Fighting Jihadists By, With, and Through U.S. Partners
Lessons Learned and Future Prospects

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A U.S. soldier explains movement techniques and squad-level tactics to Iraqi army soldiers at Camp Taji, Iraq, March 24, 2015.

"**A**llies and partners are our strategic center of gravity," asserted then chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Joseph F. Dunford Jr. in 2017.[1] He was invoking the "by, with, and through" (BWT) model that the United States has in recent years used to combat jihadist threats in the U.S. Central Command area of responsibility (CENTCOM AOR) and beyond.[2] The approach has become more popular in U.S. strategy particularly within the Middle East, as successive administrations have sought to downscale military deployments while still securing vital U.S. interests in the region.[3] Perceptions of Middle East "forever wars"[4] and the desire for a strategic "rebalance"[5] to East Asia drove American administrations to divert resources away from the region, with
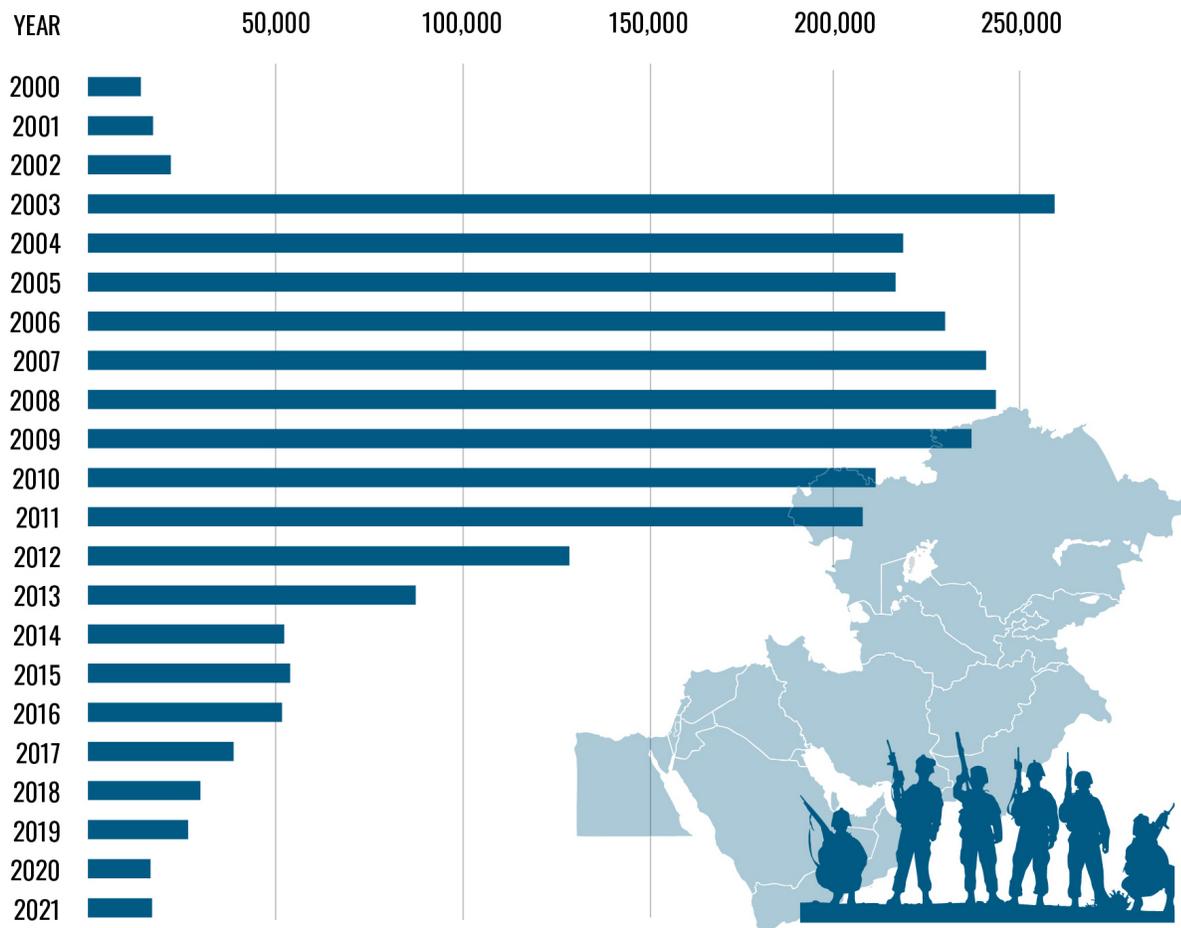
the BWT, or "advise and assist," approach touted as a low-cost alternative for continuing to pursue U.S. interests (see figure 1).[6] Since 2001, the United States has applied this approach to operations in Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, Somalia, and other countries.[7]

This study aims to examine the U.S. experience in BWT operations to illuminate what elements make this approach effective and how the United States can best achieve success in future endeavors against jihadist groups. In doing so, it surveys various cases of the American experience fighting jihadists through partner forces. It then outlines the BWT concept before assessing the evolving jihadist threat and looking in depth at different types of partner forces. The paper scrutinizes the characteristics of three types of partner forces—irregular, conventional, and special forces. It then proposes ten lessons for applying BWT in the fight against jihadist adversaries.

For its methodology, the study relies on research by other scholars and practitioners as well as new

Figure 1.
CENTCOM Force Levels, 2000–2021

Sources: Defense Manpower Data Center (https://dwp.dmdc.osd.mil/dwp/app/dod-data-reports/workforce-reports); Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (https://www.sigar.mil/allreports/); a variety of news articles, from *Military Times* in particular; Carter Malkasian, *The American War in Afghanistan: A History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021).

Figure 2.
Map of CENTCOM Area of Responsibility

author interviews with more than twenty experts, including U.S. and non-U.S. military officers from the Global Coalition Against Daesh/IS and members of U.S. partner forces—among them current and former members of the Iraqi Peshmerga and Afghan commandos and special forces. The paper also draws on the author's interviews with U.S. military officers conducted for his previous work about the conventionalization of jihadist militaries.[8]

In the author's assessment, the best partner for fighting jihadists is a determined, adaptable force capable of effective light infantry operations. For the United States, fostering such a partner rests on building strong long-term interpersonal connections between U.S. and partner personnel. As for the jihadists, they have proven their determination to seize, defend, and govern large territories and their willingness to fight hard and make great sacrifices

over many years as well as shift effectively among conventional warfare, insurgency, and terrorism to achieve their goals. Hence, effective partners must match this determination and develop not only necessary combat capabilities, but also a long-term commitment to the fight and the flexibility needed to defeat a constantly adapting enemy force. Strong connections between American and partner personnel facilitate professional training and foster shared commitment, will to fight, and adaptability. This, in turn, enables U.S. advisors to surge support during emergencies, most importantly through rapid provision of air and fire support facilitated by trusted partner ground forces, which crucially allows partners to confront jihadists on the conventional battlefield. Sustained long-term training, financing, and equipping also help increase partner forces' determination, flexibility, and resilience. And to thrive, any sustainable partnership must be rooted in a sufficient alignment of interests.

Of the three categories of partners examined, U.S.-created special forces perform best in the role of an adaptable force with light infantry capabilities.

Their small size relative to conventional and irregular forces enables more substantial U.S. investment per soldier and closer and more frequent contact between advisors and partners. As a result, American and partner personnel develop very strong relationships that translate into robust capability, interest alignment, and determination. Examples from Iraq, Somalia, and Afghanistan demonstrate the flexibility of partner special forces. These forces lead the charge against jihadist adversaries and can effectively shift from traditional small-unit raids to conventional light infantry operations when called upon and supported to do so. Partner irregular forces have shown comparable effectiveness, often only needing equipment provision and, for more intense operations, surges of air and fire support—yet they frequently suffer from interest misalignment with the United States. Partner state conventional forces, for their part, have mostly proven ineffective in the fight against jihadist groups. One of the most important lessons to draw from this analysis is that the United States should focus on building foreign special forces if it seeks a less costly and risky alternative to massive troop deployments.

Abbreviations

AQAP	al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula
ATGM	antitank guided missile
BWT	by, with, and through
CENTCOM AOR	U.S. Central Command area of responsibility
CTS	Counter Terrorism Service (Iraq)
IED	improvised explosive device
ISK	Islamic State–Khorasan
KRG	Kurdistan Regional Government
LAF	Lebanese Armed Forces
NSF	New Syrian Force
SDF	Syrian Democratic Forces
SNA	Somali National Army
SOCCENT	Special Operations Command–Central
SOF	Special Operations Forces (U.S.)
YPG	People's Defense Units

U.S. forces host a range day with the Danab Brigade in Somalia, May 9, 2021. US AIRFORCE

A female Kurdish fighter from the People's Protection Units (YPG) in Raqqa, Syria, June 15, 2017. REUTERS/ Goran Tomasevic

Essentials of the By, With, and Through Concept

The BWT operational approach assumes "operations are led by our partners, state or nonstate, with enabling support from the United States or U.S.-led coalitions, and *through* U.S. authorities and partner agreements."[9] In these operations, local partner forces take on the bulk of the hard ground fighting, sometimes with U.S. accompaniment, while American advisors provide support in the form of training, intelligence, heavy air and artillery assets, equipment, funding, and logistics. The United States can in turn commit fewer "boots on the ground," reducing the risk to U.S. personnel.

