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VIEWING JIHADIST-EXTREMISM THROUGH WAR THEORY: THE CASE FOR NATIONAL HUMILITY

Abstract

Criticisms of US policy ventures against jihadist-extremist threats in the Middle East are useful but incomplete. Criticizing the formulation and execution of policy overlooks a more fundamental source of missteps: theoretical attitudes on the role of war. Perhaps American attitudes obstruct the ability to view war from a theoretically justifiable perspective. Theory tells us war is uncontrollable, despite efforts by some theorists and practitioners to control it. This article suggests American leaders often mistakenly believe they can control war in the uniquely uncontrollable context of jihadist extremism in the Middle East. American attitudes toward war generate and develop through the nation's inaugural acts of war policy, the communications of the commander-in-chief. Analysis of commander-in-chief messages justifying the 2003 invasion of Iraq and 2011 intervention in Libya reveal questionable theoretical perspectives and mistaken expectations that American power and influence would ensure control of war and its outcomes. Commander-in-chief communications justifying the Counter-DA'ISH intervention of 2014 communicated something different: humility, by theoretically recognizing uncontrollable war in the jihadist-extremist context and articulating measured, prudent expectations. The relationship between national humility and achievement of national expectations and goals suggests there is value in a fundamental re-assessment of theoretical attitudes on the role of war.

COL John Zavage

Among the most criticized of recent US foreign policy ventures, the 2003 invasion of Iraq and subsequent counterinsurgency drew well-founded judgment of many questionable decisions, and the processes that led to them. Few need reminders that America's action unleashed years of bloodshed, incited ethno-sectarian conflict that continues to this day, and sowed the seed of jihadist extremism that fueled increasing and deadly terrorist threats. Many critics target the commander-in-chief's neo-conservative policy team for their ideological insistence in the value of spreading democracy, while others blame the Department of Defense for a disproportionate emphasis on toppling the regime at the expense of thoughtful postwar planning.¹ Criticism of policy, its formulation, or its execution can be useful, but such criticism misses a more fundamental source: American theoretical perspectives on war. Such perspectives on war – its role, its nature, and how it develops once it begins – serve as a start point to assess the genesis of American military ventures. In the post-9/11 counter-terrorism context, Iraq, the 2011 intervention in Libya and the fight against the Islamic State all bear contextual similarities and attract critical attention.

Admittedly, identifying theoretical perspectives is a nebulous endeavor; assessing them even more so. This paper will look to the commander-in-chief's attitude, revealed by his messaging and tone, as both the symbol and the representative of the nation's aggregate perspective on war. And while policy decisions are a function of the commander-in-chief's interaction with policymakers, the leader's theoretical perspectives emerge through his or her attitude displayed by personal words. In fact, the commander-in-chief's words are the inaugural act of policy. Speaking to the people, the legislature, the military, the enemy, and the world, the commander-in-chief's communications articulate more than any other message the nation's

¹ Jeffrey Record, *Wanting War: Why the Bush Administration Invaded Iraq* (Washington: Potomac Books, 2010), 1-52, 124-132.

conceptual, theoretical, even emotional perspectives toward war. This language used to justify war not only exemplifies the national attitude toward war, it foreshadows national expectations for war's outcomes. Commander-in-chief communications post-9/11 fell into one of two general categories. In many cases, the leader's language exemplified an arrogant, conclusive or even expectant tone, which related to emboldened attitudes and facilitated conclusive expectations defined in absolute terms. In other cases more measured and judicious language engendered more prudent expectations that wisely refrained from defining, in absolute terms, an end very difficult to see from the beginning.²

A twofold approach can help assess attitudes manifest in presidential messages. One part of this approach is general, fundamental and theoretical; another more contextual and specific. From a theoretical approach, war theory presents a rich background from which to illustrate an essential and relevant debate about war – that is, whether or not war is controllable. War theory as a body of text contains opposing views on the controllability of war. Both stem from Prussian theorist Carl von Clausewitz' assertion that war is an instrument of policy.³ Many theorists characterize war as a controllable instrument, capable of enabling war practitioners to forge conclusive and absolute outcomes. Others characterize war as an uncontrollable instrument and reject that war practitioners can use it to fashion conclusive or absolute outcomes. Combining war theory's perspective with a specific, jihadist-extremist context, the latter characterization of war may be a more useful perspective. This jihadist-extremist context of America's post-9/11 military ventures in the Middle East deserves particular attention, not only

² Will Waddell, Ph. D., US Air War College, Maxwell AFB, AL, January 2017. I depended on Dr. Waddell's use of 'see the end from the beginning' to help articulate my idea

³ Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. Trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984) 87.

because the three aforementioned undertakings (Iraq, Libya, Islamic State) share this context, but because this context will likely define US foreign policy for years to come.

