Deterring Terrorists Abroad:
The Implausibility of Indirect Deterrence

Ann Mezzell

Abstract

This article offers reasons for significant pessimism about the prospects for success in adopting an indirect approach to deterring terrorist threats in fragile and civil war–prone states. Individual case studies and comprehensive statistical analyses suggest US security force assistance (SFA) correlates with deterrence failures—the onset of civil wars in partner states, which allow for inroads and safe havens for terrorist organizations—and increased partner-state repression of targeted population groups. In short, SFA is an ineffective means of shoring up partner stability, inhibiting civil war, and deterring terrorists. Worse yet, SFA risks leaving partner states more susceptible to intrastate war, and the US more susceptible to terrorist threats to its interests abroad, than they would have if the US had done nothing at all.

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The *2018 National Defense Strategy* (*NDS)* identifies "interstate strategic competition, not terrorism" as the overriding US national security concern.[1] Even as senior leaders focus on "deterring or defeating long-term strategic competitors" like China and Russia, the US still needs to counter the "persistent condition" of terrorism.[2] Indeed, the *NDS* notes the Joint Force will "sustainably compete to: deter aggression in three regions—the Indo–Pacific, Europe, and the Middle East."[3] Addressing both sets of challenges—rebalancing capabilities to account for emerging strategic competition, yet maintaining capabilities to account for enduring terrorist threats—requires a significant strategic reset. How is the US adapting to meet these twin challenges? Is it adapting to account for the changing

Ann Mezzell is an assistant professor in the Department of International Security at the Air Command and Staff College, Maxwell AFB, Alabama. Her research focuses on US military strategy, US responses to fragile states, and the use of force in UN peacekeeping operations.

character of the terrorist threat, which has emerged in concurrence with the changing strategic environment?

Beginning with the 2001 invasion of Afghanistan, the US employed largely direct means of countering terrorists; in Afghanistan and Iraq, it conducted substantial military interventions, engaging in counterterrorism operations, population-centric counterinsurgency warfare, and sizable nation-building projects. Military operations, in particular, aimed to deter terrorists from re-establishing footholds in these politically unstable and conflict-prone states. Recognizing that terrorists and other violent non-state actors (VNSA) had become adept at exploiting security gaps in fragile states, the US committed enormous resources to counter their influence in Afghanistan and Iraq, hoping to stave off civil wars and state collapse.[4] However, with the return of great power competition, the US cannot afford to maintain such a cost-intensive strategic and operational approach to combating VNSAs. Instead, the new strategic approach calls for more agile deterrence options. To this end, the US has shifted to a strategy of deterrence by denial, employing indirect means to deny terrorists and other VNSA inroads, safe havens, and bases of operation in fragile states.[5]

Deterrence by denial hinges on the "capability of denying an aggressor his battlefield objectives with conventional forces."[6] The *2017 National Security Strategy* (*NSS*), the *2018 NDS*, and related theater strategy documents suggest the US will increasingly rely on indirect means to conventionally deter VNSAs—especially in fragile states at risk of armed rebellion—from civil violence in US partner states. The cornerstone of this indirect approach to deterrence is security force assistance (SFA), in which the US assists partner states with shoring up their security forces against terrorist threats, as a way to deter civil violence (that threatens partner state and US interests).[7] SFA refers to the provision of military aid, training, equipment, and support to partner states.[8] Some depict military assistance as crucial to US aims in the Middle East and Central Asia. For example, Gen Joseph Votel, commander, US Central Command, contends US support to Afghan forces is key to deterring Taliban resurgence in Afghanistan.[9] Whether SFA yields deterrence successes—denying VNSA options for building inroads, generating instability, and waging war in partner states—is an open question. Indeed, the empirical record for SFA outcomes is notably mixed.[10] While SFA's effects on partner states and US national security interests are increasingly

subject to interest from the academic and policy communities, its effects on deterring terrorism remain largely understudied.