This approach, however, is far from a no-brainer with no consequences. It is a tradeoff. As U.S. Army War College professor Anthony Pfaff noted, "In war, risk is a zero-sum game where combatants have to make tradeoffs between risk to themselves, the mission, and noncombatants."[10] When working with partners, American soldiers are at reduced risk but the cost is less control of the operational tempo, that is, "the mission."[11]

Partnering can take a large amount of U.S. resources and still require the commitment of hundreds of millions or even billions of dollars. In addition, the enabling of partner ground forces takes a concerted effort to sustain precision fires, logistics, and other assets vital to effective performance.[12] This theme was common during the U.S.-led anti–Islamic State (IS) campaign, which often required hundreds of precision airstrikes to support partners.[13] To recapitulate, partnering lowers the risk to U.S. forces, leaves ownership of the fight to the partner, and is cheaper than large troop commitments, but it is still considerably resource intensive and it entails allowing partner forces to do the job less efficiently than the United States could.

Effective partnerships require a basis for long-term cooperation. The U.S. campaigns against jihadist groups are, indeed, long endeavors lasting years or even decades. It follows, as Michael Knights and Wladimir van Wilgenburg assert, that, "trust between the United States and its partner forces is a sine qua non."[14] Advisors must be able to rely on partners—not least for their personal physical security—and partners need to know that the United States will have their backs in battle, in the international arena, and often in matters of governance, and not withdraw its support.

The best partnerships result in deep, interdependent relationships in which each party recognizes the importance of the partnership to its interests and is driven by mutual respect and admiration. At the tactical level, trust between advisors and partners on the ground grows from a shared "warrior culture."[15] American personnel commonly formed bonds with, for instance, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and Iraqi Counter Terrorism Service (CTS), both of whose combat effectiveness, consciousness about minimizing civilian harm, common goals and values, and shared operational experiences drew U.S. respect.[16] Thus, the relationship is interdependent and gradually engenders greater adaptability and flexibility as partners and their advisors develop shared tactics and learn how to execute them more smoothly. Interdependence also fuels the determination to fight common adversaries that is essential for successful long military campaigns.

At the strategic level, capability and interest alignment are the primary considerations for BWT partnerships. Although groups with little initial military proficiency will, of course, often make bad partners, the United States can build almost from scratch indigenous fighting forces to create the needed capabilities.[17]

Having identified or even built a capable partner, the United States must assess the extent of its interest alignment with the partner. Scholars Stephen Biddle, Julia Macdonald, and Ryan Baker note that interest misalignment is a common hindrance to security force assistance missions—especially "small foot-print" missions. Such misalignment can be reduced if the United States is willing to invest substantially

more in the missions and take more involved positions, such as enforcing conditions for its support and monitoring partner behavior.[18]

Similarly, analyst Mara Karlin, who currently serves as assistant secretary of defense for strategy, plans, and capabilities, posits that precisely such deep involvement in partner military affairs, together with diminished influence by external spoilers over a partner, are what ensure successful BWT operations.[19] She points to the U.S. mission to support Greece's army in the late 1940s, when success came from a shared, urgent goal of defeating a communist insurgency and substantial American investment and involvement in sensitive matters like military organization.[20] At the same time, Yugoslavia, which supplied and gave sanctuary to the Greek communists, ceased its support following tensions with its patron, the Soviet Union, driving it to seek better relations with the United States.[21] One oft-cited example of success is the American advisory mission to South Korea (1946–53), which featured rigorous U.S. involvement in organization and promotion. This approach helped better align interests with the partner and create a large effective fighting force in the Republic of Korea Army.[22] A more recent case is the American reorganization of the Iraqi army in 2006–8, which enabled it to be briefly effective until the U.S. military began handing control back to the Iraqi government in 2009.[23] Therefore, in BWT, after the United States establishes or finds a capable partner, interest alignment is the primary strategic concern in BWT. Both capability and interest alignment can be fostered through deeper U.S. involvement in partner military affairs.

Partnerships with Irregular, Conventional, and Special Forces

BWT partners usually fall into one of three categories, each with unique characteristics that should help guide how one approaches them. These are irregular forces, state conventional military forces, and U.S.-created special forces.

Irregular Forces

The first category, irregular forces, includes any armed group within a country not belonging to the official armed forces.[24] Often associated with "revolutionary" groups,[25] these forces may engage in guerrilla and insurgent warfare but can also use conventional or terrorist tactics. The United States has a long history of partnering with irregulars, such as during the Cold War when it supported anti-communist militants around the world. More recently, U.S. partnerships with the SDF, Iraqi Peshmerga, and various tribal and communal armed groups exemplify this category. Irregulars generally have stronger ties to their localities and governance structures, as the SDF does to the Syrian Kurdish population, and thus they seek political power and legitimacy as their core objectives. This broad outlook often conflicts with narrower U.S. military objectives, a cause of frequent misalignment of interests, as will be discussed later.

BWT operations with irregular forces can be traced to the classic "Lawrence of Arabia" model, often lauded as an exemplar of security force assistance.[26] Of his World War I Arab tribal partner forces, British officer Thomas Edward Lawrence famously said, "Better the Arabs do it tolerably than that you do it perfectly," thus summarizing how provision of equipment to even a mediocre partner can bring desirable results.[27] One of the best outcomes offered by the BWT operational model is this "light footprint" approach, characterized by minimal troop commitment and the search for just enough advantage to turn a conflict in a partner's favor. Former CIA paramilitary officer Mick Mulroy and ex–Navy SEAL Eric Oehlerich describe that approach as the "tactical advantage" model in their study of the U.S. partnership with the SDF.[28]

State Conventional Military Forces

Mulroy and Oehlerich contrast the tactical advantage

approach with the misguided "mirror imaging" model, in which the U.S. military tries to create large conventional armies in its own image. Recent U.S. efforts to build up state conventional forces—official armed forces of foreign countries—have indeed been consistently costly, mostly unsuccessful, and at times disastrous. The Afghan National Army disintegrated in August 2021 in the face of a rapid Taliban offensive after twenty years of American support;[29] when IS attacked northern Iraq in 2014, four of the Iraqi army's fourteen divisions collapsed after more than a decade of U.S. assistance.[30]

In other cases, however, focused efforts to support conventional formations have yielded positive results. For example, sustained U.S. backing of the Philippine armed forces in training, equipment, and advice since 2001 significantly boosted the forces' counterterrorism capabilities, especially those of the special forces. This continuous cooperation enabled American advisors to aid the Philippine military through intelligence and targeting with only a very small on-the-ground noncombat presence during the 2017 battle to liberate the city of Marawi from the Islamic State.[31] Deep U.S. involvement in reorganizing the Iraqi army in 2006–8 enabled the successful Operation Charge of the Knights (*Saulat al-Fursan*), in which the army, with U.S. support, brought Basra back under its control from the opposing Jaish al-Mahdi militia.[32] In the counter-offensives against IS starting in early 2015, the Iraqi army served as an effective holding force and flank guard for the special forces spearheads.[33] Outside the Middle East, the earlier-noted Greek and Korean armed forces examples illustrate that U.S. support can produce solid large conventional forces, albeit often with significant continued American backing. In addition, the current heroic Ukrainian defense against the Russian invasion has vindicated U.S. support for the Ukrainian military since 2014.[34]

As military analysts Michael Eisenstadt and Kenneth Pollack note, "Militaries reflect the societies they come from."[35] Therefore, the members of an official conventional army are products of the culture and politics of their society, and the army's effectiveness is heavily influenced by these underlying factors.

Corruption, politicization, tribalism, and other sociopolitical factors can have detrimental effects on military effectiveness, and if U.S. partnerships with regular state armed forces are to have a chance of success, they must account for and somehow overcome these variables.[36]

U.S.-Created Special Forces

One notable way the United States has worked toward this ideal is by raising elite units insulated from the political and regular military system. These U.S.-created special forces—the Iraqi CTS, Afghan commandos, and the Somali army unit Danab Brigade, among others—have secured the best results of U.S. security force assistance in the post-9/11 era. The CTS fought hard and spearheaded large effective offensive operations—even though it was built for small counterterrorism raids—against IS when the Iraqi army and police virtually collapsed.[37] The Danab Brigade remains the only Somali military unit capable of independent offensive operations against the jihadist group al-Shabab.[38]

Through continuous training, operational support, and close physical living conditions, U.S. Special Operations Forces (SOF) develop strong relations with indigenous members of these units, which usually mature into spitting images of American SOF teams. In many ways, this type of partner exemplifies the ideal product of the BWT concept, in which the special forces unit maintains a high level of trust with U.S. personnel and achieves tangible gains toward shared objectives with U.S. support (including airpower, artillery, intelligence, and other forms) that bestows a tactical advantage. U.S.-created special forces have also demonstrated high levels of determination stemming from relatively good alignment of interests with the United States, which derives from substantial American involvement with this type of partner. Such special forces also proved quite adaptable, because a joint commitment to the fight produced shared tactics that helped the partners transition from small-unit raids to large conventional operations. Still, the small size of such elite units presents problems for sustainment and casualty absorption over longer manpower-intensive campaigns.