Therefore scholars and practitioners can better frame future American foreign policy ventures in the jihadist extremist context of the Middle East by using war theory to examine national attitudes and expectations of past military interventions as exemplified by the communications of the commander-in-chief. In doing so, it becomes clear that commander-in-chief communications of a judicious tone that set prudent expectations more effectively serve national ends because they exemplify a national humility that respects the uncontrollable nature of war in the jihadist extremist context of the Middle East. To support this idea, an analysis of war theory will set a foundation by elucidating the uncontrollability of war. Subsequently, a look at our jihadist-extremist adversaries in the Middle East suggests military interaction with extremists makes war there uniquely more uncontrollable. Finally, an analysis of American commanders-in-chief's communications associated with these recent interventions will provide evidence to support the main argument.

Theory's representation of war: controllable or uncontrollable?

The main idea to grasp, that will help explain how the instrument of war is an uncontrollable instrument, is the idea that war is an interaction, inseparable from its context, and fraught with uncertainty. Describing war in the abstract, Clausewitz captures the difficulty in maintaining control of combat with a living adversary: "War...is not the action of a living force upon a lifeless mass...but always the collision of two living forces...there is interaction...I am bound to fear he may overthrow me. Thus I am not in control..."⁴ Clausewitz notes the paramount importance of unique and ever-changing contexts that bound war, saying, "War is

⁴ Clausewitz, 77.

never an isolated act,” and “In war the result is never final.”⁵ He paints a picture of a phenomenon that is beyond the control of its initiators: “From the very start there is an interplay of possibilities, probabilities, good luck and bad that weaves its way throughout the length and breadth of the tapestry.”⁶ Clausewitz’ visualization encapsulates war’s uncontrollability: “War is more than a true chameleon that slightly adapts its characteristics to the given case. As a total phenomenon its dominant tendencies always make war...paradoxical...”⁷ Thus war’s paradoxical fusion of human interaction, context, and uncertainty make its development and its outcomes uncontrollable.

Others agree in principle with Clausewitz’ tendencies to characterize war as uncontrollable. British maritime theorist Sir Julian Corbett’s doctrinal characterization of “command of the sea” describes a domain that is ultimately uncontrollable. Corbett’s characterization of the maritime domain parallels Clausewitz’ intellectual balance by framing success in relative rather than absolute terms. Corbett writes, “...it must be taken that [command of the sea] may exist in various states or degrees, each of which has its special possibilities and limitations,” and that “even general [command of the sea] can never in practice be absolute,”⁸ because “...so long as the enemy has a sufficient fleet anywhere, it is theoretically in his power to overthrow our control...”⁹ In saying this, Corbett emphasizes Clausewitz’ idea that war is interaction. Control of anything during war can never be absolute so long as the adversary continues to fight.

⁵ Ibid., 78-80.

⁶ Ibid., 86.

⁷ Ibid., 89.

⁸ Julian S. Corbett, *Principles of Maritime Strategy* (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2004), 102.

⁹ Ibid., 100-101.

French philosopher Raymond Aron, who writes during the late 20th century with personal knowledge of just how devastating total war can be, aligns closely with a view of war as uncontrollable, and warns warfighters to strive for prudence rather than absolute but illusory motivations and conclusions. Aron urges leaders, “To be prudent...[conform] to the secular law of international relations and not...meaningless objectives, such as ‘a world safe for democracy’.”¹⁰ For Aron such lofty and morally-oriented goals conflict with the caution and prudence necessary for final victory. Notably, Aron’s repudiation of attaching ambitious moral goals to war’s expectations not only suggests war is an uncontrollable instrument, but insinuates morality can act to unwisely embolden attitudes and expectations. Indeed, moral justifications, along with other factors to be discussed later, can enable conclusive expectations and obstruct leaders from seeing the uncontrollability of war. Aron rejects such as illusory, arguing victory is achieved only by mere survival: “...survival will be assured, a survival which in our time is the best, if not the only expression of victory.”¹¹ Bringing Clausewitz’ thought into the nuclear age, Aron advocates for a deliberate maintenance of the status quo, which not only acknowledges that war is uncontrollable, but urges leaders to become comfortable with war’s uncontrollability.

Regardless if war is uncontrollable, the desire to control it is understandable; actors would not wage it without confidence in their abilities to make it do what they expect. Accordingly, many well-known and well-regarded theorists portray war as not only controllable, but predictably winnable. This perspective often espouses moral superiority as mentioned earlier, and also champions initiative, military superiority and speed. It views military action as

¹⁰ Raymond Aron, *Peace & War: A Theory of International Relations* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2009),585.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 700.

capable of controlling tempo and fulfilling conclusive political objectives. This perspective creates the additional effect of emboldening national expectations.

