POLICY BRIEF

Terrorism and the threat to democracy

Daniel Byman

In mitigating the threat that terrorism poses to liberal democracies, governments should not only take on jihadist terrorists overseas, but right-wing terrorists at home as well.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Terrorism does more than kill the innocent: It undermines democratic governments, even in mature democracies like those in the United States and much of Europe. The fear terrorism generates can distort public debates, discredit moderates, empower political extremes, and polarize societies. An array of actors, including governments, international institutions, and civil society can decrease the scale and scope of terrorist violence and mitigate its most dangerous political effects.[1]

To mitigate the danger terrorism poses to democracies, the United States and its allies should continue to emphasize intelligence-sharing and expand such efforts when possible. This is true even though in 2018 the number of successful jihadist attacks fell dramatically in the United States and Europe. Although the Islamic State continued to plot terrorist attacks, aggressive law enforcement and the disruption of the Islamic

State's safe haven account for much of the decline.[2] U.S. and European governments should step up efforts to penetrate right-wing terrorist movements, arrest their members, and devote more resources to this problem. Given the recent decline in jihadist violence, transferring some resources is appropriate. In the United States, Congress should authorize more resources for this problem. Improving social services to Muslim communities is vital, especially in new areas with many recent refugees. This involves governments, civil society organizations, and the international aid community. The United States and Europe should cooperate on standards for internet companies, and the companies should also work together to create standards for right-wing hate groups. In foreign policy, U.S. and European diplomats should try to decrease the intensity of wars in the Middle East by pressing outside powers like Saudi Arabia and Iran to end their interventions, and in general, try to prevent and resolve wars in the region.

Finally, political leaders should emphasize societal resilience in order to decrease the psychological impact of terrorism.

TERRORISM AND THE RISK OF POLARIZATION

Terrorism can undermine political moderation in a democracy, paving the way for more extreme elements to gain footholds.[3] The death toll of a terrorist attack, often inflicted in a spectacular way that draws media attention and leads to political criticism, can undermine faith in government. Indeed, perhaps the basic function of any government is to ensure the security of its citizens, and while some attacks foster a "rally around the flag" mentality, repeated terrorist attacks lead citizens to question their leadership. This lack of faith, in turn, can convince citizens to favor more extreme voices that promise law and order or, if they do not see any hope in government, turn to nongovernmental actors such as gangs or militias for security. Particularly after 9/11 (and, in Europe, following significant attacks by al-Qaida on public transportation in Madrid in 2004, London in 2005, and the Islamic State attack in Paris in 2015), even small terrorist attacks are seen in the context of a threat that is perceived as massive. This is true even though the number of terrorist attacks in Europe is roughly comparable between the post- and pre-9/11 eras, and in the United States the number of deaths from jihadist terrorism is far less than officials anticipated in the years after the 9/11 attacks. Political leaders must act—and must be seen as acting—to fight terrorism.

This pressure and desire to act, however, can lead to a harsh overreaction. This can range from overly aggressive foreign policies that involve foolish interventions and unnecessary crackdowns on entire communities, to rhetorical demonization that further polarizes already divided societies. At times, this may be a power grab by government leaders, with terrorism as a justification, but more frequently it represents a genuine if flawed understanding of the threat and a response to strong public pressure.

Such an overreaction discredits political moderates in the minority community. In addition, it hinders integration, creating an "us versus them" mentality that becomes self-reinforcing.

Leaders are thus in a dilemma. From a policy point of view, they should seek a well-balanced "Goldilocks" position between reassurance and action on the one hand and respect for civil rights and minority communities on the other, with foreign policy favoring a moderate direction. Politically, however, the payoff is often in playing to the fears of the majority, trumpeting a terrorism threat even beyond the danger posed.[4]

DRIVERS OF TERRORISM

Many factors contribute to jihadist terrorism in Western countries, and this is true as well for the factors that link terrorism and its impact on political extremism. In addition, there is tremendous variation within "the West," with the problem in the United States profoundly different from that in Australia, Canada, and many European countries.

