Addressing the threat of terrorism, both real and perceived, would be a top priority for any president, but it is especially important for Donald Trump’s administration. Despite the dearth of Islamic State or other foreign-directed mass-casualty attacks on U.S. soil since 9/11, polls from earlier in 2016 showed that 73 percent of Americans saw the Islamic State as a “very serious” threat to the United States, and another 17 percent saw it as “moderately serious”—a rare priority that crosses political lines. Almost 80 percent believed the Islamic State has assets in the United States and can “launch a major terrorist attack against the U.S. at any time.”

Exploiting these concerns during the presidential campaign, Trump regularly warned about “a major threat from radical Islamic terrorism,” and tweeted (the forum used for all serious discussions of policy) that “We better get very smart, and very tough, FAST, before it is too late!”

President Barack Obama, he claimed, had boxed U.S. generals in with a “strategy that is destined to fail.”

Fighting terrorism has been at the top of the U.S. national security agenda since 9/11, but the terrorism threat, and thus the appropriate counterterrorism response, is often grossly misunderstood. In addition, the Obama administration failed to resolve several counterterrorism challenges, such as terrorist control of territory, that the Trump administration should consider as it designs its policies. At home the challenges are


even more complex: the election exposed failures of societal resilience and led to the public demonization of Muslims, both of which only further empower terrorist groups.

Trump’s approach so far appears to be a mix of the old and the misguided. His administration has continued the Obama administration’s efforts to steadily deny the Islamic State a sanctuary through military action against the group in Iraq and Syria. And like Obama, he has refrained from a dramatic escalation there or in places like Afghanistan, where the Taliban continue their campaign against the U.S.-backed government. Similarly, the administration has maintained the intelligence campaign against terrorist groups, which has produced many devastating losses for them. President Trump has also deepened ties to several allies in the Middle East that are important counterterrorism players. At the same time, however, Trump has alienated many other allies around the world. Even worse, his rhetoric and initial policies such as his immigration restrictions may make the problem at home, as will his emphasis on jihadist terrorism to the exclusion of other forms, such as right-wing violence.

The Threat Today

It is difficult to assess the danger of terrorism today because it varies so much by region. In the United States, the terrorism threat has been low since 9/11 despite fears to the contrary and the perceptions of many Americans. As of August 2017, only 95 Americans have died from jihadist attacks—that’s 95 too many, but that’s far fewer than experts (including myself) anticipated in the scary weeks after 9/11, whose death toll was 2,977. If you exclude Omar Mateen’s 2016 attack on the Pulse nightclub in Orlando, which killed 49 people (over half the total U.S. homeland deaths from jihadists in the post-9/11 period), right-wing terrorists have killed more Americans in the post-9/11 era than jihadists, and the level of right-wing violence has increased since Trump’s election. But we do not hear much about that.

One reason is that 9/11 was such a dominant event and reporting of terrorist plots as well as attacks has since skyrocketed, particularly if the perpetrators have even weak links to jihadist groups like al Qaeda or the Islamic State. A more globalized media has meant that Islamic State attacks in Dhaka or al Qaeda attacks in Bali receive considerable press attention, to say nothing of more familiar foreign ground such as Paris or London. Indeed, although the terrorism problem in Europe is more severe than that facing the United States, by some measures it too has not surged dramatically compared with past decades. The 1970s and 1980s saw far more attacks than there were in the post-9/11 era. Recent years have seen bloody and horrific attacks, like the 2015 shootings and bombings in Paris that killed 130 people—but 1988 saw 440 people die, most of whom perished when Libyan agents bombed Pan Am 103.

The perception of danger is far greater than the reality. Even after fifteen years of intense counterterrorism efforts at home and abroad and the failure of jihadist groups to carry out a mass-casualty attack on the U.S.

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homeland, 40 percent of Americans believe the ability of terrorists to launch a major attack on the United States is greater than it was at the time of the 9/11 attacks and another 31 percent believe it is the same.7

Although the American public has an exaggerated sense of the terrorism threat, there has been a surge in violence—it’s just not in the West. The threat has skyrocketed in South Asia, the Middle East, and Africa. Specific numbers are difficult to find, because so many of the region’s terrorist groups are also engaged in bloody civil wars in which hundreds of thousands have died, and thus much of the violence is technically not terrorism—but that confusion illustrates the broader danger these groups pose to the region. Terrorists have contributed to and exploited civil wars that have killed more than one hundred thousand in Afghanistan, tens of thousands in Pakistan, tens of thousands in Nigeria, thousands in Yemen, thousands in Libya, and hundreds of thousands in Syria.8