Renowned nineteenth century theorist Antoine Baron de Jomini portrays war as controllable and winnable for the warfighting party who takes advantage of operational principles; mainly, doctrinal superiority and initiative. Jomini often paraphrases this critical maxim: "...there is one great principle ...To throw...the mass of an army, successively, upon the decisive points...at the proper times and with energy."¹² Jomini insisted one's ability to win simply by applying initiative, speed and decisiveness is "very great, and it is based upon principle."¹³

For twentieth century air power pioneer Giulio Douhet, also war is controllable and winnable, for the side who crushes its enemy first and quickly with the destructive effects of a fast, technologically superior strategic bombing campaign. Agreeing with Jomini's emphasis on initiative, Douhet asserted, "...wars can only be won by offensive action."¹⁴ For Douhet, the technological superiority of the airplane made strategic bombing the obvious choice for such action: "Because of its independence of surface limitations and its superior speed...the airplane is the offensive weapon par excellence."¹⁵ Combining the concepts of initiative with technology, Douhet foresaw quick and winnable wars if strategic bombing were used to destroy the enemy "completely in one attack, making further attack...unnecessary."¹⁶

These are but two of many who influence American military and political attitudes about the use of war to accomplish political objectives. For a nation who enjoys relative military

¹² Baron de Jomini, *The Art of War* (Radford, VA: Wilder Publications, 2008), 52-3.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 67.

¹⁴ Giulio Douhet, *The Command of the Air* (Washington: Air Force History and Museums Program, 1998), 12.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 15.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 20.

superiority, theorists like Jomini and Douhet understandably influence strategic attitudes. Jomini's advocacy for initiative influences American war thinking in many ways, one of which is simply the disparity of doctrinal publications emphasizing offensive action versus those with a defensive focus. Of 63 publications on joint operations, 21 carry titles conveying offensive or expeditionary themes; only 7 titles convey defense.¹⁷ Douhet adds the component of technology, combining it with initiative to set a philosophical foundation that supports expectations for quick wars. America depends highly on technological superiority even now; the language of *Joint Operating Environment 2035*'s "Implications for the Joint Force" indicates a heavy reliance on technological solutions to address security challenges in the future.¹⁸

Even so, some war contexts may neutralize technological superiority, speed, initiative, and moral justifications. This fact demands balanced and comprehensive theoretical perspectives and attitudes on war. American leaders, regardless of doctrinal and technological strengths or moral scruples, would need to familiarize themselves with the characterization of war as uncontrollable if certain contexts neutralized inherent national advantages. The ensuing section will examine such a context.

Jihadist extremist context makes war uniquely less controllable

The post 9/11 American military experience in the Middle East and its ensuing scholarship emphasize characteristic threads that bring to life Clausewitz' "collusion of living forces." If war is uncontrollable due to the uncontainable interaction of living adversaries, then war in the Middle East presents an even less constrainable collusion of adversaries. The particular facets of the Middle East context that compound this collusion of living forces include

¹⁷ Joint Publication 1-01.1, *Compendium of Joint Publications*, 23 April 1999.

¹⁸ *Joint Operating Environment 2035, The Joint Force in a Contested and Disordered World*, 14 July 2016, 40-51.

unique aspects of jihadist-extremist movements. There are many, but this discussion will focus on two: a satiating ideology, and the inverse effect of Western intervention.

Jihadist extremists' will strengthened by satiating ideology

The jihadist extremists' will is the first aspect that contributes to war in this context being uniquely uncontrollable. If an enemy's will prevents its opponent from exercising control over war, jihadist extremist adversaries increase that uncontrollability more than what might be expected. Jihadist extremists' ideology in many of its nuanced variants cultivates fervor among fighters that leads to institutional resilience and tenacity.

This ideology creates such uncontrollable fervor on the part of its adherents because it satiates deep social and religious inclinations. Shiraz Maher characterizes jihadist thought as a “satiating” ideology that supplies its “adherents with a form of common cause, a unifying mission, and sense of purpose for bringing society together.”¹⁹ The religious manifestation of this satiating ideology emerges as a compelling apocalyptic interpretation of history and Islamic scripture. Jihadist ideology provides a well-researched explanation, and a dynamic call to action, for some who have struggled since early in the 20th century to reconcile the Islamic world's perceived decline and exploitation at the hands of Western powers.²⁰ This call provides scripturally-focused and revenge-minded fighters with a compelling rationale not only to fight, but to fight against great odds.²¹ Al-Qaeda's creed continues to provide an attractive motivation for violence-minded adherents who view rejection of secular governments as the best way to re-establish the glory of Islam: “...the ruler[s] who [do] not rule in accordance with God's

¹⁹ Shiraz Maher, *Salafi-Jihadism: The History of an Idea* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 27.

²⁰ Audrey Kurth Cronin, *How Terrorism Ends: Understanding the Decline and Demise of Terrorist Campaigns* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009) 169-74; Gilles Keppel, *Jihad: The Trail of Political Islam* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002) 23-42.

