

WHO DEFEATED ISIS? THE PENTAGON'S WAR MAPS

Brian Glyn Williams

Dr. Williams is a professor of Islamic History at the University of Massachusetts-Dartmouth and formerly worked for the CIA's Counterterrorism Center. He is author of seven books on warfare, terrorism and ethnicity in the Islamic world, which can be found at his website brianglynwilliams.com, including Counter Jihad: The American Military Experience in Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria.

On March 20, 2019, President Donald Trump appeared on the White House lawn with two freshly declassified maps portraying the collapse of the ISIS caliphate. Trump did not expound on the origins of the maps, but the media suspected they came from the Pentagon, which regularly published such maps to display the progress of Operation Inherent Resolve. As the press corps shouted questions on the sudden reversal of his tumult-inducing December 19 tweet order for “all” U.S. troops to be withdrawn from Syria in “30 days,” the president triumphantly pointed to the top map.¹ It featured a sprawling red blotch over Iraq and Syria that he said represented the ISIS caliphate’s territory at the time of his inauguration in January 2017.

The president then pointed to a tiny corner in eastern Syria on the lower map where the last remaining ISIS bastion, the remote village of Baghouz al-Fawqani, was depicted in a small box. The president proudly explained his role in reducing the

large red ISIS sprawl on the first map to the small red enclave on the second:

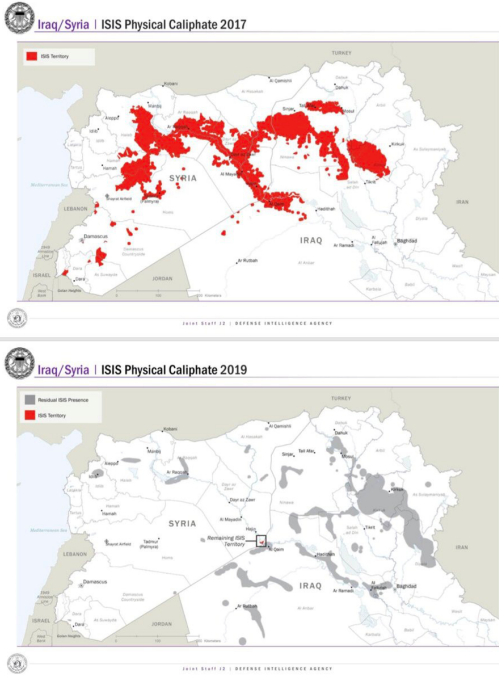
This was on Election Night in 2016 — everything red is ISIS. When I took it over, it was a mess. Now, on the bottom — that’s the exact same — there is no red. In fact, there’s actually a tiny spot which will be gone by tonight. So this is ISIS on Election Day, my Election Day, and this is ISIS now. So that’s the way it goes.²

Trump later tweeted the maps (see next page).³ The president subsequently used the same maps at a rally in Ohio to emphasize his decisive role in the defeat of ISIS:

Two maps, identical. Except the one on top was Syria. See that? The one on top was Syria in November of 2016. This is all ISIS. On the bottom, today, the caliphate is gone as of tonight. That is pretty good, right?⁴

Trump has on numerous other occasions

MAP 1. ISIS Physical Caliphate, 2017 and 2019.



Top: ISIS caliphate when Trump took office in 2017; bottom: final ISIS pocket in Baghouz al-Fawqani in March 2019.

taken credit for defeating ISIS. In his February 2019 State of the Union address, for example, he bragged, “When I took office, ISIS controlled more than 20,000 square miles in Iraq and Syria. Today, we have liberated virtually all of that territory from the grip of these bloodthirsty killers.”⁵

Trump’s statements were not only crafted to take credit for the victory captured on the two maps that he showed the press corps in March 2019; they were crafted to diminish his predecessor’s victories. A key component of his boasts rests upon undermining the effectiveness of the Obama administration’s campaign against ISIS (August 2014 to January 2017), Operation Inherent Resolve. Trump, for example, said nine months into his presidency in

October 2017: “We’ve done more against ISIS in nine months than the previous administration has done during its whole administration — by far, by far.”⁶ In March 2018, Trump would make the maximalist statement, “Terrorism, in Iraq and Syria, we’ve taken back almost 100 percent, in a very short period of time, of the land that they took. And it all took place since our election.”⁷ In February 2019, Trump tweeted, “I inherited a total mess in Syria and Afghanistan.”⁸ In January 2019, he proclaimed:

When I took over Syria it was infested with ISIS. It was all over the place. And now you have very little ISIS and you have the caliphate almost knocked out. We will be announcing in the not too distant future 100 percent. ... We’re at 99 percent right now, we’ll be at 100. When I took it over it was a disaster. I think we’ve done a great job with that.⁹

This discrediting theme began when Trump was running for president, and it extended to the Pentagon and Central Command (CENTCOM). As a candidate, he dismissed the Pentagon’s professional war fighters: “[The generals] don’t know much because they’re not winning.”¹⁰ “They don’t know much about ISIS.”¹¹ By contrast, he bragged, “I know more about ISIS than the generals do. Believe me.”¹² Trump also boasted, “I’m really good at war. Nobody is bigger or better at the military than I am. I know more about the offense and the defense than they will ever understand.”¹³ To jumpstart an apparently moribund war that he claimed was not being won by President Barack Obama or the generals, candidate Trump promised, “We’re gonna beat ISIS very,

very quickly, folks. It's gonna be fast. I have a great plan. It's going to be great. They ask, 'What is it?' Well, I'd rather not say. I'd rather be unpredictable."¹⁴ Trump would later state, "I don't want the enemy to know what I'm doing. Unfortunately, I'll probably have to tell at some point, but there is a method of defeating them quickly and effectively and having total victory."¹⁵

To overcome what Trump has described as a "total mess" and a "disaster" in an unsuccessful war in a Middle East that was "infested" with ISIS "all over the place," the president has made a concentrated effort to portray himself as the leader who came to office and, in some personal sense, intervened and formulated a new military strategy to defeat an ISIS foe in a war he declared "we were losing" — a war that he claimed had been ineptly run by Obama and the Pentagon until he personally took over and put into overdrive.¹⁶ Having apparently implemented his secret plan to defeat ISIS "quickly" in a "total victory," Trump made bold claims: "We have beaten ISIS, and beaten them badly"; "we've essentially just absolutely obliterated ISIS in Iraq and in Syria"; and finally, "we wiped out ISIS."¹⁷

At times Trump seemed to insert himself as a combatant into the fight in his efforts to glorify his role:

It was me and this administration working with others, including the Kurds, that captured all of these people that you're talking about right now. It was done within a month and a half. So, I'm the one that did the capturing. I'm the one that knows more about it than you people or the fake pundits.¹⁸

After his defense secretary, James Mattis, resigned to protest Trump's decision to abandon America's stalwart anti-ISIS Kurdish allies to an October 2019 Turkish invasion, the president lashed out at the retired four-star Marine (whom he described as "the world's most overrated general") and proclaimed, "I captured ISIS. Mattis said it would take two years. I captured them in one month."¹⁹

For the most part, viewers of the maps, and those who read Trump's self-promotional claims without having their fingers on the pulse of the campaign in a distant *terra incognita*, are left to take the president and his triumphalism at face value. But did Trump really inherit a "total mess" and a "disaster" in a Syria that was "infested" with ISIS from inept generals who were "not winning"? And did he really defeat ISIS in a "month and half" and "do more in nine months" to defeat ISIS than the seemingly hapless Obama did in his entire presidency? And did he achieve "100 percent" of the successes against the caliphate? Most important, did Trump implement a secret, new, "unpredictable" strategy to beat ISIS that "obliterated" and "wiped out" the caliphate in a "total victory"? How accurate are the maps he touted to prove his administration singlehandedly oversaw the roll-back of the caliphate?

What follows is a critical military analysis of the success of the campaign to destroy the ISIS state under presidents Trump and Obama, and an assessment of the maps Trump displayed to highlight his claims. This article will also assess the veracity of Trump's claims to having "wiped out" ISIS after taking control of the ongoing war — a war that he repeatedly indicated had not progressed until he was elected — based on more than four and a half years of analysis of the battlefields

against ISIS and assessment of Pentagon maps and reports. This analysis includes fieldwork in the region and a close monitoring of the course of Operation Inherent Resolve, from August–October 2014 to the fall of the caliphate’s final bastion in eastern Syria, as depicted on Trump’s maps, in late March 2019.

This analysis aims to provide nuanced historical detail of the cascading collapse of the ISIS caliphate buttressed by diverse accounts to triangulate locations related to the retreat of the Islamic State. It is in essence a cartographic “after action” assessment of both the war on the retreating ISIS quasi-state and Trump’s claims vis-a-vis his administration’s role in defeating it.

The analysis includes three detailed battle maps researched by the author and cartographer that support Trump’s claims on where ISIS stood when he was elected in November 2016. These maps and analyses, however, depart from Trump’s in that they also provide an in-depth assessment of the success of Operation Inherent Resolve in retaking vast amounts of territory (roughly 50 percent of the caliphate liberated by U.S.-backed forces) from a collapsing ISIS state *before* Trump came to office. These territories displayed on our maps are notably not depicted on the map he showed the press corps.

In addition, unlike Trump’s map, which conflates territory liberated by the U.S.-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) proxy militias with territory liberated by the Russia-Hezbollah-Syrian Army coalition into one blotch, our more nuanced map below also delineates territory conquered from ISIS by the adversarial alliance of the Syrian Assad regime, Russian President Vladimir Putin, the Iranian Revolutionary Guard and Hezbollah from territory liberated from the caliphate by the

competing U.S.-led coalition.

The most important contributions our maps and analysis below make to our understanding of the collapse of ISIS is that they do the following:

A. for the first time delineate territories liberated from the ISIS caliphate under Obama from those liberated under Trump;

B. delineate territories liberated by the Assad-Putin-Hezbollah-Iran coalition from those liberated by the U.S.-led coalition.

Our more nuanced maps thus provide an accurate tool for assessing the veracity of Trump’s claims to have essentially overseen the whole ISIS defeat himself with no recognition of Obama’s role or the Russian-Syrian alliance in shaping the outcome on the map he touted. This article will also look at other metrics — including ISIS’s loss of oil reserves, revenues, international borders, fighters, leaders, fallback overseas *wilayets* (provinces), freedom of movement and cyber influence — as barometers for measuring the collapse of the caliphate under Obama and under Trump, and assess each leader’s impact on the 2014–19 campaign.

MAPPING THE ISIS COLLAPSE

A. Delineating Victories

Below are our two maps that roughly accord with the amount of territory ISIS possessed when Trump was elected in November 2016. Where our maps first diverge from Trump’s is in their delineating of territories liberated from ISIS in Syria by the Russian-Iranian-Hezbollah-backed Syrian Arab Army in its separate 2015–19 campaign against ISIS, known in Russia as Operation *Vozmediye* (Revenge).²⁰ Trump’s map conflates these adversaries’ separate conquests into one that Trump claimed for himself. In reality, Syrian President Bashar

al-Assad’s campaign to the southwest of the Euphrates River competed with the U.S.-backed, Kurdish-led proxy force known as the SDF or Peoples Protection Militia (YPG) alliance to conquer territory from ISIS to the northeast of the Euphrates. On numerous occasions, this led to military clashes between the two adversarial coalitions. (In one February 2018 engagement, the United States may have killed over 100 Russian mercenaries; in another, attacking Syrian forces were repulsed from a U.S. base at al Tanf.)

Our map, for the first time, captures the competing military campaigns of the U.S.-backed SDF and the Syrian Arab Army. It clearly delineates territories conquered by these adversarial forces instead of artificially blurring them into a misleading image of one victorious U.S. campaign, as Trump’s map does. The zones liberated by U.S.-backed forces make up roughly one-third of Syria, while the zones liber-

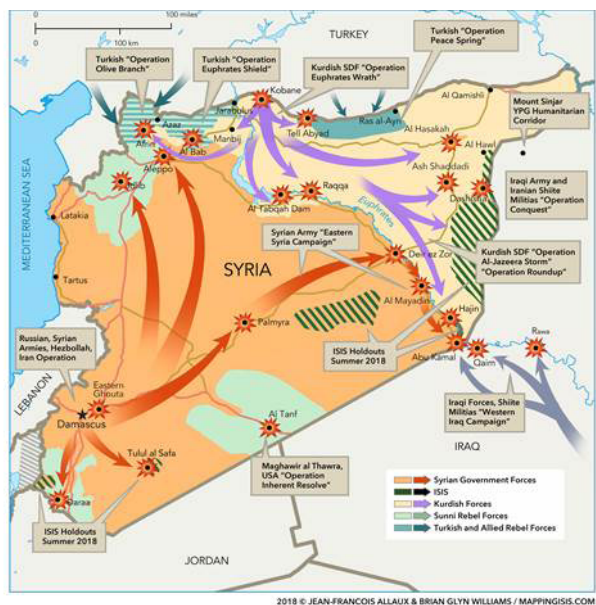
ated from the caliphate and kept free from Sunni rebels in the southwest by the Putin-Assad-Iran-Hezbollah alliance make up approximately two-thirds of the country.

Our map shows that the Syrian Arab Army alliance with Russia, Iran and Hezbollah operating southwest of the Euphrates (which bifurcates northeastern Syria) liberated the ISIS-held cities of Palmyra, Deir es Zor, al Mayadin, Abu Kamal and much of central Syria and Homs and Homs province in the west, pockets in Daraa and Suwaiyda in the south and areas east of Aleppo and suburbs of Damascus. These lands were all conquered to the southwest of the Euphrates River, an agreed-upon “deconfliction line” demarcating lands for the two sides to wage war in.

Trump’s map does not make this important distinction. It conflates the Syrian Arab Army alliance conquests to the southwest of the Euphrates de-confliction line with U.S.-SDF-led conquests of ISIS territory to the northeast of the river. This gives the false impression that all of this unspecified territory, conquered while he was president, was liberated by forces directly under his control.

It should be clearly stated that the Assad regime and its Russian, Iranian and Hezbollah allies are not members of the U.S.-led anti-ISIS coalition; therefore, the American president cannot claim their conquered territory. This de facto “Axis of Evil” coalition was seen as America’s enemy. This is best demonstrated by Trump’s decision to attack Assad on two occasions to punish him for using

MAP 2. The War to Destroy ISIS, 2016–2017



gas on civilians, and by the U.S. shoot-down of Syrian and Iranian planes and drones in Syria. The antagonistic coalitions were in a cold-war race to seize territories and were far from allies in the hot war on the caliphate.

It is clear from our second map (below) that approximately half of the territories the president claims to have liberated in Syria were actually captured by America's enemies in the Syrian Arab Army alliance, not U.S.-backed SDF proxy forces. Trump cannot legitimately lay claim to these liberated territories, which were captured by U.S. adversaries, since the Pentagon did not wage a war of conquest in these lands on his watch. The president's map-based claim to having overseen the liberation of these areas is akin to President Roosevelt's falsely claiming that U.S. forces liberated territory from the Nazis in Poland, East Germany, Bulgaria, Hungary, Romania and Czechoslovakia, when in actuality it was

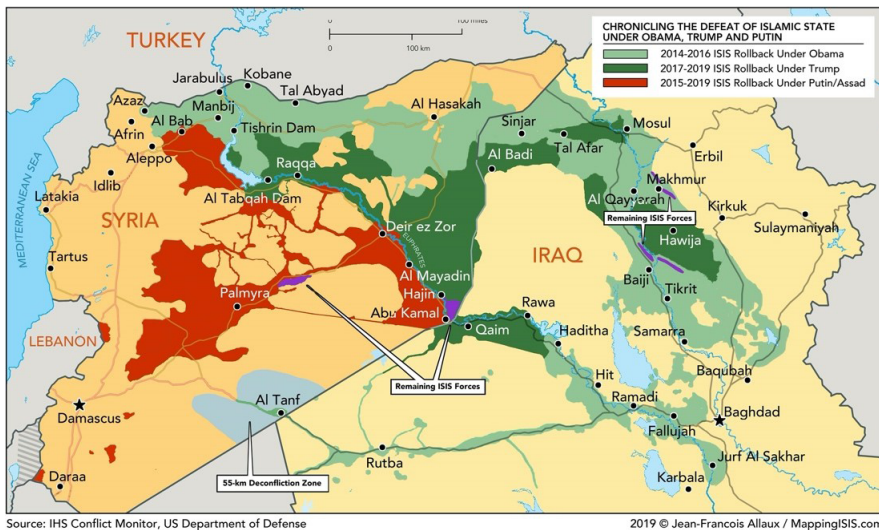
liberated by the Soviets.

