

2020 Thematic Brief: Preventing and Countering Terrorism



The National Security Program

Takeaways

The Trump Administration's stated strategies to prevent and counter terrorism have largely continued the approach of the Obama Administration.

However, this approach is at odds with the president's own rhetoric and actions, which make us less safe in the long term. President Trump has verbally attacked and abandoned key allies and partners in the fight against terrorism, including the Kurds in Syria, while embracing counterproductive policies that will make it easier for terrorists to rebuild.

At the same time, President Trump has largely ignored the far-right extremism that has spiked under his presidency. Even worse, he has retweeted statements that come from

people associated with hate groups. Right-wing extremists, and in particular white supremacists, have caused more deaths than international terrorists in recent years.¹ They feel they have an ally in President Trump because he has largely refused to condemn them. During the recent protests for racial justice, he completely ignored the threat of right-wing extremists accused of killing Americans and plotting attacks against the military, while at the same time he was inflating other extremist threats.^{2 3} And he blamed both sides in Charlottesville. To be clear, one side was neo-Nazis and other white supremacists.

The United States needs a smart and tough approach to terrorism and extremism that includes:

- Prioritizing the threat of domestic extremism and dedicating resources to prevent and counter it, including by providing support to organizations working on these issues, cutting off financial flows, evaluating whether further designations of foreign right-wing organizations are warranted, and addressing extremism in the US military;⁴
- Preventing the spread of all forms of violent extremism by addressing the root causes globally and reducing the effectiveness of recruitment efforts;
- Protecting the American homeland by preventing terrorist attacks and disrupting terrorist networks in the United States; and
- Eliminating terrorist safe havens abroad and building up the capacity of partner nations to fight terrorism on their own turf.

The Trump Administration strategy to prevent and counter terrorism largely continues the approach of the Obama Administration, but has rejected some critical Obama-era policies that made us safer.

Preventing and countering foreign and domestic terrorism remains a key national security priority for the United States. According to recent polls, terrorism is still seen as a top national security threat.⁵ And the COVID-19 pandemic may only exacerbate the problem, as terrorists seek to fill gaps in government services, advance alternative narratives, and raise and move funds while counterterrorism resources and attention are diverted to COVID-19 response

efforts.⁶ The FBI's recent finding of ties between a Saudi gunman who killed three service members in a shooting at a Florida naval base last year and an Al Qaeda affiliate group highlights that the threat of terrorism in the United States remains.⁷

In October 2018, President Trump issued the *National Strategy for Counterterrorism of the United States of America*,⁸ a document that largely continues many of the policies of the Obama Administration to prevent and counter the terrorist threat. Unfortunately, President Trump's own actions and rhetoric are often at odds with this approach. He has attacked and vilified key partners and allies in the fight against terrorism while pursuing ineffective and draconian policies, like travel bans, that reflect a fundamental misunderstanding of the threat.^{9 10}

Outside of the scope of the Administration's counterterrorism strategy, President Trump has rejected a number of key policies instituted by the Obama Administration aimed at countering terrorism and addressing the drivers of violent extremism that lead to terrorism, both at home and abroad. For example, the Obama Administration set stricter rules for the use of drone strikes.¹¹ President Obama emphasized intelligence collection and targeting, which allowed him to reduce terrorist threats while trying to minimize civilian deaths and damage that could be exploited by terrorists for recruitment.¹² And the Obama Administration rejected the use of torture as both ineffective and immoral.¹³ President Trump largely reversed all of this.¹⁴

President Trump's actions and rhetoric on terrorism make us less safe in the long term.

President Trump sees no distinction between terrorists and the communities that live on the frontlines in the fight against terrorism. Ultimately, this undermines partnerships with communities that could prevent terrorism.

