



US counterterrorism strategy

Having extended its strategy to the broader Muslim community, the US government's approach to counterterrorism has become inconsistent. *Barak Seener* examines the consequences of some of the US administration's foreign and domestic policy decisions.

Key Points

- US foreign policy towards Islamist groups is confused, and is being driven by erroneous, discredited, domestic policies that mix up integration and counterterrorism.
- These policies make a distinction between violent and non-violent extremist groups. In reality, non-violent extremism is often the stepping stone to violent extremism.
- Extremist Islamist movements abroad have taken advantage of this policy failure, gaining concessions and recognition, which has alienated genuine moderate groups.

The current United States administration's approach to counterterrorism has been inconsistent. On the one hand, following its domestic policy review in December 2009, the White House extended its Afghan strategy to the broader Muslim world in order to "intensify regional diplomacy to enable a political process to promote peace and stability". However, this move coincided with an increased number of unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) attacks against Al-Qaeda's and its affiliates' leadership in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Somalia, and Yemen. President Barack Obama's administration also ordered a troop surge in Afghanistan and reduced its armed forces in Iraq. The government engagement with the Middle East is marked by numerous strategies ranging from more frequent UAV attacks to increased intelligence sharing with states in the Middle East, and diplomatic engagement with Iran.

Moreover, the US government adopted a unique feature of engaging with local actors, despite the latter's extremist Islamist ideology. This applies to the Taliban in Afghanistan, Hizbullah in Lebanon, and the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt.

The US, caught by surprise by the Arab Spring, found itself drawing spurious distinctions between political and terrorist wings of extremist organisations. This approach was aggravated by cuts in defence expenditure. As a result, policymakers preferred to politically co-opt rather than confront Islamist organisations. Co-opting Islamist organisations abroad has its roots in the flawed counter-narrative to domestic Islamism that the US and the United Kingdom propound.

Creating counter-narrative

The president's speech in Cairo in June 2009, articulated his vision for engagement with the Islamic world. The counter-narrative to Islamism and anti-Americanism can be linked to a counterterrorism strategy promoted by Farah Pandith, the US Department of State's Special Representative to Muslim Communities. Pandith had previously worked in the George W Bush administration's National Security Council. She is responsible for "Muslim engagement", "countering violent extremism", and the Broader Middle East and North Africa (BMENA) initiative. Pandith devised a global counterterrorism strategy based on offering a counter-narrative to Islamism in Europe.

Pandith promoted a counter-narrative to Islamism by employing a grassroots approach that would focus on civil societal engagement with Islamic communities in the US and Europe. This approach appears to have been extended to the Muslim world. In this process, much attention was paid to the under-30 demographic that would be most adept at using social media, such as Facebook and Twitter, in a bid to pre-empt the development of terrorist tendencies. Pandith also conflated promoting national identity and social integration with counterterrorism and counter-radicalisation.

Domestically, attempts to integrate Islamists often overlooked their radicalism, which has been reflected in the US foreign policy





towards the Middle East. The US now considers that engaging with Islamists will help moderate them. This policy ignores the Islamists' ethos, which increases their radicalism once they assume office. In 2011, UK home secretary Theresa May concluded that this approach failed in the UK, having completed a review of the 2007 Prevent strategy, which aimed at countering radicalisation in local Muslim communities.

Conflating integration with counterterrorism

In its official Prevent strategy document, the UK Home Office reported, "Previous Prevent work has sometimes given the impression that Muslim communities as a whole are more 'vulnerable' to radicalisation than other faith or ethnic groups." It also served to cultivate the sense of 'victimisation' across Muslim communities. Director of the Network of Sikh Organisations (NSO) Dr Indarjit Singh echoed this sentiment in an NSO memorandum, saying, "Rather than tackling underlying issues, [Prevent is] producing a sense of victimisation among Muslims and a growing sense of resentment and marginalisation in other religious communities."

The Home Office report said, "There have been cases where groups whom we would now consider to support an extremist ideology have received funding." The Prevent strategy gave extremist Islamist speakers platforms at mosques and universities in the UK and even at Prevent-sponsored events. The government's embrace of civil societal efforts seemed to undermine the credibility and legitimacy of those who associated with the government counter-radicalisation agenda, and simultaneously was enhancing the credibility of extremist Islamist organisations.