With this picture in mind, the challenges facing the United States can be broken down into three issues. The first, of course, is the real risk to American lives and those of U.S. allies. In absolute terms these are small in the United States and only slightly larger in Europe. Most Americans are more likely to be shot by an armed toddler than killed by a terrorist.9

The next danger is political. Trump scored many points playing up the threat of Muslim immigrants and Syrian refugees, with the terrorism danger (despite being low to nil statistically) looming in the background.10 In Europe the politics are even nastier, and xenophobic movements have gained notable strength almost everywhere. Countries as diverse as the United Kingdom, France, Germany, Norway, Austria, Hungary, and Greece have seen a surge of anti-Muslim, anti-immigrant, right-wing nationalism.11 Defending America


9 Zak Cheney Rice, “In 2016, Toddlers Have Shot More People in the US Than Muslim Terrorists Have,” Mic, 2 May 2016, https://mic.com/articles/142348/in-2016-toddlers-have-killed-more-people-in-the-us-than-muslim-terrorists-have#.gEMSMmxQV.


means more than defending American lives: it also means defending American values, including being a home to peaceful people of all religions and welcoming refugees.

Terrorism’s success, however, often depends on the reaction of the government it is fighting and the foreign audience it seeks to influence — and here too the situation has changed, this time much for the worse. Since 9/11, keeping the U.S. homeland safe from mass-casualty terrorism is an understandable priority by which every president should be judged. But this concern has expanded to stopping all attacks on all Americans everywhere. The killing of three Americans at the Boston Marathon in 2013 understandably shut down the city. After the attack, the House Committee on Homeland Security wisely launched an investigation, but, in a letter to the administration, the Republican committee leadership immediately claimed the failure to prevent the attack raised “serious questions about the efficacy of the federal counter-terrorism efforts.” One minor and amateurish attack, apparently, means failure. Even limited strikes in dangerous areas like the 2012 attack in Benghazi that killed Ambassador J. Christopher Stevens and three other Americans are political footballs. Although to today’s Americans this low bar seems obvious, President Ronald Reagan suffered no major political penalty (and people rightly see him as tough on terrorism) despite Hizballah attacks on U.S. Marines and diplomats in Lebanon that killed hundreds as well as the deaths of 270 people from Libya’s downing of Pan Am 103 in 1988. Americans are in no mood to accept that small attacks are difficult to prevent and that low levels of terrorism at home are a sign of success, not failure.

The biggest danger, however, is to U.S. interests in Muslim parts of Asia, Africa, and the Middle East. Stability and governance have collapsed in many countries and are under threat in others. In addition to the human cost, this threatens the stability of U.S. partners and has led to dangerous confrontations, with countries like Saudi Arabia intervening in Yemen and otherwise ratcheting up regional tension in competition with Iran. The danger also allows U.S. allies like Egypt to resist pressure regarding democratization, claiming that all forms of religious opposition are linked to terrorism.

Unmet Challenges

The Obama administration did not resolve several problems that have hindered U.S. counterterrorism efforts and foreign policy in general. These include managing technological change, ending terrorist havens, and incorporating terrorism into overall U.S. foreign policy.

The Islamic State has used the Internet to recruit and fundraise, with social media proving particularly important to its rise and to its ability to work with followers in the West to conduct attacks. Although the United States can and should push technology companies to monitor their users to hinder egregious terrorist recruitment and operations, protecting the right of free speech the proliferation of communications technologies remains a boon for groups that cannot be completely avoided. Terrorists will use the technology of their times; as it grows more advanced so will they. On the other hand, the United States can take


advantage of terrorists’ social media output and otherwise use their digital footprints to track them. Indeed, such efforts are vital for identifying and stopping so-called ‘lone wolves,’ whose only indication of an impending attack might be a tweet or Facebook post that brings them to the attention of security services. In addition, the administration can push technology companies to live up to their terms of service and otherwise try to make the Internet a restrictive and dangerous place for would-be terrorists, as it was in the late 2000s.14

Another challenge is terrorist control of territory. In areas where civil wars rage, the United States will have to step up and improve training programs for allied militaries and partner substate groups. It needs more competent good guys – or at least less bad guys – to support in the Middle East and other danger zones. Such forces are necessary to push back the Islamic State and other groups on the ground and, even more difficult, hold the territory as these groups respond with renewed attacks and guerrilla operations.

Addressing territorial control in the long-term requires a fundamental shift from the Obama era. The Obama administration aggressively hunted terrorists throughout the greater Middle East and Africa yet remained hesitant to become bogged down in the swamp of Middle East politics. The result was an aggressive campaign to kill and arrest terrorists that was often divorced from the environment that allows them to breed and expand. Civil wars, for example, generate new terrorist groups and allow existing ones to expand operations: halting or preventing civil wars is thus vital for counterterrorism.