President Trump's divisive language alienates and attacks the very partners needed to effectively counter terrorism in America's communities. For example, his repeated denigration of Muslims¹⁵ makes it less likely that community and religious leaders will be eager to partner with the government to prevent certain forms of violent extremism. Hate crimes targeting Muslims surged during President Trump's campaign and early presidency.¹⁶

The president's erratic and uncoordinated foreign policy decisions have also undermined America's counterterrorism efforts. In particular, his October 2019 decision to abandon America's Kurdish partners in Syria risks enabling a resurgence of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). The Syrian Kurds were one of the most effective fighting forces against the terrorist group.¹⁷ The Kurds provided critical information to the 2019 US military operation that killed ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.¹⁸ President Trump's decision to withdraw US troops from northern Syria and abandon the Kurds led to the escape of an estimated 200 ISIS

detainees and, according to a Defense Intelligence Agency analysis, allowed ISIS to “reconstitute capabilities and resources within Syria and strengthen its ability to plan attacks abroad.”¹⁹ Despite President Trump’s claim that ISIS is “defeated,” the US Special Envoy for the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS estimated that some 14,000 to 18,000 ISIS fighters remain in Iraq and Syria.²⁰ President Trump has also attacked America’s key global allies, in Europe and elsewhere, whose cooperation and intelligence sharing are crucial to US counterterrorism efforts.²¹ The US government needs the trust and cooperation of the same foreign partners Trump has spent his presidency attacking and abandoning.

President Trump refuses to take seriously the threat of domestic extremism that has been fueled by his presidency.

Nowhere is the mismatch between President Trump’s rhetoric and actions and the strategies of his Administration more apparent than in how he has handled the dramatic uptick in domestic extremism under his presidency. Domestic extremism is at an all-time high, fueled by President Trump’s rhetoric and refusal to condemn racially and ethnically motivated violent extremists, particularly those on the far-right. The president’s failure to prioritize *all* forms of violent extremism has threatened American lives and empowered these individuals and groups to launch more violent attacks. During the recent protests against systemic racism and for criminal justice reform, the president ignored the threat of far-right wing extremism — despite a number of perpetrated or planned attacks by these individuals — while inflating other extremist threats without evidence.

Domestic extremism, particularly far-right extremism such as white supremacy, has flourished under President Trump’s candidacy and presidency. The FBI has found that racially and ethnically motivated violent extremists, particularly white supremacists, have caused more deaths than international terrorists have in recent years. FBI Director Christopher Wray testified before Congress that racially and ethnically motivated violent extremists “were the primary source of ideologically-motivated lethal incidents and violence in 2018 and 2019, and have been considered the most lethal of all domestic extremism movements since 2001.”²² Similarly, the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) found that 2019 was the sixth deadliest year on record for domestic extremist-related killings since 1970 with 42 “extremist-related murders.”²³ By their count, 2018 was even deadlier. ADL found that the overwhelming majority of these attacks in 2019 (90%) were linked to right-wing extremists such as white supremacists. In particular, polling of US active duty troops has found growing extremism in their ranks, with several recent high-profile violent incidents linked to current or former service members.²⁴



⊕ THIRD WAY

“The top threat we face from domestic violent extremists stems from those we now identify as racially/ethnically motivated violent extremists (RMVEs). RMVEs were the primary source of ideologically-motivated lethal incidents and violence in 2018 and 2019, and have been considered the most lethal of all domestic extremism movements since 2001.”

-FBI Director Christopher Wray

With domestic extremism surging, the US government should prioritize efforts to counter this deadly threat. But when right-wing extremists commit acts of violence—such as during the “Unite the Right” rally in Charlottesville, Virginia in August 2017—President Trump remains silent or even places some blame on the victims.²⁵ This has only served to empower the extremists.