There are several reasons for pessimism about the prospects for success in adopting an indirect approach to deterring terrorist threats in fragile and civil war-prone states. Individual case studies and comprehensive statistical analyses suggest US military assistance correlates with deterrence failures—the onset of civil wars in partner states, which allow for inroads and safe havens for terrorist organizations—and increased partner state repression of targeted population groups. In short, SFA is an ineffective means of shoring up partner stability, inhibiting civil war, and deterring terrorists. Worse yet, SFA risks leaving partner states more susceptible to intrastate war, and the US more susceptible to terrorist threats to its interests abroad, than they would have been if the US had done nothing at all.

This article addresses the logic behind the US's growing reliance on the indirect approach to conventional deterrence as well as the limitations of that approach. It examines failures to deter al-Qaeda's influence and activities during the onset and spread of the Yemeni Civil War. Finally, it presents considerations for US foreign policy decision makers regarding future counterterrorism pursuits.

The Logic of Indirect Deterrence

Given the need to secure US interests against strategic competitors and VNSA alike, and the risks of either broadly engaging or broadly ignoring "real but limited" terrorist threats—decision makers are primed for seeking alternatives to direct and cost-intensive uses of force.[11] As Elbridge Colby, deputy assistant secretary of defense for Strategy and Force Development, says of the *2018 NDS*, "One of the things the strategy is trying to do is say that we know we are going to be dealing with terrorism in one way or another for the long haul—so let's figure out ways of doing it that are more cost-effective, that are more tailored."[12]

Defensive posturing and offensive counterterrorism operations require significant resources: the former for "detecting and deflecting" threats as they arise, and the latter for defeating threats at their sources.[13] Direct conventional deterrence and traditional extended deterrence (in the form of retaliatory strikes, military interventions, or proxy wars against threats to protégés) are also costly, and largely inapplicable to the risks of intrastate instability and civil war onset. The indirect approach to deterrence,

though, presents a seemingly limited and resource-sustainable means of serving extended deterrence aims—it affords the US options for managing conflict in regions of interest without having to overtly commit to defending protégé states against threats of aggression. By "sponsoring" other states' security forces, the US can limit expenditures to the provision of military aid, training, and equipment; the burden of employing those resources falls largely on the partner states.

In theory, the indirect approach to deterrence should allow US decision makers to balance capabilities for serving priority interests in Europe and the Asia–Pacific as well as lingering concerns in the Middle East, Central Asia, and Africa. Moreover, it should provide options for deflecting strategic competitors' and VNSAs' growing facility for exploiting intrastate crises to their advantage. Both Russia and the Islamic State (IS), for example, took advantage of Syria's descent into instability, violence, and civil war: Russia gained a foothold in the Levant, and IS gained territory in support of its declared caliphate.

The indirect approach to deterrence should also allow for a measure of political cover. Unlike directly coercive threats or uses of force, SFA is relatively low-profile; it tends to draw little risk of oversight–interference or public scrutiny. The US humanitarian wars of the 1990s and state-building efforts in Afghanistan and Iraq generated considerable political debate. SFA, though, is structured to minimize the US military footprint in the partner state. It tends to go unnoticed by the US public and sometimes, by administration officials and members of Congress. This helps ensure that SFA shortcomings incur limited reputational costs for the US; the US rarely "loses face" as a result of a state descending into civil war, regardless of US security force assistance.

Finally, the employment of indirect approaches in states prone to civil war is not new to the US. The US maintains a long record of employing military assistance and small-scale interventionism to secure partner states (or US-aligned groups operating inside hostile states) against threats of aggression. Indeed, these "small footprint" efforts constituted the plurality of US twentieth-century military operations. Military assistance-and-support operations were key to the pursuit of US post–WWII containment aims; it functioned as the primary non-nuclear military pillar against communist threats to the liberal international order.[14] The US breadth of experience with the indirect approach should prove useful to contemporary SFA strategists.