Understanding the Jihadist Adversary

As the American military footprint lightens in the CENTCOM AOR, the United States has had to continue its campaigns against IS and other jihadist groups through its local partners. What kinds of partners are needed to effectively prosecute the fight against jihadists? To answer this question, one must first understand the jihadist adversary.[39]

A Brief History of Jihadist Warfare

The main goal of all Sunni jihadist groups is the restoration of the Caliphate—the Islamic empire governed by sharia, or Islamic law—through holy war (jihad). Some jihadist organizations, like the Taliban, focus their efforts locally, seeking to create Islamic states within the borders of existing countries that may one day be part of the Caliphate. Others, most notably al-Qaeda, IS, and their affiliates, operate on a global scale.[40] Despite the virulent anti-Western outlook of jihadist groups, their first major encounter with the United States was in the context of U.S. provision of Stinger man-portable air-defense systems to the mujahedin (Arabic for "wagers of jihad") against the occupying forces of the Soviet Union in Afghanistan.[41] Notwithstanding this short period of cooperation, the Taliban and al-Qaeda then emerged from the mujahedin to fight against the United States and its partners for decades after the Soviet Union withdrew from Afghanistan in 1989.

Al-Qaeda explicitly marked the United States as a target, officially declaring war in 1996.[42] Terrorist attacks on the U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania and the infamous 9/11 attacks aimed to force the United States to end its military presence in the Middle East, thus laying the groundwork for an "Islamic army" to reconquer Muslim lands. Instead, al-Qaeda terrorism earned the wrath of the United States, which sent tens of thousands of troops to Afghanistan in 2001 to topple the Taliban regime, which was hosting al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden, and capture or kill the perpetrators of the 9/11

attacks. Devastated yet determined to continue the jihad, the Taliban began waging a brutal insurgency in Afghanistan while al-Qaeda sponsored franchises in the Middle East and beyond.

Al-Qaeda's new affiliates in Iraq, Yemen, the Maghreb, Somalia, and Syria not only perpetuated bin Laden's campaign of terror but extended it onto the conventional battlefield. Al-Qaeda–linked jihadist groups organized themselves into military units, erected fortifications to fight in urban environments, and sought battle against established armies for control of terrain.[43] A pattern emerged whereby jihadist groups achieved victory in various theaters of war only to be forced back into insurgency and terrorism by Western intervention, waiting for an opportune moment to regain lost territory when their opponents became exhausted and withdrew.

The most recent example occurred with the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan after the United States withdrew in 2021. Similarly, the 2011 U.S. withdrawal from Iraq precipitated the rise of the Islamic State. That event brought jihadist proficiency in conventional warfare to new heights, with IS adaptation of suicide tactics, leveraging of new media, the advent of an unprecedented foreign fighter movement, and integration of antitank guided missiles (ATGMs) and drones into its operations.[44]

An Adaptable and Innovative Enemy with Imperial Ambitions

Operating as terrorists, insurgents, and conventional warfighters, jihadist organizations have proven themselves highly adaptable and innovative despite limited access to advanced technology. To meet their lofty ambitions of recreating an empire, jihadists have had to find ways to offset their material inferiority by such innovations as the mass production of improvised explosive devices (IEDs) and the armored suicide car bomb.[45] Moreover, jihadist groups have faced the challenge of constantly having to fight the world's foremost military powers (e.g., the United States, Soviet Union), forcing them even more to find creative solutions to their unique military problems. Leadership that encouraged creativity, the ideological

imperative to secure vast amounts of territory, and a high willingness to sustain casualties are additional factors that have contributed to a jihadist aptitude for innovation.[46]

Jihadists have proven particularly adept at low-tech "disruptive innovation." The term, coined by business analysts Joseph L. Bower and Clayton Christensen, describes new products that are generally more basic than their predecessors but offer comparative advantages in their relative simplicity, portability, and accessibility.[47] For instance, jihadists used suicide bombers in place of cutting-edge precision fires, missiles, airpower, or autonomous weapons, with IS augmenting the bombers' vehicles for large-scale use on the conventional battlefield. "Technicals"—civilian pickup trucks with mounted machine guns or antiair autocannons—gave jihadist armies mobility and are far cheaper and easier to operate than the helicopters or armored personnel carriers of a conventional military force.

This style of innovation often gave jihadists an edge over other local forces, but it did not allow for "stand-up fights" with advanced foreign armed forces, most notably their precision strike systems. In the 2001 U.S. invasion of Afghanistan, air attacks alone cost the Taliban tens of thousands of casualties.[48] In 2012, one Taliban commander complained, "The foreign troops are also not so powerful; the only power that they have is air support, and otherwise they cannot stand against us."[49] The same pattern of heavy losses from precision fires persisted in the war with IS.[50] With only simple low-level air defense capabilities, Sunni jihadists in the post-9/11 era could do nothing against fast high-flying fixed-wing aircraft.[51] Most often, jihadist fighters relied on dispersion of weapons and personnel, concealment, and human shields to evade opposing airpower.[52]

A High Will to Fight

Driven by an ambitious ideology, jihadist groups have consistently demonstrated a high will to fight—defined here as "the disposition and decision to fight, to act, or to persevere when needed"—sometimes to

a suicidal degree.[53] These groups have maintained long insurgencies and shown strong resolve in battle, with few instances of mass retreats or surrenders.[54] Indeed, jihadist will to fight was at times so high that it became counterproductive and foolhardy, such as at the battle of Kobane (between U.S.-backed Kurdish militia members and IS), in which IS fighters reinforced a position four times despite being promptly destroyed each time they reoccupied the position.[55] As in that example, a desire for martyrdom sometimes trumps military objectives.

Facing such a determined jihadist enemy means finding a partner with its own high determination. One common criticism of recent U.S. partnerships against jihadist groups is that the partner forces often lack sufficient will to fight.[56] As a result, morale is often worse among U.S. partners than it is among the shared jihadist adversaries.[57] And this lower morale has especially been noticeable in U.S. partnerships with state regular armies, less so with irregular or special forces. The next section will discuss the reasons for these morale problems, examining the sources of combat power for U.S. partners and what has made various U.S. partnerships against jihadist groups more effective or less so.

Wanted: A Determined and Adaptable Partner

Barring large deployments of American troops, what kind of partner is best equipped for conducting BWT operations against jihadist groups? This section evaluates the post-9/11 U.S. experience in this endeavor with the three types of partners described: irregular forces, state conventional forces, and U.S.-created special forces. For each, the paper assesses its performance using three variables: capability and interest alignment, relations with U.S. personnel, and will to fight.

Overall, the U.S. experience indicates that a determined and adaptable force with light infantry capabilities represents the best BWT partner against

jihadist groups. This kind of force has the mobility and aggressiveness to pursue jihadists employing elusive small-unit tactics. At the same time, this partner can (ideally) adapt quickly to conventional warfighting when jihadists try to seize territory. Smooth cooperation between partner and U.S. personnel enabling prompt fire and intelligence support along with antiarmor weapon provision is the key to this adaptability. Of the three categories of partners, U.S.-created special forces have generally performed best. (See table 1.)

Irregular Forces as a BWT Partner

The United States has worked with various irregular forces in BWT partnerships against jihadist groups. Some groups falling into this category are the SDF; Iraqi Peshmerga; Iraqi, Afghan, Yemeni, and Syrian tribal forces; Syrian opposition rebel groups; and Puntland Security Force.