Muslims in Europe complain, correctly, that they are systematically profiled or otherwise face discrimination.[5] Scholars William McCants and Chris Meserole found a strong connection between a veil ban (and the hostility it displayed toward Muslims) and the later prevalence of terrorist recruits in a country—indicating that such hostile moves generate extremism.[6] A European terrorism analyst described the 2005 riots in Paris as involving "the older brothers of today's foreign fighters."[7] The jihadists offer European Muslims an explanation for the discrimination against them and provide a course of action to respond.[8]

The discrimination and restrictive citizenship laws in many European countries, which in some cases prohibit even the children of migrant workers who have lived in a country from gaining citizenship, fuel a lack of integration, thereby facilitating the spread of militant Islam. Even in the United

Kingdom, which does not have a veil ban or similar measures, Muslim households are more likely to speak a language other than English at home, live in cloistered neighborhoods, and marry within their faith and country of origin. (Part of the reason the United States has a far lesser problem with Islamic militancy than Europe is the successful integration of most American Muslims, who on average are better educated and wealthier than their non-Muslim neighbors.) To non-Muslim Europeans, however, violence seems like proof of the community's hostility, and opportunistic politicians play this up. This creates two terrorism problems. First, radicals find it easier to recruit terrorists. Second, the population as a whole, even if not sympathetic to the terrorists, is also less likely to cooperate with a government they regard as hostile and thus are less likely to inform security services of suspected terrorists.

The problem also exists, albeit to a far lesser degree, in the United States, where the Muslim community is far better integrated and regularly cooperates with law enforcement.[9] Politicians have successfully linked economic and social status concerns about immigration with terrorism, giving a national security dimension to this problem and reversing decades of pro-immigrant policies. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the rhetoric and policies of President Donald Trump himself, who frequently portrays foreign Muslims seeking to enter the United States as a terrorism threat, conflates refugees and immigrants, and otherwise uses terrorism as a springboard for a nativist agenda. Many of his advisors push the same message, describing Islam itself as dangerous.[10]

The drivers are external as well as internal. A problem in one country can be picked up by radicals in another and used as a rallying point or to create wedge issue. The 2005 publication in Denmark of cartoons mocking the Prophet Muhammad, for example, spread controversy to the rest of Europe about whether or not newspapers should republish them on free speech grounds while making many Muslims feel unwelcome. This controversy continued for a decade, and 10 years later terrorists in Paris attacked *Charlie Hebdo*, a satirical magazine that regularly mocked Islam, along with other religions, as a way to score points with Muslims angry about the controversy and portray their violence as defending their community from insult.

Many Islamic organizations in Europe are funded by Saudi Arabia, and their teachings create a more radical community.[11] Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states built mosques and religious schools and funded extremist clerics and organizations. In the Balkans, one Saudi-funded preacher would disrupt more moderate rivals while issuing bloodcurdling rhetoric calling for all Muslims to join the jihad: "The blood of infidels is the best drink for us Muslims."[12] The linkage is not always direct. As the head of Kosovo's counterterrorism police noted, the foreign organizations did not directly fund travel to Syria. Instead, "they supported thinkers who promote violence and jihad in the name of protecting Islam."[13] Converts to Islam, an important source of future terrorists, are especially likely to be attracted to these extreme interpretations of their new faith.

Wars overseas inspire young Muslims to go abroad and become foreign fighters, picking up dangerous skills and becoming more radical as they do so. In addition, groups active in the war zone at times seek to conduct international terrorist attacks, using these foreign fighters or inspiring home-grown radicals to conduct attacks. They use the internet to issue propaganda, recruit, and provide command and control from overseas.[14]

The wars also produce refugees—in the cases of Afghanistan and Syria, these are massive flows, with millions fleeing the violence. Hundreds of thousands have sought to go to Europe, roiling politics there and increasing Islamophobia. Even the small numbers trying to find a haven in America unleashed a political storm, dividing Americans.[15]