Such a recommendation is easier to implement in spirit than in practice. Military training programs in Syria and Iraq, for example, have often failed disastrously. After months or even years of training, U.S.-aided groups have fled in the face of the enemy (or, in Syria, even before). When the Islamic State took Mosul in June 2014, perhaps 30,000 well-armed Iraqi forces fled the city in the face of perhaps 1,000 Islamic State fighters, leaving massive amounts of equipment behind, including Abrams tanks as well as small arms and ammunition.15 The Islamic State’s expansion occurred in part because Iraqi military forces were primarily Shiites, who had little interest in defending local Sunnis, many of whom viewed them with hostility and contempt. Thus in Sunni areas such as Mosul, residents often regarded the army as an instrument of an Iranian puppet regime. The Iraqi officers did not command the respect of their troops and lacked professionalism, and when they fled the battlefield their troops quickly followed.16

Training programs without broader reform will fail given such deep problems. Starting small will be essential. The United States will need to thoroughly vet small unit leaders as well as senior officers. Improving governance is also vital. This is not usually a question of financial aid or broader democratization but rather of ensuring that corruption is kept to a minimum and basic services are provided.

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The United States, however, cannot and should not be everywhere. Part of the new President’s job will be drawing lines between areas of strong interest and those that are peripheral. Some areas might be better left to allies: France, for example, could continue to take the lead in parts of North and West Africa. Just as the American public should not empower amateurish or failed terrorist plots by overreacting, the next administration should direct its considerable, but still finite, power at what is assessed to be an actual threat.

Finally, Obama’s administration often focused on counterterrorism to the exclusion of other issues. Its policies in Libya and Yemen, for example, aimed at destroying terrorist groups there but ignored the broader civil wars that enabled them to thrive. Its intervention in Syria focused only on one actor, the Islamic State, thus embroiling the United States in a complex conflict without a broader strategy to the struggle as a whole. Allies often deliberately generate sectarianism to undermine rivals and, in so doing, assist recruitment by groups like the Islamic State.

Trump’s Misguided Approach

In its opening months, the Trump administration has continued many policies of the Obama administration, often quite successfully. The administration has maintained the slow but successful military campaign against Islamic State forces in Iraq and Syria, although it appears to have slightly loosened restrictions on military commanders and deployed additional forces to Syria, nearly doubling the number of previous forces in the fight for Raqqa.\(^\text{17}\) In addition, it maintained the coalition of states and local actors that the Obama administration cobbled together. Furthermore, the aggressive global intelligence campaign begun under President George W. Bush and continued under Obama remains robust. Together such efforts have hindered Islamic State operations and steadily shrunk its territory. In addition, the group’s various provinces have failed to expand and suffered significant blows, as in the case of its most successful province in Libya.

In his first few months in office, however, the President has taken several steps that may impede the struggle against jihadist terrorism. First, in his campaign rhetoric and through actions like Executive Order 13769 (the so-called ‘Muslim ban’), the Trump administration is demonizing American Muslims and damaging relations between religious communities—a traditional source of American strength, pride, and values. Such actions increase the allure of the Islamic State and other groups that claim that the West is at war with Islam. In addition, these actions increase the likelihood that Muslim communities will fear the police, FBI, and other government institutions, and thus be less likely to cooperate with them.

Overseas, President Trump embraced the Saudi perspective on the Middle East. Saudi Arabia is an important counterterrorism partner, and the United States shares several vital interests with the Saudi regime. Relations with the Kingdom became strained under Obama, and President Trump’s efforts to strengthen ties should be commended. However, the Saudi government continues to fund an array of preachers and institutions that promulgate an extreme version of Islam, enabling the Islamic State to recruit and otherwise gain support. In addition, Saudi Arabia promotes an anti-Shi’a agenda that harms regional stability and fosters sectarianism, a key recruiting tool of the Islamic State. More broadly, the disdain for human rights as a foreign policy value

adopted by the administration advances the argument that the United States cares little about the well-being of ordinary Muslims and is uncritically on the side of the dictatorial regimes in the Arab world.\textsuperscript{18}

At home, administration officials appear highly skeptical of programs to counter violent extremism (CVE). Many such programs are based on weak data and untested theories and demand scrutiny and oversight.\textsuperscript{19} However, many of these programs deserve continued support because they offer an often cheap and valuable tool to work with communities and could identify and stop potential terrorists. In addition, the administration proposed dramatic cuts to the already-small foreign aid budget and has not staffed the Department of State, the civilian arm of the Department of Defense, and other key agencies. As a result, the U.S. ability to use a whole-of-government approach to combat terrorism is diminished.