B. Mapping ISIS Territorial Losses

Our map also notably diverges from Trump's (which excludes territory liberated from ISIS *before* he was elected president) in another sense. For the first time, it clearly displays the territories liberated from ISIS while Obama was still in office and delineates them from those liberated under Trump. This information is missing from Trump's selective historical snapshot, which gives the misleading impression that the entire caliphate fell on his watch. The territory liberated from ISIS when Obama was commander in chief is roughly equal to the amount freed by Pentagon-bolstered Iraqi and SDF surrogate forces during the Trump presidency.

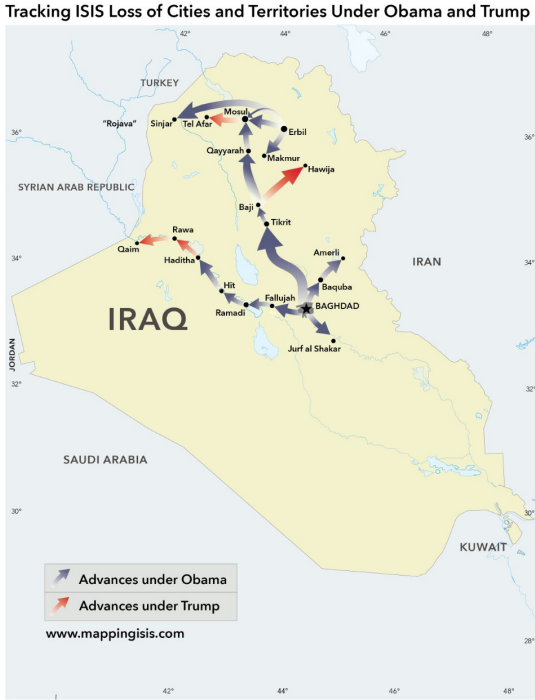
Our map supports the statements of the U.S. envoy to the anti-ISIS coalition, Brett McGurk. One of the masterminds behind the 74-member alliance, McGurk

MAP 3. Territories Liberated from ISIS



Russian-Hezbollah-Iranian-Syrian Arab Army territories liberated from ISIS in medium shade, liberated during the Obama years in light shade, and liberated in the Trump years in dark shade.

MAP 4. Advances under the Obama and Trump Administrations



stated in June 2016 (seven months before Trump came to office) that ISIS had lost 47 percent of its territory. Our map also supports his subsequent statement in his final briefing in 2019: “Where we were when the Trump administration came in — in early 2016 ... about 50 percent of the territory had been cleared.”²¹ This buttresses the findings of the global anti-ISIS coalition, which reported that “by November 2016 [two months before Trump took office] Islamic State had lost 62 percent of its mid-2014 ‘peak’ territory in Iraq, and 30 percent in Syria.”²² In addition, our map supports the findings of the widely respected British think tank IHS Markit, which reported that, by the final months of Obama’s presidency, ISIS territory in Iraq had shrunk from 40 percent of the country to just 10 percent.²³

Our maps clearly do not support Trump’s claim that “on terrorism, in Iraq and Syria, we’ve taken back almost 100 percent, in a very short period of time, of the land that they took. And it all took place since our election.”²⁴ On the contrary, our map indicates that roughly half of the territories liberated by U.S.-backed proxy forces in Syria and Iraq were captured from ISIS under Obama in roughly the same time span that the remaining territories were liberated from the caliphate under Trump (two and a half years).

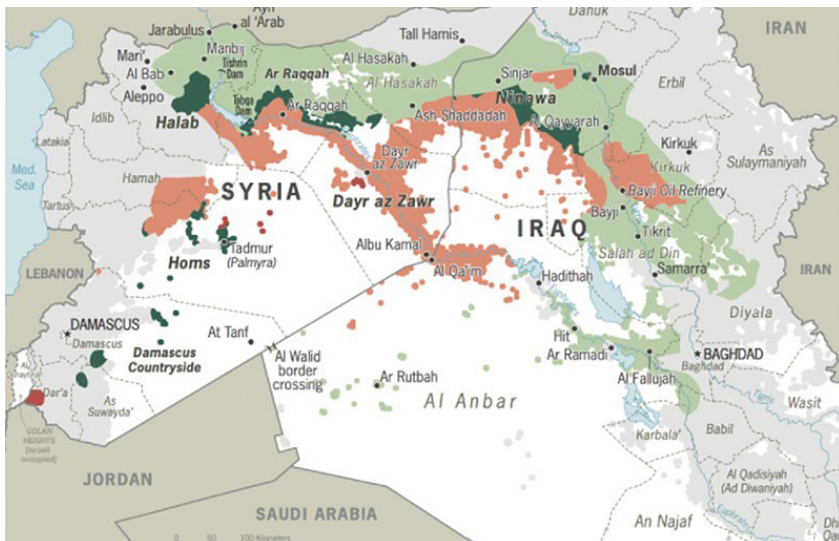
ISIS’s significant territorial losses under Obama are notably absent from Trump’s selective historical snapshot. These losses before Trump came to power included the major Syrian ISIS-held towns of Azzaz, Hasakah (a provincial capital), Shadadi, Ain Issa (now the capital of the North Syrian Democratic Federation) and the strategic Turkish-Syrian border towns of Tel Abyad, Kobane and Jarabulus. The 2015–16 loss of these three vital border towns and adjacent frontier lands denied the ISIS caliphate access to the world and diminished its capacity to receive jihadi reinforcements from abroad (as many as 40,000 had previously traveled to Syria and Iraq). The loss of these strategic towns under Obama hurt ISIS’s ability to sell looted artifacts abroad and dispatch terror cells to Europe, Turkey and Russia via its terrorist springboard known as the “Azzaz Terror Corridor.” Their loss also hurt the now-isolated ISIS state’s ability to trade on the black market with Turkey and sell oil (ISIS’s oil production was already severely damaged in 2015’s Operation Tidal Wave II bombing campaign, ordered by Obama).

Under Obama, the ISIS caliphate in Syria also lost Tishrin (the location of its second-largest dam) and Manbij (ISIS's Emni external-operations base for launching terror attacks abroad, including the 2015 Paris attack that led to 130 deaths); this loss made the world a safer place. In the months before Trump came to office, U.S. forces and allied Arab militias in southeastern Syria also captured the Syrian-Iraqi border region of al Tanf. It became a strategic base that allowed the Pentagon to control the vital Baghdad-Damascus highway from a large pocket of land controlled by local proxy forces. Israel was grateful for the capture of this southeastern Syrian region from ISIS and the Pentagon's creation of a large security zone around it. This U.S. interdiction prevented Iran from sending Republican Guard troops and supplies to Assad regime allies via this land route, where they could threaten Israel

and stage attacks to the south.

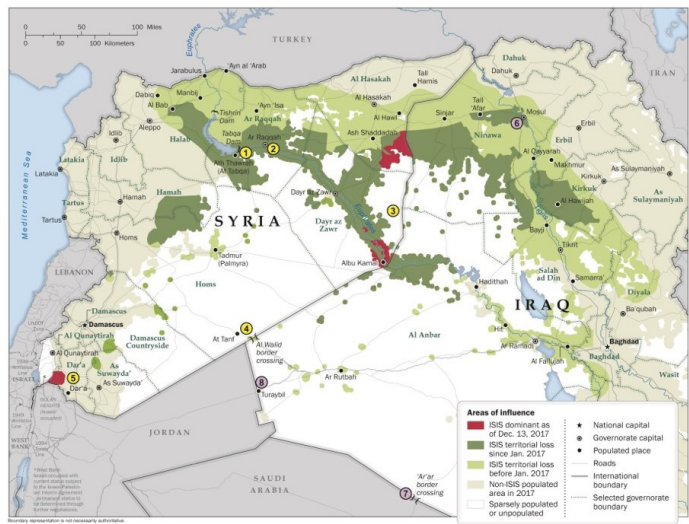
While Obama was in office, ISIS also suffered major losses across the border in the Iraqi half of the caliphate. It lost Sinjar, the main city of the Yazidis, an ancient minority whose 500,000 members faced genocide at the hands of ISIS until they were repelled by the Obama-ordered bombing in August 2014. Under Obama, the caliphate also lost Ramadi (capital of Iraq's largest province, Anbar), Haditha (site of a strategic dam), Sharqat and Tikrit (Saddam Hussein's home town). From a tactical perspective, one of ISIS's greatest losses was Qayyarah, a strategic town used by 5,000 U.S. support troops and the Iraqi army as a springboard to conquer ISIS's largest city, Mosul. The Iraqi half of the caliphate also lost Makhmour (which became a launching pad for Kurdish Peshmerga offensives), Fallujah, Baji (with Iraq's largest oil refinery) and, most impor-

MAP 5. Pentagon Map of ISIS Losses and Holdings as of January 2017



ISIS losses under Obama in light green; caliphate lands remaining when Trump took office in orange; areas under assault when Obama left office in dark green.

MAP 6. State Department Map of ISIS Losses and Holdings as of January 2017



ISIS losses as of January 2017, when Obama left office, in light green; caliphate areas remaining when Trump took office, in dark green.²⁶

tant, the eastern half of Mosul (its western half did not fall to advancing Iraqi forces until five months after Obama left office).

Pentagon maps support our findings on the capture of these towns from ISIS after the August 2014 launch of Operation Inherent Resolve until Obama left office in January 2017. These maps clearly refute Trump’s claim that “100 percent” of ISIS territory was liberated while he was in office.

The vast Omar oil field (Syria’s largest) and the Mosul Dam (Iraq’s largest) were also taken from ISIS while Obama was commander in chief. Erbil, the capital of the Kurdistan Regional Government, and the nearby Kirkuk oil fields (the center of Iraq’s oil industry) were saved from an ISIS invasion by U.S. bombing of advancing caliphate forces, ordered by Obama in August 2014. These significant repulses, and ISIS’s loss of these cities and surrounding territories, oil fields, dams, international borders, and rich agricultural

lands in northeastern Syria (almost half of that country’s agricultural zones) and most of the Sunni heartland in central Iraq were systematically recorded and reported by Pentagon statements, Department of Defense maps, State Department maps and communiques, global media (BBC, Al Jazeera, Fox and CNN), local sources, and think tanks at the time. These conquests under Obama are easy to verify by simply Googling the town in question or tracking the ISIS collapse via monthly maps drawn by the nonpartisan and highly respected Institute for the Study of War.²⁵

Under Trump, ISIS subsequently lost cities as well, although fewer than under Obama: west Mosul, Raqqa (the ISIS capital in Syria), Tal Afar, Hawija, Rawa, Qaim, Tabqa (Syria’s largest dam) and surrounding territories. These losses, too, can be verified on Pentagon maps and media sources or State Department maps like the one above.

A CALIPHATE IN RETREAT

As is evident from all the above maps, roughly half of the land liberated from ISIS by U.S.-backed Syrian YPG/SDF Kurds, the Iraqi Army, Iranian-backed Iraqi Shiite militias and Kurdish Peshmerga forces was captured before Trump came to office, from August 2014 to January 2017. This refutes this misleading claim by Trump: “We’ve done more against ISIS in nine months than the previous administration has done during its whole administration — by far, by far.” The loss of ISIS land shown on our maps also refutes Trump’s statements that “we were losing” and the generals “were not winning” until he came to office and jump-started the war with his secret “unprecedented plan.”

Not surprisingly, analysis of Pentagon, State Department, think-tank and other local sources reveals a story of a war on ISIS that had achieved tremendous battlefield success and momentum on all fronts before Trump took the White House.

In February 2016, 11 months before Trump took office, the U.S. Central Command stated that it had destroyed or damaged 21,501 ISIS targets in Iraq and Syria, including 6,720 “fighting positions,” 1,216 pieces of “oil infrastructure” and 1,043 “staging areas.”²⁷ A Pentagon report from February 22, 2017 (30 days after Trump took office and announced, “I am also going to convene my top generals and give them a simple instruction: They will have 30 days to submit to the Oval Office a plan for defeating ISIS”²⁸) captured the perilous state of the collapsing ISIS caliphate at the time Trump assumed control of the war and ordered his generals to come up with a new plan:

We’re now seeing signs that ISIS fighters, its leaders in Raqqa, are

beginning to feel the pressure. Specifically, they’re becoming increasingly paranoid. They’ve increased population control measures in Raqqa by seeking to remove or destroy television, searching houses for mobile phones and satellite dishes in order to maintain control of news and access to information about their losses.

These are not the actions of an enemy who feel they’re winning, and that’s because they’re not. We’re seeing reflections of pessimism among mid-level commanders and this worldview is spreading to the rank-and-file fighters. We’re also commonly seeing reports of ISIS arresting and executing their fighters who try to abandon the fight or are suspected of collaborating with forces trying to liberate areas that ISIS controls. We’re hearing typical reports that ISIS leaders understand their fate in Raqqa and they’re moving their own families out of Raqqa and into towns and villages in the countryside, even as they detain civilians who attempt to do the same.²⁹

Patrick Skinner, a terrorism expert and former CIA case officer, said of the U.S.-led campaign against ISIS in January 2016 (a year before Obama left office): “They’re getting the living hell pounded out of them. It’s undeniable that ISIS is ending the year [2015] in much worse shape than they began.”³⁰ A month before Obama left office, CNN was to report devastating losses to the ISIS army, which had once soared to as many as 80,000:

At least 75 percent of ISIS fighters have been killed during the campaign of U.S.-led airstrikes, according to U.S. officials. The U.S. anti-ISIS envoy said the campaign has winnowed ISIS’ ranks to between 12,000 and 15,000 “battle ready” fighters. The

figures mean the U.S. and its coalition partners have taken out vastly more ISIS fighters in Iraq and Syria than currently remain on the battlefield, two years since the bombing campaign began. Last week a U.S. official said the coalition had killed 50,000 militants since 2014.³¹

In July 2016, six months before Obama left office, the assessment that ISIS was being defeated on the battlefield was reaffirmed by Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter. He noted that “play by play, town after town, from every direction and in every domain — our campaign has accelerated further, squeezing ISIL and rolling it back towards Raqqa and Mosul. We’re isolating those two cities and effectively setting the stage to collapse ISIL’s control over them.”³² By the time he handed the successful war over to Trump, Obama felt vindicated in his “standoff” unconventional warfare (UCW) approach to “small war,” which had seen U.S.-backed proxy forces repulse ISIS and then go on the offensive and seize a vast swath of its territory, as well as deprive it of its financial resources and kill many of its fighters and more than 300 top leaders.

At approximately the time Obama left the White House in the winter of 2017, General Raymond Thomas, head of U.S. Special Operations Command, told a symposium in Maryland, “We have killed over 60,000 [ISIS members].”³³ The British concurred; Major General Rupert Jones, deputy commander for the Combined Joint Task Force coalition, announced, “We are killing Daesh [ISIS] at a rate that they simply can’t sustain ... and therefore they lose terrain, they lose battles.”³⁴ A CNN headline at the time provided a snapshot of the result of Obama’s two-and-a-half-year

war on ISIS: “As Donald Trump Takes Over, A Diminished ISIS Awaits.”

ISIS is losing ground across its self-proclaimed caliphate, according to a new report. Global intelligence and analysis firm IHS Conflict Monitor, which uses open-source intelligence including social media and on-the-ground sources, estimates that ISIS lost 17,600 square kilometers (6,800 square miles) of the land it held in Iraq and Syria over 2016. ISIS’ caliphate in the two countries shrunk by 23 percent over the course of the year, according to a survey and map released by IHS. The group lost 34 percent in the same region compared to January 2015. The U.S.-led coalition say ISIS has lost 27 percent of its territory in Syria — and 61 percent in Iraq — from its peak. U.S. Air Force Col. John L. Dorrian, spokesman for the U.S.-led operation against ISIS, says the group has lost Ramadi, Falluja, Hit, Qayyara and Sharqat. ISIS’ loss of territory has also reduced the number of civilians it can tax, Dorrian said, and the 600 airstrikes against oil facilities and oil-truck shipments hasn’t helped its finances either. Pay to ISIS fighters has been disrupted as well as death benefits for suicide bombers.³⁵

In the final days of Obama’s presidency, other headlines around the globe also recorded the stunning collapse of ISIS; and a month before Trump took office, CNN ran an article titled, “Obama Has Degraded ISIS. Can Trump Finish the Job?”

The Obama administration is publicly handing Donald Trump a gift as he prepares to enter the White House: a degraded ISIS. The question is what the President-elect will do with it. The

U.S. has said that U.S.-led airstrikes have killed up to 75 percent of ISIS fighters and 180 of its leaders, assessing that the international anti-ISIS coalition has choked the group's ability to recruit foreigner fighters, undermined its propaganda efforts and helped Iraqi forces retake territory.³⁶

It is clearly counterfactual to deliberately ignore U.S. State Department maps, Pentagon reports and maps, and easily accessible international headlines and stories that recorded the collapse of ISIS territory and the loss of 75 percent of its fighters before the 2016 presidential election. It is equally misleading to create a false narrative of a war essentially beginning when Trump took office in January 2017 to clean up a “disaster” and a “mess” in lands “infested” with ISIS from generals who “were not winning.” Such politicized, distorted narratives do a grave disservice to the honest pursuit of an objective understanding of military, counterterrorism, foreign policy and political history.