²¹ Cronin, “ISIS Is Not a Terrorist Group,” *Foreign Affairs*, March/April 2015, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/middle-east/isis-not-terrorist-group>.

revelation...are infidel apostates...Armed and violent rebellion against them is an individual duty on every Muslim.”²²

The Islamic State (hereafter referred to by its Arabic acronym, “DA’ISH”) takes it even a step further.²³ By connecting existing jihadist thought with apocalyptic Islamic prophecies and DA’ISH’s geographic location in the heart of predicted end-of-times battles, DA’ISH successfully generates violent fervor by linking spirituality with urgency. One particular Islamic prophecy urges Muslims to flock to Syria: “The Muslims’ place of assembly on the day of the Great Battle will be in Ghouta near a city called Damascus, one of the best cities in al-Sham.” To his adherents, and to potential recruits who know the prophecy, self-proclaimed DA’ISH Caliph Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi urges, “O youth of Islam! Go forth to the blessed land of Sham...for the Great Battles are about to transpire.”²⁴ These exhortations serve as compelling motivation for a small but bloodthirsty group of adherents to endure significant risk, hardship and deprivation to not only participate in religious battles, but to fight tenaciously.

Jihadist-extremists appeal to more than just religion. The jihadist call appeals to disaffected young people across the globe, shunned by their government or outcast by their society, who struggle for a sense of identity, belonging, or sometimes merely adventure. Several demographic groups fit these characteristics. On one hand are the obvious geographically proximate: disaffected Sunni Arab citizens of Shi’a dominated governments in Iraq and Syria.²⁵ In addition are isolated Muslim emigrant communities across the globe, many in Western nations. Here youth are often ripe for jihadist recruitment because they simultaneously suffer

²² Maher, 11.

²³ The acronym “DA’ISH” is formed from the English transliteration “Dawla-t-al-Aslamiya f il-Iraq wa-al-Sham.” In Arabic, ‘dawla’ = state; ‘Aslamiya’ = Islamic; ‘Sham’ is a historical Arabic term referring to what Westerners know as the Levant, including modern-day Syria, Jordan, Lebanon, and Palestine

²⁴ William McCants, *The ISIS Apocalypse: The History, Strategy, and Doomsday Vision of the Islamic State* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2015), 99-101.

²⁵ Fawaz Gerges, *The History of ISIS* (City: Publisher, 2016) 98-189; 170-201.

discrimination from their host societies and condemnation from their own. The jihadist message offers exactly that which they lack: acceptance and a sense of purpose.²⁶ In addition to offering adherents a sense of belonging and purpose, DA'ISH exploits a particular but attentive audience of the world's Muslim youth by appealing to a primordial desire for not only adventure, but violence, power, even sex. Audrey Kurth Cronin observes, "The group attracts followers yearning for ... adventure, personal power, and a sense of self... of course, some people just want to kill—and ISIS welcomes them, too... its sales pitch is conquest in all its forms, including the sexual kind."²⁷

The ideology's role in satiating deep religious and social appetites among its adherents accounts for their institutional resilience, their ability to consistently regenerate fighting power from across the globe despite harsh conditions and military losses. From a theoretical perspective, this may explain why superior doctrine, initiative, or technology might struggle – indeed, has struggled – to achieve conclusive results. If forces with material and doctrinal superiority struggle to defeat physically weaker, but ideologically resilient forces, the uncontrollable result, as Clausewitz asserted, is truly "paradoxical."

Inverse effect of Western intervention²⁸

Western intervention creates an inverse effect, galvanizing jihadist-extremist fighters and strengthening their long-term ability to fight. American and Western military interventions take on a role in jihadist political discussions unlike those of adversaries in more traditional strategic confrontations. Typically adversaries may see one another as merely an obstacle to their ends. The jihadist-extremist ideology however sees destruction of the conventional global authority –

²⁶ Cronin, *How Terrorism Ends*, 173-4.

²⁷ Cronin, "ISIS Is Not a Terrorist Group."

²⁸ Col Jeremiah Monk, USAF, discussion at the US Air War College, Maxwell AFB, AL, January 2017. I borrowed the term "inverse effect," when describing the impact of Western intervention, from Col Monk.

the international governing structure and its Western Liberal lead – as *the* end. Destruction of the Western way of life *is the* objective.

The ideology and its adherents use an anti-Western rhetoric as fuel, profiting from two centuries' worth of imperialism and perceived exploitation of Muslims in the Middle East, to recruit vulnerable youth and influence their beliefs.²⁹ This exacerbates the uncontrollability because the two interacting forces hold diametrically opposing historical views of the same story. This historical component of the ideology has the paradoxical impact of making Western-led effort to overtly influence it counterproductive.