Capability and interest alignment. Partner irregular forces have generally been capable, although frequently they have had misaligned interests that required special U.S. efforts to resolve. Tribal groups, the Iraqi Sunni Arab "Awakening" in particular, proved quite reliable as partners when provided with funding, simple equipment (mostly small arms), and some training and accompaniment.[58] The Peshmerga has been one of the most reliable U.S. partners since 2003, conducting effective counterterrorism operations while providing U.S. forces with basing, security, and intelligence at the cost of the United States covering some Peshmerga salaries.[59]

For all these partners, fighting the shared jihadist adversary was a distinct objective, but while it was primary for the United States, it was often a second- or third-ranked one for partners. The SDF, for example, was mainly concerned with securing

Table 1.
Characteristics of Different Types of Partner Forces

	Irregular Forces	State Conventional Military Forces	U.S.-Created Special Forces
Capability and interest alignment with the United States	Capable; mixed alignment of interests depending on partner political objectives	Frequently incapable; misaligned interests driven by politicization	Highly capable; maximum interest alignment due to substantial U.S. involvement
Relations with U.S. personnel	Good relations from mutual appreciation of fighting capabilities, with some friction resulting from cultural and political differences	Superficial relations (with few exceptions) because of indigenous force dysfunction and limited advisor ability to interact with partners	Very strong relations, derived from close interactions with U.S. advisors
Will to fight	Strong because of connection between these forces and the populations from which they are drawn	Brittle because of politicization, with examples of individual courage overshadowed by instances of mass collapse	Very strong because of professional training and standards, shared commitment, and robust interpersonal relationships with U.S. advisors

Kurdish territory in northeast Syria and saw its main threats as emanating first from Turkey, second from the regime of Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad and his Russian and Iranian allies, and only third from IS. These priorities caused much diplomatic tension with Turkey—a U.S. treaty ally—and significant operational delays that gave IS space to counterattack against the SDF.[60] Moreover, interest misalignment worked both ways; SDF morale and operational tempo were rattled in December 2018 following former president Donald Trump's unilateral declaration that the United States would withdraw its forces from Syria.[61]

The situation becomes even more complicated with tribal and other communal groups. The Awakening tribes proved very effective against the al-Qaeda in Iraq from 2006 onward, but there was little interest alignment to sustain the relationship with the United States after the enemy was defeated. In fact, trust and interest alignment had very shallow roots: many of these tribal militias had fought against U.S. forces just years or even months earlier.[62] Such local groups are focused on securing territory that they are connected to by tradition, ancestry, and clan, and they were often willing to work with whichever actor proved strong enough to help them do so.[63]

The Awakening tribes prosecuted a fierce war against al-Qaeda insurgents. They understood that the jihadists were threatening their power, and their irreconcilably differing visions of political Islam made their conflict with al-Qaeda ideological as well.[64] As the Awakening rose to fight al-Qaeda, the United States was seen as a strong force to work with against the jihadists, and the ensuing partnership severely weakened al-Qaeda. At the same time, in the wake of the subsequent U.S. withdrawal in 2011, some tribal figures opted to ally themselves with what would become IS to protect their interests, but many Awakening members remained staunchly opposed to the jihadists and played important roles in liberating areas of northern Iraq from IS.[65]

An important outlier in the misalignment pattern is the U.S.-Peshmerga relationship. The Peshmerga is the official security force of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), which enjoys autonomy within the three provinces of northern Iraq that make up Iraqi Kurdistan.[66] The main goal of the Peshmerga is to provide internal security for Iraqi Kurdistan and preserve the KRG's autonomy within Iraq—which also meant the Peshmerga could be expected to fight only for lands it considered its own.[67] But the Peshmerga, despite that limit-of-advance issue, has been an exceptionally enthusiastic partner to the United States especially after the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq, investing significant time, blood, and treasure in supporting the American war to topple the regime of Saddam Hussein and fight the subsequent insurgency.[68] This fact is perhaps unsurprising because Saddam and then the jihadist enemies of the United States in Iraq arguably posed existential threats to the KRG. If anything, this partnership evolved to a point where the Peshmerga is considerably more committed to the relationship than the United States is.

Relations with U.S. personnel. Partner irregular forces have often earned the respect and admiration of U.S. military personnel. This positive regard is apparent in the U.S.-SDF relationship, in which American advisors regularly expressed their admiration for their partner force.[69] In the same way, U.S. soldiers who worked with the Peshmerga spoke highly of the latter.[70] Similarly, American military officers expressed deep respect for tribal warrior culture in Afghanistan.[71]

Partnered irregular forces have generally had similar sentiments, making the tactical relationship an asset in military operations. Respect for U.S. military power and combat proficiency have been important for winning the trust of partners. Even when partners had misgivings, American personnel could usually adapt to keep the relationship strong. For instance, as Knights and van Wilgenburg note, members of the SDF were impressed by American firepower but still often viewed the U.S. military as an "imperialist" body and deliberately preserved its guerrilla warrior culture versus the more conventional organizational template that the United States preferred.[72] Nonetheless, U.S. advisors adapted

accordingly, supporting SDF light infantry advances with much-needed firepower but also deliberately not trying to turn the SDF itself into a different kind of military force.

One telling example of the importance of inter-personal relations is the U.S. failure to produce an effective infantry force in (non-Kurdish) northwest Syria to fight the Islamic State. The program, active in 2015–16 and embodied in the New Syrian Force (NSF), had U.S. special forces train vetted members of the Syrian opposition to liberate areas from IS.[73] From the start, however, the Obama administration was reluctant to invest substantially in it and placed considerable constraints on advisor activities, such as barring any accompaniment in the conflict zone and not green-lighting provision of air support until immediately before the first combat deployments.

The NSF program leader and former head of Special Operations Command–Central (SOCCENT) Lt. Gen. Michael Nagata noted that this approach had a deleterious effect on partner confidence. This effect became evident in the disbanding of the first NSF group sent into Syria, even though it won its initial battle with jihadist forces, thanks to the rigorous training program it underwent. It was so demoralized after the battle that it could not continue its campaign.[74] Indeed, this Pyrrhic victory reflected a strong U.S. capability to train small units well in combat skills, but the NSF was missing the robust determination that characterized long-established irregular forces. Therefore, the NSF failure illustrates how crucial close relations between U.S. and partner personnel are—especially in newly built forces.

Will to fight. When given adequate support, partner irregular forces have proven highly determined to fight shared adversaries. Simple provision of equipment was often enough to spur partners on, with supplementary logistical, intelligence, and fire support filling in the gaps where needed. This determination was apparent in the Anbar Awakening, in which the United States provided security and arms for tribal groups, which, in turn, took on the

hard fighting against jihadist insurgents. To fight better armed groups like IS, partners such as the SDF and Peshmerga needed more rigorous assistance in the form of heavy logistical and fire support to bolster their capabilities. Still, following the period of hard fighting against IS, the Peshmerga remains an effective partner in its own right with continued U.S. provision of funding and equipment and a diminished need for rigorous U.S. efforts. Indeed, regarding their relationship with the United States, Peshmerga officers interviewed for this study were most concerned with securing relatively modest numbers of American systems, including advanced ATGMs and small reconnaissance Puma drones.[75] That is to say, irregular forces generally do not need much support to boost their determination.

One reason for that resoluteness is that most of these groups have a strong preexisting motive for fighting. Because of their strong connections with local popu-lations, irregular forces see the lands they fight for as their own. For the Peshmerga and SDF, the motive is the local Kurdish populations and widespread Kurdish nationalist aspirations; for tribal groups or other local militias, it is to defend their homes, families, and traditional tribal domains. In fact, defeat in battle was more often a result of inadequate logistics than morale collapse. At the 2014 battle of Kobane, the People's Defense Units (YPG, the SDF's dominant component) fought tooth and nail against a materially and numerically superior IS advance, and the YPG likely would have battled to the last fighter had the United States not intervened at a critical moment to provide the firepower that finally enabled it to repel the jihadists.[76] The Awakening tribes likewise demonstrated stalwart determination until the Iraqi government disarmed and defunded them in 2011.[77] It was the ability to surge U.S. support that provided the tactical advantage that these irregular forces needed to carry on the fight.

State Conventional Forces

The United States has invested heavily in working with the conventional armies of multiple countries to fight jihadist groups—often to no avail. Sprawling,

decades-spanning partnerships with the armed forces of Iraq and Afghanistan resulted in disaster, while significant investment in the Somali National Army (SNA) has also been fruitless.

Capability and interest alignment. Regular armies that the United States has partnered with to fight jihadist groups have mostly proven inadequate for the task. The Afghan and Iraqi armies since 2001 and 2003, respectively, have been mostly unable to execute effective operations against jihadists without substantial U.S. support. At critical moments—notably the 2013–14 IS campaigns in Iraq and 2021 U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan—they disintegrated. The SNA, despite years of investment and training from multiple countries, remains a patchwork of disparate tribal and local militias unable to fight al-Shabab effectively.[78] And there was no lack of effort; in the 2001–15 period, for example, the United States allocated a total of more than $146 billion for training the Afghan and Iraqi security forces.[79]

Interest misalignment is an important aspect of these ineffective partnerships. The case of the Iraqi army is illustrative: the Iraqi government, particularly during Nouri al-Maliki's years as prime minister (2006–14), often pursued sectarian goals opposed to U.S. interests.[80] The SNA, too, could not benefit from any training program because its brigades remained loyal to local clan interests rather than a central command fighting al-Shabab.[81] Moments of improved interest alignment correlated with improved effectiveness, such as when the Iraqi army successfully led the 2008 Operation Charge of the Knights, as described earlier. Thus, when working with foreign conventional forces against jihadists, the United States has faced persistent interest misalignment that has stifled its partnerships.

