



AMERICAN STRATEGY TO COUNTER TERRORISM OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES

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It was on October 4, 2018 that US President Donald Trump announced a new and fully articulated strategy to counterterrorism, stating that: «It defines the US approach to countering evolving terrorist threats, and represents the first clear-eyed strategy to counterterrorism since 2011.» The strategy adopts «more resilient and wider methods, and addresses the whole gamut of terrorist threats to the United States, including enemies abroad, and people who seek to influence the United States with violence. It uses full American power, and every tool available to counter terrorism at home, abroad, and in cyberspace.» The strategy prioritizes a wide range of non-military capabilities, such as preventing terrorist recruitment, reducing the appeal of terrorist propaganda via the internet, and building the community capacity to counterterrorism.

The most important foci include:

First: The Terrorist Adversary

The strategy considers extremist Islamist terrorists the main transnational terrorist threat to the US and its interests, “because they have violent extremist ideologies that create a common identity to be harnessed to persuade new recruits of the goals and trends of terrorist groups, while maintaining cohesion and providing justification for the use of violence to achieve their goals.”

Notorious terrorist organizations, especially ISIS and Al-Qaeda, have repeatedly demonstrated the intention and ability to attack American interests, plot new attacks and enthruse individuals to commit acts of violence in America. Such groups exploit poor government, instability, and political and religious grievances.

Despite the ongoing civil and military efforts by the US and IMCTC, which have reduced the impact of ISIS in Iraq and Syria, the Organization still remains the most serious transboundary threat. It maintains the financial, material and physical resources and expertise needed to launch external attacks, and its senior leaders continue to advocate targeting the US. It has eight official branches, and more than 24 networks.

For the strategy, Iran is the most notorious state sponsor of terrorism. More so, it supports armed and terrorist groups throughout the Middle East, and operates a network of agents who threaten the US and the world. Such groups, most infamous – Hezbollah – exercise terrorism and other means to expand Iran influence in Iraq, Lebanon, the Palestinian territories, Syria and Yemen.

There are many revolutionary, nationalist and separatist movements abroad that, often by their violence, jeopardize the stability of the American communities, including the Northern Resistance Movement, which is a widely known socialist nationalist organization, hostile to the West, which has carried out violent attacks against Muslims, leftist groups, and several others. These include the New Nazi National Working Group in Europe, and Babbar Khalsa International in India.

Second: Prioritization and Resourcing

The threats of terrorists vary based on the degree of risk, in relation to organizations, groups and the region. Therefore, the tools and methods used in countering terrorism are generally directed to regional and functional plans, and priority is given to terrorist groups that most threaten vital national interests.

Hence, counterterrorism efforts should be carefully balanced by all the tools of national power, hence should include the efforts of traditional and non-traditional supporters. While the US should maintain the ability to counter and strike terrorism worldwide, non-military tools, such as law enforcement agencies, intelligence, diplomacy, financial measures, stabilization and development, prevention and intervention and reintegration, are equally essential to prevent and counter terrorism.

Third: Monitoring Terrorist Threats

Terrorists instrumentalize the free and open society of the US to target civilians. For instance, they take advantage of cutting-edge technology such as the internet and encrypted communications to further promote their goals and spread their extremist ideologies. Outside the US territory, they thrive in countries of poor governments.

Priority Actions

- 1- Use military and non-military capabilities to target terrorism that threatens American citizens and interests.
- 2- Promote access to densely populated areas abroad to which physical access is impossible in order to protect direct interests, and innovative methods should be developed.

3- Detain more terrorists in such a method as to best counter terrorism and tackle the dangers of terrorists, while enhancing the ability to collect intelligence information, pending transfer to the US for criminal prosecution.

Fourth: Isolating Terrorists from Source of Support

It has become now a practical reality that technological developments have created interconnectedness all over the world, hence have facilitated the transportation of people, money transfer, shipment of materials and communication of information around the world. The backbone of such interconnectedness is the information technology (IT) that terrorists instrumentalize to manage their organizations.