Note jihadists, after the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan, began to frame Western governments, and even the liberal capitalist international regime they fostered, as the singular cause of the Islamic world's perceived misery.³⁰ Usama bin Laden in the mid-90s, motivated by stationing of US troops in the Arabian Peninsula, encapsulates the hostility:

“...Islam [has] been afflicted with oppression, hostility, and injustice by the Judeo-Christian alliance...the blatant imperial arrogance of America, under the cover of the immoral United Nations, has prevented the dispossessed from arming themselves. So the people of Islam realized that they were the fundamental target of the hostility of the Judeo-Crusader alliance.”³¹

The mere anticipation of US military involvement planted the seeds of extremist insurgency in Iraq well before it physically materialized in response to America's 2003 invasion. Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) founder Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi left Afghanistan for Iraq after the initial fall of the Taliban in 2002 precisely because he believed the US would “invade Iraq sooner or later.”³² The mere existence of America is inseparable from the jihadist motivation to achieve

²⁹ Keppel; Cronin, *How Terrorism Ends*.

³⁰ Maher, 42-3.

³¹ Maher, 43.

³² McCants, 9.

political ends through violence. America's existence is the ideological driver that makes violence necessary.

If the jihadist-extremist ideology was strong before 2003, the US-led invasion of Iraq transformed its potency. It brought vivid animation to a more radical subset of jihadists who were all too ready to connect the current struggle to Islamic prophecies of the apocalypse. Visions of American troops killing Muslims in Iraq, the Islamic heartland for so many apocalyptic prophecies, provided ample justification for jihadi-minded jurists to explain current events by equating 21st century America to the Rome of prophecy.³³ But even more, the ensuing fight between jihadists from around the world and Western soldiers became the proving ground for the refinement and implementation of a growing body of as-yet untested jihadi doctrine. According to Maher, the US-led invasion of Iraq became “the crucible” of jihadist thinking. The ensuing 8-year battle between jihadists and Americans generated “... a large body of carefully considered literature to explain, justify and vindicate...” jihadist activity. Additionally, “The 2003 invasion of Iraq was instrumental in giving shape and definition...” to jihadist movements afterward. Maher continues, characterizing Iraq as a watershed of sorts, “...ideological coherence is what matters here. There is an important difference in degree between groups...conceived during...this time and those which had come before...”³⁴

Therefore an intervention that intended to stabilize the Middle East became the singular event that achieved the opposite. Rather than decrease its adversaries' power, US military action against jihadist-extremists displays a tendency to increase their power because it gives credibility to the satiating ideology which spawned them in the first place. Western military ventures that do

³³ McCants, 145-6.

³⁴ Maher, 17-8.

successfully neutralize fighters mobilize other adherents from around the globe, perhaps more fighters than they eliminate.³⁵

The introduction of Western military forces seeking decisive gain through superior doctrine, initiative and technology, or even moral justification, tends to generate an uncontrollable interaction when pitted against a jihadist-extremist adversary steeped in satiating ideological motivation that knows no geographic boundaries. The result of such military intervention brings to life Clausewitz' abstract and practical characterizations of uncontrollable war: two diverse, living adversaries, inseparable from context, collide to produce an uncontrollable and paradoxical result.

Commanders-in-Chief's communications: arrogance or humility?

This section will analyze specific commander-in-chief communications, using war theory and jihadist-extremist context in a twofold approach. American commanders-in-chief spoke to the nation and the world in advance of decisions to enter into war. The words and tone of war communications serve as the initiating national act of war, because they generate expectations that before had not existed. The tone of these messages point to existing theoretical attitudes on war, and indicate the conclusiveness or expectancy with which leaders articulate national expectations. This section will discuss the relationship between the commander-in-chief's attitudes on war, the war's controllability or lack thereof, and efficacy meeting expectations and achieving national ends. Briefly, the attitudes and associated narratives of the 2003 invasion of Iraq, and the 2011 action in Libya, both struck a confident, in some cases arrogant, tone. Both narratives assumed either military superiority or moral justification (or both) would enable control of war and meet conclusive national expectations. In fact, they did not. The last action,

³⁵ Clint Watts, "Deciphering Competition Between Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State," CTC Sentinel, July 27, 2016, <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/deciphering-competition-between-al-qaida-and-the-islamic-state>.

Counter-DA'ISH intervention, by contrast exhibited humility. It struck a judicious tone and set prudent expectations. The narrative of this intervention grew from an acceptance that war is uncontrollable, and the results have been markedly different.

Iraq 2003

Messaging of the American decision to invade Iraq in 2003 bore the attitude of leaders who mistakenly viewed war in Iraq as controllable. Both before the invasion and after, American leadership expected use of its military doctrine and technology would be conclusive.³⁶ Consider the commander-in-chief's explanation to European journalists in November of 2002: "We expect [Saddam] to disarm. ... one way or the other, he's going to be disarmed, and it's in everybody's interest that that be the case," and separately, "the course of this nation does not depend on the decisions of others."³⁷ Confidence in military superiority is understandable, often laudable. What marks this language is the bold use of the word "expect," and a disregard for even the possibility that uncontrollable war, and the decisions of others, may disrupt the goal. This over confidence in the means – doctrinal superiority and technology – obstructed the nation's view of the jihadist context lurking beneath the surface, a context that reduced military superiority's ability to control war's outcomes. Results – that Saddam's ultimate disarmament was messier and less conclusive than expected, and that the invasion unleashed an unforeseen jihadist-extremist insurgency and the birth of DA'ISH – indicated a failure to humbly appreciate this war's uncontrollable nature.