Pandith considered offering a counter-narrative to facilitate integrating Muslim communities as synonymous with counterterrorism. She has emphasised that "the top-to-bottom, one-size-fits-all approach will not work", and that the government should advance a counter-narrative by embracing the civil society. Echoing this in the US in 2011, the White House released the National Strategy for Empowering Local Partners to Prevent Violent Extremism, which is based on the National Strategy for Counterterrorism, or the Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) strategy. The CVE stated, "Just as the terrorist threat we face in the United States is multifaceted and cannot be boiled down to a single group or community, so must our efforts to counter it not be reduced to a one-size fits-all approach."

Integration separate from counterterrorism

Counterterrorism and counter-radicalisation initiatives are different from creating an alternative counter-narrative that seeks to integrate Muslims. The revised Prevent strategy acknowledged that it had previously "confused the delivery of government policy to promote integration with government policy to prevent terrorism". This revision reflected UK prime minister David Cameron's speech on 5 February 2011 at the Munich Security Conference that distinguished between terrorism and non-violent extremists. The latter are defined as people and organisations that disagree with the UK "core values", including democracy, equality before the law, and universal human rights. Cameron cautioned that both violent and non-violent extremism are cause for concern. "As evidence emerges about the backgrounds of those convicted of terrorist offences," Cameron explained, "it is clear that many of them were initially influenced by what some have called 'non-violent extremists', and then took those radical beliefs to the next level by embracing violence." Although the 1997-2010 Labour governments created a subtle distinction between radical ideas and the promotion of violence, which would determine who was acceptable to engage with, the revised Prevent strategy rejects the distinction between violent and non-violent extremism, condemning all radical ideologies. Similarly, the White House's CVE stated, "Adherence to Al-Qaeda's ideology may not require allegiance to Al-Qaeda, the organisation. Individuals who sympathise with or actively support Al-Qaeda may be inspired to violence and can pose an ongoing threat, even if they have little or no formal contact with Al-Qaeda."

In the US and the UK, radicalism has been identified as creating a host environment for terrorist groups to spread. The new Prevent approach targets radicalism and terrorism and makes no distinction between soft and hard forms of Islamism. Maajid Nawaz, founder of the counter-extremism think-tank Quilliam, identified ideology as a gateway to terrorism. Nawaz said, "Islamists and others often claim that the most effective way to prevent violence is to empower non-violent Islamists. Yet the term 'moderate Islamist' is a deception; even the most moderate Islamist adheres to an ideology that is diametrically opposed to Western values, such as those enshrined in the US Constitution. Furthermore, though not all Islamists are jihadists, all jihadists are Islamists. Even the most moderate Islamists promote an intellectual environment in which non-Islamic or insufficiently Islamic governments and their citizens exist in violation of



Islamic law, and must be opposed."

US foreign policy today is similar to the one adopted in the early Prevent days, when counterterrorism and integration were assumed to be the same. It currently often paints radicals as moderates, alienating genuine moderates.

Islamist strategies - hidden agendas

Affected by dwindling resources to implement a successful interventionist foreign policy, the US has also been vulnerable to the deceptive strategy employed by Islamists to conceal their radical agenda from the international audience. For example, the US assumption that the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood could be political moderates once they assumed office reflects the belief that co-opting ideologically moderate Islamists would create a bulwark against terrorism.

Islamists can conceal their agenda, misleading Western governments to engage with them. Sunni Islamists have employed duplicitous strategies, such as *dawa* (preaching), which conceal their extremist agenda. Groups such as Hamas have employed the 'hudna' (ceasefire) or collaboration with enemies until the time is ripe to adopt the revolutionary phase of defeating or converting the infidel. The Shia concept of 'taqiyyah' similarly views this as permissible to achieve the same goal. The Muslim Brotherhood concealed its radical agenda and portrayed itself as a pluralistic movement.