Initial signs suggest that the Trump administration would respond poorly to a terrorist attack on U.S. soil. At a time when a president should provide steady leadership, President Trump’s record suggests he might speak or tweet too quickly, without assembling the necessary facts or listening to the views of his advisors. His response to the London attacks earlier in June 2017 needlessly aggravated U.S.-U.K. relations at a time when allies should come together. The President has lost credibility among many Americans, which will cause the public to be skeptical of his claims on the nature of any terrorist attack and necessary subsequent actions in the aftermath of an attack.\textsuperscript{20} He may seek broad detentions or surveillance or act otherwise in ways that might exacerbate the problem in the long-term. After 9/11, the United States detained over one thousand Muslims, gaining almost no useful intelligence but harming relations with the community. As Daniel Benjamin, a former senior counterterrorism official, recalled, “Repairing the damage from that crackdown took years.”\textsuperscript{21}

\textit{Rectifying the Failures at Home}

It may prove hardest for the new President to navigate domestic waters than the shoals of the Middle East. Since 9/11, three of the biggest failures in U.S. counterterrorism policy have involved domestic politics. Unfortunately, under Trump these failures appear likely to worsen.

The first is institutionalization. Under both Bush and Obama, new and controversial counterterrorism instruments–targeted killings, increased domestic surveillance, aggressive FBI sting operations, detention


\textsuperscript{21}Gartenstein-Ross, “What Does the Recent Spate of Lone Wolf Terrorist Attacks Mean?”
without trial, and so on – are at the heart of counterterrorism. In addition, the United States is bombing the Islamic State in Iraq and especially in Syria with only dubious legal justification.

Since 9/11 counterterrorism policy has been decided by the executive branch and modified by the courts. One branch of government, perhaps the most important in the long-term, has been AWOL under both Democratic and Republican leadership: the U.S. Congress. Regardless of whether you want to expand or shrink the above policies, public debate and legislation are vital. This puts the executive branch and the courts on a sounder footing and enables longer-term planning necessary for programs to develop properly. It also ensures that government lawyers do not have to tie themselves in knots or unnecessarily limit operations because the legal niceties are missing. President Trump appears enamored of unfettered executive power and, in his tweets and rhetoric at least, has little patience with the role of Congress and the courts.

Yet this weak institutional base for counterterrorism reflects a second failure: resilience. Terrorism deaths at home since 9/11 have proven low, but fears of terrorism remain high. In a landmark speech in 2013 and in subsequent remarks, President Obama has tried to talk down the threat, describing al Qaeda as on “the path to defeat” and noting that another 9/11 is unlikely. He failed. Alarm over Islamic State atrocities, even though it did not directly involve the U.S. homeland (or even many American citizens), led to a spike in fear of terrorism. Our new President seems to prefer to stoke fears that play into the hands of terrorists rather than calm the public mood.

The new administration risks jeopardizing one of America’s greatest counterterrorism successes: integration of immigrant communities. Muslims’ trust in the government and security services is low in many European countries. Add such a sense of humiliation to a surging far right political movement that constantly blasts

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Muslim immigrants and citizens, and the conditions for radicalization are strong.\textsuperscript{26} In contrast to Europe, the American Muslim community is far better integrated and regularly cooperates with law enforcement.\textsuperscript{27}

Unfortunately, Trump’s demonization of the American Muslim community will endure beyond the election unless he walks it back. This card is on the table, and other politicians are likely to pick it up. Ideally, the new President should press state and local officials to work with Muslim communities, not just to stop radicalism in their ranks but to protect them from right-wing extremists. Good relations, and a recognition that Muslims face daily security threats, will help ensure that radicalization remains low and that when it occurs the community cooperates with law enforcement.

This demonization is part and parcel of Trump’s broader embrace of right-wing nationalist politics. Whether it is his refusal condemn right-wing abuse of Muslims, ambivalent response to the Nazi and KKK rally in Charlottesville in August 2017, or hiring of officials who prioritize the threat from Muslim groups over others, the President has made clear that he prioritizes one form of terrorism—jihadist—over others. Much of the right-wing low-level harassment and violence that has resulted may not be labeled terrorism, but at least some of it is, and this is likely to receive fewer resources and worsen.

The American President has a lot on his hands. He must understand the true threat of terrorism, revise U.S. policy in the Middle East, and address the domestic concerns of resilience and rising Muslim discrimination. Unfortunately, initial signs suggest the U.S. approach to terrorism is likely to become less effective during the Trump administration.

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