While the Department of Homeland Security and federal law enforcement agencies have produced strategies and reports highlighting how seriously the executive branch takes this threat, the president’s own rhetoric and actions do not demonstrate the same.²⁶ When members of a largely far-right extremist movement were charged by federal authorities with a series of violent crimes during the recent marches for racial justice, including the killing of law enforcement and plotting to bomb federal facilities and attack marchers, the president was largely silent.²⁷ Meanwhile, the Trump Administration has focused overwhelmingly on the loose collection of groups and individuals in the anti-fascist (antifa) movement, despite the fact that they are not suspected of the same level of violence as far-right extremists.²⁸ And the president has threatened to formally designate “antifa” as a terrorist group even though it’s thought to be a decentralized movement, doing so would infringe on free speech protections, and the executive branch’s authority to label groups as terrorist organizations only applies to “foreign” organizations so this action would surely face legal challenges.²⁹ In all of these actions, President Trump and his Administration have shown that they are more focused on partisan politics than in preventing and countering the real threats faced by America from domestic extremism.³⁰

A smart and tough approach to terrorism and extremism should include: 1. prioritizing the threat of domestic extremism; 2. addressing root causes globally and disrupting recruitment;

3. protecting the homeland from attacks, and 4. building up partner capacity.

The United States needs a smart and tough strategy to combat terrorism and extremism. Such a strategy must address these four things:

1. Prioritizing the threat of domestic extremism and dedicating the resources to prevent and counter it.

The United States faces a growing threat of domestic extremism that has continued to soar at unprecedented rates under the candidacy and now presidency of Donald Trump. The largest threat the United States faces is from racially and ethnically motivated extremists, particularly white supremacists and other far-right extremists. Yet this threat has not received the resources and political leadership it deserves. There are a number of steps Congress could take to address this.

First, Congress must send clear signals that it takes the threat of domestic extremism seriously as a top national security priority and that it rejects all attempts by the Trump Administration to minimize the severity of the threat emanating from right-wing extremists. Members can make this clear in their oversight actions, such as hearings, and in public statements. Members should highlight the extent of the threat of domestic extremism, particularly on the far-right, and push back against any effort by the President and his Administration to inflate the threat of other forms of extremism for partisan motivations.

Second, Congress can take a number of legislative steps to ensure the federal government is prioritizing this threat and putting appropriate resources and leadership behind combatting it. This could include providing increased resources to nonprofit organizations working to both prevent and counter the domestic extremist threat and considering legislation such as the “Domestic Terrorism Prevention Act of 2019” (S. 894) to authorize offices in key federal agencies to focus on this threat and provide regular reporting to Congress on it.³¹ This could also include evaluating whether the US government has the needed tools to label white supremacist and other far-right extremist groups as foreign terrorist organizations when they meet the qualifications as such and pose a threat to the United States.³² In addition, Congress should evaluate proposals to strengthen anti-money laundering and counterterrorism financing mechanisms to ensure any violations of financial laws by these extremists can be prosecuted.³³ Further, embracing common sense gun safety reforms will help ensure guns do not get into the hands of domestic extremists.³⁴

Third, Congress must push the Pentagon to do more to root out white supremacy and other forms of extremism in its ranks. There have been a number of recent high-profile incidents involving far-right extremists where the accused are service members or veterans.³⁵ The FBI

has previously found that white supremacists have targeted members of the military for recruitment.³⁶ A survey conducted by the publication *Military Times* found more than one-third of active duty service members and more than half of minority service members say they have witnessed examples of white nationalism or ideological-driven racism in the military.³⁷ The FY2020 National Defense Authorization Act (P.L. 116-92) included a provision requiring the Pentagon to include in appropriate surveys whether any service members had witnessed extremist activity in the workplace and had reported it.³⁸ It also required the Secretary of Defense to study the feasibility of screening individuals who seek to join the military for extremist and gang-related activity.³⁹ This is a good first step, but Congress can go even further. This could include establishing an interagency taskforce to recommend steps to combat white supremacist and other extremist infiltration.⁴⁰ It could also require the military to put in place stricter screening measures for new recruits to try to root out extremism before it enters the armed forces, as well as regular reporting to Congress on the extent of the threat of white supremacy and other forms of extremism in the military. And Congress should evaluate the extent that penalties are being imposed on individuals found to have violated laws and rules against extremism in the military.⁴¹

2. Preventing the spread of all forms of violent extremism globally and reducing the effectiveness of terrorist recruitment.