One exception to the pattern of ineffective partner conventional forces against Sunni jihadists is the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF). Since 2006, the United States has invested more than $2.5 billion in training and equipping the LAF to stabilize Lebanon.[82] This program has considerably boosted LAF combat effectiveness against Sunni jihadist groups—though, of course, the LAF has done nothing to protect Lebanon against Shia jihadist Hezbollah. Looking narrowly at counter-Sunni jihadist operations, the LAF was first tested in May 2007 when it engaged al-Qaeda–linked group Fatah al-Islam in the Nahr al-Bared Palestinian refugee camp, ultimately ousting the 200 defending militants after a three-month siege that destroyed the camp.[83] The destructive, prolonged operation highlighted significant lingering LAF deficiencies, but it also showed the LAF's growing morale and ability to conduct sustained operations against a determined opponent. A series of LAF operations against jihadist strongholds, culminating in the summer 2017 ouster of IS from the town of Arsal, ultimately diminished the Sunni jihadist threat in Lebanon and reflected strong security cooperation with the United States.[84] In this case, sustained U.S. support for a determined partner conventional force produced a good—if narrowly anti-Sunni jihadist—outcome.

Relations with U.S. personnel. With some important exceptions, relations between U.S. military personnel and partner conventional forces were distant and often mistrustful. Continuing with the Iraqi army case, a regular army battalion in 2008 usually had eleven American advisors embedded,[85] and many soldiers would not see their advisors more than once a week, while Maliki sometimes limited U.S. advisor presence to deepen his politicization of the military.[86] Some U.S. and coalition soldiers dreaded working with their Iraqi counterparts[87] and lamented the latter's lack of motivation.[88]

At the same time, good relations were an indication of higher combat effectiveness. In the Charge of the Knights, for example, the initial Iraqi army advance ended in the collapse of the newly formed—and thus inexperienced—3rd Brigade of the 14th Division. The subsequent entrance of the more experienced 1st Brigade of the 1st Division, which had developed strong relations with its U.S. Marine Corps advisors and came with substantial coalition material support, turned the tide.[89] The synergy between the partners and their advisors—and the effectiveness

it produced—would become a crucial element of the anti-IS fight several years afterward.

Will to fight. Despite episodes of disintegration and the overall ineffectiveness of state conventional forces against jihadist groups, these forces have not always shied away from hard fighting. Professors Neta C. Crawford and Catherine Lutz estimate that in the post-9/11 era, more than 69,000 Afghan and almost 49,000 Iraqi national military and police members died from the wars in those countries.[90] Iraqi soldiers have often demonstrated a high degree of individual courage on the battlefield, even if they did not always employ their capabilities effectively.[91] The Afghan army also sometimes showed an ability to stand and fight at the tactical level.[92]

Underlying political dynamics were an important determinant of regular army will to fight. In Iraq, pervasive sectarianism inside the government, especially under Maliki, persistently undermined Iraqi will to fight; for example, Maliki appointed loyalist cronies over competent officers. In Afghanistan, widespread corruption eroded soldiers' confidence that they could count on their officers and political leaders, promoting absenteeism and desertions.[93] On occasions when the United States was willing to apply carrots and sticks, such as by insisting on the removal of troublesome officers or threatening to take away air coverage, it could get the Iraqi army moving against IS. Conversely, U.S. air, fire, and logistics support was often enough to motivate more reluctant regular forces to (tentatively) advance against jihadists.[94]

U.S.-Created Special Forces

The most effective creation of post-9/11 U.S. BWT efforts has been foreign special forces units—nested within larger efforts to develop foreign conventional armed forces—under the tutelage of American military personnel, most often U.S. special forces. These include the Iraqi CTS, Afghan commandos, and Somali Danab Brigade, all small elite units composed of local recruits and often conceived of as quick reaction forces to strike at entrenched

jihadists. These units often served as the only elements of indigenous forces capable of significant offensive action against jihadist terrorists, insurgents, and conventional warfighters alike. Moreover, the small size of partner special forces enabled more substantial U.S. investment in training and financing per soldier than efforts with large conventional armies.

Capability and interest alignment. U.S.-created special forces have been highly capable and have pursued many of the same interests as the United States, including institutional reputation-building and maintenance. This positive outcome is mostly a result of close U.S. mentoring of these forces so that they roughly mirrored U.S. special forces units. The CTS, Afghan commandos, and Danab train and operate together with U.S. special forces, with separate command-and-control systems, and thus are not subject to the political or cultural constraints of conventional units.

One interesting exception to this trend of effective-ness was U.S. training of Yemeni special forces to fight al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), which had seized territory in Yemen's Abyan region in 2011.[95] Eric Oehlerich, the former Navy SEAL, was involved in the operation and describes meticulously seeking recruits within Yemen's armed forces and implementing a two-year training program to select their best SOF personnel. But on their first post-training operation, Oehlerich said, "seventy percent of the force [of 20–30] showed up to the night of the op to interdict an AQAP guy, [and] they were stoned on qat."[96] During the ensuing nighttime advance over some four hundred meters of desert terrain, "they got super confused and scared...and started shooting at each other."[97] Michael Knights also noted qat consumption as a hindrance to Yemeni military effectiveness, partially attributing a chronic inability to perform offensive actions, even more recently guided by Emirati forces, to qat use.[98] General Nagata, who was also involved in the Yemen support mission, noted that some Yemeni forces indeed performed poorly while others were more capable but that overall effectiveness was weak because of

relatively low U.S. investment in and commitment to the mission.[99]

Nonetheless, U.S.-trained Yemeni special forces demonstrated an ability to negotiate AQAP surrenders where familial or tribal links with jihadist cadres facilitated it, a unique capability that the United States might consider exploiting further but not one that proved decisive in the anti-AQAP fight.[100] Moreover, later efforts by the United Arab Emirates did manage to produce Yemeni fighting forces up to the task of clearing AQAP out of al-Mukalla, the Masila oil field, and Aden.[101] The UAE not only sought out good fighters but also tackled the qat issue head-on: the Emirates recruited Islamists (who opposed drug use of any kind), scheduled operations for times of day when people did not chew qat, or rewarded local forces with in-kind payment of qat, recognizing that chewing the stimulant would persist as a practice.[102]

Relations with U.S. personnel. The unique nature of partner special forces must be understood in the context of their relationships with U.S. personnel on the ground. These very close relationships—which could develop because American advisors interacted daily with the partners—made it easier to surge U.S. support and adapt tactics when needed. The conventional forces, as noted earlier, did not see their American advisors nearly as often. Special forces units lived, trained, and fought together with Americans, with indigenous and American soldiers commonly referring to one another as "brothers."[103] As one former Afghan commando said, "You feel that you share the same DNA as your [U.S.] partners."[104] A strong sense of brotherhood and genuine friendship developed between U.S. and partner special forces, often continuing post-deployment via phone, email, birthday cards, and other means.[105] These close relations were manifested after the 2021 Taliban takeover of Afghanistan, when American veterans worked strenuously to help their former partners escape the country.[106]

Furthermore, the friendships that developed among partner special forces and U.S. personnel often turned the partnership into an end in itself. The partners would follow U.S. troops into combat wherever they operated. This closeness made interest alignment at the tactical level a nonissue and encouraged adaptability among partner forces when they needed to change tactics to effectively combat the shared adversary.[107] As General Nagata explained,

> What can make all the difference in the world is for someone to be with that [partner]...where I and my colleagues are standing with them on the same conditions, on the same ground they have to operate in, and we're saying, "Look, you can do this, I am not going to leave you, I will help you, I will not let you fail, but you have to do this." And nine times out of ten, someone who previously wouldn't do it will now do it. But they won't do it if you're a stranger. They will do it if they think you are their friend.[108]

Will to fight. Close personal relations—coupled with professional training and selective recruitment—translated into excellent will to fight. During the initial IS offensives in Iraq in 2013–14, the CTS was the only element of the Iraqi security forces that stood its ground while the regular army collapsed.[109] In the 2021 Taliban conquest of Afghanistan, the commandos reportedly kept fighting, often to the last soldier, as army units disintegrated.[110] In Somalia, the Danab Brigade remains the only indigenous military force willing and able to conduct offensive operations against al-Shabab. Meanwhile, Yemeni special forces never became close with their U.S. advisors and exhibited persistent unwillingness to advance against jihadists. Overall, the strong sense of a shared commitment to fight against jihadist adversaries, which was built upon close relations among U.S. and partner personnel, has produced ironclad determination in partner special forces.