The Limitations of Indirect Deterrence

Despite the many reasons SFA should enhance partner state deterrence of VNSA challenges to stability (and by extension, US deterrence), evidence suggests that the indirect approach to deterrence may be inherently ineffective. Statistical analyses of US presence abroad—specifically, in the form of military assistance—reveal SFA can have substantially destabilizing effects on partner states. Military assistance correlates with an increased likelihood of recipient state civil war during the Cold War era; in the post–Cold War era, it correlates with an increased likelihood of recipient-state repression.[15] Likewise, case-specific data indicate both small-scale and expansive SFA efforts are associated with deterrence failures.[16]

Several factors account for the previously mentioned statistical and case study findings. First, under conditions of armed resistance, rebels are disincentivized from settling with states rather than going to war; given the informational uncertainties that typify the onset of insurgency and civil war, third-party behaviors are unlikely to deter rebel aggression. Second, third-party threats are particularly susceptible to problems of credibility signaling, and "cheap" signals are apt to magnify (rather than minimize) existing informational uncertainties. Finally, third-party involvements in intrastate crises are prone to conditions of moral hazard.[17] Each of the factors mentioned above is apt to raise the risk of deterrence failures. Rationalist accounts of war and conflict shed light on these barriers to indirect deterrence successes.

Intrastate Conflict: Effects of Informational Uncertainties

SFA does little to counteract informational uncertainties that typify the onset of civil disputes. Due to informational uncertainties, rebel actors (such as VNSAs) can be particularly impervious to deterrent threats or uses of force. Whether the state at risk (such as a partner state) of aggression—or a third-party (such as the US) acting in defense of that state—adopts coercive behaviors, rebels are unlikely to interpret those behaviors as causes for turning to a negotiated settlement rather than war. The war-as-bargaining literature suggests that rational actors should prefer negotiated settlement over war, given the high costs of war relative to the costs of settlement. It acknowledges, though, that even rational parties may opt for war over settlement. This is because they are likely to face: 1) uncertain information about the adversary's strength or resolve, 2) questions about the adversary's commitment to upholding a negotiated

settlement, or 3) stakes that cannot be easily divided (one or both parties may seek sole control of the government or a piece of territory).[18] All three conditions typify periods of domestic political dispute and risk of conflict onset and escalation;[19] consequently, the effects of deterrent threats and uses of force against rebels are apt to be muted.[20]

Rebels are apt to pursue war when they question the state's commitment to upholding settlement terms or when they suspect their security can only be assured by gaining control of the state in its entirety. Rather than risking post hoc settlement abuses, insurgents may seek decisive military victory, hoping to gain control of the state's government and territory.[21] Uncertain information is perhaps most influential on the behaviors of rebel-aggressors and state-defenders. In most cases, rebels will appreciate the likely superiority of the state's armed forces. However, they will exaggerate their strength in hopes of compelling the state to grant concessions. The state, similarly, will likely recognize the limited military capacity of the rebel group(s) but will exaggerate its resolve in hopes of deterring further rebel aggression. The state may have difficulty assessing rebel strength (given the costs of monitoring rebel capabilities); rebels may have difficulty assessing state resolve. Under such conditions—when either the defender or the aggressor lacks adequate "proof" of the other's strength/resolve—civil war onset is the more probable outcome than a negotiated settlement.[22]

Even when backed by a third-party actor, the state's deterrent threats or demonstrations of force may ring hollow with rebels, holding little influence on their calculations about the expected costs of war. This seems to be particularly true of US assistance to Nigeria, which plays a role in the state's preferred "carrot-and-stick" approach to Boko Haram. Consisting of conventional military campaigns as well as efforts to entice (likely) members away from the organization, the approach has prompted critics to question its potentially "muddying" effect on Boko Haram's calculations about the state's intentions and capabilities.[23] The US began augmenting SFA to Nigeria in 2010 in the wake of the 2009 emergence of the Boko Haram insurgency; following limited short-term improvements to the state's security apparatus in 2010–2011, Boko Haram's continued attacks strained state resources, eventually degrading its security force capacity. [24] Though Nigeria announced its "technical defeat" of Boko Haram in late 2015, the group's attacks have been "just as frequent and deadly" in 2017–2018 as in previous years.[25]

