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# America's Response to Terrorism: How to Fight Rather than Feed the Beast

Recent terrorist plots and attacks have escalated calls for an expansion of American military intervention abroad and increased airport security and profiling of Muslims. However, thinking and working smarter rather than harder will prove more effective, less costly and risky.

The Christmas Day attempt by Nigerian Umar Farouq Abdulmutallab to blow up an airliner landing in Detroit once again raises a critical question: "What makes a seemingly normal, integrated, university-educated Muslim turn to terrorism?" This same question came up after five American Muslims from Northern Virginia were arrested in Pakistan on terrorism charges. Experts and pseudo-experts debate possible influences and breeding grounds: universities, mosques, and the internet, which a new breed of radical imams increasingly use for recruitment and indoctrination in a jihadist ideology. Each of these factors is important, but it is critical not to seek an easy one-size-fits-all solution.

Extremists and terrorist organizations are the product of a specific contexts and diverse circumstances. While many have ideological, leadership or tactical commonalities, they also have distinctive differences. As we have seen, while some terrorists come from occupied lands or have lived lives of desperate hopelessness, many others like Osama Bin Laden, his second-in-command, physician Ayman al-Zawahiri, or the 9/11 terrorists and now Nigeria's Abdulmutallab come from upper and middle class, privileged and prosperous families. Many are well-educated and prior to their radicalization had been seen as integrated in mainstream society. However, if some are recruited and radicalized by preachers of hate, whether terrorist organizations or the radical imams, others become alienated and radicalized due to their own experiences and perceptions. This diversity is reflected in their use of the internet and terrorist websites.

Many recent cases have not resulted from a top down process of recruitment and

radicalization initiated by al-Qaeda and its affiliates or radical preachers, but rather from a bottom up dynamic. Today, individuals like Nigeria's Abdulmutallab, Fort Hood's Maj.Nidal Malik Hasan, and the five American Muslims from Northern Virginia, are the initiators. They turn to radical imams -- like the American-born and educated Yemeni radical preacher Anwar al-Alwaki, and the Jamaican-born cleric Abdullah El Feisal -- for advice, justification and legitimacy. Would-be terrorists can also find a sense of solidarity and community in chat rooms.

Addressing issues of terrorism and framing de-radicalization programs requires paying attention not only to the war in cyberspace, but also to individuals' psychological and identity problems and political concerns. The point here is not to excuse or explain away but, most importantly, to understand and prevent.

Many bright, talented and otherwise well-balanced individuals are profoundly affected and changed by what they see as endless oppression, corruption and injustice in Muslim regimes and failed states and Western foreign policies. They see Western powers, particularly the US, as supporting and aiding autocrats or as using power and military force to threaten, invade and "occupy" Muslim lands. The perception of occupation and injustice in Iraq, Afghanistan, Kashmir, Chechnya, and Palestine continues to be a catalyst heavily exploited in the rhetoric and ideologies of terrorist organizations.

As recent events in Yemen and a resurgent Taliban in Afghanistan and Pakistan underscore, capturing, killing and containing terrorists remains an ongoing, significant challenge. However, although counter-terror measures like drone strikes and special operations can be successful, they have also backfired. They often kill innocent civilians, providing powerful propaganda feeding anti-Americanism and recruiting future terrorists. Equally important, they also alienate the vast mainstream majority in the Muslim world. As the Gallup World Poll and PEW polling has shown, mainstream Muslims -- the primary victims of terrorism -- are as concerned, if not more concerned, about the dangers of extremism and terrorism as Westerners are. In addition, they admire Western democratic values and want better relations. They are indeed our natural partners against terrorist forces.

To make the administration less vulnerable to charges that, as in the Bush era, it is engaging in widespread military intervention and occupation, the President must more vigorously pursue his stated goal to emphasize diplomacy and development over a military response. Obama must emphasize and expand policies to reach out to local populations, tribal and religious leaders, and communities (such policies were advocated and implemented by senior military leaders like Generals Petraeus and McChrystal, and were supported in Iraq and Afghanistan). Protection and security should be offered more as a defensive than offensive force, in partnership with local security forces and the police who are primarily responsible for their country's stability. America's primary mission should be seen as building strong infrastructures through critical economic, educational and technological development, all areas for which America (and the West in general) are admired, and which are strongly desired by majorities in countries like Iraq, Afghanistan, Egypt, and Yemen.

At the same time, domestic political situations in the Muslim world can not be overlooked. While most governments move aggressively to counter terrorism, weak or autocratic regimes often do not address the systemic causes of radicalization: lack of real political participation, corruption, massive violation of human rights, and the growing gap between rich and poor.

Religion, used by extremists to recruit, legitimate and mobilize, also plays an important role. Thus, the political and economic causes of violent extremism as well as the use or abuse of religion must be effectively condemned. Muslim religious and community leaders, in the West and overseas, need to be even more active and aggressive in speaking out, issuing fatwas condemning terrorism in the name of Islam, and working with their governments to institute de-radicalization programs.

We live in a violent global context in which terrorism cannot be completely eradicated but its growth can be limited and contained. This requires recognizing the complexity of the problem, avoiding the knee-jerk reactions of increasingly profiling Muslims and escalating military intervention (which entails heavy human and financial costs). We must not align ourselves more closely with failed governments that can feed anti-Americanism. More emphasis is needed on the use of soft power, diplomacy, and economic and educational development. These provide the surest path to greater safety and security in that they develop our capacity to work in concert with our most natural partners in the multi-faceted fight against terrorism: -- the overwhelming majority of the world's Muslims who make up the mainstream of this diverse and global community. The alternative approach tends to place them all under suspicion -- and in so doing injures and compromises their standing in their own communities and in our shared struggle against extremism.

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