The president's aggrandizing narrative is more about self-promotion than conveying a historically accurate battle assessment. His false narrative overlooks the remarkable achievements of professional military strategists like General Joseph Votel, who successfully created a proxy warfare plan in 2014–15 and prosecuted the campaign to “degrade and destroy” ISIS after being chosen by Obama to lead the Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC) and CENTCOM.

Trump's revisionist history also dishonors the service of U.S. Green Berets, Navy SEALs, Delta Forces (including several Special Forces operatives killed in action prior to Trump's taking office), Marine artillerymen, Joint Terminal Attack Con-

trollers, ground spotters for aircraft, Army Rangers and pilots supporting them from above, all of whom helped local Syrian Kurds repulse the thus-far unbeaten ISIS war machine in the decisive fall 2014 Battle of Kobane and go on the offensive. These American troops fought “by, with, and through” local forces in the subsequent bloody battles for Ramadi, Fallujah, Manbij, Tikrit, Tishrin, Hit, Qayyarah, Sharqat, Shahadi, Hasakah, Tal Abyad, Makhmur and east Mosul for two and a half years before Trump claimed to have intervened and commenced the rollback campaign himself.³⁷ Trump's narratives, which omit all of the planning for the successful war and any mention of previous battlefield successes before he took office, also discredit the allied Kurdish, Assyrian Christian, Armenian, Arab and Iraqi Army soldiers who had already sacrificed thousands of lives repulsing ISIS. These U.S.-backed allies had ISIS on a back foot long before Trump became president.

OTHER METRICS FOR ASSESSING THE ISIS FALL

One important metric for understanding the ISIS collapse is the declining state of its finances. In “Caliphate in Decline: An Estimate of Islamic State's Financial Fortunes,” The International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation (ICSR), an independent research center based in the Department of War Studies at King's College, London, reported a collapse in ISIS revenue due to the bombing of transport systems, banks and oil-production facilities, and the loss of taxable populations, international borders and infrastructure by 2016 (the last full year of Obama's presidency). According to this 2016 snapshot of ISIS's declining fortunes before Trump took office, the caliphate had lost half of its

revenue and roughly half of its territory by the time Obama left office:

In the years since 2014, Islamic State's annual revenue has more than halved: from up to \$1.9 billion in 2014 to a maximum of \$870m in 2016. There are no signs yet that the group has created significant new funding streams that would make up for recent losses. With current trends continuing, the Islamic State's "business model" will soon fail.³⁸

Another metric for analyzing success in defeating ISIS is the loss of foot soldiers and leaders. In August 2016, six months before Obama left the White House, the Pentagon announced it had killed 45,000 ISIS fighters in just over two years of fighting.³⁹ This number would rise to 50,000 by the end of the year and reach 60,000 by the beginning of 2017.⁴⁰ The U.S. force of approximately 500,000 suffered approximately 47,000 combat deaths in 10 years of warfare in Vietnam.⁴¹ If accurate, this statistic speaks to a withering war of attrition that effectively removed tens of thousands of ISIS fighters from the battlefield in the final two and a half years of Obama's presidency. According to U.S. Air Force Central Command data, 41,000 sorties were launched when Obama was president compared to just 21,000 under Trump in 2017 and 2018 during Operation Inherent Resolve.⁴²

From August 2014 to January 2017, the caliphate also lost dozens of top leaders in airstrikes, battles, drone killings and other "kinetic activities": Abu Omar al-Shishani, ISIS's commanding general; Abu Ali Afri, ISIS's deputy leader; Mohammad al Adani, ISIS's head of external global terror operations and main propagandist; and Jihadi

John, an infamous British fighter whose beheadings of U.S. journalists went viral. In addition, the caliphate lost the head of its Afghanistan province, the head of its Caucasian province, the second-in-command of ISIS's Syria province, and the head of its Libya province. The greatest ISIS loss was the killing of its commander for oil and gas and top financier, Abu Sayyaf. He was killed in May 2015 in a raid launched into eastern Syria from Iraq at the direct command of Obama. The Delta Force commandos engaged in what is known as SSE (Sensitive Site Exploitation), collecting a treasure trove on how ISIS operated. They also captured Abu Sayyaf's wife, Umm Sayyaf, who was a wealth of information when it came to the subsequent destruction of ISIS's oil infrastructure.⁴³ Under Trump, ISIS lost fewer of its leaders because there were fewer left to kill.

Another metric for assessing ISIS's decline is the loss of its second-most important source of income, oil production. Under Obama, the Pentagon began targeting ISIS oil trucks in what was known as Operation Tidal Wave II. Hundreds of oil tankers were destroyed in November 2015 in both Iraq and Syria. In one day alone, November 18, 2015, more than 300 tankers were destroyed. ISIS was formerly making \$140 million a month in oil sales; after the U.S. bombings, it was only making a fraction of that. The Pentagon described the destruction of ISIS's oil capacity in November 2015: "This was not a piecemeal execution; this was a sudden strike. This was a tidal wave that swept across these oil fields and it really crippled them."⁴⁴

It was not only ISIS oil production that the Pentagon claimed had been knocked down by 90 percent before Obama left office. In April 2016, the Pentagon an-

nounced that the flow of foreign fighters to ISIS had been cut from 2,000 to 200 a month, due to the capture and closing of the caliphate's only international frontier, the Turkish border, by the U.S.-backed Syrian YPG Kurds and their SDF allies and Turkish forces.⁴⁵ As a result of the destruction of 90 percent of its oil production capacity and 100 percent loss of its international borders (which prevented not just resupply of fighters and equipment, but halted most international trade), the financial situation for the caliphate became so dire that, in January 2016, ISIS announced it would be cutting the salaries of its fighters in half.

An increasingly depleted ISIS was forced to deploy child soldiers, the "cubs of the caliphate," on the front lines to make up for mounting shortages in troops. Mouwafak al-Rubaie, a member of the Iraqi Parliament, described the problems facing ISIS in 2016: "Eighteen months ago, Daesh was the existential threat to Iraq. I think we managed to contain it and push it back."⁴⁶

All of the above Pentagon, State Department, media, think-tank, ex-CIA and Iraqi reports on the destruction of the retreating caliphate's oil capacity and loss of international borders (that had allowed the caliphate to sell its oil in Turkey) refute the politicized spin of right-wing Middle East commentator Richard Spencer: "The collapse of ISIS is due to President Trump. When Obama left office, it looked as if ISIS was here to stay, and was on the path to legitimization, à la the Palestine Liberation Organization. It was finding buyers for its low-priced oil."⁴⁷ Far from it. According to the Pentagon, ISIS's oil production was decimated by the killing of oil minister Abu Sayyaf and Operation Tidal Wave II.

Despite Spencer's reality-bending claim

that ISIS "was on the path to legitimization," the encircled and internationally besieged caliphate had no legitimization or official contacts with any government of the sort that the Palestinian Authority had. The State Department announced in 2016 that it had, on Obama's orders, created an anti-ISIS coalition of 66 partners, described as "one of the greatest coalitions ever assembled," including more than 1,000 French forces in theater, as well as the Charles de Gaulle Carrier Strike Group (which carried out attacks from the Mediterranean with Mirages, Rafales and other strike aircraft). It also included 400 British personnel supported by Tornados and other fighter bombers, 1,000 Turks, led by Leopard main battle tanks and supported by Turkish F-16s, as well as hundreds of troops from such diverse nations as Germany, Canada, New Zealand and Hungary, and aircraft from Jordan and the Gulf states.⁴⁸ Trump inherited the anti-ISIS coalition from Obama, and eight more countries were added to it on his watch, but it was the ambassador to the coalition, McGurk, and the State Department that forged the global effort.

Another metric for understanding the collapse of ISIS is, as Obama proclaimed, "In many places, ISIL has lost its freedom of maneuver because they know if they mass their forces, we will wipe them out."⁴⁹ *The Los Angeles Times* was to concur:

U.S.-led airstrikes have compelled Islamic State fighters to change tactics to shield their forces, American officials said. They began to refrain from flying their distinctive black flags or moving in large convoys. They also mingled with civilian populations and cut back on YouTube-ready parades.⁵⁰

CENTCOM commander Votel would concur, describing ISIS's loss of freedom of maneuver as it was two months before Trump assumed office: "They don't have the ability to move large troop formations, large convoys."⁵¹ On April 6, 2016, Pentagon officials said the coalition had "degraded the enemy's ability to move freely on the battlefield while regaining significant amounts of territory and degrading [ISIS] leadership and resources."⁵²

By this time, ISIS's leadership, defined as HVTs (High Value Targets) by coalition forces who were hunting them 24 hours a day, were vitally aware that they were under constant NSA, drone, satellite, spy, cyber and eavesdropping surveillance. They faced the never-ending threat of airborne death. U.S. and coalition "hunter killer" drones and fixed-wing aircraft carried out the methodical targeted killings of ISIS leaders through an airborne war of attrition. The platforms also destroyed ISIS command-and-control facilities, bombed fixed positions, wiped out convoys and captured tanks, and patrolled the skies hunting for "pop-up targets" of opportunity. Many ISIS leaders stopped using cellphones when it became obvious that the NSA, DIA and CIA were using "sigint" (signals intelligence) meta-data from their phones to triangulate their positions and using voice recognition software and monitoring SIM cards on their phones to track and kill them. As ISIS's surviving leadership went underground and stopped using the internet and cellphones, coalition spokesman McGurk was to mock the caliphate's hiding leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, in 2016: "Issuing audiotapes deep in hiding is not really a sign of a confident leader, particularly in today's media age."⁵³

Meanwhile, in the final months of Obama's presidency, the devastation

continued and the United States bombed an ISIS "cash collection and distribution point" in Mosul with massive 2,000-pound bombs, blowing up what the Pentagon described as "millions of dollars ... from all their illicit stuff: oil, looting, extortion," money that was used to pay ISIS fighters.⁵⁴ In March 2016, the United States bombed and destroyed an ISIS chemical-weapons production plant and a tactical chemical weapons unit in Iraq. The sites were identified based on information provided in the interrogation of Sulaiman Daoud al-Afari, a key ISIS official involved in running the group's chemical-weapons program who was captured by Special Operations Forces.

In my 2016 embeds with Kurdish Peshmerga fighting ISIS in Iraq, I found widespread gratitude for the bombing campaign carried out under Obama (which appreciative Kurds were certain had saved their enclave from a fast-advancing ISIS invasion in August 2014). In this pro-American, frontline region, I found that the president was routinely called "Obomba," and restaurants and children were named in his honor by grateful Kurds. Locals told me they would go to cheer and watch the sky light up at night from the U.S. bombing of nearby ISIS-held Mosul from the Zagros Mountains outside the Kurdistan capital of Erbil.⁵⁵ In a January 2016 interview, Masrour Barzani, the head of Kurdistan intelligence, told me,

If the president had not intervened to repulse the Daesh assault on our lines in the summer of 2014, we would have fallen due to the enemy's advantage in heavy weaponry and training from Saddam Hussein's armies and their sheer fanaticism. The bombings saved our front lines and our capital.⁵⁶

In dozens of my interviews with Kurdish generals and frontline commanders in 2016, this sentiment was voiced over and over. The Peshmerga fighters were tremendously grateful for the hundreds of U.S. special forces embedded in their ranks as combat controllers to call in air and artillery strikes to repulse the heavily armed ISIS fighters. Kurds, whose motto was, “we have no friends but the mountains,” now proclaimed they had “no friends but the Americans.”⁵⁷ One Kurd, who named his son after the U.S. president, told a reporter, “Before the war we had two ‘brothers’ — one Turkish, one Arab — but they stood by and did nothing. Only Obama helped us in our time of need, so I named my son after him as a gesture of thanks.”⁵⁸

It was not just the Kurds who were grateful to the United States. Millions of Syrians and Iraqis had been freed from the retreating ISIS sharia theocracy in the successful two-and-a-half-year war that Obama handed over to Trump on January 20, 2017. There was widespread gratitude to the Americans for their vital role in the liberation. One of them said, “Because of his help maybe we will get rid of this cruelty and get back to our homes.”⁵⁹ As freed populations of Kurds, Arabs, Yazidis, Assyrian Christians, Turkmen and Circassians celebrated their liberation by 2016, ISIS morale plummeted. One local source described its dire straits as early as 2015: “In Raqqa [the ISIS capital], they are being slowly strangled. There is no longer a feeling that Raqqa is a safe haven for the group.”⁶⁰

The all-out war to push the caliphate back continued on other fronts as well. In March 2016, Secretary of Defense Carter announced that U.S. Cyber Command had launched an offensive against ISIS. The objective was to “overload networks” and

“interrupt their ability to command and control forces” with jamming, malware and other cyber tools. The offensive began in February 2016, when Cyber Command jammed ISIS online traffic during a four-day offensive in northeastern Syria that helped facilitate the capture of the strategic town of Shaddada. The United States also created a “cyber fusion” center in the United Arab Emirates that engaged in the counter-messaging of ISIS propaganda and recruitment drives 24 hours a day. This led to a steep decline in ISIS’s online presence.

In addition to waging a war of attrition on the ISIS core lands in “Syraq” and through an online presence, in November 2015 Obama launched a war on ISIS’s fallback state, an affiliate headquartered in Sirte, Libya. He ordered the insertion of U.S. Special Forces to call in airstrikes in support of local anti-ISIS Libyan militias from the town of Misurata. Later that month, a U.S. precision airstrike killed the ISIS leader in Libya, Abu Nabil al-Anbari. A second major airstrike, in February 2016 on an ISIS training camp, killed 40 militants, including one of the masterminds of the devastating 2015 Sousse attack on British tourists in Tunisia. After a bloody six-month, street-by-street battle, the U.S.-backed proxy finally recaptured Sirte in the final months of Obama’s presidency. This was a reprise of the UCW leveraging of local surrogate Kurdish-led SDF forces in Syria and Kurdish Peshmerga and Iraqi Security Forces in Iraq. The Libyan ISIS terrorists then withdrew from Sirte south to the desert, where they suffered another airstrike, in January 2017, that killed 18 more militants.

To summarize, by the time Trump took office, ISIS had lost 90 percent of its oil production capacity and had

suffered a 90 percent decline in foreign fighter immigration. It had also lost 100 percent of its foreign borders and an astonishing 60,000 fighters making up 75 percent of its fighting force. By the time Obama left office, ISIS had also lost 50 percent of its territory and 50 percent of its finances. It had also suffered the loss of key leaders, including the caliphate's top general, the legendary Omar al-Shishani and the second most important leader in ISIS, Adnani, and oil minister Abu Sayyaf, and had lost its fallback province in Libya. If this were not enough, ISIS suffered a cyber loss on an "epic scale."⁶¹

All of the above would seem to contradict Trump's claim that before he came to office, "We weren't fighting to win, we were fighting to be politically correct." It could be safely argued that there is nothing politically correct about incinerating tens of thousands of terrorists with AC-130 Spectre gunship fire, HIMARS satellite guided artillery, JDAM satellite guided bombs or laser-guided Hellfire missiles. These Pentagon reports also refute Trump's claim that victories were elusive before he took office: "Because you didn't have Trump as your president. I mean, it was a big difference. I mean, there's a big, big difference if you look at the military now." Far from "not winning" until he took office, as Trump retroactively claimed, the Pentagon generals clearly were winning decisively according to every military metric.