Top 10 Lessons Learned and Implications for the Ongoing Campaign Against Jihadist Groups

The rich U.S. and global experience in BWT operations against jihadist groups contains numerous lessons for how to approach such military partnerships in the future.

1. Building small units can yield large returns.

Sustained U.S. investment in creating elite units has brought major gains. The CTS, Afghan commandos, and Somali Danab Brigade proved up to the task of reversing jihadist advances. Their aggressive special forces and light infantry tactics, adaptability, and strong relations with their U.S. SOF advisors, as well as careful U.S. attention to their selection and training, have made them the most consistently effective, reliable, and determined partners against jihadists. Of course, small unit size also has meant that American dollars would be more focused and advisors could give more attention per soldier to partner special forces, an important advantage this type of partner has over the other two types.

Indeed, the close connection these units enjoyed with the United States both insulated them from negative influences on their effectiveness and uniquely aligned their interests with those of the United States.[111] It also facilitated adaptable combined arms cooperation in times of intense conflict, such as the CTS-led advances against IS urban strongholds, and, in turn, enabled the units to fight against terrorist, insurgent, and conventionalized jihadist adversaries alike.

Yet because of their small size, such units cannot be relied on to perform long-term holding operations, and slow replacement rates as a result of lengthy

specialized training can compromise combat effectiveness in the face of significant casualties.[112] Moreover, Ben Connable notes that overreliance on elite units can promote a "praetorian" military culture that allows increasing neglect of regular units needed for support, holding, and some clearing roles.[113] Hence, while U.S.-created special forces units are superb in mobile strike contexts, BWT operations must allow space for support from irregular or conventional forces, along with offensive actions from such forces if they are capable.

Still, one area where all partner forces, including special forces, have fallen short is an independent capacity for innovation, particularly low-tech disruptive innovation (see earlier discussion of disruptive innovation vis-à-vis jihadists). Where jihadist groups have learned to adapt simple, widely available materials to arms and IED production, modify various weapons, and engage in information warfare, partner forces have struggled to develop innovative organizational cultures of their own and stayed attached to their preexisting styles of fighting. Partner special forces have distinguished themselves by rapidly adapting from counterterrorism/counterinsurgency to conventional warfighting through quick repurposing of their tactics for a light infantry context. However, even partner special forces struggled to effectively combat, for example, the Islamic State's suicide bombs. And they relied mostly on U.S. firepower to counter more significant jihadist innovations. Continued U.S. support will remain important, but partners should learn to adapt lower-tech solutions to their needs, at least by imitating some jihadist adaptations.

2. Deep personal relationships on the ground are a major force multiplier.

Successful BWT occurs wherever U.S. personnel accompany partners on the ground and develop strong interpersonal relationships with them. As shown earlier, this principle is most obvious with the U.S.-created special forces. In the Iraqi army–led Operation Charge of the Knights, it was a unit—the

1st Iraqi Army brigade of the 1st Division—that had strong relations with its U.S. Marine Corps advisors that turned the tide, as noted previously. The SDF demonstrated increasing combat effectiveness as its relations with U.S. advisors grew stronger, and particularly after the United States began committing the same cast of special forces members to the mission rather than rotating in new soldiers every several months, helping deepen interpersonal ties.[114] In contrast, superficial or nonexistent relations bred contempt and lack of motivation.[115] More limited U.S. commitment often signaled to partners that the United States was not serious about the mission and had a negative impact on effectiveness.[116]

Development of deep personal relationships between American and partner personnel are, thus, key to successful BWT. They are crucial to building trust, adaptability, and interest alignment. The United States should emphasize this principle in any BWT operation it undertakes, making sure to commit dedicated groups of advisors to work closely with partner forces to promote deepened bonds. As much as possible, the United States should also commit the same units to work with a partner, rather than regularly rotate new ones, to promote the development of strong interpersonal ties.[117] U.S. advisors should also have as much discretion as possible to accompany partner forces on the ground, near the frontlines, or even on frontlines, and provide them with air and fire support to foster the optimal environment for growth of close relations; the failure of the first NSF group into Syria illustrates what happens when the United States puts undue constraints on its advisors.

3. Limit dependency where possible, but emphasize "surgeability."

U.S. BWT operations have tended to foster dependency on certain American military enablers, notably logistics, airpower, intelligence, and precision fires. For instance, all partners in the counter-IS campaign relied on American air and intelligence support to reverse jihadist gains. Such material support has become integral to the warfighting styles of the SDF,

Peshmerga, and Iraqi military, among others. As the war against IS wound down, U.S. partners had less need for heavy material support, but they remain dependent on it should a new jihadist military threat emerge.

To mitigate this risk, the United States should reduce dependency where possible by mentoring partners to fight without heavy fire support, but it should also retain the ability to surge in times of crisis. Provision of low-end technologies, such as drones and ATGMs, can serve as a relatively cheap alternative to highly destructive close air support, though would not mitigate dependence on U.S. assets. Serious investment in assisting some partners develop indigenous logistics and arms industries can serve as a longer-term solution. Even in the absence of advanced technologies, partners like the Peshmerga or SDF might use a combination of drones and bomb-making know-how to sustain more intense operations. Indeed, if IS has built a relatively robust arms industry, logistical system, and combined arms capability without the support of well-resourced, advanced partners, then U.S. partners should be able to as well.[118]

In that same vein, partners should get in the habit of adapting available materiel to their needs rather than becoming attached to U.S. technology. For example, many armed actors in the CENTCOM AOR already use modified or upgraded civilian pickup trucks as adequate substitutes for infantry/armored fighting vehicles or Humvee fleets. Off-the-shelf drones and remote-controlled ground vehicles can fill reconnaissance or even strike roles with relatively simple modification. Partners thinking in such a low-tech innovation mindset with encouragement from advisors would go a long way in minimizing dependency on high-end U.S. technologies. Periodic U.S. provision of niche technologies—notably new counter-drone systems or unmanned ground vehicles—can help supplement partner capabilities, but partners should not rely heavily on them to avoid developing dependency.

At the same time, the United States should be

prepared to supply heavier support at an early moment when particularly challenging threats emerge. The key here is to maintain strong long-term relations with partner forces through even a limited continuous presence of troops on the ground. This will also encourage shared development of new tactics that increase the effectiveness and efficiency of partner operations. When threats emerge unexpectedly, advisors and partners will be ready to rapidly bring U.S. firepower to bear and diminish the threats before they expand. The rise of the Islamic State in Iraq is a case in point: the absence of a U.S. presence made it far more difficult to intervene and develop a combined warfighting style until after IS had already occupied Mosul and attacked Peshmerga positions.

4. Encourage and seriously consider partner feedback.

Another way to bolster partner force preparedness is by accepting feedback from the partners themselves. Ultimately, assessments by the partners of their own needs cannot be overlooked, even if such assessments may sometimes be wrong or self-serving. The Iraqi Peshmerga can be counted among the most active in giving feedback. Peshmerga officers consistently emphasized their dire need for ATGMs—as well as small surveillance drones—to rapidly respond to surprise motorized assaults by IS, as it has done in the past, or Iran-backed militias more recently.[119] One officer interviewed for this study called for closer U.S. mentoring of Peshmerga officers through expansion of English language training for them and more post-training accompaniment.[120] Another called for more seats for Peshmerga officers to train at U.S. military academies, officer exchanges with the United States and other countries dealing with insurgency and military reform, and Peshmerga military attaché placements in KRG diplomatic offices.[121] Peshmerga staff Brig. Gen. Hajar Omer Ismail suggested that after the success of the CTS, the United States might consider investing similarly in KRG counterterrorism forces.[122]

The United States should assess partner feedback with a critical eye but accept good faith recommendations and signs of appreciation for the relationship when they do come. The Peshmerga suggestions described here are achievable and could yield outsize returns for the relationship, and the United States should implement them. In fact, it should go further by emphasizing language-learning programs for prospective U.S. advisors to the Peshmerga to learn Arabic and Kurdish, which would add another layer of mutual respect and depth to interpersonal relations. The same goes for other partners, including the U.S.-created special forces units, SDF, and various tribal groups that have participated in BWT operations.

5. Invest energy in an underappreciated component of BWT: long-term engagement with tribal and other local actors.

U.S. engagement with tribal and local groups generally proved strong in the short term, but the United States has missed the opportunity to reap benefits from long-term relations with them. The relationship with the Anbar Awakening tribes is a case in point. U.S. advisors developed strong relations with Awakening leaders at the company and battalion levels, but very few kept in touch after the 2011 American withdrawal from Iraq.[123] This loss of contact limited the enlistment of some tribal groups in the subsequent counter-IS fight,[124] thereby compounding the lack of an on-the-ground presence over 2011–13, complicating the process, and exposing former U.S. partners to government persecution.[125] Maliki's rescinding of government support for the Awakening crippled it and pushed some people from tribal areas to throw in their lot with IS.[126] Had the United States maintained long-term ties with the Awakening groups—at least via a covert Title 50 program—it likely could have retained them as effective fighting forces that would have played a larger role in opposing IS.[127]

Such efforts can prove difficult when, as in Iraq, governing authorities oppose them. the potential payoff, however, justifies risking tensions. The United States has operated with partners even when higher government authorities did not fully approve of U.S. actions, as at different times in Somalia, Afghanistan, and Iraq. For example, the Peshmerga officers interviewed for this study lamented that the United States could not establish more direct formal ties with it because of Baghdad's objections and pointed out the latter's refusal to implement a budget for the KRG.[128] Despite Baghdad's misgivings, the United States continues providing extensive support to the KRG, and the Iraqi government has largely acquiesced.