Insurgent Perceptions: Signaling Credibility

Third-party support for partner states is frequently complicated by signaling problems, which undercut the deterrent effects of SFA. When a third-party actor signals support for its partner, it must do so credibly. Credible signals convey a willingness to assume sunk costs (to allocate the resources needed to act on a deterrent threat in the future) or audience costs (to risk losing face for failing to act on a deterrent threat).[26] High cost signals, like threats of military intervention, bring clarity to deterrent bargaining scenarios. Low-cost signals, like diplomatic shaming, yield uncertainty.[27] High cost third-party signals are linked to the decreased probability of civil war, while low cost third-party signals are linked to increased odds of civil war.[28]

Credible signals provide state defenders and dissident aggressors with actionable information about whether and how to adjust their behaviors, while low cost threats do not. When a third-party commits to militarily intervening on behalf of another government, the partner state and the rebel group have clear bases for adjusting their bargaining positions, though they might be otherwise disinclined to bargain.[29] When a third-party commits to militarily assisting another government, the partner state and rebel group have questionable bases for adjusting their bargaining positions, though they might be otherwise inclined to bargain. In the first case, the threat is overt; it signals that the external actor will assume potentially great costs on behalf of its partner. In the second case, the threat is implied; it signals that the external actor will assume potentially limited costs on behalf of its partner. Most US security force assistance operations carried out in the US Africa Command's (USAFRICOM) area of responsibility adhere to this low-profile, implied threat model of SFA.

The distinction between the two scenario types is critical. Assistance commitments convey a willingness to assume some costs, but not necessarily great costs; the signal is neither clearly costly nor cheap. Even sizable, high-visibility assistance programs call for comparatively modest cost sinking (unlike direct coercive action) and rarely place the US at risk of losing face. However, modest and low-profile assistance programs still require a willingness to accept losses. Unlike overt threats of direct military action, implied "threats" of SFA leave potential insurgents with uncertain information about US effects on the partner's capability and

resolve. Uncertainty, in turn, increases the likelihood of civil war onset and escalation.[30]

The question of credible signaling can be applied to USAFRICOM activities in East and West Africa, largely designed to assist African states in countering terrorist threats. Despite the counterterrorism impetus for the Command's activities, US messaging could raise doubts about the extent to which the US is committed to assisting African states in deterring terrorists. In 2012, for example, Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs Don Yamamoto argued before a US House Foreign Affairs Committee meeting that the US expected "African countries affected by groups such as al-Shabaab, Boko Haram, al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and the Lord's Resistance Army" to "lead the response to terrorism" themselves. Despite US support for partner activities, he stated, the US could not risk allowing terrorist organizations to legitimize their efforts by "attempting to draw us into the conflict."[31] Though the statements were directed at a US government audience, they also ran the risk of reinforcing others' perceptions of the low cost (and perhaps limited commitment) US approach to deterring terrorists abroad.

Partner State Interests: Moral Hazard

Third-party efforts to shape the strategic dynamics of intrastate hostility are further complicated by the possibility that the partner state may seek to "capture" the external actor's presence or resources for the pursuit of its interests; this can remove the SFA from its intended deterrent aims.[32] In the case of impending military intervention, for instance, the partner state may exploit the defensive cover provided by the third-party actor. Rather than maintaining its defensive options, it may instead go on the offensive, employing force in hopes of achieving a decisive victory. Unless the rebels agree to settlement options—if they go to war, or "wait out" the third-party's presence and then go to war—the partner state has cause to request further resources or longer-term support from its external patron.[33] (Moral hazard also applies to rebels, who may exploit signs of third-party presence to drum up popular support for aggression against the partner state.)[34]

The dynamics mentioned above characterize direct US military interventions (they played a role in the 2009 Afghan surge) as well as indirect US partner support missions (such as the once substantial US military

assistance to Pakistan).[35] The states in greatest need of SFA support often have limited means for upholding their end of the partnership arrangement. Further, a partner's interests in receiving SFA may differ greatly from the US's interest in providing it. While the US may hope to bolster the partner's ability to counter potential terrorist insurgents, the state may find other domestic dissidents or insurgents to be more concerning.