The caliphate's rank-and-file fighters and leadership had been decimated and forced into hiding, its salaries cut in half, its forces beaten over and over again on numerous battlefields and forced to deploy child soldiers as a desperate last resort, its cyber presence crippled. Most important,

in the Iraqi half of the caliphate, the heavily defended eastern half of Mosul (which ISIS's entrenched fighters had defiantly proclaimed would become a "jihadi Stalingrad") had fallen after months of tough street-by-street fighting. The increasingly experienced Iraqi ground forces had gained confidence and created battle synergy with their U.S. counterparts by the time Trump took office. In the Syrian half of the caliphate, phases one and two (preparation bombing, surrounding and isolating via the capture of suburbs and resupply routes) against the ISIS capital of Raqqa had also been implemented, and the long-planned SDF assault on the city was about to commence. Indeed, the offensive to recapture the de facto ISIS capital of Raqqa began in November 2016, under Obama, and by late December of that year, Voice of America was reporting that U.S.-backed Syrian Democratic Forces had made significant advances in the campaign. According to this report, written a month before Trump took office,

U.S.-backed Syrian Democratic Forces have made significant advances in their march toward the city of Raqqa, the Islamic State group's de-facto capital in Syria, an SDF spokesperson said Thursday. ... SDF fighters have liberated 97 villages in the western part of Raqqa province in the past 10 days, said Jihan Sheikh Ahmed, a spokeswoman for the SDF offensive, dubbed "Rage of Euphrates."⁶²

By the time Obama prepared to leave the White House on January 20, 2017, he could take solace in the fact that the noose was tightening around the crumbling, isolated, economically devastated, militarily retreating ISIS caliphate in Iraq and Syria, and its fallback bastion in Sirte,

Libya, had been destroyed. When Trump took office, ISIS's collapsing state was surrounded and cut off from the world with nowhere to retreat to and deprived of most of its foreign-fighter reinforcements and most of its oil production. While even Trump's most ardent admirers realize that he is prone to self-promotional rhetoric and obsessed with eradicating Obama's accomplishments, in few other cases has he been so focused and successful in right-wing circles than in rewriting the history of one of his predecessor's greatest accomplishments.

But how much of the success of all of the above from August 2014 to January 2017 can be attributed to Obama's decisions and leadership? How did he personally shape the creation and implementation of the highly effective campaign known as Operation Inherent Resolve, a campaign that, as has been demonstrated, achieved such widespread success? And what impact did Trump personally have on the second half of the campaign to finish off the remaining half of the caliphate in his two and a half years of overseeing the war?

MISSION IMPROBABLE

Political leaders can make a tremendous impact on war and military actions, as demonstrated, for example, by Hitler's decision to override his generals and invade the USSR instead of Britain in 1944. There are also President Harry Truman's decision to prevent General Douglas MacArthur from bombing China beyond the Yalu River during the Korean War, and President George H.W. Bush's decision not to topple Saddam Hussein's Baathist regime in the 1991 Gulf War for fear of destroying this socialist-secular "firewall" against both Shiite Iran and Sunni jihadism. More recently there has been Obama's

decision to triple the number of troops, from 30,000 to 100,000, to repulse the resurgent Taliban in the "Forgotten War" in Afghanistan from 2009–13, or Trump's decision to order strikes on Syrian facilities to enforce the "red line" to punish the Assad regime for using chemicals on civilians (after Obama famously retreated on his threat). And, most recently, there is the case of Trump's October 2019 order for U.S. troops to abandon, to the Syrian Army alliance, bases and counterterrorism facilities in the one-third of Syria that they had conquered alongside the Kurdish-led SDF.

History shows Obama had a far-reaching impact on the war to defeat ISIS, whose forces rose from a CIA estimate of a mere 700 fighters at the time of his much-condemned failure to fight back against the Shiite-dominated Iraqi government and keep troops in Iraq (whose government had voted for an end to the U.S. occupation in 2011 in fulfillment of former President George W. Bush's 2008 Status of Forces Agreement requiring U.S. withdrawal).⁶³ Obama had come to the presidency at a time when the Iraq War, which had cost almost \$2 trillion and 4,500 American lives, had come to be defined as an unwanted, costly quagmire in a distant sectarian blood feud with roots going back centuries. Obama had consistently opposed the conflict, which involved 168,000 troops at its peak, and other conventional wars involving division-sized forces, due to their high costs. In an era of austerity, designed to save the post-2008 recession economy, and war fatigue stemming from the ruinous 2003–11 conventional slog in Iraq, Obama and most Americans were as opposed to another open-ended war in Iraq as they were to ISIS's anti-civilizational message.

This created a conundrum for Obama, who had staked his legacy on ending the

deeply unpopular Iraq War. He was committed to defeating ISIS but clearly reluctant to launch another full-scale conventional war in the Middle East. When ISIS arose in 2013 to rally repressed Sunnis against the pro-Iranian Shiite government of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki in Iraq, he declared war on it. Having been given a mandate from voters to end the Iraq War, Obama was conscious of how unpopular another war in the region would be. The idea of a conventional war was also unpopular among many fiscally conservative or isolationist Republicans like Senator Rand Paul of Kentucky, who had called for nation building at home instead of abroad.

Obama ordered the Pentagon to launch what would later become known as Operation Inherent Resolve in August–September 2014, but he felt it would not serve the country’s interest to wage a war of occupation in both Iraq and Syria. While the pressure would subsequently mount from the Republican hawks to return troops to the battlefields of Iraq and enter the bloodbath in Syria, Obama adamantly disagreed. He felt this would simply make American soldiers targets for insurgents and incite Sunnis against them as it had done during the 2003–2011 occupation of Iraq. While critics attacked the president for not launching what would essentially be Operation Iraqi and Syrian Freedom, the context for his historic decision to order a different type of campaign must be taken into consideration.

It should be recalled that Obama had previously listened to the Pentagon (despite Afghanistan special envoy Richard Holbrooke’s warnings about a Vietnam-style slippery slope) and had ordered the deployment of 70,000 troops to save the retreating Karzai government from a resurgent Taliban during the 2009–12

troop surge. This had taken a heavy toll on American soldiers and had cost \$10 billion a month in a time of economic recession back home. But when the surge (which tripled the number of troops in theater) ended and the reinforcements came home, the Afghan war returned to a bloody stalemate.

Most alarming, the American commanders on the ground reported that the local Afghan National Army and Police had become reliant on the Americans to fight the Taliban for them. It was U.S. troops who arrived in Black Hawk helicopters to kick in the doors on dangerous night raids in the Taliban-controlled southeast, not Afghan troops. This bred a culture of military dependency and, when the 70,000 surge troops came home, the Taliban simply filled the void as the Afghan National Army retreated in much of the Pashtun southeast. During my time spent as an SME (Subject Matter Expert) on a forward operating base in Afghanistan, my information operations team members referred to their seemingly endless and pointless counterinsurgency mission as “mowing the grass.” No matter how many night raids were carried out by U.S. forces, the Taliban “grass” always grew back. The America-dependent locals were not “mowing” the insurgent grass themselves in the badlands of Helmand, Uruzgan or Kandahar.

Having recently ordered a massive and costly conventional surge of troops to save the deteriorating situation he had inherited from George W. Bush in the overlooked “Other War” or “Forgotten War” in Afghanistan, Obama was hesitant to commit large numbers of troops back to Iraq or across the border in the vast Syrian desert to lead the war effort against ISIS. With U.S. forces acting as the vanguard against ISIS, he felt the local forces would poten-

tially develop an Afghan-style culture of military dependency as U.S. troops sustained horrific losses again in Fallujah, the Sunni Triangle and the Triangle of Death. Most important, he feared a high death toll should American troops engage in urban street combat in Mosul, a city of two million that had been heavily land-mined, tunneled and blockaded with concrete and car barricades by thousands of entrenched ISIS fighters. Obama's advisers feared a costly "Forever War" and Vietnam-style carnage that would see Americans fighting and dying for years or even decades, as occupiers, while local forces took a back seat.

After much deliberation, Obama rejected a conventional approach to confronting the transnational ISIS caliphate. Instead he chose an option to defeat ISIS that was a hallmark of his administration: UCW. But this was to make him the target of Republicans who accused him of not doing something dramatic to defeat the expansionist state. Instead of launching a "shock and awe"-style, conventional war of conquest and occupation — a replay of the bloody street-by-street battles for Fallujah of 2003 and 2004 that had seen U.S. Marines sustain hundreds of casualties — Obama chose to wage a "light footprint" war.

It should be recalled that Obama had been impressed by the efficacy of UCW when Bush ordered the overthrow of the Taliban in 2001. In just two months, small CIA teams of CTC and SAD operatives (Counter Terrorism Center and Special Activities Division), Green Beret special operators, and JTACs (Joint Terminal Attack Controllers, or combat controller spotters for aircraft) were able to leverage anti-Taliban Northern Alliance forces led by legendary Uzbek Mongol cavalry commander General Rashid Dostum and his Tajik and Hazara allies to topple the

entrenched Pashtun Taliban.⁶⁴ It had taken just 300 American boots on the ground to defeat a Taliban force of 50,000 and destroy al-Qaeda's sanctuary in the Hindu Kush in just 60 days, offering a new template for military operations.⁶⁵ Green Beret leader Colonel John Mulholland (the only colonel to conquer a country as the commander of 2001's Task Force Dagger campaign against the entrenched Taliban) described this novel form of proxy warfare to me:⁶⁶

The conventional army commanders were not particularly happy to see Special Forces take the lead role in overthrowing the regime and wanted to conventionalize the war. But ... we let the Afghan Northern Alliance do the fighting. We overthrew the enemy in just 60 days, long before conventional forces could be mobilized and deployed. In this campaign we used the new technology at our disposal [especially laser-target designators and smart bombs] to its maximum potential.

There is no such thing as a fair fight in war. In Afghanistan, Special Forces had our chance to spearhead a campaign. Our objective was to augment the local forces and make sure they were the "face" of the campaign. The Green Berets were always in the background calling in airstrikes, and there were no American flags. The victory had to be seen as coming from the indigenous forces. This is consistent with how we wage unconventional proxy war. Small elements of Green Berets work with indigenous forces to enhance their capabilities and propel them into combat to do the fighting and achieve our objectives.⁶⁷

Having seen the impressive results of

UCW in 2001, Obama had become a believer in the efficacy of Special Forces and light-footprint, hi-tech counterinsurgency/counterterrorism operations. It was Obama, for example, who had ordered a withering drone blitz that included five times as many airstrikes as Bush had ordered on al-Qaeda's sanctuary in the remote Pashtun tribal lands of northwestern Pakistan.⁶⁸ During this campaign, which saw the CIA and JSOC (Joint Special Operations Command) carry out 353 drone strikes (as opposed to 53 under Bush and 13 under Trump). Al-Qaeda was decimated as spies on the ground working with the CIA conveyed the coordinates of al-Qaeda and Taliban compounds to U.S. airborne killers.⁶⁹ The Reaper and Predator drones killed the head of the Pakistani Taliban on two consecutive occasions, as well as the head of the Afghan Taliban and dozens of high-ranking members of al-Qaeda, including the consecutive number threes on two separate occasions under Obama. When the 2008–12 drone blitz was finally over, al-Qaeda Central was decimated, its iconic leader Osama bin Laden killed and its safe haven neither safe nor a haven.

Obama recognized the potential for using a UCW "surgical scalpel" instead of a costly conventional "sledge hammer" approach to defeating jihadi enemies. This approach meant regularly ordering the deployment of light forces in a range of ungoverned spaces around the world. Special Forces were deployed from the brushlands of jihadist-infested Mali, to the deserts of Somalia, to the wilds of the Spin Ghar mountains in western Pakistan's FATA tribal lands, to the hills of southern Yemen's Abyan governate, to the Mediterranean coast of Libya, to the forests of Boko Haram's stronghold in northeastern Nigeria. Under Obama, Special Forces

were to wage an unprecedentedly vast unconventional proxy and aerial war against al-Qaeda affiliates across the globe as the president chose special ops for counter-jihad to prevent new 9/11s and deny jihadists sanctuaries.

Obama, for example, ordered a UCW campaign against a Taliban-like group known as the Shabab in Somalia. The CIA and JSOC leveraged local African Union ground troops working in conjunction with U.S. Air Force and Special Operations Command to drive the al-Qaeda-linked Shabab militia out of its capital, Mogadishu, out of its backup capital, Kismayo, and into the desert. This terrain-denial mission achieved its ambitious goals in three years with no American casualties.

Obama also worked with CIA Director Leon Panetta to destroy a nascent al-Qaeda state being formed in southern Yemen by ordering an air campaign to bolster local governate anti-al-Qaeda forces. They drove al-Qaeda out of its territory in the Abyan governate and prevented it from creating a proto state by 2013. In the process, Obama infuriated the left by personally ordering the killing of a U.S. citizen, al-Qaeda's chief propagandist, Anwar al-Awlaki. Anti-drone activists, such as Code Pink, were infuriated by Obama's devastating "extrajudicial assassination" campaign in Pakistan, Yemen, Somalia and elsewhere. Anti-war liberals derisively called him "Obomba." Medea Benjamin, a Code Pink anti-drone critic, was to write of his "creeping non-wars" across the globe in an article titled "America Dropped 26,171 Bombs in 2016. What a Bloody End to Obama's Reign."

In January 2012, Richard Weitz, writing for *The Diplomat*, summed up the importance of UCW in Obama's strategic vision for fighting global terrorism:

President Barack Obama's attraction to the Special Operations Forces (SOF) among other unconventional operations has perhaps only been rivaled by President John F. Kennedy, who saw unconventional warfare as the tool that would prevent Soviet- and Maoist-backed communist revolutions from taking over much of what was then called the Third World. The Obama administration has invested heavily in unmanned vehicles [drones] — air, land, and sea — and has conducted many more drone strikes in Pakistan, Yemen, and elsewhere than previous administrations. More visibly, the administration has sent the Special Forces to free hostages, kill terrorists, and perform other important missions. Rather than Colin Powell-type overwhelming-force missions, the Obama team is partial to the deft and swift surgical strikes conducted by missile-armed drones and helicopter-transported commandos.⁷⁰

It is not surprising, in light of his track record for waging UCW wars fought “off the radar” to defeat jihadists, that, when ISIS rose from the ashes to confront Shiite repression and carve out a militant theocracy, Obama chose to implement a UCW strategy to “degrade and destroy” this hybrid military-terrorist threat. He stated on September 11, 2014: “Our objective is clear: we will degrade, and ultimately destroy, ISIL through a comprehensive and sustained counter-terrorism strategy. First, we will conduct a systematic campaign of airstrikes against these terrorists. Second, we will increase our support to forces fighting these terrorists on the ground.”⁷¹

In a reprise of his efforts elsewhere, Obama then ordered a gradual deployment of “expeditionary targeting” forces to Iraq

and advisers and trainers to stand up local proxy allies like the Iraqi Security Forces' elite Golden Division troops and Kurdish Peshmerga. This number of American “force multipliers” gradually came to include Navy SEALs, Delta Forces, Green Berets and Marine artillerymen, ground crews for aircraft, base-protection troops and JTACs.

The number of U.S. “enablers” gradually crept up to 5,000, and they quickly made an impact on the battlefield. In 2015, these “aid and assist” forces were able to work with local “partner forces” to repel the ISIS threat, which had reached the doorstep of Baghdad, and to recapture the Sunni Triangle cities of Fallujah, Ramadi, Hit, Baiji, Sharqat, Baquba, and Tikrit, and a key base at Qayyarah that would be used as a springboard for attacking ISIS's prize, Mosul. But even as the UCW proxy campaign made tremendous gains, Obama faced harsh criticism for his leveraging of locals instead of having American troops do the fighting (and dying) themselves. There was a sense among his Republican critics that Obama was dithering, “outsourcing” the war to Kurds and Arabs, and “leading from behind.”⁷²

But this was exactly the plan, the defining feature of what had become known as the Obama Doctrine: enabling the locals to do the fighting and backing them up with air support and special operators. This came to be described by the Pentagon as working “by, with, and through” indigenous forces to wage proxy war. As *The New York Times* was to report, “One of the Obama administration's core doctrines was that America's allies in the region needed to take the lead in recapturing territory, with American forces providing only air support and limited logistical assistance.”⁷³ It was also reflected in the 2015 National

Security Strategy: “We will seek to mobilize allies and partners to share the burden and achieve lasting outcomes.”⁷⁴ Andreas Krieg was to report on the Obama administration’s shift from Bush-era “big wars” to a new proxy strategy:

In the aftermath of lengthy and costly operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, the Obama administration’s approach to the Middle East has not been one of disengagement so much as one of shifting engagement. ... Unlike his predecessor, Obama appears to prefer waging war in the shadows with a light footprint and if possible limited public scrutiny. Externalizing the strategic and operational burden of war to human and technological surrogates has developed into America’s preferred way of war under the Obama administration.

Essentially, surrogate warfare describes a patron’s externalization, partially or wholly, of the strategic, operational and tactical burden of warfare to a human or technological surrogate with the principal intent of minimizing the burden of warfare for its own taxpayers, policy-makers and military.⁷⁵

In response to this approach, Senator Lindsey Graham (R-GA) chastised Obama for “outsourcing” the war and melodramatically fretted that “they [ISIS] will open the gates of hell to spill out on the world. ... This is ISIL versus mankind. They’re intending to come here, so I will not let this president suggest to the American people we can outsource our security and [that] this is not about our safety.”⁷⁶ As the criticism reached shrill levels, critics felt Obama’s proxy plan would ultimately fail when it faced its greatest challenge, Mosul.

