

# Issue Brief: Preventing and Countering Terrorism



**The National  
Security Program**

## Takeaways

- President Trump has failed to articulate a tough and smart strategy to prevent and counter terrorism.
- His rhetoric and actions make us less safe in the long-term. Trump has attacked key allies in the fight against terrorism while issuing immoral and illogical policies that make it easier for terrorists to recruit and staying silent on certain types of violent extremism that have spiked under his presidency.
- The United States needs a smart and tough approach to terrorism that includes:
  - Protecting the American homeland by preventing terrorist attacks and disrupting terrorist networks in the United States;

- Eliminating terrorist safe havens and helping allies disrupt terrorist networks abroad;
- Preventing the spread of violent extremism and reducing the effectiveness of terrorist recruitment; and
- Building up the capacity of partner nations to fight terrorism on their own turf.

## **President Trump has failed to articulate a tough and smart strategy to prevent and counter terrorism while the threat remains both at home and abroad.**

President Trump has failed to articulate a coherent counter-terrorism strategy for his Administration.<sup>1</sup> According to recent polls, the public still views fighting terrorism as a top policy priority.<sup>2</sup> Yet, President Trump has not developed a comprehensive strategy for preventing and countering this threat.<sup>3</sup> Instead, he has attacked and vilified key partners and allies in the fight against terrorism while pursuing theatrical policies like travel bans that do nothing to stop actual terrorists.<sup>4</sup>

Previous Presidents issued a number of strategies aimed at countering terrorism as well as addressing the drivers of violent extremism that lead to terrorism both at home and abroad. The Obama Administration increased the use of drone strikes while setting clear rules for their use.<sup>5</sup> Obama emphasized intelligence collection and targeting, which allowed him to reduce terrorist threats while trying to minimize civilian deaths and damage caused by US counterterrorism operations that could be exploited by terrorists to recruit.<sup>6</sup> And the Obama Administration

rejected the use of torture as both ineffective and immoral.<sup>7</sup> President Trump has largely rejected all of this.<sup>8</sup>

Without a clearly articulate tough and smart counter-terrorism policy, the Trump Administration runs the risk of pursuing bloated, outdated, and/or ineffective policies which will waste the resources already spent on the fight against terrorism—an estimated \$2.8 trillion since 9/11.<sup>9</sup>

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

President Trump sees no distinction between terrorists and the communities that are actually on the frontlines in the fight against terrorism. Ultimately, this runs the risk of radicalizing more people and makes partnering with communities in preventing terrorism difficult.

President Trump has used scare tactics to alienate and attack the very partners needed to effectively counter terrorism in America's communities. For example, Trump's repeated denigration of Muslims<sup>10</sup> makes it less likely that community and religious leaders will continue to be eager partners in working with the government to prevent violent extremism. Instead, hate-crimes targeting Muslims have doubled under during President Trump's campaign and presidency.<sup>11</sup> His anti-Muslim rhetoric has not only incited violence, but it does nothing to help build trust with these communities that is critical in the fight against terrorism.

Further, Trump has continued to link the terrorist threat solely to Islam and Muslims, undermining counterterrorism efforts and leading to ineffective policies. Trump's unwillingness to distinguish between law-abiding Muslims, who constitute the majority of the Muslims around the globe, and terrorists reinforces terrorist narratives about the United States being at war with Islam.<sup>12</sup> His explicit racial motivation when instituting the travel ban and the lack of a security connection to any terrorist attack show that he is not

interested in effective counterterrorism measures, but symbolic, xenophobic approaches.<sup>13</sup> Further, his failure to prioritize all forms of violent extremism, such as far-right extremism, that have threatened American lives has empowered these individuals and groups to increasingly launch attacks.<sup>14</sup>

President Trump has also attacked America's key global allies in Europe and elsewhere whose cooperation and intelligence sharing are crucial to the United States' counter-terrorism efforts.<sup>15</sup> His habit of blurting out classified information, for instance, has alarmed critical intelligence sharing partners,<sup>16</sup> while his labeling of allies' trading practices as a "national security threat" threatens to damage critical partnerships in the fight against terrorism.<sup>17</sup> The United States government needs the trust and cooperation of the very foreign partners Trump has spent his presidency attacking.

President Trump has also imperiled initiatives aimed at making it harder for terrorists to recruit in the first place. Often communities are the first to notice signs of something amiss. But without education about the danger signs, or training on what to do when they see them, communities may not know how to respond or who to turn to for help. Supporting communities to respond and intervene *before* an attack takes place is part of a long-term approach known as "countering violent extremism" or CVE. Under the Obama Administration, the federal government promoted domestic and international CVE efforts that encourage communities, civil society groups, and other key actors in societies to work together to prevent violent extremism before terrorism occurs.<sup>18</sup> The Trump Administration has proposed cuts to CVE programs<sup>19</sup> and in 2017 rescinded CVE grants that were committed to groups that work to combat right-wing extremism.<sup>20</sup> Because it is hard to judge the success of prevention programs, some have questioned effectiveness of these efforts. But de-funding and de-prioritizing CVE initiatives altogether eliminates one of the early warning signs of terrorism.

A smart and tough approach to fight terrorism must support key partners and allies in efforts to prevent and counter this threat both here at home and abroad—not denigrate, attack, alienate and ignore violence against them.

## **A smart and tough approach to terrorism should include these four things.**

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

### **1. The protection of the American homeland by preventing terrorist attacks and disrupting terrorist networks in the United States.**

The U.S. 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 terrorist threats on the homeland.