IMPACT ON SOCIETY, GOVERNANCE, AND FOREIGN POLICY

Publics fearing terrorism also support more aggressive policies at home and more hawkish foreign policies.[16] Support for the Obama administration's intervention in Syria against the Islamic State grew tremendously after the highly publicized beheadings the group conducted on U.S., British, and other hostages. In both the United States and Europe, terrorism has played into debates on migration, with fears of immigrants or refugees from Muslim-majority states running high. Social trust decreases after a terrorist attack.[17] A Chatham House survey from 2017 found that in the 10 countries surveyed, over half the population "agreed that all further migration from mainly Muslim countries should be stopped," with only 20 percent disagreeing—a remarkable consensus. A 2017 U.S. poll found that 60 percent of Americans supported the Trump administration's "travel ban" that severely limits immigration from mostly Muslim countries.[18]

Many of these dynamics played out after the November 2015 Islamic State attack in Paris that killed 130 people, the worst strike Europe had seen since the 2004 al-Qaida attacks in Spain. After the attacks, most of the French public agreed with the statement that France is "at war." Support for accepting refugees from Iraq and Syria fell, and right-wing political parties gained support.[19] The Paris attacks also affected attitudes elsewhere in Europe and even in the United States, where fears of an Islamic State attack increased.[20] In the weeks following the Paris attacks in November 2015, attacks targeting Muslims in London tripled.[21]

Terrorism and social hostility between Muslims and non-Muslims create a dangerous circle. Terrorist attacks lead to a spike in hostile rhetoric and low-level anti-Muslim violence, which in turn reduces the integration of the Muslim community and creates more tolerance of radicalism.

Aspiring autocrats use terrorism in the West and violence linked to Muslims to criticize democracy and justify their strong-arm tactics. Viktor Orbán,

Hungary's prime minister, has deliberately equated Muslim migrants with terrorists as part of his broader critique of liberal democracy, claiming that he wants to keep Hungary safe and Christian.[22]

POLICY IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Reducing the number of terrorist attacks and their lethality is vital for limiting the political impact of terrorism. Although demagogues can and will play up any attack, it is far easier for them to do so after massive strikes like the 2015 Paris attack than it is after less lethal attacks, especially if they are infrequent. Thus an array of military measures against terrorist sanctuaries overseas, intelligence-sharing to disrupt terrorist travel, and policing at home remain necessary and must be resourced appropriately. Intelligence-sharing within Europe is particularly important as violence in one country—Paris in 2015, or the Danish cartoon controversy—can easily spill over into other European countries, and some cells, such as the one that carried out the Paris attacks, operate in multiple countries. The high social and political cost of terrorism suggests this should be a priority even when the terrorism threat is ebbing, as it appears to be in 2018.

To prevent a vicious circle, security services must also target right-wing terrorism. In the United States, right-wing violence has grown, with Jews and Muslims in particular being targets—and, even worse, President Trump's rhetoric and actions are viewed as encouraging or at least tolerating this hatred at a time when he has cut programs focusing on right-wing groups even amid a growing threat.[23] Given the recent decline in jihadist violence, transferring some resources is appropriate. In the United States, Congress should authorize more funding to address this problem.

Promoting integration of immigrant communities is also essential. Historically, this was an American success story. In contrast to Europe, the American Muslim community is far better integrated and

regularly cooperates with law enforcement.[24] Ideally, President Trump will press state and local officials to continue and expand their work with Muslim communities, not just to stop radicalism in their ranks but also to protect them from right-wing extremists. Besides being the right thing to do, good relations with Muslim Americans, especially in an atmosphere where many face daily security threats, will help ensure that radicalization remains low and that if and when it occurs the community cooperates with law enforcement.

An array of actors, especially civil society organizations, need to play a role in integration. Part of this is simply to improve services in poorer Muslim communities. In addition, civil society organizations, especially ones that promote moderate Islamic leaders, can counter some of the deleterious effects of Saudi funding, bolstering alternative voices. Such efforts are particularly necessary with refugees. Few of the refugees coming in are radical: however, they and especially their children are vulnerable if they do not receive effective services, are politically demonized, and are nurtured by more radical Islamist organizations.