Priority Actions

- 1- Define the identity of the terrorists, and take legal measures against them in their countries of origin, while respecting privacy and protecting civil rights.
- 2- Continue to collect and exchange information on the travel of terrorists and their movements, while collaborating to enhance travel security and protect borders.
- 3- Cooperate between the public and private sectors to exchange information on the financial transactions of terrorists, while applying law enforcement.
- 4- Prevent terrorists from acquiring knowledge or obtaining materials that assist them in developing weapons of mass destruction and other advanced weapons.
- 5- Some countries continue to use terrorism as an overt tool of their foreign policy, while clandestinely support terrorists, taking advantage of legitimate commercial networks. Therefore, the US continues to acquire evidence of the deceptive practices of such countries.

Fifth: Modernizing Tools and Authorities to Counter Terrorism

We should necessarily stay ahead of terrorist attacks by advancing our detection capabilities and share early indicators with those who can piece together plot information and take necessary actions.

Priority Actions

- 1- Secure borders from terrorist threats, and coordinate with partners.
- 2- Adopt data processing technologies and enhance the ability to access terrorist communications.
- 3- Establish a database of terrorist identities to support and employ counterterrorism, especially watchlists and biometric information.

Sixth: Protecting Infrastructure and Enhancing Preparedness

Proudly enough, the critical infrastructure of the United States, much of which is owned by the private sector, provides the essential goods and services that well drive American prosperity.

Priority Actions

- 1- Enhance defensive measures for infrastructure and soft targets, and put in action measures for a rapid recovery of systems if an attack should occur.
- 2- Promote partnering with organizations, individuals, and all levels of government, to ensure that society is ready to resist and recover from any terrorist attack quickly, including the possibility of an attack with weapons of mass destruction.
- 3- Develop and coordinate a general communications strategy to counter terrorism, and training federal and local interlocutors in meaningful dialogues with the public to foster a culture of preparedness, readiness and resilience.

Seventh: Countering Terrorist Radicalization and Recruitment

A robust and fully articulated counterterrorism architecture to put a halt to attacks and eliminate terrorists was built over the past seventeen years. However, a prevention architecture to thwart terrorist radicalization and recruitment has not been so far developed. Unless otherwise countering terrorist radicalization and recruitment is well realized, fighting a never-ending battle against terrorism in the homeland will still be an everyday reality.

Priority Actions

- 1- Support local solutions, empower stakeholders and equip them with the knowledge and resources they need to address terrorist threats.
- 2- Undermine the ability of terrorist ideologies, offering alternatives to exit from violence, preventing individuals from becoming more involved in and committed to these violent ideologies and methods.
- 3- Increase the ability of civil society to prevent terrorism, fostering awareness of extremist activity and recruitment.
- 4- Support anti-terrorist intervention efforts by identifying signs of violent extremism, with a special emphasis on them in the real and virtual world to prevent terrorist attacks.

- 5- Fight the use of terrorism in cyberspace where they commercialize and showcase their violent ideologies.
- 6- Create a common operating picture of terrorist propaganda activities and narratives.

Eighth: Strengthening the Abilities of International Partners

It is critically important to strengthen the partners of good resources, such as expertise, wide relations across various geographical areas, to further support the countries that lack the resources and capabilities to internationalize counterterrorism efforts, while reducing dependence on US assistance.

Priority Actions

- 1- Establish large anti-terrorist groups that include the allied countries, the technology sector, financial institutions and civil society.
- 2- Raise the capabilities of the main foreign partners by professionalizing military services, law enforcement and judicial agencies, intelligence and security, so that they can conduct counterterrorism operations effectively and fairly.
- 3- Expand the network and the exchange of information with the partners to deepen understanding of the emerging terrorist methods and improve the ability to exchange information and work with the partners.
- 4- Work with local stakeholders and civil society to alleviate grievances exploited by terrorists, and work with partners to encourage positive narratives that promote tolerance and security.

Continuum and Interruption

US President Donald Trump has described the US strategy as a “shift in the approach of the United States of America to countering and preventing terrorism”. In reality, however, it is a continuation of the approach of the Obama Administration Strategy based on the adaptation of President George Bush in his strategy to counter terrorism in his second term. US President Trump’s strategy accommodates new developments such as the rise of ISIS, the increased use of social media by terrorists, and the challenges of returning foreign fighters. However, most of the goals and action plans are very similar to those that former US President Obama issued in the 2011 National Counter-Terrorism Strategy.

