Time for a Comprehensive Strategy Against Islamic Terrorism in 2016

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Introduction

The White House acknowledges many at home and abroad feel that President Barack Obama has failed to craft and implement a coherent plan of action against Islamic terrorism. Yet rather than reassess policy, in the wake of the globalization of terrorists groups and their most recent attacks in Paris and San Bernardino, Obama believes it necessary to focus on better explaining the existing one to the pubic.[[1]]

On 6 December 2015, the US president outlined a four-part counter-terrorism strategy during a primetime address: "First, our military will continue to hunt down terrorist plotters … taking out ISIL leaders … Second, we will continue to provide training and equipment to … Iraqi and Syrian forces fighting ISIL on the ground … Third, we're working with friends and allies to stop ISIL's operations … Fourth, with American leadership, the international community has begun to establish a process—and timeline—to pursue ceasefires and a political resolution to the Syrian war … to focus on … destroying ISIL."[[2]]

A Failing Strategy

Granted, the so-called Islamic State (IS, aka ISIL and ISIS) is experiencing some loss of key personnel and territory under US and EU bombardment and Iraqi army advances.[[3]] But those extremists are adapting to the changing conditions. Not surprisingly, after the US president's strategy speech, IS Caliph Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi alerted followers around the globe, through social media, about the coming long haul: "Be patient … we should not let mobilization of the nations of unbelievers … break our resolve, for we will be the victors … with Allah's power."[[4]]

President Obama's plan targets a single fanatical organization. IS, however, is one of several groups who seek to impose Islamic religious extremism through violence. Consequently, despite the president's earnest words, subsequent mid-December 2015 polls indicated people continue to feel less safe even though terrorism is a significant cause of death only in a few countries of the developing world.[[5]]

The basic problem, which the White House's communication spin cannot surmount, is that Islamic terrorism is growing in scope rather than being tamped down.[[6]] So it's time for a comprehensive strategy against those who resort to violence allegedly for Islam.

A Revised Approach

First, the war on terror must stop focusing upon one group at a time. Organizations such as Al-Qaeda, the Taliban, Al-Shabaab, and Boko Haram share commonality with IS through Arabian funding sources, extremist interpretation of Islam, intolerance of moderate Muslims and members of other faiths, and reliance on violence.[[7]] The Taliban and Al-Qaeda are resurgent in northern Afghanistan, overrunning Kunduz city last October. Boko Haram is killing more people than IS and Al-Qaeda, albeit regionally. Zealous fighters and financiers switch fielty to whichever extremist group is succeeding, wanting their way to prevail everywhere. So, all these organizations need to be eradicated.

Second, military actions should be expanded. Bombardment from the air, special forces on the ground, and training to establish indigenous troops should not be limited to countering IS in Syria and Iraq, but also demolish IS offshoots, Al-Qaeda, and other groups in Libya, the Sinai, Afghanistan, and elsewhere. IS, Al-Qaeda, and others spread in parallel manners, by sending charismatic recruiters to set up regional command posts and incorporate resident radicals.[[8]] Systematically eliminating the traveling ideologues and the local gangs they organize also must become a priority for breaking the global jihad.

Third, the non-military counter-offensive against Islamic extremism needs to be taken worldwide. Better intelligence collection and more effective preemptive operations must prevent attacks by terror cell members and wannabes. Reasonable compromises, balancing privacy rights and security concerns, could find solutions to the communication and application encryption which law enforcement agencies fear.[[9]] Extremist-affiliated media portals providing attack techniques should be taken down as soon as they appear. Internet sites portraying Islamic terror organizations as principled should be taken over and redeployed with vivid images of how they distort Islam's doctrines and practices to achieve radical goals. Susceptible populations need to be ideologically inoculated via internet outreach against Islamist propaganda being trendy and Islamic terrorism being appropriate.[[10]]

Fourth, while much success has been achieved in cutting off external funds especially from the Middle East to IS and Al-Qaeda, cash flows within terrorist-controlled areas must be shut down too.[[11]] IS's smuggling in Syria and Iraq includes oil, natural gas, human organs, and antiquities. The Taliban and Al-Qaeda are active in narcotics and human trafficking. Boko Haram generates millions through ransoms. They cannot be permitted to become self-sustaining through such activities. In tandem, tax collection offices run by terrorists must be destroyed within Iraq, Syria, and elsewhere—for the groups should not gain durability through state-like functions.