In the fall of 2016, the assault on the heavily defended metropolis of two million began. It would be the ultimate test for Obama’s UCW approach. Despite sustaining heavy losses — of the sort the Americans would have taken had they spearheaded the invasion — the Iraqi government troops were able to conquer the eastern half of Mosul through ferocious street fighting by the time the president left the White House in January 2017. Time and again, stalled Iraqi forces turned to the Americans to call in “air artillery” from drones, fighter bombers or HIMARs (satellite guided artillery) fired from Qayyarah West airbase to the south to destroy approaching ISIS vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices (VBIEDs), sniper nests, points of resistance, concrete street barricades, tunnel networks, advancing units and supply lines. The precision U.S. firepower directed by small bands of American “advisers” tipped the balance, allowing the Iraqi forces to conquer east Mosul street by street in the heaviest urban combat since Stalingrad.

Kurdish Peshmerga also received U.S. support starting in 2014, pushing ISIS out of Makhmur Province east of Mosul, conquering the strategic Mosul Dam and liberating most of the lands north of the city before swinging northwest to liberate the Sinjar region near Syria, home to the Yazidis. This U.S.-backed Peshmerga movement to the Syrian border helped cut off ISIS supply and communication lines between the twin capitals of Mosul and Raqqa. As with the Iraqi security forces, the Americans skillfully leveraged the Kurds (who also sustained heavy losses) while suffering few U.S. casualties.

This lack of U.S. casualties was due in part to rules of engagement that Obama put in place to prevent U.S. troops from lead-

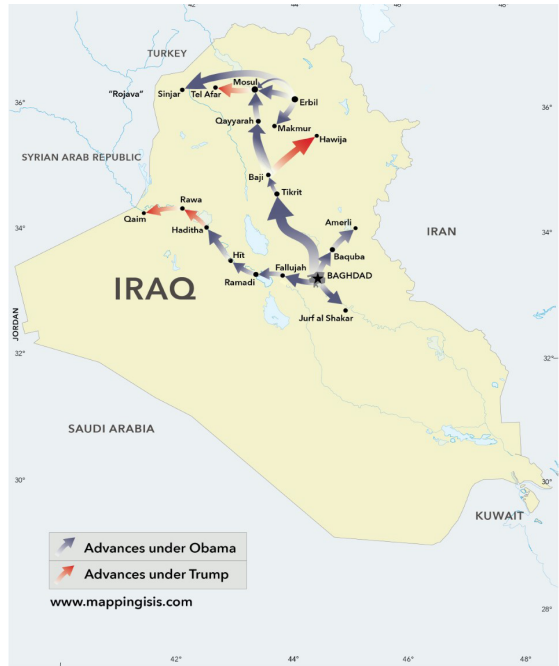
ing the fight and taking horrific losses of the sort sustained in the costly 2003–11 Iraq war. As al-Baghdadi’s ISIS fighters died in the tens of thousands but failed to inflict heavy losses on U.S. troops, the caliph cursed the Americans for using local “agents” whom he described as “the Awakenings, apostates, the heretic Kurds, and herds of rejectionist [Shiite government] cattle.”⁷⁷

But al-Baghdadi took consolation in the fact that Obama did not have a proven proxy force in Syria, where the opposition to ISIS was made up of a hodgepodge of competing Sunni Arab militias that had proven unreliable partners for the CIA, more intent on fighting the hated Shiite-Alawite Assad regime than the caliphate. Al-Baghdadi mocked Obama when it came to the far more difficult situation in Syria:

You should know, you defender of the cross, that getting others to fight on your behalf will not do for you in Syria as it will not do for you in Iraq. And soon enough, you will be in direct confrontation — forced to do so, God willing. And the sons of Islam have prepared themselves for this day. So wait, and we will be waiting, too.⁷⁸

It was in Syria that the Obama approach to war would face its greatest difficulty in trying to find partners willing to sustain high casualties to help the Pentagon and White House achieve their objectives. In marked contrast to Iraq, where the United States had two allied governments, in Baghdad and the Kurdistan Regional Government — with hundreds of thousands of professional, U.S.-trained troops (includ-

MAP 7. Advances under the Obama and Trump Administrations



ing Iraqi special forces and divisions armed with M1A1 Abrams tanks, artillery, Humvees, Apache attack helicopters and infantry weapons) — Syria was a chaotic vortex of untrustworthy Sunni Arab militias (many with jihadist agendas) fighting the Assad regime. The Obama administration’s CIA had been excoriated by Republicans for failing miserably to create an Arab proxy force to fight ISIS in Syria in 2014. But there was another little-known, non-Arab ethnic group about to burst onto the world stage and offer the United States a perfect proxy option.

In the fall of 2014, the YPG (Peoples Protection Brigades), a group of “consocialist, feminist, secularist, democratic,” environmentalist Kurds, who believed in devolving power to local councils made up of both men and women as well as local minorities like the Assyrian Christians,

decided to resist the ISIS juggernaut. The outgunned Kurdish YPG fighters chose to defend an obscure Turkish-Syrian frontier town known as Kobane. When news of this seemingly doomed defense reached Obama, he personally ordered Central Command to assist the Kurds with airstrikes. The Obama administration also pulled off a diplomatic miracle and convinced Turkey (an enemy of the YPG, which was armed and trained by the PKK Kurdish rebels) to allow hundreds of heavily armed Iraqi Peshmerga to cross through Turkey to assist the outnumbered and outgunned, but determined, YPG rebels.

As global media televised the David-versus-Goliath battle between untested northern Syrian socialist Kurds and an as-yet-undefeated terror state with as many as 100,000 fighters ruling over as many as 12 million people in an area larger than Israel, Britain's Daily Mail reported:

Has Kobane become a vortex of death for ISIS? As U.S. jets obliterate fanatics from the air and Kurds suck them into the street "meat grinder," experts believe jihadists have finally made a strategic miscalculation. Islamic State militants may live to regret encouraging street battles with outgunned Kurdish forces inside Kobane. The barbaric terror group's tried and tested "pincer movement" has previously forced enemies to retreat or even defect. They used to seize vast swathes of territory in north Syria and west Iraq, where security forces melted away. Now Kurdish troops are engaging terrorists in street-to-street battles — a tactic that doesn't play to ISIS' strengths.⁷⁹

The answer to the Daily Mail's question as to whether Kobane was to be a "vortex

of death" was a resounding "yes." By December 2014, the Kurds had, after sustaining tremendous losses, perfected battle synergy with the U.S. Air Force. Finally, in January 2015, they repulsed the seemingly endless waves of ISIS fighters that the caliphate's infuriated military leader, Omar al-Shishani (aka The Chechen), threw into battle to take the strategic prize of Kobane. The YPG Kurds, including many female fighters who were lionized by the media, showed the various Sunni rebel factions in Syria that were fighting ISIS (including al-Qaeda's franchise, al-Nusra), the Syrian Arab Army, the Iraqi Army and the Iraqi Kurdish Peshmerga that ISIS could be beaten. It was a tremendous vindication for both the Kurds and Obama, who had been criticized by Republicans during the battle.

When the initial 50 U.S. military "enablers" were subsequently deployed by Obama (without the Syrian government's permission) to work with the relatively unknown Kurdish YPG (a socialist militia that later formed the backbone of the SDF) in October 2015, this proxy approach to fighting ISIS was mocked by critics on the right as "too little too late."⁸⁰ Hawkish opponents described it as "incremental tokenism." Many wanted to conventionalize the war and deploy division-sized U.S. units to fight the jihadists. One critic suggested at the start of the Syrian proxy campaign in the fall of 2015: "In terms of the actual concrete numbers, it's hard to imagine it [the small U.S. force] would make a difference."⁸¹

Obama and the Pentagon were, however, optimistic that the YPG Kurds were America's greatest weapon in the Syrian theater. The president decided to order the risky deployment of U.S. Special Forces to Syria to help the YPG citizen-soldiers transition from defense to offense. At the

time of the October 15, 2015, deployment of the initial 50 “advisers” to Syria, a White House official patiently explained the UCW approach to “degrading and destroying” the ISIS transnational state in Syria to a war-weary public and skeptical Republicans: “The responsibility that they [the 50 Special Forces] have is not to lead the charge to take a hill, but rather to offer advice and assistance to those local forces about the best way they can organize their efforts to take the fight to ISIL or to take the hill inside of Syria.”⁸²

With U.S. Special Forces advisers assisting them from Kobane, the YPG and its Arab allies went on the offensive. They pivoted to capture ISIS’s borders from Turkey and then headed east to liberate the capital, Hasakah city. An Associated Press report stated, “The YPG said on its Facebook page that ‘our fighters are now surrounding the mercenaries from all sides in the city.’ It added that streets on the southern edge of Hasakah are full of bodies of dead IS fighters, and others have been taken prisoner.”⁸³ By the end of June 2015, the city had been liberated, and a Carnegie Foundation account of the battle was to report, “Islamic State is now being knocked around like an amateur boxer in northeastern Syria.”⁸⁴

The previously little-known Syrian Kurd conquest of ISIS lands in northern Syria, especially the caliphate’s main terrorism launching pad in the Arab town of Manbij, however, infuriated the Turks. Turkey saw the PKK-linked YPG as a greater threat than ISIS (despite the fact that ISIS had created carnage in numerous mass-casualty terror attacks in Turkey, whereas the YPG had not). Sensitive to Turkey’s concerns, the Obama administration initially limited material support of the YPG to small arms, communication equipment, night-vision

goggles and a limited number of 500 on-the-ground Special Forces advisers. In October 2015, the United States also air-dropped 50 tons of small-arms ammunition and grenades to a joint Kurdish YPG-led, Sunni Arab, Assyrian and Turkmen force in the northeastern Syrian province of Al-Hasakah.⁸⁵

By the time Obama left office in January 2017, the United States had made 350 air-drops of small arms and munitions to the Kurdish-dominated force, but it avoided delivering heavy anti-tank weapons, mortars, armored vehicles and artillery for fear of antagonizing powerful NATO member Turkey. The Obama administration’s aim with these direct supplies of ammunition to 25,000-30,000 battle-tested Syrian Kurds and 3,000-5,000 Arabs from a Syrian-Arab-Turkmen-Kurdish coalition was to “thread the needle.” This meant cautiously bolstering the YPG in its efforts to march south and attack the ISIS capital of Raqqa. But this had to be done without antagonizing the powerful Turks.⁸⁶

By this time, the Pentagon had convinced the YPG to change its name to the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) to assuage Turkish fears of YPG links to their PKK nemesis fighting an insurgency in Turkey. As the Kurdish YPG-led SDF gathered momentum and perfected “synergy” with the U.S. Special Forces enablers who rose to 500 by the time Obama left office, it moved south out of the Kurdish homeland of Rojava (the Land of the Setting Sun) into the Arab desert. There it broke through ISIS defenses guarding Raqqa to reenact the successful conquest of Mosul.

At this time, the Republican criticism of Obama’s and the Pentagon’s proxy approach appeared to be waning, as it was clearly working with less than a dozen American combat deaths and a small price

tag. It was an approach that clearly had the support of the U.S. military, according to Defense One's Kevin Baron, who reported extensively from the frontlines in Iraq. Baron was to write on January 18, 2017, two days before Trump took office:

What does the military want? In dozens of interviews with U.S. officials and coalition military commanders — from the White House to America's war room in Tampa, the command in Baghdad, forward control centers and training grounds in Kurdistan, defense-minister meetings in Paris, and NATO headquarters in Brussels — one thing was clear and consistent. On the whole, America's military leaders do not want to be here any longer than they must.

It is also clear that they wanted to “accelerate” the campaign against ISIS, as Obama has been doing already for more than a year with success, but they do not want America to own this fight. They do want Iraqis to fight and a functioning Iraqi government to take control when the Islamic State is gone. They don't want to defeat ISIS only to become an occupying force of sitting ducks. What they want is what Obama wants: patience. It's a word I hear over and over, talking with special operators tasked to train local forces to fight terrorism and with the faraway policy makers they support.⁸⁷

But soon after this interview, America had a new president who was hardly known for his patience. It was clear he wanted to “own” the war and put the Trump name on it after belittling Obama's approach to war and announcing that the “generals were not winning.” As he took

office, actors ranging from the besieged ISIS fighters in Raqqa, to the Turks who were leery of Obama's leveraging of the Syrian Kurds, to the frontline U.S. troops who were preparing to invade the western half of Mosul, waited to see how the new president would impact the war.

TRUMP'S CAMPAIGN AGAINST ISIS

As soon as the Trump administration came to the White House, it began an unprecedented assault on the previous administration's legacy. It began systematically dismantling its predecessor's signature acts, such as the Affordable Care Act, the Paris climate accords, the Trans-Pacific Partnership deal and the 2015 Iran nuclear-disarmament agreement. Trump similarly wanted to drastically dismantle the Obama administration's UCW strategy on defeating ISIS and put his own imprimatur on the war. As a candidate, he had mentioned his interest in conventionalizing Obama's unconventional war and had suggested he might send as many as 30,000 troops to the region to fight ISIS. Upon taking office, Trump ordered his generals to come up with a new strategy to reshape the war in 30 days.⁸⁸

But after 30 days, his generals met and convinced him to stick with the successful UCW blueprint the Obama administration had already put in place. Vox reported:

After Trump took office in January 2017, his administration didn't change the basic parameters of the strategy — opting not to fix something that wasn't broken. The overall strategy, to assist and empower local allies rather than win the ground war using large troop deployments, remained intact.

... “The Trump administration didn’t screw up the Obama plan, which we were all kind of afraid of,” one former National Security Council official tells me. “They at the very least continued a working policy.”⁸⁹

Michael Morell, a former deputy director of the CIA, agreed with this sentiment: “There is no doubt that the Trump administration followed the basic strategy put in place by the Obama administration.”⁹⁰ Anthony Cordesman, a national-security analyst at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, similarly asserted, “Obama set up nearly all the structure that did the fighting under Trump. There was no significant change in the overall plan.”⁹¹ Michael O’Hanlon, an analyst at the Brookings Institution, also stated, “Many of the successes of the air campaign, the tightening on movements of ISIS money and people, occurred under Obama.”⁹²

The Obama approach was clearly leading to the collapse of the caliphate even in Mosul, without having to redeploy large numbers of conventional U.S. troops back to Iraq. The war was to cost 11,000 Syrian Kurds their lives and record a stunning 50 percent casualty rate among Iraq’s elite Golden Division troops and the deaths of 10,000 Iraqi security forces. The United Nations would report that nearly 2,000 members of this elite force were killed in November 2017 alone. These could very well have been U.S. casualties had Obama listened to his Republican critics, conventionalized the war and had Americans lead it.⁹³ As it was, America was winning with the successful UCW approach to war, but Americans were not dying.⁹⁴

To appease Trump, Mattis, the new secretary of defense, dubbed the campaign a “war of annihilation.” Speaking on

CBS’s *Face the Nation* on May 28, 2017, Mattis explained the apparently new U.S. strategy:

Our strategy right now is to accelerate the campaign against ISIS. It is a threat to all civilized nations. And the bottom line is, we are going to move in an accelerated and reinforced manner, throw them on their back foot. ... We have already shifted from attrition tactics, where we shove them from one position to another in Iraq and Syria, to annihilation tactics, where we surround them. Our intention is that the foreign fighters do not survive the fight to return home to North Africa, to Europe, to America, to Asia, to Africa. We’re not going to allow them to do so. We’re going to stop them there and take apart the caliphate.⁹⁵

But, as has been shown previously, ISIS had already been facing a war of annihilation for two and a half years on all fronts, loss of borders, loss of the freedom of movement, loss of its Libyan fallback province, loss of 60,000 fighters, deaths of top leaders, destruction of its oil production capacity, economic losses, and cyber influence, so the name change was largely symbolic. There was, however, a clear uptick in bombings under the Trump administration in 2017, something Trump touted. Statistics released by the Air Forces Central Command in *Air Force Times* indicated that the United States and its partners in Operation Inherent Resolve deployed 3,878 weapons in Iraq and Syria in March 2017, nearly twice as many as the 2,052 deployed in March of 2016.⁹⁶ *Business Insider* reported that this uptick was related to the attack on Raqqa and reflected ongoing battle operations more than a new presidential directive:

While Air Forces Central Command could not specify what caused the increase in weapons deployed in March, it told Air Force Times in February [2017] that Iraqi and partner forces' efforts to recapture Mosul and operations against Raqqa in Syria — both of which coalition aircraft are supporting — were responsible for part of that month's high total. In Iraq, efforts to recapture Mosul, ISIS' last urban stronghold in the country, have been going on since mid-October [2016], and the spike in weapons deployed against ISIS in and around the city may have been in part driven by the operational tempo of that campaign, rather than totally by Trump's directives.⁹⁷

But, as the Trump administration touted the upswing in bombing in Syria in the winter and spring of 2017 (moderated by a decline in bombing in Iraq after Mosul fell in summer 2017) as part of its war of annihilation strategy, it began a war to discredit the Obama administration's handling of Operation Inherent Resolve from 2014 to 2017. The new official spin on the war was that the Obama administration had been involved not in implementing a successful UCW with the Pentagon but in preventing the Pentagon from fighting the war. This narrative largely revolved around claims of Obama-era rules of engagement (ROE) and micromanaging. Trump bragged about his role in changing the ROE. He proclaimed that he had done so by “totally changing our military” and allowing the Pentagon to fight for the first time, instead of “fighting to be politically correct”:

The President: It had to do with the people I put in, and it had to do with rules of engagement. We weren't

fighting to win, we were fighting to be politically correct. It had to do with a whole set of things that I did. I also gave the power to the people on the ground. The [Obama] White House used to get calls [from Pentagon officials] — “Can we do this? Can we do that?” — to places and in places that they [the White House] had never even heard of. And by the time they got back a week, and two and three weeks later, there was no fight left, okay? It was ridiculous.