³⁶ Record, 124-132.

³⁷ George W. Bush, "Interview with European Journalists," *Compilation of Presidential Documents*, Vol.38, Issue 2047, p2052, November 18, 2002, <https://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/WCPD-2002-11-25/pdf/WCPD-2002-11-25-Pg2047.pdf>; Bush, "Address Before a Joint Session of the Congress on the State of the Union," *Compilation of Presidential Documents*, Vol.39, Issue 109, p114-116, January 28, 2003, <https://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/WCPD-2003-02-03/pdf/WCPD-2003-02-03-Pg109.pdf>.

America also displayed an ideology that sought to enable global prosperity by initiating wide-scale transition to democratic values, beginning with regime change in Iraq. This neo-conservative thinking exuded a moral triumphalism, emboldening expectations of success.³⁸ Two weeks after the invasion, the commander-in-chief issued another expectation, this time predicting the future for the Iraqi people themselves: “we know the outcome: ... the Iraqi regime will be ended; and the long-suffering Iraqi people will be free...Iraq's greatest long-term need is a representative government that protects the rights of all Iraqis...[we] are confident that a free Iraq will be a successful nation.”³⁹ Such a statement would be remarkable for its confidence in any context, let alone the volatile context of jihadist extremism. America may have been better served heeding Aron’s warning, that objectives such as “a world safe for democracy” may prove “meaningless.” The difficulty with which Iraq continues to struggle with democracy forces leaders to scrutinize moral justifications that embolden expectations.

Libya 2011

American belief in controllable war obstructed more than one commander-in-chief. Intervention into Libya in 2011 displayed similar beliefs that war, and its outcomes, would be controllable. In the preparation for this conflict, the commander-in-chief announced, in order to prevent a feared genocide, “Qadhafi must stop his troops... These terms are not negotiable...If Qadhafi does not comply ... the resolution will be enforced through military action.”⁴⁰ Here the leadership created conclusive expectations, bolstered again by a belief in superiority of cause. The administration had embraced an emerging doctrine known as ‘R2P’, or Responsibility to

³⁸ Record, 29-52.

³⁹ Bush, “The President’s News Conference With Prime Minister Tony Blair of the United Kingdom at Camp David, Maryland,” *Compilation of Presidential Documents*, Vol.39, Issue 383, p383. March 27, 2003, <https://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/WCPD-2003-03-31/pdf/WCPD-2003-03-31-Pg383.pdf>.

⁴⁰Barack Obama, “Remarks on the Situation in Libya,” *Compilation of Presidential Documents*, Issue 182, p1-3, March 18, 2011, <https://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/DCPD-201100182/pdf/DCPD-201100182.pdf>.

Protect. This doctrine attached morality to actions overseas, identifying an imperative for powerful nations to intervene to prevent possible genocide.⁴¹ Despite recent scholarship that questions the certainty of Qadhafi's feared acts of genocide, the doctrine emboldened expectations, indicating that leadership held the belief that war and its results would be controllable.⁴²

As the battle continued for months, American leadership's confidence that military capability brought controllable results surfaced again: "The surest way for the bloodshed to end is simple: Muammar Qadhafi and his regime need to ... acknowledge the reality that he no longer controls Libya. He needs to relinquish power ..."⁴³ This statement brims with the confidence that military technology would be able to control the war and its outcome.⁴⁴

Additionally, leadership believed the political outcomes would be controllable as well: "... the Transitional National Council as the legitimate governing authority in Libya... should continue to demonstrate the leadership ... respecting the rights of the people...protecting the institutions... pursuing a transition to democracy that is just and inclusive ..."⁴⁵ Here again American leadership believed military superiority combined with moral imperative would enable a controllable war and result.

As was true in the case of Iraq, results proved otherwise, due to the uncontrollable nature of Middle East war in a jihadi-extremist context. The Libyan transition to representative democracy struggled mightily. Rival governments formed and continue to fight for power. The

⁴¹ Michael Hastings, "Inside Obama's War Room," *Rolling Stone*, October 13, 2011, <http://www.rollingstone.com/politics/news/inside-obamas-war-room-20111013>.

⁴² Alan J. Kuperman, "Obama's Libya Debacle: How a Well-Meaning Intervention Ended in Failure," *Foreign Affairs*, Mar/Apr 2015, 66-77, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/libya/obamas-libya-debacle>.