Terrorism cannot be effectively fought by military means alone. In the long term, an effective counterterrorism strategy means addressing the drivers of this violence to begin with and reducing the vulnerability of people to terrorist recruitment. The United States must strengthen its support for, and enhance its own efforts aimed at, addressing the root causes of terrorism, including through strengthening the rule of law and good governance. Otherwise, terrorist groups will be able to rebuild. Support for civil society groups, particularly women-led groups, that can reach the communities most at risk for violent extremism is also critical. President Trump's actions to deprioritize and reduce funding for US diplomatic and development entities that work to reduce terrorism will hurt, not help, in our fight against terrorism.⁴²

A key component of this approach must also be to combat violent extremist propaganda and narratives online. Because ISIS, white supremacists, and other violent extremist groups use the Internet and social media to recruit, the US government must continue to support efforts aimed at countering narratives and taking terrorist and extremist accounts offline. Additionally, while social media companies have made progress in suspending accounts linked to these groups, there should be greater cooperation between the private sector and government in this regard, while safeguarding human rights and protecting free speech and other civil liberties.^{43 44}

3. Protecting the American homeland by preventing terrorist attacks and disrupting terrorist networks in the United States.

The US government must protect the American homeland from terrorism by disrupting potential terrorist attacks and terrorist networks in the United States. National security and law enforcement must be fully prepared, trained, coordinated, and funded to protect Americans against terrorist threats, while ensuring resources to deal with current day threats that cannot be addressed through military or law enforcement means (such as the threat of global pandemics and climate change).

Since 9/11, the United States has not only dismantled terrorist safe havens abroad but also disrupted terrorist networks at home. Through efforts to engage communities, limit terrorist use of social media, and undertake advanced electronic surveillance, for example, we have been fairly successful at preventing large networks of terrorists from forming inside the United States.

Still, “lone wolf” terrorism remains a threat. Lone wolf terrorists are not under the operational control of a terrorist group, but receive inspiration from violent extremist groups. These attacks are difficult to prevent because attackers may not be on the radar of law enforcement and may not leave an electronic trail.

Experts have noted some things the United States can do to make lone wolf attacks less likely. To stop these attackers, trust and collaboration between key communities and law enforcement are essential; these relationships enable communities to alert law enforcement to possible threats. Donald Trump’s abhorrent actions to vilify Muslims and Islam while ignoring the threat of domestic extremism, particularly on the far right, will make us less safe in the long run.⁴⁵

To protect the United States from terrorists, the government should strengthen its focus on disrupting terrorist networks and preventing attacks, repair the trust that has been broken by President Trump with key partners in the United States, and reinforce efforts to catch lone wolf terrorists and prioritize the threat of domestic extremism.

4. Eliminating terrorist safe havens and helping partner nations and groups fight terrorism abroad.

Since 9/11, a top priority of the US counterterrorism approach has been eliminating terrorist safe havens around the world and working to support partner nations in fighting terrorism on their own turf. After the disastrous invasion of Iraq in 2003 by the Bush Administration, followed by years of pursuing ineffective counterterrorism approaches, the United States expanded its support to countries impacted by terrorism. After his election, President Obama further expanded the tools in the US counterterrorism toolbox, working to disrupt and

dismantle terrorist networks through a wide variety of means. His Administration also captured or killed a number of terrorist leaders, including Osama Bin Laden, the leader of Al Qaeda.