So I totally changed rules of engagement. I totally changed our military. I totally changed the attitudes of the military. And they have done a fantastic job. Yes, ISIS is now giving up. They're giving up. They're raising their hands. They're walking off. Nobody has ever seen that before, and that's good.

Mr. Plante: Why didn't that happen before?

The President: Because you didn't have Trump as your President. I mean, it was a big difference. I mean, there's a big, big difference if you look at the military now, and you look — look at what's going on in Afghanistan. ... We're making more headway in the last — I changed rules of engagement about a month ago, and we're fighting now to win as opposed to fighting to just stay there. And you know, we were losing. Now we're winning.⁹⁸

In actuality, despite Trump's claim that success was “due to the people I put in,” there was little changing of the guard among the generals prosecuting the war. Such key figures as Votel, the CENTCOM head, and McGurk, the envoy to the anti-ISIS coalition, remained in place. But

support for this claim and Trump's claims of having "totally changed the attitude of the military," came from National Security Adviser Michael Flynn, who claimed just before Trump took office that "one of the problems with the current fight against ISIS" was that the military's "hands are tied."⁹⁹ Less than a year into the Trump presidency, Fox News was to support such claims:

ISIS has lost 98 percent of the territory it once held — with half of that terror group's so-called "caliphate" having been recaptured since President Trump took office less than a year ago, U.S. military officials said Tuesday. The massive gains come after years of "onerous" rules, when critics say the Obama administration "micromanaged" the war and shunned a more intensive air strategy that could have ended the conflict much sooner.

"The rules of engagement under the Obama administration were onerous. I mean, what are we doing having individual target determination being conducted in the White House, which in some cases adds weeks and weeks," said retired Air Force Lt. Gen. David Deptula, the former head of U.S. Air Force intelligence. "The limitations that were put on actually resulted in greater civilian casualties."

Joseph Micallef would similarly write, "To its credit, the Trump administration revitalized and expanded the lackluster campaign that the Obama administration had been waging against the Islamic State. It paved the way for the eventual defeat of ISIS forces in Iraq and Syria, and the liberation of the territory previously under its control."¹⁰⁰ As will be shown, Trump's

claims and those above are vastly inflated. His decisions actually represent yet another continuum of Obama policies that began before he took office.

As stated previously, Obama was haunted by the images of flag-covered caskets returning to grieving families by the hundreds during the Iraq War and the images of wounded veterans at Walter Reed hospital. He was adamant that there would be no more hemorrhaging of American blood in the sands of the Middle East of the sort that had turned both Republicans and Democrats against Bush's Iraqi quagmire. This policy translated into remarkably few U.S. combat deaths. In Syria, ISIS was rolled back, one-third of the country captured by U.S. Kurdish-led SDF surrogates, the caliphate's heavily defended capital of Raqqa taken and its last bastion conquered by March 2019. All of this was achieved with two Americans killed in action. U.S. troops grumbled at the policies, but they nonetheless helped destroy half of the caliphate in 30 months. Most Americans made it home alive.

But as the Mosul offensive began in October 2016, the U.S. Special Forces began to be needed closer to the front lines to call in even more urgent strikes to support Iraqi troops engaged in grueling urban combat. In response to requests from the Pentagon to loosen the ROE to allow U.S. troops to be more actively engaged in targeting and other combat activities, in December 2016 Obama signed a directive relaxing the rules of engagement. To expedite the unfolding collapse of ISIS, in one of his last moves as president, on December 26, 2016, Obama issued a directive that allowed U.S. military personnel to better assist, physically and logistically, local Iraqi and Syrian Democratic Forces troops. Front-line U.S. Joint Terminal Attack Controllers

were now allowed to avoid cumbersome requests through a joint command center in order to directly call in bomb strikes. They could instantly attack the enemy based on their own on-the-ground observations in battles they were witnessing, without passing their higher ups or strike cells. The Associated Press would report of this change in the rules of engagement vis-a-vis strike cells in Obama's final month:

Previously, such support "would have gone through a whole bureaucracy and through Baghdad." The spokesman for the U.S.-led coalition, Air Force Col. John Dorrian, confirmed to the Associated Press the rules of engagement in the fight against IS in Iraq were adjusted by the December directive, explaining that some coalition troops were given the "ability to call in airstrikes without going through a strike cell." ... Since the late December directive from Lt. Gen. [Stephen] Townsend, Iraqi forces have secured swifter territorial victories in the fight against IS and in the first days of the renewed push on Mosul's western half, Iraqi forces have sustained relatively low numbers of casualties, compared to the early days of the fight inside Mosul from the eastern front.¹⁰¹

But there were rules of engagement when it came to bombings in "civilian rich environments," and the Pentagon and White House were conscious of the fact that killing Arab and Kurdish civilians they were trying to liberate from ISIS was not useful in winning the hearts and minds of the population, the center of gravity in the war. There was, however, pushback on the Obama administration's strict rules on killing civilians and the often-lengthy chain of command required for many strikes on

high-value targets with civilians involved. The Daily Beast reported:

Pentagon leaders tell The Daily Beast, the ISIS war's decision-making process, run by National Security Adviser Susan Rice, has been manic and obsessed with the tiniest of details. Officials talk of sudden and frequent meetings of the National Security Council and the so-called Principals Committee of top defense, intelligence and foreign-policy officials (an NSC and three PCs in one week this month); a barrage of questions from the NSC to the agencies that create mountains of paperwork for overworked staffers; and NSC insistence on deciding minor issues even at the operational level. "We are getting a lot of micromanagement from the White House. Basic decisions that should take hours are taking days sometimes," one senior defense official told The Daily Beast.¹⁰²

This chain of command was removed by Trump, and the Pentagon credited this with more rapid airstrikes and a wider array of targets, even as the civilian death toll soared as a consequence. But, as stated above, many of the rules of engagement for fighting were lifted and put into place before Trump took office in Obama's December 2016 directive. It should be mentioned that it is highly misleading to report that a meddling Obama White House was involved in platoon-level decisions to call in airstrikes on fast-approaching ISIS VBIEDs, snipers and other targets, prior to the issuing of this directive, as Fox reported above. Even prior to Obama's December 2016 directive, daily and hourly decisions on immediate life-and-death, close-air-support strikes were made within seconds, not by Obama, but by strike cells,

as Dorrian accurately reported above. Such critical air and HIMAR strikes were a regular part of the battle rhythm since 2015 and regularly saved lives by assisting Iraqi, SDF or Peshmerga troops engaged in intense fighting in 2014-16 battles like those for Kobane, Haditha, Hasakah, Manbij, Fallujah, Hit, Tikrit and Ramadi. It is absurd to suggest that the president inserted himself into such decisions. Kurdish commanders I interviewed in 2016 reported these often took mere minutes to be responded to by coalition aircraft “loitering” overhead in an “overwatch” role.

Rules on bombing had also been lifted before Trump took office. The tempo of bombing increased in Syria in Obama’s final months as the operations to strangle Raqqa began, but even before that, the rules had been lifted, which led to an uptick in bombing. A typical report on this loosening of the ROE for bombing from February 2016 reported,

The White House appears to be acknowledging these calls with a new intensification of the war against ISIS. The rules for airstrikes in Syria and Iraq have been relaxed to allow for more civilian casualties. In early November, 45 minutes after American planes dropped leaflets warning, “Get out of your trucks now, and run away from them,” A-10 Thunderbolts and AC-130 gunships destroyed 116 ISIS oil tankers near Deir Ezzor, Syria. Previously, these would not have been targeted because, as Operation Inherent Resolve spokesman Col. Steve Warren explained, “the truck drivers, themselves, [are] probably not members of ISIL. They’re probably just civilians.”¹⁰³

Certainly, Trump wholeheartedly ap-

proved of such loosening of rules of engagement, which was in the process of being implemented when he came to office, and it appears to have been extended on his watch. But his approvals were not a novel approach to the war that somehow allowed a previously handcuffed Pentagon to take the gloves off for the first time and finally fight the war unhindered by politicians.

In light of the above, it is not surprising that local proxy forces fighting ISIS in Iraq saw no noticeable shift in the war’s pace, tactics or strategy when Trump took office. In an interview by CNN terrorism analyst Peter Bergen, Lieutenant General Abdul Wahhab al Saadi, the legendary head of Iraq’s Golden Division Counter Terrorism Service, claimed, “There was no difference between the support given by Obama and Trump.”¹⁰⁴ Jennifer Cafarella, an analyst at the nonpartisan and highly respected Institute for the Study of War, shared the frontline Iraqi general’s sentiment: “Nothing President Trump did or authorized was a fundamental game changer in the counter-ISIS strategy.”¹⁰⁵ In my interviews with dozens of Kurdish Peshmerga commanders, the only real impact they felt when Trump came to power was a sense of betrayal when he issued his travel ban on all Iraqis, including America’s stalwart Kurds. The Washington Post was to opine on this continuation of the UCW proxy strategy initiated by Obama and continued by Trump, despite the latter’s efforts to drastically reshape the war:

Over the past three or four years, Obama and Trump have inadvertently teamed up on a strategy in Iraq and Syria that has it right: Muddle through with a smaller U.S. investment that keeps the worst from happening but

also keeps America out of Middle Eastern quagmires. This is far from a perfect solution. But it happens to be the best one that we have. Trump has taken credit for recent military gains against the Islamic State, furthering the narrative that he's responsible for turning things around. In reality, his administration has wisely picked up where Obama's administration left off and stayed the course.¹⁰⁶

In Syria, Trump also continued Obama's support of the Pentagon-backed, Kurdish-led SDF surrogate campaign to finish off ISIS in its capital, Raqqa, and areas of Deir es Zor province to the south. As the SDF forces plunged into the heart of darkness known as Raqqa, the number of U.S. troops "co-located" with the local proxy forces as they sought to administer the coup de grace to ISIS's physical state rose to 2,000, much as it rose to 5,000 in Iraq in 2016. It was at this time that Trump finally parted with Obama and put his imprimatur on the war (a point that has been surprisingly missed in his statements trumpeting his exclusive role in leading the war on ISIS). As stated above, Obama walked a fine line in leveraging the PKK-linked YPG Kurds and the SDF umbrella group as proxies to degrade and destroy the Syrian half of the caliphate. Obama cautiously avoided offending Turkey (which has NATO's second-largest army and saw the PKK Kurdish rebels in Turkey as its primary threat) by limiting the weapons supplied to the YPG/SDF to 50 tons — small arms, grenades and communication equipment.¹⁰⁷

This somewhat mollified the Turks, who feared that, if the United States supplied weapons like anti-tank guided missiles to the YPG/SDF Kurds, such weapons could be used by the Kurdish rebels against

Turkey's Leopard main-battle tanks. The Pentagon, however, worried that the lightly armed SDF would suffer high losses and be stalled by ISIS fighters defending Raqqa if they did not have heavy weapons. When CENTCOM asked Trump to supply such weapons to the SDF in 2017, he put aside Obama's earlier concerns vis-à-vis the Turks and ordered the heavy weapons to be sent to the region. This infuriated Turkey, which subsequently launched a punitive invasion of the Syrian Kurds' westernmost enclave of Afrin, killed hundreds and ethnically cleansed thousands in 2016. Despite the Kurds' terrible losses at the hands of the invading Turks, they certainly assisted the Pentagon in its mission to take Raqqa. The support ordered by Trump to the SDF now included, for the first time, helmets, ballistic vests, mortars, anti-tank weapons, heavy machine guns, Humvees, Stryker attack vehicles and engineering equipment to enable the lightly armed SDF to cope with urban warfare. These weapons doubtless accelerated the battle of Raqqa, which was concluded in October 2016. This decision to approve the shipment of heavy weapons, combined with his continued relaxing of the rules of engagement begun by Obama, represents Trump's most notable impact on the UCW campaign to roll ISIS back.

That is, until Trump's fateful December 13, 2018, decision to (in Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell's words) "precipitously" decide that ISIS was all of a sudden "defeated" and that the approximately 2,000 U.S. forces in Syria needed to come home "now" and in "30 days." The Kurdish-led SDF, which lost 11,000 fighters to ISIS far beyond its north Syrian homeland of Rojava in furtherance of its trusted American ally's objectives, was jettisoned by the U.S. president in October

2019. He betrayed the SDF in a widely condemned Mission Accomplished-style tweet that staunch pro-Trump Republican Senator Graham would declare to be “a stain on the honor of the United States” and the “stupidest fucking thing I have ever heard.”¹⁰⁸

While he delayed his abandonment of the Kurds, Trump green lit in early October 2019 an invasion of the hard-fighting Kurds’ homeland by Turkey. As the Turks prepared to invade the lightly armed Kurds’ ancestral lands with jihadist surrogates (including former ISIS members), Trump ordered U.S. troops in Syria to retreat to Iraq and abandon their bases and counterterrorism outposts. As shocked U.S. troops, who had grown close to their Kurdish comrades over four years of fighting shoulder to shoulder, rushed to fulfill Trump’s retreat order, a wide sense of betrayal permeated the pro-American, pro-Christian-minority, pro-democracy, pro-women’s-rights Kurdish-led SDF and North Syrian Democratic Federation of Rojava.

When I questioned retired four-star Marine Corps General John R. Allen (who served as special presidential envoy to the Global Coalition Against ISIS) about the significance of Turkish threats to America’s Kurdish allies in light of Trump’s abandonment of them, he unequivocally described the strategic imperative for the United States. to stand by its surrogate force in Syria:

We owe them [the Syrian Kurds] a lot. We, the United States, can’t walk away from another client, one that we supported in terms of a strategy to beat the Islamic State. Walking away from them will make it very difficult the next time we want to

apply our unique system of security assistance. ... Nobody is going to trust us. Anything that conveys an absence of long-term commitment to support them, to provide stabilization, I think prompts the Turks to make operational discussions [about invading Kurdish lands].

Legendary spymaster and counterterrorist Sir John Scarlett, the former head of Britain’s MI6 foreign intelligence service, concurred, stressing the essential need for America to stand by its Kurdish allies, who sacrificed thousands of their people for the common goal of ridding the world of ISIS:

The point about the United States being loyal and consistent to a vital ally who has been such an operational help is really fundamental. There are plenty of people in the Middle East saying, “you can’t count on the U.S., they are there one minute and gone the next. When Moscow [by contrast] is a steadfast ally.” I have heard that and it really resonates.

Outrage at Trump’s betrayal of America’s stalwart anti-ISIS allies was swift and came from all quarters. The most notable came from the widely respected Mattis. The four-star Marine general refused to consider abandoning the Pentagon’s Kurdish allies to the Turks, who have a history of supporting jihadist extremists in Syria. After failing to convince the president to stay the course, as he had in April 2018, when Trump previously demanded a sudden U.S. troop withdrawal, Mattis (who had extensive combat experience in the region) infuriated Trump by submitting his resignation letter. In it, he chastised Trump: “While the U.S. remains the indispensable nation in the free world,

we cannot protect our interests or serve that role effectively without maintaining strong alliances and showing respect to those allies.” The Pentagon was horrified by Trump’s impulsive agreement with the Islamist president of Turkey to surrender their remarkable gains in Syria that had come with just two American deaths and abandon their Kurdish allies to a looming Turkish invasion. Votel told Congress he had not been informed of Trump’s retreat decision in advance. Trump’s decision made no strategic sense in the war on a resilient ISIS, which, far from being “obliterated” (as Trump falsely claimed), was shifting to insurgency as its state collapsed under Kurdish assaults.