Fifth, ending Islamic terrorism requires focusing not merely on current troublemakers but emerging ones as well. Recent history demonstrates that groups, while being cut down, spawn more violent offspring—such as IS from Al-Qaeda. Consequently, nascent terror cells need to be eradicated. Not responding to IS prior to its taking over strategic areas in Syria during 2013 and then using resources from there to springboard into Iraq in 2014, like the failure to halt the Taliban from seizing Afghanistan in 1996 and using that country to harbor Al-Qaeda in 2001, were miscalculations that cannot be permitted to repeat anywhere.

Sixth, the countries that contributed most ideologically, fiscally, and socio-politically to the rise and spread of Islamic fanaticism must become central to ending it. The coalition of thirty-four predominantly Sunni Muslim nations established in late December calls extremism "a disease."[[12]] But its power players Saudi Arabia, the Persian Gulf Emirates, Turkey, and Egypt are busy quashing neighboring Muslims like the Houthis who do not follow Sunni tenets, thwarting potential separatists like the Kurds, and subduing internal dissidents ranging from the Muslim Brotherhood to democracy activists. Without serious pushback from those nations, the real terrorists will not be defeated.

Seventh, the US and its western partners need to persuade Middle East rivals Saudi Arabia and Iran that

inflaming sectarian tensions for religio-political goals is detrimental. The White House is correct in worrying that rivalries and deteriorating relations between leaders in Riyadh and Tehran are continuing to both fuel terrorism and impede effective counter-actions.[[13]] Violence is returning to the forefront as a tool in the almost fourteen centuries long intra-religious struggle between the two largest Muslim sects, with suicide bombings and summary executions directed most often against noncombatants in each community. As local communities of Sunnis and Shiites square off, Islamic terror-mongers pick off both sides.

Eighth, solutions to civil wars in the Middle East must tackle not only military dimensions but religious ones in order to endure. A workable political resolution for Syria has to accommodate all that country's communities, including Alawites and other Shiites. Likewise for Iraq to stabilize, mechanisms to prevent revenge extraction between Shiite and Sunni citizens have to be established. Power-sharing and revenge foregoing are both needed to end the struggle in Yemen. After all, Islamic terrorists are most active, destructive, and lethal in countries where Muslims comprise a substantial portion of the citizenry.[[14]] Though Sunnis and Shiites may never fully trust each other due to theological differences, working together they can strip away any notion that Allah sides with extremists and thereby provide the entire Muslim community and the world with security.

The Overall Aim

Islamic terrorism, while striking fear among westerners, is ravaging third world nations which are much in need of political stability, social harmony, and economic progress.[[15]] From there, it is spilling over to first world nations as people, ideology, tactics, and weapons move across the globe. The dissemination of Islamic terrorism from its original repositories and its taking hold within new populations can be compared to the spread of diseases, with rates of transfer increasing exponentially due to the very same modern technologies—like air travel and the internet—that bolster positive aspects of globalization.[[16]]

Eradicating permutations of global jihad, accordingly, should be approached akin to stopping epidemics. It will only be accomplished by a concerted, international, coalition of nations. Both hard and soft power have to be deployed consistently from the air, on the ground, and through physical and virtual networks to take out terrorist hotbeds and remove pro-terrorist sympathies. The strategy must be multifaceted, adaptable, involve Muslims as fully-contributive partners alongside non-Muslims, and demonstrate unambiguous clarity of goals and premeditated allocation of resources.

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