Despite President Trump's claim that ISIS has been "defeated," the threat still remains and the COVID-19 pandemic may provide opportunities for ISIS and other terrorist groups.⁴⁶ While ISIS has lost the overwhelming majority of its territory, the threat has not been completely eliminated; thousands of its fighters are still believed to be alive. And the President's abandonment of the Syrian Kurds has hindered the fight against ISIS. The announcement by the FBI of a link between the gunman in the 2019 shooting at a Florida military base and Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) demonstrates that the threat from groups like Al Qaeda also remains.⁴⁷

The United States must continue its efforts to eliminate safe havens and support partner countries and groups in preventing terrorists from regrouping, rebuilding, and rebranding. This must also include working with the Syrian Kurds and pushing America's European allies and other governments to develop a long-term solution to the thousands of ISIS prisoners in Iraq and Syria, as well as their family members—largely women and children—being held in detention facilities. Many of these governments have refused to repatriate their own citizens, creating a situation that is unsustainable in the long term.⁴⁸

Additionally, the United States should help our partners around the globe prevent and counter terrorism so they can effectively provide for their own security. President Obama set these efforts on the right path by emphasizing cooperation with other countries to share the costs and risks of counterterrorism and make these efforts more sustainable. These partner nations are often on the frontlines in these efforts. However, while President Trump's counterterrorism strategy states that international cooperation is a key priority for his Administration, this does not match his real actions, which have aimed to pull the United States back from the world stage, not increase global engagement.⁴⁹

The United States dramatically increased its funding to partner nations to support security cooperation after 9/11. The US government must now assess how effective this funding has been and prioritize making it more efficient.⁵⁰ Additionally, while President Trump has emphasized the need for allies to spend more on defense, the United States spends a tremendous amount of money building up partner nations' military capacity at the expense of security sector reforms that will make law enforcement more effective.⁵¹ This is critical not only for the fight against terrorism and violent extremism but to combat other security threats, such as cybercrime.

The United States cannot tackle the threat of terrorism without also focusing on stabilization activities, development, and efforts to build up civilian institutions and civil society in these

countries. Continuing the fight against ISIS and other terrorist groups is the right thing to do, but without a plan to stabilize the regions in which they operate, terrorists could yet again emerge from the chaos.⁵² Stabilizing these regions must be done with the help of allies and partners on the ground. President Trump should pursue closer ties with these allies and partners, including the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), not alienate and insult them as he has continued to regular do.⁵³

Preventing and countering terrorism and domestic extremism remains a critical priority to protect American national security and save people's lives. But it is critical for Congress to keep in mind that the threat of terrorism pales in comparison to the threat posed by global pandemics, as the COVID-19 crisis makes clear. Since 9/11, the US government has spent trillions of dollars in the fight against terrorism and in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, largely through defense spending.⁵⁴ But our military cannot fix COVID-19 and the connected economic crisis. Our military and intelligence agencies are not on the frontlines of this crisis—our doctors and nurses are. Unfortunately, America has dramatically underinvested in critical global health and infectious disease programs for years.⁵⁵ As Congress evaluates where it is dedicating resources, it needs to rebalance US security spending to ensure we are able to remain vigilant against terrorism while better protecting the American public from the things that cause the most damage, especially pandemics and other natural disasters.

Conclusion

President Trump's counterterrorism strategy largely continues the approach of the Obama Administration, but the Trump Administration's actual actions and rhetoric are completely disconnected from the objectives of its strategy. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the way the Trump Administration has largely ignored the threat of racially and ethnically motivated domestic extremism. Congress must use its oversight capacity and power of the purse to advance a smart and tough strategy to prevent and counter terrorism and extremism. This strategy should prioritize the threat of domestic extremism; strengthen support for efforts aimed at preventing the spread of all forms of extremism globally, including targeting online extremist content while safeguarding human rights and civil liberties; protect the American homeland by preventing potential terrorist attacks; and build up the capacity of partner nations to fight terrorism on their own turf. In all of these efforts, Congress must ensure it is not overspending on preventing and countering terrorism while underspending on the threats most impacting Americans today, particularly pandemics.

ENDNOTES

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