That was a point that Trump inadvertently made when he showed his maps to the press corps, contradicting his sweeping claims that ISIS was “obliterated.” Trump’s second map showed wide areas of ISIS insurgency in gray in Iraq and Syria, a point he deliberately overlooked while bragging about his successes. Despite Trump’s premature triumphalism about ISIS’s purported demise, the Pentagon estimated that the surprisingly resilient terrorist group still had as many as 30,000 die-hard followers and had reverted to its roots as a guerrilla insurgency.¹⁰⁹ An alarming “World Wide Threat Assessment” by the 16 U.S. intelligence agencies, released in January 2019, stated, “ISIS still commands thousands of fighters in Iraq and Syria, and it maintains eight branches, more than a dozen networks, and thousands of dispersed supporters around the world, despite significant leadership and territorial losses.”¹¹⁰ The United Nations agreed with the Pentagon’s estimate of 30,000 remaining ISIS fighters in the core lands of Iraq and Syria. It found that ISIS’s affiliates in Afghanistan, Libya and the Sinai also had

4,000, 3,000 and 1,000 hardcore fighters, respectively. Neither the core group nor its affiliates show any sign of ending their guerrilla campaigns.

CONCLUSION

Since the dawn of time, leaders have tried to downplay their predecessors’ military accomplishments. Pharaoh Ramses, the first ruler to acquire the appellation “The Great,” was notorious for erasing the names of previous pharaohs on monuments dedicated to their battles and replacing them with his own. Over the centuries, kings and presidents have been what Fox News calls “glory thieves” in a quest to shape their legacy. Certainly, Trump’s systematic efforts to erase his predecessors from official history follow this precedent. Trump’s map-based claims to having single-handedly overseen the defeat of ISIS and misleading, self-aggrandizing statements, such as his comment, “on terrorism, in Iraq and Syria, we’ve taken back almost 100 percent, in a very short period of time, of the land that they took. And it all took place since our election,” clearly fit this pattern.¹¹¹ But Soviet-style disinformation has no place in a democracy, where an objective understanding of history is an urgent prerogative for an informed citizenry. And there are few issues as important for citizens to be accurately informed about as the nation’s wars.

As has been demonstrated, the role of the Trump administration in defeating ISIS has been drastically and systematically inflated, at the Obama administration’s expense, in a top-down disinformation campaign led by the president himself. One can speculate on why the Obama administration did not trumpet its victories over ISIS in the way Trump has done. Certainly, the Democratic Party has many anti-war

elements who were infuriated by Obama's "non-wars," and this may explain his reticence to brag. However, it is clear that the Obama administration laid the foundation for a successful UCW campaign that ultimately defeated the caliphate's physical state — but not its insurgency, despite Trump's claims to having "obliterated" ISIS.

This rollback was achieved in less than five years with only a handful of American deaths and at a fraction of Bush's \$2 trillion Operation Iraqi Freedom of 2003–11. The Middle East Institute was to provide a retrospective on the UCW strategy implemented by the Obama administration:

The U.S.-led operation to defeat ISIS in Syria is the most successful unconventional military campaign in history. What began as a quiet deal in 2014 between U.S. Special Forces and a smattering of the People's Protection Units (YPG) to defend the town of Kobani on the Turkish-Syrian border grew into a four-year coalition partnership to support a nearly semi-autonomous force through air support, intelligence and on-the-ground presence.¹¹²

This UCW campaign waged from August 2014 to January 2017 under Obama was remarkably effective at rolling back the ISIS caliphate in both Iraq and Syria. The caliphate lost half of its land, all of its international borders, much of its cyber influence, its freedom of movement, oil infrastructure, taxable populations, dams, leadership, rank-and-file fighters, its Libyan fallback base and revenue. While Trump put his imprimatur on the campaign by giving the Kurdish-led SDF much-needed heavy weaponry to take Raqqa and increased air support in conjunction

with this final major battle, he followed Obama's successful UCW blueprint to a tee. By so doing, Trump oversaw roughly the same amount of liberation of ISIS territory as his predecessor.

Trump did this not by implementing some bold new secret plan or by unleashing a military that had been somehow "held back" from the fight by stifling rules of engagement, as he bragged. And he did not oversee the destruction of the final half of the caliphate by somehow halting White House micro-managing of the daily pulse of battles. He did so by following Obama's and the Pentagon's effective, battle-proven UCW proxy-warfare strategy. Far from "not winning," as candidate Trump claimed, under Obama the generals were winning. Following a blueprint designed by the casualty-phobic Obama, who had come to rely upon "light footprint" UCW-proxy wars around the globe, the generals were winning on every front. ISIS was on the retreat on every front when Trump assumed the White House, from the destruction of the cyber-caliphate to the ongoing collapse of the defense of the diamond in Caliph al-Baghdadi's turban, Mosul.

To artificially start the clock for the war on ISIS with his election, as Trump did when showing his selective snapshot maps to the press corps, did a grave disservice to history — and to those brave American military personnel who fought alongside the stalwart Kurdish-led SDF, Iraqi security forces and Kurdish Peshmerga allies to stop the ISIS steamroller and then launch their own successful counteroffensive, long before Trump took office. Among those who played a role in this successful UCW campaign to drive back ISIS under Obama was Naval Special Warfare Operator 1st Class Charles Keating IV. He died on May 3, 2016, in northern Iraq in a hail

of gunfire. The Navy SEAL was advising Kurdish forces when he and other U.S. troops comprising a rescue force joined a battle that had been raging for two hours against 125 Islamic State fighters. The Gold Star hero is the face of the campaign to defeat ISIS — far more than Trump, who claimed, “I’m the one who did the capturing [of ISIS fighters],” or Obama, for that matter.¹¹³

Sadly, history would seem to indicate that Trump’s most lasting contribution to the ongoing war on the down-but-far-

from-out ISIS insurgent force of thousands of die-hard jihadists may have been his decision to impulsively withdraw U.S. troops from northeastern Syria without any discussion with his generals or NATO and Kurdish SDF/Iraqi allies. In so doing, the president, who has been so active in trumpeting his own success in defeating ISIS, undercut the Pentagon’s ongoing effort to fight a resurgent terrorist threat and breathed new life into an ISIS insurgency dedicated to outlasting the “fickle Crucifixer invaders.”

* I would like to thank Carol Hansen for her vital role in this article and Robert Troy Souza for his assistance, as well as Miriam Braz Leite and all those in the Middle East and United States involved in the campaign to defeat ISIS who granted me interviews.

¹ Deb Riechmann, “Timetable of Trump’s Pullout from Syria Being Questioned,” *Fox News*, December 21, 2018, <https://www.foxnews.com/us/timetable-of-trumps-pullout-from-syria-being-questioned>

² Adam Shaw, “Trump Displays Syria Map Detailing ISIS Territory Loss, Vows Terror Network ‘Will Be Gone by Tonight,’” *Fox News*, March 20, 2019 <https://www.foxnews.com/politics/trump-wields-syria-map-promises-isis-will-be-gone-by-tonight>.

³ Donald Trump (@realDonaldTrump), “ISIS Caliphate two years ago in red vs. ISIS Caliphate TODAY. (Was even worse in November 2016 before I took office),” Twitter post, March 20, 2019, <https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/1108479818000224256>.

⁴ Meridith McGraw, “President Donald Trump, Showing a Map, Declares ISIS Will Be ‘Gone by Tonight,’” *ABC News*, March 20, 2018, <https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/president-donald-trump-showing-map-declares-isis-tonight/story?id=61819010>.

⁵ Department of State (@StateDept), Twitter post, February 6, 2019, <https://twitter.com/statedept/status/1093012360871129088>.

⁶ Glenn Kessler, “Trump Claims He Has Done More by Far than Obama to Defeat ISIS,” *The Washington Post*, October 25, 2017, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/fact-checker/wp/2017/10/25/trumps-claim-that-hes-done-by-far-more-than-obama-in-the-fight-against-isis/>.

⁷ “A Fact Check: Trump on Trade, Islamic State, Vets, Clinton,” *CBS News*, March 24, 2018, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/ap-fact-check-trump-on-trade-islamic-state-vets-clinton/>.

⁸ Donald Trump (@realDonaldTrump), Twitter post, February 1, 2019, <https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/1091326078323486722?lang=en>.

⁹ David Beavers, “Trump Determined to ‘Bring Our Folks Back Home’ From Syria, Afghanistan,” *Politico*, January 3, 2019, <https://www.politico.com/story/2019/02/03/trump-troops-syria-afghanistan-1144285>.

¹⁰ Pam Key, “Trump: Our Generals Don’t Know Much Because They Are Not Winning,” *Breitbart*, June 5, 2016, <https://www.breitbart.com/clips/2016/06/05/trump-generals-dont-know-much-theyre-not-winning-isis/>.

¹¹ “Generals Don’t Know Much About ISIS,” *CBS News*, June 5, 2016, <https://www.cbsnews.com/video/>

trump-u-s-generals-dont-know-much-about-isis/.

¹² Chris Cillizza, "The Dangerous Anger of Donald Trump," *The Washington Post*, November 13, 2015, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2015/11/13/the-remarkably-unappealing-anger-of-donald-trump/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.305b6e3d6b8b.

¹³ Andrew Bacevich, "Leave it to the Generals," *The New Republic*, November 8, 2017, <https://newrepublic.com/article/145418/leave-generals>.

¹⁴ Ariel Cohen, "Trump Says He Has a Secret Plan to Beat the Islamic State," *Washington Examiner*, April 23, 2016, <https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/trump-says-he-has-a-secret-plan-to-beat-the-islamic-state>.

¹⁵ Eliza Collins, "Donald Trump's Three Plans to Save the World," *USA Today*, September 9, 2016, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/onpolitics/2016/09/09/donald-trump-secret-plans/90123482/>.

¹⁶ Louis Nelson, "Trump Takes Credit for ISIS 'Giving Up,'" *Politico*, October 17, 2017, <https://www.politico.com/story/2017/10/17/trump-isis-giving-up-243870>.

¹⁷ "A Presidential Epic Fail: Watch Trump Try to Explain His Syria Policy," *Haaretz*, April 25, 2018, <https://www.haaretz.com/middle-east-news/syria/trump-tries-to-explain-his-syria-policy-and-fails-full-transcript-1.6029602>; and "Wrong About ISIS," *Weekly Standard*, September 26, 2018, <https://www.washington-examiner.com/weekly-standard/trump-says-isis-is-defeated-hes-wrong>.

¹⁸ Maegan Vazquez, "Trump Says He Is the One Who Did the Capturing in Syria," *CNN*, October 21, 2019, <https://www.cnn.com/2019/10/21/politics/syria-cabinet-meeting-donald-trump/index.html>.

¹⁹ Leo Shane III, "Trump Blasts Mattis as 'the World's Most Overrated General,'" *Military Times*, October 17, 2019, <https://www.militarytimes.com/news/pentagon-congress/2019/10/17/trump-blasts-mattis-as-the-worlds-most-overrated-general/>.

²⁰ Brian Glyn Williams and Robert Souza, "Operation 'Retribution': Putin's Military Campaign in Syria," *Middle East Policy* 23, no. 4 (Winter 2016), http://www.brianglynwilliams.com/pdfs/Williams_and_Souza.pdf.

²¹ John Hudson, "Top U.S. Official: Islamic State Has Lost 47 Percent of Its Territory in Iraq," *Foreign Policy*, June 28, 2016, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2016/06/28/top-u-s-official-islamic-state-has-lost-47-percent-of-its-territory-in-iraq/>; and Joel Gehrke, "Mike Pompeo's State Department Mocks U.S. Anti-ISIS Envoy over Resignation: 'Good Job, Brett,'" *Washington Examiner*, April 3, 2019, <https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/news/mike-pompeos-state-department-mocks-us-anti-isis-envoy-over-brett-mcgurk-resignation-good-job-brett>.

²² Peter Neumann, "Don't Follow the Money," *Foreign Affairs*, August 2017, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2017-06-13/dont-follow-money>.

²³ Pamela Engel, "ISIS' Caliphate Is Shrinking, and the Terror Group Is about to Lose One of Its Biggest Cities," *Business Insider*, October 17, 2016, <https://finance.yahoo.com/news/isis-caliphate-shrinking-terror-group-221154529.html?>.

²⁴ "A Fact Check: Trump on Trade, Islamic State, Vets, Clinton," *CBS News*, March 24, 2018, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/ap-fact-check-trump-on-trade-islamic-state-vets-clinton/>; (emphasis mine).

²⁵ For a State Department map of ISIS territorial losses by December 2016, just before Trump took office, see here in light green: https://content.govdelivery.com/attachments/USSTATEBPA/2017/12/21/file_attachments/933854/map.jpg.

²⁶ "Strikes in Iraq and Syria," Department of Defense, http://www.defense.gov/News/Special-Reports/0814_Inherent-Resolve.

²⁷ Brian Beutler, "Donald Trump Will Turn to Ignorant Generals Whom He's Smarter than to Destroy ISIS, Bigly," *The New Republic*, September 7, 2016, <https://newrepublic.com/article/136603/donald-trump-will-turn-ignorant-generals-hes-smarter-destroy-isis-bigly>.

²⁸ "Department of Defense Press Briefing by Col. Dorrian via Teleconference from Baghdad, Iraq," Department of Defense, February 22, 2017, <https://www.defense.gov/News/Transcripts/Transcript-View/Article/1091450/departament-of-defense-press-briefing-by-col-dorrian-via-teleconference-from-bag/>.

²⁹ Shane Dixon Kavanaugh, "ISIS by 2015's End: Battered, but by no Means Beaten," *Vocativ*, January 1, 2016, <https://www.vocativ.com/authors/shane-dixon-kavanaugh/index.html>.

³⁰ Kevin Liptak, "U.S. Says 75% of ISIS Fighters Killed," *CNN*, December 14, 2016, <https://www.cnn.com/2016/12/14/politics/white-house-isis-numbers/index.html>.

³¹ "Opening Remarks at Counter-ISIL Defense Minister Meeting," Speech, Department of Defense, <http://www.defense.gov/News/Speeches/Speech-View/Article/850519/opening-remarks-at-counter-isis-defense>.

minister-meeting.

³² Ryan Browne, "U.S. Special Ops Commander: Killed More than 60,000 ISIS," *CNN*, February 14, 2017, <https://www.cnn.com/2017/02/14/politics/isis-60000-fighters-killed/index.html>.

³³ Kylie Maclellan, "Isis Militants Being Killed 'at a Rate They Simply Can't Sustain,' UK General Says," *Independent*, February 28, 2017, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/isis-killed-at-rate-they-cannot-sustain-iraq-mosul-major-general-rupert-jones-a7604771.html>.

³⁴ Nick P. Walsh, "As Donald Trump Takes Over, A Diminished ISIS Awaits," *CNN*, January 18, 2017, <https://www.cnn.com/2017/01/18/middleeast/isis-loses-territory-in-iraq-syria/index.html>.

³⁵ Nicole Gaouette, "Obama Has Degraded ISIS. Can Trump Finish the Job?," *CNN*, December 14, 2016, <https://www.cnn.com/2016/12/14/politics/isis-degraded-trump-policy/index.html>.

³⁶ Zack Beauchamp, "A Month Ago, ISIS's Advance Looked Unstoppable. Now It's Been Stopped," *Vox*, October 28, 2014, <https://www.vox.com/2014/10/28/7079695/isis-iraq-syria-defeat>.

³⁷ "Caliphate in Decline: An Estimate of Islamic State's Financial Fortunes," The International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence (ICSR), <https://icsr.info/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/ICSR-Report-Caliphate-in-Decline-An-Estimate-of-Islamic-States-Financial-Fortunes.pdf>

³⁸ Kristina Wong, "General: 45,000 ISIS fighters Killed in Two Years," *The Hill*, August 11, 2016, <https://thehill.com/policy/defense/291179-general-isis-fighters-becoming-easier-to-kill>.

³⁹ Kevin Liptak, "U.S. Says 75% of ISIS Fighters Killed," *CNN*, December 14, 2016, <https://www.cnn.com/2016/12/14/politics/white-house-isis-numbers/index.html>.

⁴⁰ "America's Wars," U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, https://www.va.gov/opa/publications/factsheets/fs_america_s_wars.pdf.

⁴¹ "AFCENT Air Power Summary," AFCENT.AF.Mil, <https://www.afcent.af.mil/Portals/82/Documents/Airpower%20summary/Airpower%20Summary%20-%20February%202018.pdf?ver=2018-03-19-034424-470>.

⁴² Martin Chulov, "ISIS Wife Reveals Role in Helping CIA Hunt for Baghdadi," *The Guardian*, May 31, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/may/31/isis-wife-reveals-role-in-helping-cia-hunt-for-baghdadi>.

