

# Thematic Brief: Preventing and Countering Terrorism

## Takeaways

The Trump Administration's strategy to prevent and counter terrorism has largely continued the approach of the Obama Administration.

However, this approach is at odds with the president's own rhetoric and actions that make us less safe in the long term. President Trump himself has verbally attacked key allies in the fight against terrorism while embracing counterproductive policies that make it easier for terrorists to recruit. At the same time, he has refused to condemn far-right extremism that has 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, before it comes to America.

## 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, the American public still views fighting terrorism as a top policy priority.<sup>1</sup>

In October 2018, President Trump issued the *National Strategy for Counterterrorism of the United States of America*,<sup>2</sup> 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<sup>3</sup> while pursuing ineffective and draconian policies, like travel bans, that reflect a fundamental misunderstanding of the terrorist threat.<sup>4</sup>

Outside of the scope of this 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 clear rules for the use of drone strikes.<sup>5</sup> President Obama emphasized intelligence collection and targeting, which allowed him to reduce terrorist threats while at least trying to minimize civilian deaths and damage that could be exploited by terrorists for recruitment.<sup>6</sup> And the Obama Administration rejected the use of torture as both ineffective and immoral.<sup>7</sup> President Trump has largely reversed all of this,<sup>8</sup> instead embracing the killing of terrorists' families and promoting those who conducted past torture programs.<sup>9</sup>

## **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 increases the risk of radicalizing more people and makes partnering with communities to prevent terrorism difficult.

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 Muslims makes it less likely that community and religious leaders will be eager partners in working with the government to prevent violent extremism.<sup>10</sup> Hate crimes targeting Muslims have remained at historically high levels during President Trump's campaign and presidency.<sup>11</sup>

In addition, Trump has continued to link the terrorist threat solely to Islam and Muslims, undermining counterterrorism efforts and leading to ineffective policies. His unwillingness to distinguish between terrorists and law-abiding Muslims, who constitute the majority of the Muslims in the United States and around the globe, reinforces terrorist narratives about the United States being at war with Islam.<sup>12</sup> Despite the president's claims that the travel ban is motivated by concerns about security, his own tweets and words display an explicit racial motivation and show that he is not interested in effective counterterrorism measures—only symbolic, xenophobic approaches.<sup>13</sup>

Further, President Trump's failure to prioritize *all* forms of violent extremism, particularly far-right extremism, has threatened American lives and empowered these individuals and groups to launch more violent attacks. As the 2018 attack on a Pittsburgh synagogue demonstrated,<sup>14</sup> attacks motivated by violent far-right ideologies have surged under President Trump. Over the last decade, attackers motivated by far-right extremism have committed more attacks in the United States than any other category of extremism.<sup>15</sup> With far-right 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 is silent or even places some blame on the victims.<sup>16</sup> This has empowered the extremists.

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.<sup>17</sup> His habit of blurting out classified information, for instance, has alarmed critical intelligence sharing partners,<sup>18</sup> while his labeling of allies' trading practices as a "national security threat" threatens to damage critical counterterrorism partnerships.<sup>19</sup> The US government needs the trust and cooperation of the same 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, the communities in which radicalization and recruitment take place 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, these 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, and addressing the root causes of this violence to begin with, is part of a long-term approach known as “countering violent extremism” (CVE). Under the Obama Administration, the federal government promoted domestic and international CVE efforts that encouraged communities, civil society groups, and other key actors to work together to prevent violent extremism before terrorism occurs.<sup>20</sup> The Trump Administration has proposed cuts to CVE programs<sup>21</sup> and, in 2017, rescinded CVE grants that were committed to groups that work to combat right-wing extremism.<sup>22</sup> Because it is hard to judge the success of prevention programs, some have questioned the effectiveness of these efforts. But de-funding and de-prioritizing CVE initiatives altogether eliminates one of the early warning detectors of violent extremism.