Iran's Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini employed taqiyyah in the late 1970s to dupe the US. American academics advocated that the US should reach out to Khomeini when he was living in exile outside of Paris. This sentiment grew when Khomeini was part of a coalition with the secular movement including the communist Tudeh Party and the anti-Shah capitalist Mojahedin-e-Khalq (MEK) party. Richard Falk, then a professor of International Law at Princeton, met with Khomeini. Subsequently, he published an article on 16 February 1979 entitled *Trusting Khomeini* in which he argued that "the depiction of Khomeini as fanatical, reactionary, and the bearer of crude prejudices seems certainly and happily false". Falk said that Khomeini was surrounded by moderate politicians who had a "notable record of concern for human rights". US ambassador to Iran William Healy Sullivan thought Khomeini would work well with younger officers from the Shah's army. Khomeini was painted as an anti-colonialist or as a pious cleric who wanted to devote himself to purely spiritual matters in the city of Qom. Khomeini shrewdly echoed what the international community wanted to hear and spoke of human rights, gender equality, and the violation of human rights by the Shah. However, history recalls how Khomeini proceeded to brutally purge all those who had previously constituted his coalition in order to advance his Islamist agenda. In the process, Khomeini laid a political blueprint that has since been followed by Islamists across the Middle East: the more distant from power, the more moderate and democratic the rhetoric is. The greater the proximity to power, the more openly anti-Western and undemocratic the agenda becomes.

Muslim Brotherhood

Mustafa Mashhur, the fifth General Guide of the Muslim Brotherhood in 1996-2002 stated, "We accept the concept of pluralism for the time being; however, when we will have Islamic rule we might then reject this concept or accept it." Although the Muslim Brotherhood's internal deliberations are secret, Mashhur revealed in his book *Jihad is the way* how the Brotherhood differs from terrorist groups, such as Al-Qaeda, in tactics, but not in its ultimate goals. Reflecting on the way the Brotherhood initially remained in the shadows of the Tahrir Square protests in Egypt, Mashhur wrote, "The Brotherhood is not rushed by youth's enthusiasm into immature and unplanned action, which will not alter the bad reality and may even harm the Islamic activity, and will benefit the people of falsehood." He added, "One should know that it is not necessary that the Muslims repel every attack or damage caused by the enemies of Allah immediately, but [only] when ability and the circumstances are fit to it." Mashhur wants Islamists to adopt these tactics internationally, as the ultimate goal is "to restore the Islamic caliphate and to re-establish the Islamic state on strong foundations".

Just as Khomeini temporarily hid behind moderate allies, such as Iranian prime minister Mehdi Bazargan's provisional government, in Egypt, the Muslim Brotherhood advanced politically through broad-based alliances with opposition groups, such as the April 6 Youth Movement and the ultras from the Ahlawy football club. During the Tahrir Square protests, the Brotherhood made Mohamed ElBaradei the head of the opposition movement, referring to him as the "donkey of the revolution", implying that he could be cast aside after 'having ridden' on him. Similarly, staying behind seemingly 'moderate' figures was a tactic that Hizbullah adopted in Lebanon when it



placed Najib Mikati as prime minister in June 2011.

The dawa strategy has managed to disorientate the West. At a US House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence hearing on 10 February 2011, US Director of National Intelligence James Clapper commented that the Muslim Brotherhood was "largely secular". He continued, "The term 'Muslim Brotherhood'... is an umbrella term for a variety of movements, in the case of Egypt, a very heterogeneous group, largely secular, which has eschewed violence and has decried Al-Qaeda as a perversion of Islam." Yet, the Muslim Brotherhood expressed remorse at the assassination of Sheikh Osama bin Laden, saying that "the legitimate resistance against foreign occupation is a legitimate right awarded by divine law and international covenants, and the confusion created between legitimate resistance and violence against innocents has been deliberately sown by the Zionist enemy".