Even if the partner redirects efforts to aims unaligned with those of the US, the US may be beholden to the partnership; withdrawal of support could tempt terrorist actors to exploit the state's loss of backing.[36] Monitoring partner compliance with SFA terms carries material costs, and ending partnerships absent clear evidence of SFA abuse entails political and strategic costs. Consequently, the US can become "obligated" to sustaining support operations that have little chance of deterring threats to the partner state's security and may entail counterproductive outcomes.[37] Just as direct intervention can result in conflict escalation rather than deterrence, indirect support efforts can yield disruption rather than stabilization.[38]

In the wake of the 2001 US invasion of Afghanistan, the US increased military assistance to Pakistan by considerable degrees, hoping to shore up its counter al-Qaeda and counter Taliban efforts. Indeed, the assistance was regarded as a vital means of deterring the groups' resurgent influence in Afghanistan, and their efforts to secure inroads and safe havens in Pakistan.[39] US officials, though, came to question Pakistan's employment of SFA; some went so far as to suggest that Pakistan had not only "abused" US assistance for its ends, but accommodated the presence of Taliban actors.[40] Nonetheless, the US remained largely dependent on Pakistan as an access and resupply point for its efforts in Afghanistan. In essence, the US ran risks by continuing to provide SFA to Pakistan; it also ran risks by threatening to cut SFA to Pakistan. The Trump administration's 2018 decision to suspend key military assistance to Pakistan elicited renewed debates about the moral hazard implications of SFA.[41]

The Case of Yemen[42]

The onset and escalation of the Yemeni Civil War illustrate the influence of each limitation of SFA's deterrent effectiveness: informational uncertainties, signaling challenges, and conditions of moral hazard. Troublingly, they also reveal that indirect deterrence—in the form of

SFA—helped undercut US counterterrorism aims in Yemen. The US began increasing security assistance to Yemen in 2007, and then substantially disbursed SFA funding and equipment in 2008–2009. Wary of the rise of al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), and the group's efforts to secure inroads in Yemen, the US allocated more than $500 million in SFA between 2007 and 2012.[43] While then president Ali Abdullah Saleh siphoned off much of the aid for himself, AQAP's growing presence in Yemen ensured US security force assistance to Yemen continued uninterrupted. Houthi dissidents, who sought expanded rights for the Zaidi–Shia sect, exploited the situation to their advantage, decrying Saleh's alignment with the US, and shoring up popular support for the Houthi movement.

When the 2011 Arab Spring protests reached Yemen, power jockeying yielded a near collapse of the state. AQAP affiliated militias moved to fill the power vacuum, seizing territory in the south. The US and Saudi Arabia discreetly worked to broker options for political transition; Saleh agreed to transfer power to the former vice president, Abdu Rabbu Masour Hadi. Assuming office in 2012, Hadi faced challenges from AQAP, southern separatists, Saleh's loyalists (including some military units, which split away from the new Hadi government), and increasingly powerful Houthi movement. Despite backing from the US, Saudi Arabia, and the UN Security Council, his government struggled to build support for a new political framework. By January 2014, the various factions involved in the constitution building process had come to a stalemate. Houthi leaders saw an opportunity for armed resistance.

The US continued to back Yemen against AQAP; but, it did little to shore up the state against Houthi aggression. In fact, counter AQAP pursuits may have had the inadvertent effect of strengthening the Houthis against the better trained and equipped AQAP fighters. Seizing on Hadi's moment of weakness— his vulnerability to challengers, and near-total reliance on US–Saudi support— the Houthis pushed to solidify their control of the northern Saada province. Bolstered by success in Saada, growing influence over Yemen's population, and a coalition-of-convenience with former rival Saleh, the Houthis seized the capital city of Sana'a in September 2014. Hadi shortly escaped to the south, reestablished Yemen's government in the port city of Aden, and sought support from loyalists among the police, armed forces, and the Popular Resistance Committees (militia groups).

