine.com/articles/anatomy-of-the-surge/>. See also figure 20 in Jacobson, "A Tale of Two Wars: Public Opinion on the US Military Interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq," 25.

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15. For constraints on preventive war in a democracy, see Jack S. Levy, "Preventive War and Democratic Politics," *International Studies Quarterly* 52, no. 1 (March 2008): 1–24.

16. Barack Obama, "Remarks by the President at the National Defense University" (speech, National Defense University, Fort McNair, Washington, DC, 23 May 2013), accessed 19 June 2017, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2013/05/23/remarks-president-national-defense-university>.

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20. The Obama administration's drone-strike data differ from that of some nongovernmental organizations (NGOs); Office of the Director of National Intelligence, "Summary of Information Regarding U.S. Counterterrorism Strikes Outside Areas of Active Hostilities," Office of the Director of National Intelligence website, 1 July 2016, accessed 19 June 2017, <https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/Newsroom/Press%20Releases/DNI+Release+on+CT+Strikes+Outside+Areas+of+Active+Hostilities.PDF>;

The Council on Foreign Relations aggregated NGO data are discussed by Micah Zenko, "Questioning Obama's Drone Deaths Data," Council on Foreign Relations website, 1 July 2016, accessed 19 June 2017, <http://blogs.cfr.org/zenko/2016/07/01/questioning-obamas-drone-deaths-data/>.

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26. *Ibid.*, 210.

27. *Ibid.*, 72–73, 123–24; McCants, *The ISIS Apocalypse*, 148–51.

28. Mary Habeck, *Knowing the Enemy: Jihadist Ideology and the War on Terror*, 1st ed. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006), 170.

29. McCants, *The ISIS Apocalypse*, 22.

30. Biddle, Friedman, and Shapiro, "Testing the Surge."

31. United Nations (UN) High Commissioner for Refugees, *Regional Refugee and Migrant Response Plan for Europe: Eastern Mediterranean and Western Balkans Route, January to December 2016* (Geneva: UN High Commissioner for Refugees, rev. May 2016), accessed 19 June 2017, <http://reporting.unhcr.org/sites/default/files/RRMRP%20Europe%20Jan.-Dec%202016%20-%20Revision%20May%202016.pdf>.

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