Besides hard fighting, tribal and communal groups can also assist with security and development in their localities if provided with adequate support. The Village Stability Operations initiative in Afghanistan succeeded in encouraging Afghan villages to fight the Taliban by inserting U.S. and Afghan special forces teams to provide security, training, and arms.[129] It worked in at least seven villages through a model of a U.S.-created and -supported team of special forces who raised local irregulars to act as holding elements.[130] In this case, local groups served effectively in the holding role, while the commandos provided offensive capabilities. Derivatives of this model arguably had the potential to yield decisive gains and perhaps gradually decrease American involvement over a period of years if the U.S. government had not discontinued the program. In Syria, tribes in SDF territories played an important role in reintegrating families of Islamic State members and others displaced from the war with IS, a role Iraqi tribespeople could play too.[131]

The United States, through indirect, informal, or covert channels, should augment its engagement with tribal and local groups to improve BWT operations. Those in SDF territory are in dire need of security and can be a great help in counterterrorism and reintegration of displaced people. The same goes for those in Iraq. In fact, Iraqi Awakening tribes have been faithful partners to the United States and largely

continued fighting against jihadists after the U.S. withdrawal. In September 2021, a portion of them even extraordinarily called for normalizing relations between Iraq and Israel at a conference held in Erbil (though they later recanted their calls after threats from the Iraqi government and Iran-backed factions), an important foreign policy objective for the United States that the latter did nothing to support.[132] This event is a significant missed opportunity that the United States should begin to correct by quietly persuading the Iraqi government to rescind outstanding arrest warrants on some conference participants.

6. Governance assistance is often essential for long-term success.

President Biden recently criticized U.S. governance assistance efforts as overly cumbersome "nation building" projects.[133] Nonetheless, not all nonmilitary assistance amounts to nation building and much of it is necessary to exploit military gains. In the Village Stability Operations discussed earlier, some Afghan locals could not consider organizing self-defense forces without first resolving pressing issues related to agriculture, for example.[134] A former leader of the program, Lt. Col. Scott Mann, remarked that two-thirds of their activities consisted of addressing such local issues.[135] These were necessary governance-related activities, but they hardly amounted to the large resource-intensive democratization and development efforts the United States tried to institute in Iraq in 2003–11.

These efforts are particularly important for irregular forces, which rely on the populations they are tied to for legitimacy and military strength. The SDF needs legitimacy to remain useful to the United States in the fight against IS, which means that the United States should support the economy of northeast Syria, help the SDF coordinate with local Arab tribes, leverage diplomacy to manage the Turkey-SDF conflict, and assist the SDF with management of displaced people and IS detainees in its territory.[136] Military operations, then, are only one component

of the proper approach to BWT, which must substantially incorporate nonmilitary assistance to address the underlying needs of a partner.

Furthermore, the United States should make governance assistance a key aspect of BWT by embedding a significant number of civilian advisors alongside military advisors. These advisors would liaise with local authorities, learn their needs, and ensure they receive adequate support. Commitment to a long-term presence will also go a long way in motivating locals to support anti-jihadist operations. Thus, local populations build resilience and are better able to deny jihadists use of their localities as safe havens or recruitment grounds. Military forces, in turn, will be able to focus on offensive operations against jihadist groups.

7. Building conventional forces is a long-term commitment.

In contrast to working with irregular and special forces, the United States found it quite difficult to effectively support conventional forces over a long period. Part of the problem was scale; conventional forces are gargantuan organizations that necessitate major efforts to build and sustain. Moreover, U.S. advisors were rarely present in sufficient numbers to carry out the kind of hands-on approach that brought success with smaller forces. This permitted local government corruption, sectarianism, and other negative effects to influence the development and degradation of the armed forces and generally prevented U.S. personnel from forming close bonds with their partners.

In the future, as the United States continues seeking to build partner conventional forces, it will have to be willing to invest the same care it does in raising special forces. Consequently, it will mean continuously deploying groups of advisors to live near their partners. Advisors will need to be able to have some influence over organization, promotion, and dismissal to insulate partners from corruption, when needed, and apply sticks as well as carrots to foster

partner cooperation.[137] A long-term commitment will also be necessary, as it was in building up the Republic of Korea Army. It is possible to build partner conventional forces, but it requires a long-term commitment with hands-on efforts. Ultimately, however, the United States should focus on developing smaller, more effective special forces units that deliver outsize impacts relative to investments in them.

8. BWT is useful for battle-testing new tactics and technologies.

By, with, and through operations against jihadist groups have seen the United States exercise considerable military power and often deploy cutting-edge tactics and technologies. The war against IS, for example, involved widespread use of new-generation precision airpower,[138] first-time deployment of drone countermeasures,[139] and innovative employment of cyber approaches to support information warfare and kinetic ground operations.[140] The United States, meanwhile, learned new tactics by imitating some IS innovations, such as the large-scale use of small drones to monitor the battlefield, perform route reconnaissance, and coordinate joint fires.[141]

Deploying new technologies and tactics in BWT operations allows the United States to learn innovative methods of fighting that could be transferred to other contexts with relatively low risk. One example is the coalition's use of cyber to disable IS communications in advance of partner ground advances, a tactic that would boost future combined arms capabilities.[142] Relations with partner forces also stand to gain by the joint development of tactics, techniques, and procedures, solidifying links between U.S. and partner personnel while increasing adaptability. Notwithstanding the risk of weapons falling into enemy hands, the United States should carefully increase its employment of cutting-edge technologies and tactics in partner operations. Air defense and counter-drone assets are one area of opportunity. Another is development of cyber techniques to better support kinetic actions, particularly through streamlining and synchronizing of legal authorities for cyber.[143] At the

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same time, while the United States should leverage BWT to make its own innovations, it should refrain from fostering dependency on these higher-tech solutions to encourage partners to make their own low-tech innovations.

Information warfare is also an area where both the United States and its partners can learn to do better together. One coalition advisor summed up anti-IS information operations as "weak tweets," saying of IS: "They were destroying us [in the information space]...They were leading the narrative."[144] Future information campaigns should be more aggressive and emphasize use of quick information released through various media to discredit jihadist adversaries, or at least to dispute the narrative until more detailed, evidenced information is brought to bear. Toward this end, the United States and its partners should pool their resources. Streamlined legal authorities would also be needed here.

9. U.S. partners suffer when BWT relationships end.

Successive U.S. administrations have sought to reduce the U.S. military presence in the CENTCOM AOR and other theaters where jihadists operate. In virtually all BWT operations against jihadist groups, significant American withdrawals have generally been harmful, if not devastating. The 2011 U.S. withdrawal from Iraq paved the way for the rise of IS; the 2018 reduction of troops in Syria compromised the SDF's position; the 2021 withdrawal from Somalia exposed the Danab Brigade to political misuse and paralyzed its training and operations (although the Biden administration has wisely redeployed U.S. troops to Somalia);[145] the 2021 withdrawal from Afghanistan ceded the country to the Taliban. Indeed, those actions highlight the necessity of a long-term approach to BWT and make clear that success rests on synergy and strong relations between U.S. personnel and their partners.

Withdrawal, then, must be viewed with extreme caution and as a danger to partner forces. Accordingly,

U.S. officials should stop emphasizing withdrawal as a strategic objective and instead tout a long-term military presence by the United States as an important component of its relationships with its allies. Officials should emphasize the enormous difference between limited deployments to enable partners to do the hard fighting and deployments of hundreds of thousands of troops to do the fighting themselves. Ultimately, pursuing such a policy of limited support missions will help keep threats to the United States at bay and avoid the need for redeployments when serious threats do emerge.

10. "Over-the-horizon" holds little promise.