Once civil war was underway, the US substantially dialed back SFA to Yemen; Hadi barely clung to power, and wartime conditions posed obstacles to the disbursal and employment of aid. The US voiced rhetorical support for settlement options, and the UN proposed terms for peace talks. Faced with the prospect of long-term war, competing regional tribal groups weighed plans for restructuring the government and Yemen's provinces. The resulting draft constitution—that proposed dividing the state into six federally administered regions met with Houthi rejection. The constitutionally delineated regions, they claimed, left them with inadequate resources and without access to the sea. Fearing their designated region would leave them weakened and exposed to rivals, the rebels opted to push for control of the entire state.

As Houthi insurgents advanced to the south, Hadi sought support from Sunni tribes. Foreign minister Riad Yassin called for external support, and a Saudi-led coalition of Sunni–Arab Gulf states prepared to intervene on Hadi's behalf. Despite the noted possibility of Gulf coalition action (Saudi Arabia had previously struck against Houthi sites in 2009, hoping to undercut Iran's "proxy" in Yemen), Houthi rebels did not acquiesce. Rather than accepting the slim odds of claiming Yemen against local and external challengers, they expanded the conflict. Neither coalition air strikes nor the deployment of ground forces to Aden—initiated in March and August 2015, respectively— deterred the spread of Houthi resistance. Western support for the Saudi-led efforts held little effect on their calculations, as the Houthis benefited from Iranian backing. The Gulf coalition ultimately secured Aden, but the rebels sustained combat for four months; they also initiated a campaign to seize the nearby city of Taiz and shored up their control of Sana'a.

After civil war broke out in 2015, factions solidified along progovernment, Houthi, and AQAP lines. Combatants made few attempts at negotiation, remaining suspicious of each other's motives, capabilities, and resolve (uncertainties that were magnified by the roles of external actors). AQAP waged attacks with increased frequency, seeking to build influence beyond its initial footholds in Yemen. SFA did little to deter the Houthi uprising, the onset of armed resistance, or the spread of conflict across the country. By extension, it did little to deny AQAP access to or territorial gains in Yemen.

Over the 2000–2018 period, the US disbursed an estimated $841 million in security assistance to Yemen (though estimates vary).[44] Each

point of increased commitment was followed by the onset of further instability or hostility: anti-government protests in 2011, multi-front challenges to state power in 2013, and the onset of civil war in 2015. US military assistance to Yemen, particularly during the 2007–2015 period, reveals how the strategic dynamics of civil war can be particularly resistant to indirect deterrence. Exploitation and cheap signaling, in conjunction with informational and commitment uncertainties, combined to ensure that indirect deterrence (in the form of SFA) was all but guaranteed to fail.

Informational Uncertainties and the Outbreak of Civil War

Informational and commitment uncertainties played a clear role in Houthi decision-making. The Hadi government's initial failure to show resolve in the face of initial Houthi challenges gave way to further claims on key Yemeni cities and provincial territories. Hadi's subsequent efforts to reassert government power left Houthi rebels with little sense of the need to pull back from war. When Hadi assumed office in 2012, Yemeni military capacity had been degraded by Saleh's exit; his loyalists in the military opted to back him regardless of his fall from power. Regardless, Yemen's security capacity likely outmatched Houthi capabilities.

The upsurge in Hadi's array of challengers, and his ostensible dependence on US–Saudi support provided Houthi leaders the basis for calculating that their potentially slim chance of victory in war merited the likely costs of going to war. With the extent of Yemen's weakness— and the scope and likely duration of US-Saudi support for Hadi—up for question, the Houthis saw an opportunity for action. Because the constitutionally proposed territorial divisions placed the Houthis at risk of post-settlement abuses (given Houthi leaders' stated concerns about resource accessibility and exposure to rivals), they also saw a cause for action. Thus, the Houthis opted to seize the capital city and strategically significant regions of the state.