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

Still “lone wolf” terrorism has become an increasing threat. Lone wolf terrorists are not under the operational control of a terrorist group. They receive no direction, only inspiration, from violent extremist groups. And as ISIS has been pushed out of much of Iraq and Syria the group has relied more heavily on lone wolf terrorists to perpetrate attacks. These attacks are difficult to prevent because attackers may not be

on the radar of law enforcement and may not leave an electronic trail.

But experts have noted there are things the United States can do to make them less likely. To stop lone wolf attackers trust and collaboration between key communities and law enforcement are essential so communities can alert law enforcement of possible threats. Donald Trump's abhorrent actions to vilify Muslims and Islam and reduce funds to help communities prevent terrorism before it becomes violent will make us less safe in the long run. <sup>21</sup>

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

## **2. Eliminating terrorist safe havens and helping allies disrupt terrorist networks abroad**

Since 9/11, a top priority of the US counterterrorism approach has been eliminating terrorist safe havens around the world and dismantling terrorist networks. After the disastrous invasion of Iraq in 2003 by the Bush Administration and years of pursuing ineffective counterterrorism approaches such as the use of torture, the US expanded its support to countries impacted by terrorism to bolster their efforts in the fight against terrorism. After his election, President Barack Obama even 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.

However, after the United States decimated the ranks of al Qaeda in Iraq in the late 2000's, portions of the group morphed into ISIS. The group took advantage of an opportunity to regroup, rearm, and rebrand with power vacuums that occurred in Iraq and Syria. At its peak in fall

2014, ISIS held an estimated 8 million people and held 41,000 square miles in Iraq and Syria.<sup>22</sup> Since then, a U.S.-supported coalition recaptured major cities in Syria and Iraq while weakening ISIS significantly.<sup>23</sup> While ISIS may eventually lose all its territory that does not mean the ISIS threat has been completely eliminated and the threat from other groups like al-Qaeda still remains.<sup>24</sup> The United States must continue its efforts to eliminate safe havens and support partner countries in working to prevent terrorist groups from regrouping, rebuilding, and rebranding.

The United States must also continue its close coordination with allies to deal with returning foreign terrorist fighters who travelled from places in the United States, Europe, and elsewhere to Iraq and Syria to join ISIS and may try to return home to perpetrate attacks. U.S. officials have estimated that over 40,000 men, women, and children from 120 different countries, including the United States and countries in Europe, had at one time joined ISIS in Iraq and Syria.<sup>25</sup> Thousands of those individuals have already returned home.<sup>26</sup> Cooperation between the United States and its allies is more important than ever to address foreign fighters who pose a threat.<sup>27</sup>

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.<sup>28</sup> Stabilizing these regions must be done with the help of partners on the ground and allies. Trump should pursue closer ties with these allies and partners, not alienate and insult them as he has done.<sup>29</sup> If the United States doesn't want to be the world's policeman, it needs allies to help.

### **3. Preventing the spread of violent extremism and reducing the effectiveness of terrorist recruitment**

Fighting terrorism means more than just clawing back territory from ISIS in Iraq and Syria. In the long-term, it also means addressing the drivers of this violence to begin with

and reducing the vulnerability of people to terrorist recruitment. Terrorism cannot be effectively fought through military means alone. 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 continue to be able to rebuild. Support for civil society groups that can reach the communities most at risk for violent extremism is also critical. President Trump's actions that have reduced funding for and deprioritized the importance of U.S. diplomatic and development entities that work to reduce terrorism in the long-term hurt, not help, in our fight against terrorism.<sup>30</sup>

A key component of this approach must also be to combat violent extremist propaganda and narratives online. Because ISIS uses the Internet and social media to recruit, the U.S. government must continue to support efforts aimed at countering its narratives and taking terrorist accounts offline. Additionally, while social media companies have made progress in suspending accounts linked to terrorist organizations, there should be greater cooperation between the private sector and government in this regard.<sup>31</sup>

#### **4. Building up the capacity of partner nations to fight terrorism on their own turf.**

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 and through other countries to share the costs and risks of the fight against terrorism and to make these efforts more sustainable. Already, many of these partner nations have been on the frontlines in these efforts. Because President Trump has not articulated a comprehensive counter-terrorism strategy, it is unclear whether he will prioritize these efforts moving forward.<sup>32</sup>

The U.S. has dramatically increased its funding to partner nations to support security cooperation since 9/11. The U.S.



government must now assess how effective this funding has been and prioritize making it more efficient.<sup>33</sup> Instead of doing so, President Trump has attacked and alienated many of these partner nations, which could have a devastating impact on U.S. counter-terrorism cooperation with them. Additionally, while President Trump has emphasized the need for allies to spend more on defense, the United States spends a tremendous amount of money on building up partner nations' military capacity at the expense of also supporting security sector reforms that will make law enforcement more effective, which is critical to fight terrorism.<sup>34</sup> While traditional defense capacity is important, the United States will not tackle the threat of terrorism without also focusing on stabilization activities, development, and efforts to build up civilian institutions in these countries as well.<sup>35</sup>

## Conclusion

President Trump has failed to issue a counter-terrorism strategy that allows the American people and Congress to understand and evaluate his efforts to combat this threat. He should set out a smart and tough strategy to counter terrorism would prioritize the protection of the American homeland by preventing potential terrorist attacks and disrupting terrorist networks in the United States, counter terrorist groups globally, strengthen support for efforts aimed at preventing the spread of violent extremism, and build up the capacity of partner nations to fight terrorism on their own turf.

### TOPICS

<b>TERRORISM</b> 99
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