

15 YEARS AFTER 9-11: THE STATE OF THE FIGHT AGAINST ISLAMIC TERRORISM

**Hearing Before the House Armed Services Committee,
September 21, 2016**

James F. Jeffrey, Washington Institute for Near East Policy

SUMMARY

I wish to thank the Committee for the opportunity to discuss this extraordinarily important issue.

The fight against Islamic terrorism in its various manifestations is both a key element in our national security, and a central component in the effort to stabilize the broader Middle East. While America may face greater strategic threats, the direct impact of large scale terrorist attack with loss of life in America, and the danger terrorism poses for the still critically-important Middle East, warrant priority attention.

The Administration's combination of homeland defense, military action and political support for the region's own efforts against the sources of terrorism is generally sensible and has had some success. Any final victory will require much more time, continued military pressure, close cooperation with partners, support for a regional order that rejects terror, and special attention to Iran's malignant role as both a supporter of terror and "accelerant" for Sunni extremism.

THE SITUATION

On the first element of our post 9/11 counter-terrorism policy, securing the homeland, the United States has been successful stopping attacks prepared outside the U.S. and limiting those launched by home-grown terrorists.

On the second element, combating terrorist movements with military force, directly and with partners, the record is mixed. With the exception of ISIS and Hezbollah, radical Islamic terrorist movements do not hold strategic territory, although they have presence in 'ungoverned areas,' from Western Pakistan and parts of Afghanistan through Iraq, Syria, Yemen, Sinai, Libya, Somalia and North Africa south of Algeria.

The U.S. was slow countering ISIS' rise, and at times hesitant bringing necessary force against it. That campaign is gaining ground slowly, but events from refugee flows to the recent erroneous U.S. strikes on Syrian troops demonstrate that as long as ISIS operates as a state it can further destabilize the region. But as seen in the U.S.-led Coalition's operations, defeating a terrorist group on the battleground undercuts recruiting just as terrorist military success encourages it.

On the third element, countering the root causes of terrorism, the U.S. has had less success. Most analysts and the Administration understand that this is not primarily a job for the outside world. Islamic terror is both a component, however marginal, of the Islamic world, and a major contributor to the dysfunctionalities within that world that fuel terrorist sentiment.

The current high levels of terror in the pursuit of political goals is a function of the crisis within Middle Eastern Islamic civilization. This crisis has antecedents that stretch back centuries, and gained strength with the collapse of the Ottoman

Empire. For 60 years thereafter the region witnessed a struggle between models for governance, from traditional royalty to modern military or party dictatorships, to Islamic movements. Beginning in 1979, with the founding of the Iranian Islamic Republic and the seizure of the Mecca Grand Mosque, and later the rise of the Taliban and al Qaeda, Violent Islamic movements challenged both individual states and the principle of modernity with its integration of the Middle East into the global system.

The underlying strength of these movements was manifest with the “Arab Spring” in 2011. Despite a decade of counter-terrorist success after 9/11, the Arab Spring movements, while themselves not instigated by violent extremists, by collapsing four military-party dictatorships, in Libya, Syria, Egypt and Yemen, opened the door not to moderate governance but to Islamic terrorist movements.

In addition, this revolt of populations throughout the Middle East, especially in Sunni Arab regimes, empowered Iran and its brand of Islamic extremism. As both a state and a pan-regional religious movement with a history of using terror, Iran poses a special challenge. As a state with whom we must deal diplomatically, and with an internal struggle between moderate and extremist elements we erroneously think we can influence, we often tolerate its use of violence, including an attempt to bomb a Washington restaurant in 2011 and attacks by Iranian surrogates from Lebanon to Azerbaijan and Bulgaria.

Thus, until these societies establish truces within themselves, and with the outside world, based on political, economic, social and theological visions purified of violent extremism, terrorism in some form will continue.

ONE WAY FORWARD

These three elements are a useful platform upon which the next Administration could build. The first, homeland defense, is essential. The second and third represent the offense, the second direct and primarily military, the third ultimately political, working with entities in the region to dry up sources of Islamic terror. Information and intelligence operations compliment these military and political campaigns.

The military element, while it cannot solve this problem, is critical both in defending ourselves and limiting the expansion of Islamic terror and the creation of new 'ungoverned territories.' As such it complements the political effort to eradicate root causes of terrorist violence.

The latter is not our job from the outside, but one for states, societies and peoples in the Middle East to resolve. The United States and our European allies can influence that outcome through military and political action, but can also exacerbate grievances and inadvertently open the way to more terror.

Thus America cannot do this political/sociological job on its own, but only support partners on the margins. Sympathy for Sunni violent extremists in the region according to polls is very low; but support for political Islam, Sharia codes and generally a bigger role for Orthodox Islam is widespread, and this increases ambiguity in the face of terror and limits willingness to speak out. Consequently, counter-terror efforts by our friends are often indirect, limited, locally-crafted and slow to produce results. But patience, and cultural sensitivity, are necessary.

This sensitivity has limits. The Administration's unwillingness usually to speak publicly of this threat as "Islamic" is a mistake.

Muslims understand the nature of this threat including its Islamic roots. We will not make enemies calling a truth true; failure to do so out of political correctness erodes support for balanced responses to terrorism among Western populations.

But we cannot generalize, linking entire Muslim populations with terrorists. The former are our actual or potential allies.

We will not win without them.

Supporting imperfect partners in this struggle is often complicated. As in Egypt today we share the fight frequently with governments some of whose actions encourage terrorist recruitment. While this requires balancing, the first principle—as America's actions are judged by other partners throughout the region—is to emphasize cooperation, not criticism.

More generally, America can help rollback support for terror by explaining not just what we are against but what we are for. Aside from supporting partners, this must include undergirding the international order based on state sovereignty, non-recourse to violence, collective security and international law.

America's military offensive against terror should be directed in particular to advance this order in the Middle East, where it faces multiple stresses. Thus we should have acted sooner against ISIS in 2014 as it gained territory and an army, and should have never contemplated a military withdrawal from Afghanistan. This military component might be less crucial than the region's own development of antibodies against Islamic terror, but military operations can give the region the time needed to do so. These operations need not be large-scale, costly or high casualty, but must long continue with clear

victory elusive.

Finally, our military and political campaign against Islamic terror must focus on Iran as well as Sunni groups. It is not an acceptable partner in the war against terror. First, the theocratic regime's Islamic roots have much in common with Sunni Islamic extremism. It and its surrogates use terror themselves, and it has had relations with al Qaeda and Taliban elements. In either its Islamic or Persian xenophobic guise it undercuts international order and state sovereignty. Furthermore regional states generally see it as a more existential threat than Sunni Islamic terror. There is thus a real danger that, if we are not resolute containing Iran, and if the Sunni-Shia conflict now seen in Syria emerges region-wide, our Sunni partners could see violent Sunni Islamic movements not as threats, but as allies against Iran.