Informational uncertainties were most influential on the 2014–2015 phase of the Houthi insurgency. Unconvinced by Hadi's indications that he would maintain resolve and act on deterrent threats, and troubled by indications that they might "lose out" on constitutionally designated territorial divisions of Yemen, they opted to go to war. Though critical to Houthi calculations during the lead up to the civil war, informational

uncertainties continued to shape rebel-actor decision-making as the civil war evolved to encompass the broader Yemeni state.

Commitment Signaling—Assistance vs. Intervention

US signaling via SFA reinforced the effects of informational and commitment uncertainty. The US's deliberately limited but supportive SFA presence left Hadi in a tenuous position. Hadi likely calculated that his government could rely on Saudi Arabia for support, given Houthi ties to Iran. Yet, the US began reducing its already modest and AQAP-centric SFA to Yemen once civil war broke out. As government actors worked to build on US–Saudi rhetorical support for Hadi, the Houthis calculated that Western states—and particularly the US—were unlikely to pursue direct military intervention on Hadi's behalf. They had already secured backing from Iran; they were willing to accept the risk of a potential Saudi Arabian intervention. Given the US's questionable commitment to acting on Hadi's behalf and the absence of immediate external defensive cover, the Houthis recognized an ideal opportunity for advancing the insurgency.

Aware of Hadi's vulnerability to competing claims to state power, and the limited probability of Western support beyond counter AQAP efforts (which held inadvertent benefits for the Houthis, given AQAP's threats to Houthi territorial interests), the rebels acted before Hadi secured clear commitments from Saudi Arabia and other Sunni–majority Gulf states. By the time the Saudi–led coalition had initiated strikes on Houthi–held cities, the Houthis had already gained further ground and shored up support from broader segments of Yemen's population.

Though the US provided logistical, intelligence, and refueling support for Saudi Arabia's efforts in Yemen, its officials also worked to distance the US from immediate ties to coalition attacks; the coalition strikes posed clear threats to civilian populations, while its efforts to block access to Yemen's ports compounded the growing humanitarian crisis in Yemen. This shift in the rhetorical US support for the Saudi–led efforts to restore Hadi's government, coupled with its modest SFA support to Yemen, further solidified perceptions of cheap commitment signaling. Despite persistent coalition strikes against Houthi strongholds, and recent indicators of support from the Trump administration, the civil war in Yemen continues unabated.[45]

Moral Hazard—The Counter AQAP Trap?

Moral hazard conditions, finally, amplified the effects of both informational uncertainty and the US's cheap commitment signaling in Yemen. During the lead up to the Yemeni Civil War, the US continued to focus SFA spending on counter AQAP aims, despite indications that the Houthi movement had been slowly gaining ground since its emergence in 2004. US assistance to Yemen's security forces peaked at $177 million in 2010; Saleh's (self) interest in SFA had little to do with denying AQAP its desired foothold in Yemen.[46] Despite signs of Saleh's misappropriation of SFA funding and equipment, the US was hesitant to risk letting Yemen "fall" to AQAP and sustained the SFA partnership despite the diversion of counter AQAP resources.

Hadi's interest in regaining SFA support—which declined significantly in 2011, but then reached $150 million in 2012 and $136 million in 2014—was likely rooted in concerns for shoring up state stability.[47] Yet, the US continued to concentrate SFA on AQAP specific efforts. The Yemeni government was far less preoccupied with AQAP attempts to secure influence in Yemen than by Houthi attempts to assume control of Yemeni territories and the capital city of Sana'a. Nonetheless, US officials failed to draw connections between Hadi's potential loss of power to Houthi rebels, and the likelihood of AQAP territorial and influence entrenchment in Yemen.