⁴³ Barack Obama, "Statement on the Situation in Libya," *Compilation of Presidential Documents*, Issue 583, August 21, 2011, <https://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/DCPD-201100583/pdf/DCPD-201100583.pdf>.

⁴⁴ Hillary Rodham Clinton, *Hard Choices* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2014), 363-381.

⁴⁵ Obama, "Statement on the Situation in Libya."

resulting power vacuum opened the door for multiple militant groups to establish safe haven. As this analysis might have predicted, a DA'ISH satellite calling itself the Islamic State in Libya exploited Western intervention to bolster its strength.⁴⁶ This Libyan satellite of DA'ISH has been arguably the strongest and most dangerous of DA'ISH's affiliates, and has spread its influence significantly in Africa, increasing terrorist activity throughout the southern Sahara region.⁴⁷

Counter-DA'ISH 2014-Present

A contrast emerges in the commander-in-chief's language associated with the decision to intervene against DA'ISH in 2014. Almost immediately, the commander-in-chief acknowledged events may already be beyond control: "...it will take time to eradicate a cancer like ISIL. And any time we take military action, there are risks involved..."⁴⁸ This represents a fundamental acceptance that war in this context is uncontrollable, by acknowledging the desired results are not achievable in a definite amount of time. This, and the immediate warning of risk, represent an acquiescence that we, as Clausewitz wrote, are "not in control."

Subsequent communications represent a profound theoretical acknowledgement of both war's uncontrollability and American military limits, that can be lauded as national humility: "American power can make a decisive difference, but we cannot do for Iraqis what they must do for themselves, nor can we take the place of Arab partners in securing their region."⁴⁹ First, by

⁴⁶ Kuperman.

⁴⁷ Clint Watts, "When the Caliphate Crumbles: The Future of the Islamic State's Affiliates," *Warontherocks.com*, June 13, 2016, <https://warontherocks.com/2016/06/when-the-caliphate-crumbles-the-future-of-the-islamic-states-affiliates/>; Gorm Rye Olsen, "Fighting terrorism in Africa by proxy: the USA and the European Union in Somalia and Mali," *European Security*, 2014 Vol. 23, No. 3, 290-306, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09662839.2014.884074>.

⁴⁸ Barack Obama, "Address to the Nation on United States Strategy To Combat the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) Terrorist Organization," *Compilation of Presidential Documents*, Issue 654, p1-4, September 10, 2014, <https://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/DCPD-201400654/pdf/DCPD-201400654.pdf>.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

acknowledging limits of American power, the commander-in-chief theoretically distances himself from those who would assert military supremacy or moral justification could conclusively control this war's outcome. Second, the commander-in-chief acknowledges the specific religious and social aspects of this context that make this war even more uncontrollable, by noting the inverse effect of US forces, and the need for indigenous forces to lead the fight.

Additionally, this narrative takes care to communicate the military approach would be indirect, not direct, and that the progress would be methodical, not fast. The commander-in-chief replaces military superiority and speed-centered certainty of previous communications with more humble, patient, judicious verbiage: "...degrade and ultimately destroy...comprehensive and sustained...not involve American combat troops fighting on foreign soil.... campaign will be waged through a steady, relentless effort ... [supporting] partners' forces on the ground."⁵⁰

Results have justified the narrative. The Counter-DA'ISH campaign has demonstrated more sustainable progress toward national ends than the Iraq or Libya interventions. Since the start of US-led operations in 2014 DA'ISH has lost significant swaths of land to the slow, steady advances of Iraqi troops and the tactical alliance of Syrian and Kurdish opposition forces.⁵¹ Under the ensuing administration, whose commander-in-chief has not yet significantly departed from his predecessor's Counter-DA'ISH approach, Mosul has fallen and US-supported proxy forces are increasing pressure on DA'ISH strongholds in Syria.⁵² Coalition airstrikes contributed to this effort while committing few collateral damage events.⁵³ Concentration of foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq has decreased.⁵⁴ While DA'ISH's ability to export terrorist acts

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Brian Michael Jenkins, "Fifteen Years On, Where Are We in the War On Terror?" CTC Sentinel, September 7, 2016, <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/fifteen-years-on-where-are-we-in-the-war-on-terror>.

⁵² Kimberly Dozier, "Who Invented Trump's ISIS Plan? Obama." *TheDailyBeast.com*, February 27, 2017, <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2017/02/27/who-invented-trump-s-isis-plan-obama.html>.

⁵³ Jenkins.

⁵⁴ Watts, "Deciphering Competition Between Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State."

remains, their ability to maintain constant or catastrophic attacks has decreased.⁵⁵ Displaying national humility through judicious messages and prudent expectations that respect the uncontrollable nature of war, especially against jihadist-extremists in the Middle East, paid off.