Businesses, especially technology companies, also have an important role to play. Terrorist groups exploit the internet, social media, and other technologies to spread their message, recruit and groom individuals, "cybercoach" operatives, and directly control operations.[25] Companies can cooperate with government investigations and take their own measures to combat this, such as taking down terrorist accounts and terrorist propaganda. Google has pioneered a program that redirects general internet searches for groups like the Islamic State to content that highlights the group's deficiencies.[26] Private-public partnerships that cross borders are vital given the transnational nature of terrorism, the terrorists' use of internet infrastructure controlled by private companies, and the need to have clear standards to ensure fears of terrorism do not lead companies to take down legitimate, if unpleasant, speech.

Overseas, the United States and Europe must work together to prevent wars, stop them from escalating when prevention fails, and then manage conflicts when they end. The biggest weakness of President Obama's counterterrorism strategy was that it often tried to divorce fighting terrorism from broader regional policies: The administration fought the Islamic State in Syria and Libya, for example, but it did little to try to dampen or shape the civil wars there.[27] Today civil wars rage in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Nigeria, Somalia, Syria, and Yemen, with Egypt and Pakistan also in crisis—and this pool swells further when countries on the brink are also considered. Unfortunately, the Trump administration appears more likely to withdraw from the region or even egg on regional rivals rather than try to end these destructive conflicts.

These wars are devastating for the region and provide fertile ground for radical groups to develop and prosper and then reach back to the West for recruits and operations. Once underway, it is often necessary for the United States to target terrorist groups there, particularly if they are believed to be planning attacks on the United States. However, earlier action would be more effective. Limiting the frequency, scope, and scale of such wars hinders the abilities of radicals to recruit by exploiting the civil war and makes it less likely that they can find a base within the war itself. In addition, fewer and less bloody wars will decrease refugee flows. Although refugees themselves are only rarely involved in terrorism, reducing these flows reduces a point of tension between Muslims and non-Muslims in the West.

Although these are tall orders and policies will fail more than they succeed, even with the best of intentions, it is important for governments to recognize that wars in the Muslim world have profound consequences beyond the countries in question. Syria's civil war, for example, attracted over 40,000 foreign fighters, posing a long-term terrorism risk. Now that the Islamic State is removed from Iraq, the United States is devoting

few resources to conflict resolution at a local level or otherwise trying to ensure good governance that will reduce the chances of the group's return.

Finally, perhaps the most serious counterterrorism failure in the post-9/11 era concerns resilience. President Obama had tried repeatedly to talk down the threat, starting with a 2013 speech in which he described al-Qaida as on "the path to defeat" and noting that another 9/11 was unlikely.[28] He was right. But the rise of the Islamic State and its high-profile atrocities have fostered the perception that the terrorist threat to the U.S. homeland and Europe has skyrocketed. In both Europe and America, public polling and election rhetoric demonstrate that efforts to build resilience failed. It remains easy for a terrorist group, or even some lucky amateurs, to sow fear and undermine the strength of a democracy in the process.

Political leaders should emphasize societal resilience, not fear, in their statements. Leaders might invite qualified Muslims to take high-profile jobs in their administrations, ensure Muslim leaders are regularly consulted, emphasize that most violence is small-scale and that the police are ably handling the problem, and otherwise stress inclusion and play down the psychological impact of terrorism. In addition, security services must aggressively target right-wing violence in order to prevent a deadly back-and-forth and to reassure all communities that they are welcome. Indeed, with the decline of the Islamic State's above-ground presence in Iraq and Syria and the fall in arrests and plots in the United States and Europe, now is an ideal time for such efforts.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Daniel Byman is a senior fellow in the Center for Middle East Policy at Brookings, where his research focuses on counterterrorism and Middle East security. He previously served as the research director of the center. He is also vice dean for undergraduate affairs at Georgetown University's Walsh School of Foreign Service and a professor in its Security Studies Program. Previously, Byman served as a staff member with the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks on the United States ("The 9/11 Commission") and the Joint 9/11 Inquiry Staff of the House and Senate Intelligence Committees. Prior to that, Byman was a policy analyst and the director for research in the Center for Middle East Public Policy at the RAND Corporation and worked for the U.S. government. His next book is *Road Warriors: Foreign Fighters in the Armies of Jihad* (Oxford, 2019). He is the author of several other books on counterterrorism, state sponsorship of terrorism, and conflict and terrorism in the Middle East.