Donald Trump’s strategy adopts a cooperative approach to fighting terrorism, and highlights “cooperating with foreign governments so that they take the lead when possible, and working with others to take responsibility for countering terrorism, so that they can ultimately address terrorist threats.” It is an ongoing approach before US

President Donald Trump came to office, as it was clear following the 9/11 Attacks that the major American military campaigns have not had a successful and sustained impact on eliminating terrorism. As Al-Qaeda expanded in the wake of the US invasion of Iraq, the Bush Administration began to pay more attention to building the capabilities of cooperating forces to help it fight Al-Qaeda and counter terrorist threats. Former US President Obama continued this approach, and made working with partner countries a cornerstone of his strategy to counter terrorism. The new US strategy emphasizes cooperation in fighting terrorism. However, many observers believe that the real practices of the Trump Administration have blown up any opportunities for this cooperation! The discourse of cooperation contained in the strategy is far from the common speech of US President Donald Trump, especially with the NATO, and in rebuking and calling on the allies and partners to do more! It expressly contradicts the opposition to all the multilateral things this administration embodies. This created uncertainty for the allies and partners of the United States. The anti-terrorism policy makers in Europe, Africa, the Middle East and South Asia have expressed concern about whether the US still works in tandem with them on this mission, although the strategy affirms that “America first, does not mean America works in isolation”; many US allies plan for the possibility of “America first” actually becomes “America works in isolation”.

The recent annual report issued by the European Law Enforcement Agency (EUROPOL) revealed the reality of terrorism and its associated trends in the European Union about these concerns.

The Cooperation Path to Victory

The strategy did not turn a blind eye to what the US should do with the cooperating countries to address community risk factors for extremism and recruitment by promoting political reforms and economic development, which are costly matters, and require substantial investment from the US and its partners which is not expected to be made by the US in light of Donald Trump’s policy of cutting development aid. One of the weaknesses of the strategy is its inability to fully recognize the requirements of the lesser reliance on the military to counter terrorism.

Domestic Terrorism

The strategy focused on the threats from domestic terrorists who were not motivated by extremist ideologies, and it indicates that “domestic terrorism represents a real threat”, but because US President Donald Trump has made Islamist militants the focus of his attention, courting the far-right in the US, his administration is not expected to take measures consistent with the requirements to counter such a threat. Dr. Stephen Tankel, a former Pentagon consultant and a fellow of the new US Security Center, cites two challenges that prevent the application of what is contained in the strategy about confronting the threats of domestic terrorism. The first challenge is legal. American

law defines domestic terrorism, but it does not specify any associated sanctions. This is why Timothy McVeigh, the Oklahoma City bombing perpetrator, was convicted of murder, and Dylan Storm Roof, an attacker on a black church in Charleston, South Carolina, was convicted of federal hate crimes, even though the two perpetrators' crimes clearly fulfill the American definition of terrorism.

The other challenge is political, and specifically the policy of US President Donald Trump, whose most prominent supporters are far-right extremists. A number of active actors operating under the umbrella of far-right extremism or participating in extremist violence in the US have been active or have increased their activity by electing US President Donald Trump, as members of the Ku Klux Klan (KKK), far-right militia members and neo-Nazis march side-by-side in pro-Trump rallies.

Conflicting Paths

The strategy takes conflicting paths when it makes the war on terror like the Cold War, as a war against what it describes as “evil, totalitarian ideas that challenge the American way of life.” Another part of the strategy highlights preventing terrorism, and the need to build a broader coalition to counter terrorism. “It is difficult to reconcile these two perspectives in the fight against terrorism,” states Dr. Jessica Trisko Darden, visiting fellow at the American Enterprise Institute. She explains that the biggest flaw in the strategy is its excessive attention to ideologies.

Darden emphasizes that the strategy's great interest in political Islam alone is a problem for several reasons: First, the strategy overestimates the degree to which American citizens and national interests are threatened by terrorist groups. Second, when the strategy sees counterterrorism as part of a broad cultural conflict, it overestimates the impact of propaganda and communications. Third, explicit targeting of Islamic groups is likely to complicate cooperation in combating terrorism in a number of countries, as Islamist groups perform an important action in the political process.