



## Beyond Kinetic Operations: A Road Map to Success in Syria and Iraq

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*Abstract: Kinetic operations—either overt, covert, or clandestine— should only be employed with ample forethought as to what they are intended to achieve and whether the costs are worth the benefits. Notwithstanding their advantages and disadvantages, the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) will not be defeated through kinetic operations alone. When linking tactical operations to the strategic goal of degrading a terrorist threat, post-conflict stabilization and rebuilding are often required to cement tactical victories into a desired and sustainable end state. Terrorism, including ISIS, is not an existential threat to the U.S. and requires a multi-layer approach that is not linear and should encompass locally derived goals. The U.S. government should envision kinetic operations as only one part of a broader strategy to stabilize Iraq and Syria after the collapse of ISIS, or it will continue to find itself in a perpetual war.*

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The United States government’s counterterrorism mission in theory should be simple to define: to protect the United States and its allies against terrorist threats at home and abroad. Nearly 18 years after 9/11, however, there is no single counterterrorism (CT) mission definition<sup>1</sup> that spans and unites the work of America’s CT community.<sup>2</sup> Without a defined CT end state, the entities responsible

<sup>1</sup> The Department of Defense defines counterterrorism as “[a]ctivities and operations taken to neutralize terrorists and their organizations and networks in order to render them incapable of

BAKOS

for CT work in the United States carry out divergent actions with no coherent purpose. This lack of coherent purpose makes it easy to fall into the trap of misreading activities, such as strikes or raids, as ends in and of themselves. They are divorced from a strategy or series of policies that might have a more cumulative impact on terrorist actors or communities providing them with operating space. This article is designed to provide a framework to think about the role of kinetic—or lethal—military or paramilitary uses of force in CT missions. After doing so, it will apply this framework to the current situation in Iraq and Syria. Finally, it will offer some recommendations for the use of kinetic force as part of a broader CT strategy in post-Caliphate Iraq and Syria.

### Defining the Strategic Objective

From Southeast Asia to the Middle East and North Africa, the U.S. government often has turned to kinetic operations, a tactical function, as a substitute for a strategy. As hinted at above, these operations offer a veneer of “doing something” when there is a sense of urgency in the face of a perceived or real risk, even if the efficacy of using kinetic operations is questionable. They can be useful in the short term to prevent or limit control of territory, or if a terrorist organization has settled into a power vacuum, kinetic ops can buy time for stabilization efforts to take root. But if they are not incorporated into a broader strategy, kinetic operations cannot be successful in combating terrorist threats—particularly because kinetic operations are a tactical and episodic response to a strategic and enduring challenge. There are also costs associated with improper and excessive use of kinetic operations; they can result in civilian casualties, spur resentment in the local population, and take time and energy away from focusing on more pertinent threats. Despite America’s reliance on its military’s lethal capabilities, the term *kinetic* lacks a standard definition. At best, it is a linguistic contortion to get around using terms like *warfare* or *combat operations*. At worst, it is a euphemism used to avoid terms like *killing* and *destroying*.

In order to deploy kinetic operations effectively, the U.S. government should reframe the counterterrorism policy used over the last three administrations to define a clear end state and properly define kinetic operations as a tool rather than a strategy. Recent administrations have focused on counterterrorism to the near-

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using violence to instill fear and coerce governments or societies to achieve their goals.” The State Department defines it as “efforts to combat al Qaeda and other foreign terrorist organizations that are designated by the Secretary of State, or other individuals and entities engaged in terrorist activity or support for such activity.” Last, the Department of Homeland Security states that it is “practices, tactics, techniques, and strategies designed to prevent, deter, and respond to terrorism.” *United States Government Glossary of Interagency and Associated Terms* (Washington, D.C., July 2017), 204.

<sup>2</sup> Frederick W. Kagan, Kimberly Kagan, Jennifer Cafarella, Harleen Gambhir, and Katherine Zimmerman, “U.S. Grand Strategy: Destroying ISIS and al Qaeda, Report One: Al Qaeda and ISIS: Existential threats to the US and Europe,” *American Enterprise Institute and Institute for the Study of War*, January 2016,

<http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/PLANEX%20Report%201%20--%20FINALFINALFINAL.pdf>.

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