After the August 2021 U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, the Biden administration espoused the "over-the-horizon" approach as an alternative way of fighting the Islamic State's "province" in Afghanistan (Islamic State–Khorasan, or ISK) with zero boots on the ground.[146] Instead of advising and accompanying partners in the country, the United States would rely exclusively on airpower and some covert intelligence assets to find and eliminate jihadist targets. As former deputy commander of SOCCENT Andrew Milburn notes, this policy amounts to one of "decapitation," in which the United States kills key jihadist leaders with airstrikes,[147] as recently illustrated by the targeted strike against longtime al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri in Kabul via drone on July 31, 2022.[148] This strategy, however, has arguably proven ineffective and sometimes counterproductive against jihadist groups since the latter have developed resilient ideologies, organizations, and institutions that outlive any one leader.[149] In addition, more competent jihadist operatives have at times been catapulted into leadership positions after killings of their less dangerous predecessors.[150] Moreover, exclusive reliance on airpower for intelligence and strike increases the risk of civilian casualties, which can then drive local populations into jihadist hands.[151] A telling example is the August 30, 2021, U.S. airstrike targeting ISK in Kabul that mistakenly killed ten members of a family—an event President

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Biden initially touted as evidence for over-the-horizon's potential before the civilian casualties were recognized.[152] Finally, leadership decapitation cannot be a successful strategy when jihadist groups do strive to seize and hold territory, in which case a competent ground force will be needed to engage in maneuver warfare to dislodge the enemy from its holdings.

One might point to the completely remote September 2014–December 2015 U.S. cooperation with the YPG against IS as an example of successful over-the-horizon operations—that is, no U.S. boots were on the ground and all air support was provided via electronic communications. The pivotal battle of Kobane and subsequent YPG campaigns in this period were effectively supported by a heavy commitment of U.S. airpower controlled in a U.S. and Iraqi Kurdish-manned strike cell hundreds of miles away in Iraqi Kurdistan's Sulaymaniyah.[153] Without any U.S. troops present in Syria, designated YPG fighters and Iraqi Kurdish security forces coordinated with the strike cell, helping to clear IS from Kobane and Jazira provinces and several important population centers as well as repel a major IS counteroffensive.[154]

This, however, was a case of an impressively capable partner amenable to U.S. support in a fairly simple defensive operation on a single front and with no civilian presence. Moreover, the far more complex campaigns to liberate urban centers deep in IS territory saturated with civilians and heavily armed IS fighters at Manbij, Raqqa, and the Hajin pocket—the Islamic State's real power bases in Syria—ultimately required more fire and logistical support. The support started arriving in December 2015, along with many U.S. advisors on the ground.

Turning to Afghanistan, the United States has neither a viable partner ground force nor a neighboring base of operations. Even if it did, the Syria experience suggests it could pursue only limited objectives without committing to an on-the-ground presence. Ultimately, the over-the-horizon approach would require some on-the-ground presence if it sought to make real future gains against jihadists, as the United States has experienced with the Islamic State in Syria.

Conclusion

This study has laid out the fundamentals of BWT and assessed some ways that U.S.-allied forces can succeed against jihadist adversaries. It has analyzed partner forces of three types: irregular, conventional, and special forces. The best partner for fighting jihadists is a determined and adaptable force with light infantry capabilities, with U.S.-created special forces performing best in this role and irregular forces also demonstrating proficiency in overcoming jihadists. Partner conventional military formations have rarely succeeded. Strong personal bonds between U.S. and partner forces are the key to successful BWT. A continuous on-the-ground presence, even just a small one, is likewise indispensable, as is the selection of partners with maximum overlap of shared goals. Strong interpersonal relationships make partners more effective by increasing their commitment to the fight, shaping interest alignment, and allowing rapid adaptability by the U.S. support forces provided. This is the formula that any force needs to fight a determined, resilient, patient, and innovative opponent like a jihadist group. Fighting jihadists from afar will simply not cut it. ❖

NOTES

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114   Author email interview with Michael Knights, April 2022.

115   Author interviews with former U.S. military members, November 2020.

116   Author interview with Lt. Gen. Michael K. Nagata, April 2022.

117   See Knights and van Wilgenburg, *Accidental Allies,* 15, https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/accidental-allies-us-syrian-democratic-forces-partnership-against-islamic-state.

118   See Standardisation and Quality Control in Islamic State's Military Production (London: Conflict Armament Research, 2016), https://www.conflictarm.com/dispatches/standardisation-and-quality-control-in-islamic-states-military-production/.

119   Author interviews with Peshmerga officers, January–February 2022.

120   Author interview with Peshmerga Brig. Gen. Nabaz Sedeeq, February 2022; see also John Francis Jakubowski, "Why Not a Joint Security Force Assistance Command?" *Joint Forces Quarterly* 89 (April 2018): 76–79, available at https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Portals/68/Documents/jfq/jfq-89/jfq-89_76-79_Jakubowski.pdf?ver=2018-04-11-125441-307.

121   Author interview with Peshmerga Lt. Col. Shakhawan Salam Mohammed, February 2022.

122   Author interview with Peshmerga staff Brig. Gen. Hajar Omer Ismail, February 2022.

123   Author interview with Sterling Jensen, April 2022.

124   Ibid.

125   According to one Special Operations Forces officer interviewed by the author, U.S. officers supporting the development of tribal militias needed to vet prominent individuals seeking to raise militia forces. Whereas some claimed to be sheikhs within the Iraqi tribal system, many were bestowed their titles during the Saddam Hussein regime, when tribal power was intentionally diffused. Sunni tribal militia leader motivations were typically not patriotic in 2016–17. Most were interested in increasing political power, seeking economic gain, or exacting revenge. U.S. personnel were meant to serve as intermediaries between the Iraqi security forces and Iraqi Kurdish security services and the militia leaders themselves. The coordination function allowed U.S. officers to vet prospective tribal militia leaders for human rights abuses to ensure they could receive American materiel

and arms. The time-consuming vetting process might have been streamlined had U.S. forces maintained long-term connections with the tribes. Author interview with former U.S. Special Operations Forces officer, December 2020.

126   Author interview with Dr. Waleed al-Rawi, February 2022

127   Title 50 of the U.S. Code refers to "covert action" as "activities of the United States Government to influence political, economic, or military conditions abroad, where it is intended that the role of the United States will not be apparent or acknowledged publicly." Keeping such activities secret can be useful in sensitive situations like the one discussed here. Both civilian intelligence bodies and the military can conduct covert action. See Michael E. DeVine, "Covert Action and Clandestine Activities of the Intelligence Community: Selected Congressional Notification Requirements in Brief," Congressional Research Service, July 2, 2019, https://sgp.fas.org/crs/intel/R45191.pdf.

128   Author interviews with Peshmerga officers, January–February 2022.

129   See Mann, *Game Changers: Going Local to Defeat Violent Extremists.*

130   Author interview with Lt. Col. Scott Mann, March 2022.

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139   "U.S. 'Jammer' Curbs ISIS Drone Threat in Mosul Battle," Military.com, March 8, 2017, https://www.military.com/defensetech/2017/03/08/jammer-curbs-isis-drone-threat-mosul.

140   Levy, *Soldiers of End-Times*, 238–39, https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/soldiers-end-times-assessing-military-effectiveness-islamic-state.

141   Some of these tactics have also been employed more recently in Ukraine's defense against the February 2022 Russian invasion. Kyle Atwell and Benjamin Jebb, "Dynamite to Drones: The Diffusion of Lethal Technology to Terrorists and Insurgents," Modern War Institute, April 8, 2022, https://mwi.usma.edu/dynamite-to-drones-the-diffusion-of-lethal-technology-to-terrorists-and-insurgents/; Jack Detsch, "Drones Have Come of Age in Russia-Ukraine War," *Foreign Policy*, April 27, 2022, https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/04/27/drones-russia-ukraine-war-donbas/; Levy, *Soldiers of End-Times*, 243, https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/soldiers-end-times-assessing-military-effectiveness-islamic-state.

142   Mark Pomerleau, "What Cyber Command's ISIS Operations Means [sic] for the Future of Information Warfare," C4ISRNET, September 16, 2020, https://www.c4isrnet.com/information-warfare/2020/06/18/what-cyber-commands-isis-operations-means-for-the-future-of-information-warfare/.

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145   Ido Levy and Abdi Yusuf, "The 'Lightning' Brigade: Security Force Assistance and the Fight Against al-Shabaab," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, March 13, 2022, 16, https://doi.org/10.1080/105761 0X.2022.2045967; Ido Levy, "Redeploying U.S. Troops to Somalia Is the Right Move," *The Hill*, May 25, 2022, https://thehill.com/opinion/international/3496403-redeploying-us-troops-to-somalia-is-the-right-move/; Michael M. Phillips, "Caught in a Political Crossfire, U.S.-Trained Somali Commandos Suspend Fight Against Islamic State," *Wall Street Journal*, December 10, 2021, https://www.wsj.com/articles/caught-in-a-political-cross-fire-u-s-trained-somali-commandos-suspend-fight-against-islamic-state-11639145293.

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151   Milburn, "Learning All the Wrong Lessons," https://mwi.usma.edu/learning-all-the-wrong-lessons-why-an-over-the-horizon-approach-to-counterterrorism-wont-work/.

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154   Ibid., 104.

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