

The Time to Act: The Imperative to Combat Radical Islamic Terrorism Now

“We are at war with violent and extreme Islamists (both Sunni and Shia) and we must accept and face this reality.” LTG Michael Flynn, former director of the Defense Intelligence Agency, did not mince words in his remarks to the House Armed Services Committee. In only the first two months of 2015, there have been high-profile attacks in Paris and Copenhagen, gruesome slaughters of a Jordanian fighter pilot, Christians and hostages held by ISIL, several Boko Haram kidnappings and massacres in Nigeria, Chad, and Cameroon, and the fall of Yemen’s pro-U.S. government to Shiite rebels. The frequency and intensity of the extremist threat – or war – prove that nothing is going in the right direction. Without both immediate responses to attacks and a longer-term plan to tackle the roots of violent Islamic extremism, that direction is unlikely to change.

The roots of the jihadist threat stem from the strictest, most archaic interpretation of Islam. Driven by the perceived glory of struggle, death and its posthumous reward, and even simple blood lust, violence is considered necessary to purge Islam of apostates, to eradicate enemies, and to establish a caliphate. The Islamic State, for example, convenes religious “scholars” to rationalize a variety of heinous acts under Shariah. The result of this fanaticism is what jihadists believe is an inherent battle within Islam (Sunni, Shia, conservative, moderate, and liberal) and an inevitable battle with infidel armies that will signal the apocalypse.

This outlandish narrative has quickly evolved into today’s leading national and global security threats. Seeing terrorism as a prologue to an eventual, but future, caliphate, Al Qaeda, its affiliates, and like-minded individuals are a direct physical threat to the United States and the rest of the world. ISIL is not as preoccupied with global attacks, but supports those who do conduct them. Wanting the caliphate now, ISIL split from Al Qaeda and battles to grab as much land (and thus perceived legitimacy) as possible. They actively recruit fighters worldwide to this end. Also wanting a caliphate, Boko Haram controls several Nigerian towns and is equally brutal. Taking advantage of war in Iraq and Syria, ISIL’s growth will only further destabilize the Middle East. It will also create direct threats to American allies in the region: Israel, which ISIL wants eliminated; and NATO member Turkey, already embroiled due to proximity and home to Istanbul, whose sacking some jihadists believe is prophesized. In the meantime, mass atrocities, such as kidnapping, slavery, rape, mutilation, and murder that have become a part of daily life in areas controlled or threatened by jihadists, require more than a humanitarian response.

Apart from Jordanian King Abdullah’s avenging air raids and Egyptian jets bombing ISIL targets in Libya, the response of the United States and its allies to extremist attacks has been less forceful. The photo opportunity of world leaders (without American representation) in Paris marching in opposition to the Charlie Hebdo attacks was a symbolic, if somewhat empty, gesture. In Washington, the President’s recent request for Authorization for the Use of Military Force is a proactive step towards enabling immediate military action, but criticisms on its breadth and ambiguity by both political parties are bound to cause delays. In the meantime, violent Islamic extremists are emboldened. Case in point: An ISIL squad of suicide bombers breached the perimeter of an Iraqi base where American Marines were deployed before being killed by Iraqi security forces. Even closer to home have been the Boston Marathon bombings, the shooting rampages at Ft. Hood in Texas, a beheading in Oklahoma City, and the Ottawa shootings.

Immediate responses, kinetic and collaborative, to terror attacks and atrocities are needed to curb the jihadist threat. However, a significant role in combating the jihadist threat will also have to come from moderate Islamic communities and leaders. Most notable have been recent declarations by Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi challenging his country's religious clerics to revolutionize Islamic thinking or risk the loss of the Islamic world, as well as calling for a unified Arab force to overcome regional challenges. Still, creating long-term national and global security requires developing a comprehensive, aggressive, and proactive strategy which addresses the larger drivers that enable terrorism and the dark ideology behind this threat to evolve in the first place.

One key driver behind the extremists' recent gains has been the collapse of authority. In the forms of political leadership, industry, and social dynamics, authority is typically tasked with the creation of opportunities, ensuring stability and security, and providing moral guidance. Muslim countries and other places where radical Islam has taken a stronghold have been historically characterized by strong leadership. However, the past several decades of despotic leadership suppressed the rule of law, political diversity and the development of civil society, while giving rise to corruption and economic inequality. Radical Islamic groups, often well-organized and funded, have capitalized on the failures of the traditional pillars of authority and social order.

Another important driver is alienation. The French solidarity that resulted in the wake of the Paris attacks, for example, eluded ethnic communities in the city's poorer suburbs. The marginalization of such communities throughout Europe, as well as, to a lesser degree, within the United States, is partly due to self-isolation – the convenience and comfort of a familiar culture and language. Perhaps a larger part has been due to poor government planning with the consequences (unemployment, social services and education cuts) being disproportionately felt by such communities. Such intentional and unintentional segregation has created breeding grounds for recruitment. Notably, the Paris attackers were from such disaffected areas. Meanwhile, online access to extremist ideologies, leaders, and social networks has simplified and accelerated the radicalization process. For generations already connected by headphones and screens, this is a dangerous disconnection from reality, family and friends, education, employment, and moderate viewpoints. Whether physical or virtual, alienation creates parallel worlds where commonly accepted concepts and rules of respect, tolerance, and authority no longer apply.

Finally, desperation is the more personal driver. The lack of economic opportunity and positive social relationships, cultural conflicts as a result of ethnic upbringing, and the search for spiritual meaning create a significant gap for radicalization to fill. Radical groups are eager to indoctrinate vulnerable individuals with their ideology, as well as point to non-Islamic institutions and authorities, and “moderns” (moderate Muslims) as the source of their malaise. A familiar analogy can be found in gangs, where participation and related criminal activities afford its members an identity/status, protection, family/fellowship, and financial gain. The purpose, camaraderie, and value offered by Radical Islam and terror groups have created a similar appeal. Moreover, the speed and reach of technology has also pushed this ideology to despondent audiences worldwide.

Radicalization and terrorism are complex challenges requiring both immediate responses and longer-ranging strategies. However, as Flynn warned, “It would be foolish for us to wait until our enemies pose an existential threat before taking decisive action. Doing so would only increase the cost in blood and treasure later for what we know must be done now.” The need to get ahead of violent Islamic extremism is clear. The time to act is now.