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

## **A smart and tough approach to terrorism should include: 1. protecting the homeland; 2. eliminating safe havens; 3. disrupting recruitment; and 4. building up partners.**

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 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.

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, limit terrorist use of social media, and undertake 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, but receive inspiration from violent extremist groups. As the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (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 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 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>23</sup>

Domestic extremism that could lead to terrorism, particularly on the far-right, must also be an increasing area of focus for US law enforcement agencies. Members of Congress must push back on the Trump Administration's attempts to deprioritize this rising threat—which is now one of the biggest security risks the nation faces—and ensure adequate resources and training are put forward to combat it.<sup>24</sup>

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 reduce the threat of domestic terrorism.

## **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, followed by years of pursuing ineffective counterterrorism approaches, the United States expanded its support to countries impacted by terrorism to bolster their efforts in the fight against this threat. 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 recent claim that ISIS has been "defeated" in Syria, the threat of the group still remains.<sup>25</sup> After the United States decimated the ranks of Al Qaeda in Iraq in the late 2000s, portions of the group morphed into ISIS. Seeing the power vacuums that occurred Iraq and Syria, the group took advantage of an opportunity to reorganize, rearm, and rebrand. At its peak in fall 2014, ISIS controlled an estimated 8 million people and 41,000 square miles of territory in Iraq and Syria.<sup>26</sup> Since then, a US-supported coalition recaptured major cities in Syria and Iraq while weakening ISIS significantly.<sup>27</sup> While ISIS has lost the overwhelming majority of its territory, that does not mean the threat has been completely eliminated; thousands of its fighters are still believed to be alive. The threat from other groups like Al Qaeda also remains.<sup>28</sup> Indeed, the Pentagon recently estimated that 20,000–30,000 ISIS fighters remain in Iraq and Syria.<sup>29</sup> In comparison, Al Qaeda in Iraq had only an estimated 700 fighters in 2010 when the group was considered "decimated" before its ranks grew once again.<sup>30</sup> The United States must continue its efforts to eliminate safe havens and support partner countries in preventing 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 to Iraq and Syria from the United States, Europe, and elsewhere to join ISIS, some of whom may try to return home to perpetrate attacks. US 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 or were affiliated with the group in Iraq and Syria.<sup>31</sup> Thousands of those individuals

have already returned home but many family members remain in legal limbo in Iraq and Syria.<sup>32</sup> Cooperation between the United States and its allies to resolve this legal limbo and address foreign fighters who pose a threat is more important than ever.<sup>33</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>34</sup> Stabilizing these regions must be done with the help of partners on the ground and allies. President Trump should pursue closer ties with these allies and partners, including European partners in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), not alienate and insult them as he has done.<sup>35</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 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 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.<sup>36</sup>

A key component of this approach must also be to combat violent extremist propaganda and narratives online. Because ISIS and other violent extremist groups use the Internet and social media to recruit, the US 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>37</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 other countries to share the costs and risks of counterterrorism and make these efforts more sustainable. Already, many of these partner nations have been 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.<sup>38</sup>

The United States had dramatically increased its funding to partner nations to support security cooperation since 9/11. The US government must now assess how effective this funding has been and prioritize making it more efficient.<sup>39</sup> 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.<sup>40</sup> This is critical not only for the fight against terrorism and violent extremism but to combat other security threats, such as cybercrime. While traditional defense capacity is important, 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.

## Conclusion

President Trump's counterterrorism strategy largely continues the approach of the Obama Administration, but the Administration's actual actions and rhetoric are completely disconnected from the strategy's objectives. Congress must use its oversight capacity and power of the purse to advance a smart and tough strategy to counter terrorism that would prioritize the protection of the American homeland by preventing potential terrorist attacks and disrupting terrorist networks in the United States, countering terrorist groups globally, strengthening support for efforts aimed at preventing the spread of violent extremism (including the surge in far-right extremism), and building up the capacity of partner nations to fight terrorism on their own turf.

## ENDNOTES

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