Because Hadi could not risk the loss of US SFA support, and the US could not risk leaving an opening for further AQAP gains in Yemen, both remained committed to a partnership in which their interests were fundamentally misaligned. When the Houthi insurgency gave way to outright civil war, AQAP moved to secure its existing areas of influence and began looking to expand beyond its traditionally recognized territorial holdings. In effect, the specificity of US security force assistance to Yemen—with its emphasis on counterterrorism, and namely counter AQAP programs—left Yemen crippled by intrastate war. More problematically for the US, it left AQAP (now recognized as one of the most lethal al-Qaeda franchises) poised to fill the power vacuums in the ungoverned territories of Yemen.

Implications: Policy and Strategic Considerations

The case of the civil war in Yemen sheds light on the degree to which deterrence based SFA represents a weak form of indirect deterrence. Though the examination of a single case falls short of offering definitive proof of the inherent limitations of indirect deterrence via SFA, it does illustrate some of the inherent challenges and pitfalls of employing SFA for terrorist denial ends. These challenges and pitfalls have been the subject of informal debate since the 2007 institution of USAFRICOM, which was largely established for partnership building in service of counterterrorism ends.[48] Given SFA's growing centrality to US counterterrorism policy—in Central Asia, the Levant and broader Middle East, as well as the Sahel and Horn of Africa—its questionable deterrent effects require a review of both the specifics of its strategic design and its general fitness for policy ends.[49]

Security force assistance has been broadly employed in various forms; it seems plausible that certain forms of SFA (variations on its general strategic design) might be better suited to conventional deterrence than others. Yet, the turn to strategic redesign—absent a discussion of the fundamental barriers to SFA effectiveness —seems shortsighted. The inherent limitations of indirect deterrence, this analysis of SFA, and the Yemeni Civil War, suggest that US national security decision makers should consider restricting the provision of SFA. More specifically, they suggest those decision makers should consider limiting the provision of SFA to those states in which it is least likely to generate or amplify: informational uncertainties between disputants, disputant perceptions of limitations on US support to the partner state (cheap signaling), and conditions of moral hazard. This will require decision makers to make far more careful decisions about how and where to employ SFA for deterrent ends. At the very least, it calls for weighing SFA partnership considerations according to more rigorous standards.

Indirect deterrence (via SFA) represents a questionable alternative to countering terrorist and other VNSA threats by more direct and expansive means. The US currently employs SFA in so many states—and typically, in such limited forms—that it is not only an ineffective means of achieving counterterrorism ends, but also it often runs counter to those ends. This signals the need for strategic restraint; it calls for policy makers and strategists to exercise prudence, and commit to making tough decisions, about when and where to intervene abroad.

Decision makers would do well to recognize that limited commitment interventions can only be expected to yield limited effects; worse yet, they threaten to drain the US of resources that could be more meaningfully employed elsewhere. **SSQ**

Notes

1. James C. Mattis, *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy* (*NDS*) *of the United States of America; Sharpening the American Military's Competitive Edge* (Washington, DC: Office of the Secretary of Defense, n.d.), 1, https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents /pubs/2018-National-Defense-Strategy-Summary.pdf.

2. Mattis, 3 and 5.

3. Mattis, 6.

4. Robert Rotberg, ed. *When States Fail: Causes and Consequences* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010).

5. For a discussion of the indirect approach, see B. H. Liddell Hart, *Strategy: The Indirect Approach* (London: Faber & Faber, 1967).

6. Mearsheimer defines deterrence as "persuading an opponent not to initiate a specific action because the perceived benefits do not justify the estimated costs and risks," and further distinguishes between deterrence-by-punishment (threatening an adversary with overwhelming harm in the case of aggression, which may involve conventional and/or nuclear weapons) and deterrence-by-denial (denying an adversary his battlefield objectives, predominantly by the threat or use of conventional force). See also John Mearsheimer, *Conventional Deterrence* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1983), 14; Thomas Schelling, *The Strategy of Conflict* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press; 1960); Thomas Schelling, *Arms and Influence* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1966); and Michael Gerson, "Conventional Deterrence in the Second Nuclear Age," *Parameters* 39, no. 3 (2009): 32–48, 34, https://ssi.armywarcollege.edu/pubs/parameters /articles/09autumn/gerson.pdf.

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