Conclusion and Recommendations

These examples support a conclusion that national humility from the commander-in-chief may bear more strategically beneficial results in the Middle East than other approaches. This is because war is not controllable; a compounding reason is the jihadist-extremist context creates a unique interaction between adversaries that is even less controllable than a more conventional conflict. The leader's first act of policy are the words used to justify military action. A leader who executes this act with humility by using judicious messages to communicate prudent expectations is more likely to successfully address the unique interaction of the jihadist extremist adversary.

Admittedly, confidence brought by military capability, initiative, technological superiority and moral certitude are not inherently counterproductive to national interests. These values and capabilities are essential to America's national security. Political leaders often must – and should – cultivate support for war, not to mention nationalism, by convincing the electorate that capabilities are superior, causes are just, and goals are achievable in short order. Confidence begat by military superiority and moral guidelines plays a critical role, but within the narrow spectrum of warfare in the Middle East's jihadist-extremist context, national humility serves the country's interest better than the opposite approach.

Importantly, we must not mistake humility for weakness. Advocating for the humble approach should not be equated with an unwillingness or inability to address challenges.

⁵⁵ Jenkins.

Notably, jihadist-extremism is displaying global endurance. Recent history shows when one movement dies another immediately rises to take its place.⁵⁶ In light of this – what becomes clear is that applying a humble approach to the uncontrollable nature of this context will remedy such a long-term problem more effectively than applying its opposite approach. Humility implies patience and strength, not weakness. In fact, the nation deserves praise for learning from the mistakes of 2003 and 2011 and getting it closer to right against DA'ISH. This collective learning on a broad institutional level indicates adaptability and strength.

Going forward, the implications for American thinking on war are profound. National leadership should consider the likelihood that foreign policy missteps stem from misguided or incomplete theoretical perspectives of war, its role and its uncontrollable nature. If, through military supremacy or moral triumphalism, we theoretically fail to recognize when war's uncontrollable nature makes conclusive expectations illusory, then policy is the wrong place to direct criticism. We must first re-order our theoretical foundations and understanding of war's nature; only afterward will assessments of policy serve the national interest. In this way, American war leaders will be able to accomplish Clausewitz' stated "supreme...[and] most far-reaching act of judgment," which is "to establish...the kind of war on which they are embarking; neither mistaking it for, nor trying to turn it into, something that is alien to its nature."⁵⁷

Championing humility and acknowledging that we are unable to control war fashions a mindset that engenders patience, and introduces comfort with status quo as a commendable quality. While not always so, many challenges may require little more than maintenance of the status quo. America's military superiority and moralist tendencies can create mental obstacles to such a patient, but sometimes necessary, acquiescence. Accepting that some situations won't

⁵⁶ Watts, "Deciphering Competition Between Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State."

⁵⁷ Clausewitz, 88.

respond according to our will facilitates crafting narratives free of politically troublesome commitments and deadlines. As with humility, national patience is a valuable by-product of theoretically re-ordering attitudes to acknowledge war's uncontrollable nature.

Humility and patience together address another tendency of recent American military ventures. State building projects like those undertaken in Iraq and Afghanistan depend heavily on a theoretical belief that military superiority and moral imperative work to control war's political outcomes. The questionable results of both projects challenge these beliefs. In future situations where nation-building emerges as an attractive expectation, national humility and patience accompany the theoretical re-set of attitudes on war needed to pause before committing to such illusory expectations.

This emphasis on the importance of fashioning a humble, patient national attitude exemplified by leadership's messaging is not new. We would do well to avoid what Thucydides warned of nearly 3,000 years ago, when he sadly described this way the tragic deterioration of national messages that accompanied the brutal war between Athens and Sparta:

Words had to change their ordinary meaning and to take that which was now given them. Reckless audacity came to be considered...courage...; prudent hesitation, specious cowardice; moderation...a cloak for unmanliness; ability to see all sides of a question, inaptness to act on any. Frantic violence became the attribute of manliness...The advocate of extreme measures was always trustworthy; his opponent a man to be suspected.⁵⁸

As a final word, we ought not overlook the criticality of avoiding narratives that lump large swaths of the world's Muslims together with the small radical fringe that comprises the jihadist extremist threat. We are not at war with Islam or its believers. Despite the catastrophic effects of some of its attacks, jihadist-extremism is not widespread or widely accepted.⁵⁹ Jihadist

⁵⁸ Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War, Book III*, 65-90, <http://darkwing.uoregon.edu/~klio/tx/gr/corcyra.htm>.

⁵⁹ Maher, 3-30.

extremists need support from mainstream Muslims to survive in the long term. By taking care to make common cause with mainstream adherents of Islam, a humble narrative can slowly deny the oxygen of public support that jihadist extremists so desperately need for breath and life.⁶⁰



⁶⁰ Senior member of the Lebanese Armed Forces, interview with the author, Macdill AFB, FL, April 2015. A senior Lebanese Armed Forces officer used a similar ‘oxygen’ metaphor to describe his country’s fight with extremist elements.

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