It is therefore not surprising that two years after the Muslim Brotherhood won 20% of parliamentary seats in the 2005 election, the group sought to draft a political agenda, calling for a ban on women and non-Muslims becoming heads of state, and for the creation of a religious council to vet government decrees. Yet in an interview with the BBC, Kamal el-Helbawy, a former Muslim Brotherhood leader in exile was careful to obfuscate the Muslim Brotherhood's intention by saying that it sought "freedom, consultation, equality, freedom of everything". He avoided answering directly whether equal rights would be granted to women and Coptic Christians. Similarly, before its 2012 presidential victory, the Muslim Brotherhood made two promises: that it would contest fewer than half of the seats in parliamentary elections, and that it would not run for presidency. In June 2011, the group emphasised its commitment to co-operation with the secularist Wafd Party (Delegation Party) in creating the Democratic Alliance for Egypt - an electoral coalition that included 43 parties. However, in October, the Brotherhood reportedly insisted that 40% of the alliance's parliamentary candidates should come from its own ranks, triggering the defection of 30 parties, including the Wafd Party. Shortly thereafter, the Brotherhood backtracked on its first pledge, ultimately running for at least 77% of the seats in parliamentary election that concluded in January 2013. Then, after winning a 47% plurality in the election, the group ensured its dominance over the legislature by appointing the Brotherhood-aligned chairs to 14 of 19 parliamentary committees. After its candidate won the 2012 presidential election, President Mohamed Morsi issued a constitutional declaration on 22 November 2012 aimed at seizing virtually unchecked executive power, by removing any judicial or constitutional court oversight of his actions. Morsi also attempted to preserve the constituent assembly even after all, but the Brotherhood and its Salafist allies had withdrawn from it, despite his earlier promises to reform the assembly.

Fourth-generation warfare

Dawa and taqiyyah are deceptive strategies causing Western governments to engage with Islamists while legitimising their political wings. This creates an opening for an Islamist civil societal space to serve as a platform for future resistance. An example of this is the European Union that lists Hizbullah's military wing as a terrorist organisation and distinguishes between its political wings. US Colonel Thomas Hammes called Islamists' supposed separation of their social and political activities 'fourth-generation warfare' (4GW). The latter is a mode of asymmetric warfare that emphasises creating political, social, and economic networks to undermine the political will of the enemy to engage in combat over a long period of time. Hammes offers the example of Israel's successful countering of terrorists functioning under the rubric of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). However, Israel was unable to effectively counter the PLO's establishing of local service institutions, and eventually local governments found themselves in refugee camps too. Rather than inflicting military losses, the PLO instituted a rival regime and began to erode the legitimacy of Israel.

Policy makers' failure to appreciate 4GW often leads to the spurious distinction between organisations' political and terrorist wings. Matthew Levitt, former counterterrorism advisor to the US special envoy for Middle East regional security (SEMERS), and General James L Jones, Obama's special adviser in 2009-10, said that in the case of Hamas, the military wing was accountable to a political steering committee that included the group's acknowledged spiritual leader Sheikh Ahmed Yassin, and spokesmen Ismail Abu Shanab, Abdel Aziz al-Rantissi, and Mahmoud al-Zahar. Yassin along with Salah Shehadeh, the late founder and commander of the Izz ad-Din al-Qassam Brigades, publicly confirmed that the military wing implemented the policies determined by the political wing. David Aufhauser, the former general counsel to the US Treasury Department and chairman of the US National Security Council's policy co-ordinating committee on terrorist financing, made distinctions between terrorist groups' charitable and military wings as sophistry, adding that "the idea that there's a firewall between the two defies common sense". The Department of State echoed this saying, "As long as Hamas continues to rely on terrorism to achieve its political ends, we should not draw a distinction between its military and humanitarian arms, since funds provided to one can be used to support the other."





Fostering a liberal civic culture in the Middle East can undermine Islamists' support. The Muslim Brotherhood's government participation did not have a moderating effect, as it shed its false front once it attained power. To prevent this from occurring in the Middle East again, it is essential to write constitutions and electoral laws during an extensive transition period to prevent any party from achieving a monopoly on power. Positive freedoms, such as the freedom of speech, assembly, political organisation, and practice of religion, should be enshrined in the constitution. The current policy of painting radicals as moderates is false and spurious. The alternative for the US is to proclaim a lack of influence on events that have taken place because of insufficient resources. This is at the expense of seizing the opportunity to cultivate indigenous liberal democratic forces in the Middle East.

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