⁴³ Lisa Ferdinando, "OIR Spokesman: Coalition Cripples ISIL Oil Distribution," Department of Defense News, November 18, 2015, <https://dod.defense.gov/News/Article/Article/630352/oir-spokesman-coalition-cripples-isil-oil-distribution/>.

⁴⁴ Thomas Gibbons-Neff, "Number of Foreign Fighters Entering Iraq and Syria Drops by 90 Percent, Pentagon Says," *The Washington Post*, April 26, 2016, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/checkpoint/wp/2016/04/26/number-of-foreign-fighters-entering-iraq-and-syria-drops-by-90-percent-pentagon-says/>.

⁴⁵ "Iraq's New Threat: Calamity from Falling Oil Prices," *The New York Times*, January 31, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/01/world/middleeast/battered-by-war-iraq-now-faces-calamity-from-dropping-oil-prices.html>.

⁴⁶ Robert Spencer, "ISIS Caliphate: Dream Over," *Front Page*, March 22, 2019, <https://www.frontpagemag.com/fpm/2019/03/isis-caliphate-dream-over-robert-spencer/>.

⁴⁷ Brett McGurk, "Update on D-ISIS Campaign" State Department, December 21, 2017, <https://www.state.gov/update-on-the-d-isis-campaign/>; and Kathleen J. McInnis, "Coalition Contributions to Countering the Islamic State," Congressional Research Service, August 24, 2016, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/natsec/R44135.pdf>.

⁴⁸ Kevin Liptak, "Obama: ISIS Strategy Moving Forward with a Great Sense of Urgency," *CNN*, November 15, 2015, <https://www.cnn.com/2015/12/14/politics/obama-pentagon-isis-strategy/index.html>.

⁴⁹ David Zucchino, "Why the Iraqi Army Can't Fight Despite \$25 Billion in U.S. Aid," *Los Angeles Times*, November 3, 2014, <https://www.latimes.com/world/middleeast/la-fg-iraq-army-20141103-story.html>.

⁵⁰ Eric Schmitt, "U.S.-Backed Militia Opens Drive on ISIS Capital in Syria," *The New York Times*, November 6, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/07/world/middleeast/us-backed-militia-opens-drive-on-isis-capital-in-syria.html>.

⁵¹ Terri Moon Cronk, "Counter-ISIL Campaign Shows Strong Progress, Admiral Says," *DOD News*, April 6, 2016, <http://www.defense.gov/News-Article-View/Article/714995/counter-isil-campaign-shows-strong-progress-admiral-says>.

⁵² Kevin Liptak, "U.S. Says 75% of ISIS Fighters Killed," *CNN*, December 14, 2016, <https://www.cnn.com/2016/12/14/politics/white-house-isis-numbers/index.html>.

⁵³ Jim Miklaszewski and Cory Siemaszko, "'Millions' in ISIS Cash Destroyed in U.S. Airstrike," *NBC News*,

January 11, 2016, <https://www.nbcnews.com/storyline/isis-terror/millions-isis-cash-destroyed-u-s-airstrike-n494261>.

⁵⁴ “Syrian Kurdish Family Names Newborn for Obama,” *Al Arabiya*, October 25, 2014, <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/variety/2014/10/25/Syrian-Kurdish-mother-names-new-baby-Obama-.html>.

⁵⁵ Interview Carried Out January 15, 2015 at Kurdistan Regional Government Security Headquarters.

⁵⁶ Rashid Karadaghi, “For the Kurds, No Friends but the Americans,” *Huffington Post*, November 3, 2014, <https://www.huffpost.com/entry/no-friends-but-the-america>.

⁵⁷ Dominique Soguel, “On Turkish Syrian Border a Baby Named Obama Is Born,” *The Christian Science Monitor*, October 15, 2014, <https://www.csmonitor.com/World/Middle-East/2014/1215/On-Turkish-Syrian-border-a-baby-Obama-is-born>.

⁵⁸ Rashid Karadaghi, “For the Kurds, No Friends but the Americans,” *Huffington Post*, November 3, 2014, <https://www.huffpost.com/entry/no-friends-but-the-america>.

⁵⁹ Ken Dilanian, “Despite Bombings, Islamic State No Weaker Than a Year Ago,” *Associated Press*, July 31, 2015, <https://apnews.com/990c86ba77604586a8a9e1bf5396cec1>.

⁶⁰ Linda Qiu, “Can Trump Take Credit for Defeating a Waning Islamic State?,” *The New York Times*, October 17, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/17/us/politics/trump-islamic-state-raqqa-fact-check.html>.

⁶¹ Sirwan Kajjo, “Kurdish-Arab Forces in Syria Make Gains in Raqqa Province,” *Voice of America*, December 21, 2016, <https://www.voanews.com/extremism-watch/kurdish-arab-forces-syria-make-gains-raqqa-province>.

⁶² Qassim Abdul-Zahra, “Al Qaeda Making a Comeback Officials Say,” *USA Today*, October 9, 2012, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2012/10/09/al-qaeda-iraq/1623297/>.

⁶³ Brian Glyn Williams, *The Last Warlord: The Life and Legend of Dostum, the Afghan Commander Who Led U.S. Special Forces to Topple the Taliban Regime* (Chicago Review Press Incorporated, 2016).

⁶⁴ Brian Glyn Williams, “Report from the Field. General Dostum and the Mazar i Sharif Campaign: New Light on the Role of Warlords in Operation Enduring Freedom,” *Small Wars and Insurgencies* 21, no. 4 (December 2010), [http://www.brianglynwilliams.com/pdfs/930854297\(3\).pdf](http://www.brianglynwilliams.com/pdfs/930854297(3).pdf).

⁶⁵ Brian Glyn Williams, “Writing the Dostumname: Field Research with an Uzbek Warlord in Afghan Turkistan,” *Central Eurasian Studies Review* 6, no. 1/2 (Fall 2007): 3.

⁶⁶ Brian Glyn Williams, Interview with General John Mulholland, Boston, January 2018.

⁶⁷ Brian Glyn Williams, *Predators: The CIA’s Drone War on Al Qaeda* (Washington DC: Potomac Books, 2013); and Brian Glyn Williams, “A History of the World’s First Drone War,” *History News Network*, September 4, 2013, <https://historynewsnetwork.org/article/153148>.

⁶⁸ “U.S. Drone Strikes in Pakistan,” *The Drone War in Pakistan*, New America Foundation, <https://www.newamerica.org/in-depth/americas-counterterrorism-wars/pakistan/>.

⁶⁹ Richard Weitz, “Obama’s Special Forces Fascination,” *The Diplomat*, January 31, 2012, <https://thediplomat.com/2012/01/obama-special-forces-fascination/>.

⁷⁰ “Transcript: President Obama’s Speech on Combating ISIS and Terrorism,” *CNN*, September 10, 2014, <https://www.cnn.com/2014/09/10/politics/transcript-obama-syria-isis-speech/index.html>.

⁷¹ “President Obama’s ISIS Strategy Falling Short,” *Fox News*, February 8, 2015, <https://www.foxnews.com/transcript/president-obamas-isis-strategy-falling-short-plus-dr-ben-carson-on-measles-outbreak-vaccines>.

⁷² Rukmini Callimachi and Eric Schmitt, “Splitting with Trump Over Syria, American Leading ISIS Fight Steps Down,” *The New York Times*, December 22, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/22/world/brett-mcgurk-isis-resign.html>.

⁷³ “National Security Strategy,” NSA Archives, February 2015, <http://nssarchive.us/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/2015.pdf>.

⁷⁴ Andreas Krieg, “Externalizing the Burden of War: The Obama Doctrine and U.S. Foreign Policy in the Middle East,” *International Affairs* 92, no. 1 (2016): 97–113 https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/publications/ia/INTA92_1_05_Krieg.pdf.

⁷⁵ Brian Glyn Williams, “They Will Kill Us All! Critically Assessing ISIS Fear Mongering by U.S. Politicians,” *Huffington Post*, November 18, 2014, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/they-will-kill-us-all-crisis_b_6174566.

⁷⁶ Thomas Joscelyn, “Baghdadi Claims ‘Infidel Nations’ Are Afraid of ‘Final War,’” *FDD’s Long War Journal*, December 27, 2015, <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2015/12/baghdadi-claims-infidel-nations->

are-afraid-of-final-war.php.

⁷⁷ Alissa J. Rubin, Tim Arango, and Helene Cooper, "U.S. Jets and Drones Attack Militants in Iraq, Hoping to Stop Advance," *The New York Times*, August 8, 2014, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/08/09/world/middle-east/iraq.html>.

⁷⁸ John Hall and Jenny Awford, "Has Kobane Become a Vortex of Death for ISIS?" *Daily Mail*, October 25, 2015, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2798266/raining-fire-isis-amazing-picture-captures-moment-u-s-bomb-lands-heart-kobani-kurdish-leader-warns-airstrikes-not-defeat-jihadists.html>.

⁷⁹ Matt Stout, "Critics Say Obama Plan for Syria Is 'Too Little, Too Late,'" *Boston Herald*, October 27, 2015, <https://www.bostonherald.com/2015/10/31/critics-say-obama-plan-for-syria-is-too-little-too-late/>.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Peter Baker, Helene Cooper, and David E. Sanger, "Obama Sends Special Operations Forces to Help Fight ISIS in Syria," *The New York Times*, October 30, 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/31/world/obama-will-send-forces-to-syria-to-help-fight-the-islamic-state.html>.

⁸² "Kurdish Fighters Besiege ISIS Gunmen in Hassakeh City," *Associated Press*, July 16, 2015, <https://ap-news.com/ea9a83ee2afc4a2291a5dccc0c08100>.

⁸³ Aron Lund, "Syria's Kurds at Center of America's Anti-Jihad Strategy," Syria In Crisis, Carnegie Middle East Center, December 5, 2015, <https://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/62158>.

⁸⁴ Lucas Tomlinson, "U.S. Military Airdrops 50 Tons of Ammo for Syrian Fighters, After Training Mission Ends," *Fox News*, October 12, 2015, <https://www.foxnews.com/politics/us-military-airdrops-50-tons-of-ammo-for-syrian-fighters-after-training-mission-ends>.

⁸⁵ Eric Schmitt and Michael R. Gordon, "U.S. Aims to Put More Pressure on ISIS in Syria," *The New York Times*, October 4, 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/05/world/middleeast/us-aims-to-put-more-pressure-on-isis-in-syria.html>.

⁸⁶ Kevin Baron and Defense One, "How the Military Sees the Fight on ISIS," *The Atlantic*, January 18, 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2017/01/obama-doctrine-military-trump/513470/>.

⁸⁷ Nicole Gaouette and Barbara Starr, "Trump Is Calling for 30,000 troops. Would That Defeat ISIS?" *CNN*, March 11, 2016, <https://www.cnn.com/2016/03/11/politics/donald-trump-30000-troops-isis/index.html>.

⁸⁸ Zack Beauchamp, "In the State of the Union, Trump Took Credit for Defeating ISIS That He Doesn't Deserve," *Vox*, January 30, 2018, <https://www.vox.com/world/2018/1/30/16945312/state-of-the-union-2018-isis>.

⁸⁹ Glenn Kessler, "Trump Claims He Has Done More by Far Than Obama to Defeat ISIS," *The Washington Post*, October 25, 2017, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/fact-checker/wp/2017/10/25/trumps-claim-that-hes-done-by-far-more-than-obama-in-the-fight-against-isis/>.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Robert Farley, "Trump Takes too Much Credit on ISIS," FactCheck Posts, FactCheck, March 22, 2018, <https://www.factcheck.org/2018/03/trump-takes-too-much-credit-on-isis/>.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ "Mosul Campaign Day 61, Dec 16, 2016," *Musings on Iraq*, December 17, 2017, <http://musingsoniraq.blogspot.com/2016/12/mosul-campaign-day-61-dec-16-2016.html>.

⁹⁴ Kathryn Watson, "Fight against ISIS Has Shifted to 'Annihilation Tactics,' Mattis Says," *CBS News*, May 28, 2017, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/fight-against-isis-has-shifted-to-annihilation-tactics-mattis-says/>.

⁹⁵ Stephen Losey, "Airstrikes Against ISIS Hit Highest Point of the War," *Air Force Times*, April 14, 2017, <https://www.airforcetimes.com/news/your-air-force/2017/04/14/airstrikes-against-isis-hit-highest-point-of-war/>.

⁹⁶ Christopher Woody, "Trump Seems to be Delivering on His Campaign Promise to 'Bomb the Hell Out of ISIS,'" *Business Insider*, April 17, 2017, <https://www.businessinsider.com/trump-airstrike-total-against-isis-in-iraq-and-syria-2017-4>.

⁹⁷ Louis Nelson, "Trump Takes Credit for ISIS 'Giving Up,'" *Politico*, October 17, 2017, <https://www.politico.com/story/2017/10/17/trump-isis-giving-up-243870>.

⁹⁸ Nicole Gaouette, "Obama Has Degraded ISIS. Can Trump Finish the Job," *CNN*, December 14, 2016, <https://www.cnn.com/2016/12/14/politics/isis-degraded-trump-policy/index.html>.

⁹⁹ "With ISIS Caliphate Defeated, Syrian Democratic Forces Begin a New Chapter," *Military.com*, April 1, 2019, <https://www.military.com/daily-news/2019/04/01/isis-caliphate-defeated-syrian-democratic-forces->

begin-new-chapter.html.

¹⁰⁰ Susannah George and Balint Szlanko, "U.S. Changes Rules of Engagement for Mosul Fight in Iraq," *Associated Press*, February 24, 2017, <https://apnews.com/f084b4f094f440058e6b58318a67adce/us-changes-rules-engagement-mosul-fight-iraq>.

¹⁰¹ Josh Rogin and Eli Lake, "Military Hates White House 'Micromanagement' of ISIS War," *Daily Beast*, April 17, 2017, <https://www.thedailybeast.com/military-hates-white-house-micromanagement-of-isis-war>.

¹⁰² Bryan Schatz, "More Bombs, More Boots: The U.S. War on ISIS Is Heating Up," *Mother Jones*, February 5, 2016, <https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2016/02/united-states-war-isis-syria-iraq-libya/>.

¹⁰³ Peter Bergen, "Bergen: It Wasn't Trump but This General's Elite Soldiers Who Defeated ISIS," *CNN*, December 16, 2017, <https://www.cnn.com/2017/12/15/opinions/it-wasnt-trump-but-this-generals-elite-soldiers-who-defeated-isis-bergen/index.html>.

¹⁰⁴ Jim Michaels, "Trump Takes Credit for ISIS Defeats. Does He Deserve It," *USA Today*, December 7, 2017, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2017/12/07/trump-takes-credit-isis-defeats-does-he-deserve/931657001/>.

¹⁰⁵ Ilan Goldenberg, "Obama's ISIS Policy Is Working for Trump," *The Washington Post*, January 25, 2018, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/posteverything/wp/2018/01/25/obamas-isis-policy-is-working-for-trump/>.

¹⁰⁶ Lucas Tomlinson, "U.S. Military Airdrops 50 Tons of Ammo for Syrian Fighters, After Training Mission Ends," *Fox News*, October 12, 2015, <https://www.foxnews.com/politics/us-military-airdrops-50-tons-of-ammo-for-syrian-fighters-after-training-mission-ends>.

¹⁰⁷ Jaime McIntyre, "Lindsey Graham Prevails, As Trump Is Persuaded to Leave 200 U.S. Troops in Syria," *Washington Examiner*, February 22, 2019, <https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/lindsey-graham-prevails-as-trump-is-persuaded-to-leave-200-us-troops-in-syria>.

¹⁰⁸ "Lead Inspector General Report to the United States Congress: Overseas Contingency Operations," Department of Defense, April 1 - June 30, 2018, https://media.defense.gov/2018/Aug/07/2001951441/-1/-1/1/FY2018_LIG_OCO_OIR3_JUN2018_508.PDF.

¹⁰⁹ Daniel R. Coats, "World Wide Threat of the U.S. Intelligence Community," Director of National Intelligence, January 29, 2019, <https://www.dni.gov/files/ODNI/documents/2019-ATA-SFR---SSCI.pdf>.

¹¹⁰ "A Fact Check: Trump on Trade, Islamic State, Vets, Clinton," *CBS News*, March 24, 2018, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/ap-fact-check-trump-on-trade-islamic-state-vets-clinton/>.

¹¹¹ Robin Wright, "How Trump Betrayed the General Who Defeated ISIS," *The New Yorker*, April 4, 2019, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/dispatch/how-trump-betrayed-the-general-who-defeated-isis>.

¹¹² Maegan Vazquez, "Trump Says He Is the One Who Did the Capturing in Syria," *CNN*, October 21, 2019, <https://www.cnn.com/2019/10/21/politics/syria-cabinet-meeting-donald-trump/index.html>.