

Combating Violent Extremist Groups in the Twenty-First Century

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In our modern post 9/11 world, violent extremist organizations are an increasingly visible and obvious threat. The recent terrorist attacks in Paris, ongoing ISIS attacks in the Middle East, and most recently and uncomfortably domestic California have put the spotlight on those lurking in the shadows waiting to strike at an unsuspecting: population. This most recent attack in San Bernardino realizes the fears of modern Americans, that attacks by radical organizations can and will be carried out in the United States. While some Cold War dreamers still cling to hopes that some vile nation state shall once again become the sworn foe of the United States and allow military and diplomatic experts to operate in a public opinion friendly manner against an easily clearly defined foe who has convenient capitals and factories for the bombing and whose foot soldiers wear nice, easily distinguished uniforms and drive marked tanks whose destruction in no way hits civilian areas filled to the brim with amateur photojournalists waiting to make the U.S. look like a monster for accidentally hitting civilians being used as shields by terrorists, this simply is not the reality of the world we live in. Violent extremist organizations are currently the most significant threat to the United States and all attempts to get them to wear uniforms and follow the rules of war have been for naught. Leaders of these half military half criminal groups are convincing legions of economically destitute boys without a cause that the western nations, and the United States chief among them, is their great enemy and preparing them for brutal terror attacks against our nation. Make no mistake, they are coming, and we are a target. What is needed now is proper planning for how to not only combat this twenty-first century threat but also to identify it and eliminate it before more headline grabbing attacks can be carried out.

Fortunately United States policy makers are not blind to these modern realities. The National Military Strategy of the United States recognizes that "youth populations are rapidly growing in Africa and the Middle East, regions that face resource shortages, struggling economies, and deep social fissures."¹ Terrorism grows best in regions without stable government and with limited economic opportunity. If there is no hope for a bright future, people become desperate. When people become desperate, they become more open to radicalization. To someone with hope for tomorrow, the ramblings of some demented nut job are exactly that, the ravings of a mad man. But to someone who sees only dark at the end of the tunnel, these ramblings can become a source of hope. Maybe the reason

¹ "The National Military Strategy of the United States of America 2015," United States Department of Defense, (Washington DC: GPO, 2015).

there are no jobs in their country is because of the United States and its oil companies. Many people without hope for the future try to find something to cling to and radicalism often fits the bill. Young people want to take action to bring change to their world and this is what terror recruiters promise: the ability to bring change to the world. While hordes of young idealists swear that their idealistic convictions are brought on by a desire for "social justice," they are often brought on by a desire for a cause. In the Middle East and northern Africa, these causes are often economic masquerading as religious. Jobs are scarce, so poverty is common. Of the money that is being made, much of it is being made in the natural resource field, and the companies that are making that money are often western. Seeing billions being made with their country's natural resources by western companies, local people blame the easy target -- western businesses and by default westerners -- not their local governments and warlords keeping the massive local profits derived from western corporations for themselves instead of investing this money in their country.

This fertile soil for radical recruitment produces a major security threat for the United States. These foreign radicals are joined by countless westerners radicalized for different reasons but as the San Bernardino shootings recently proved just as capable. In order to combat this threat a major element of United States strategy must be to combat recruitment, but here a problem is faced. Violent Extremist Organizations (VEOs) don't exactly have recruitment centers in shopping malls. They instead reach out to a territory quite alien to military brass but comfortable for the modern generation: the internet and cellular telephones. The National Military Strategy of the United States of America points out that "VEOs are taking advantage of emergent technologies as well, using information tools to propagate destructive ideologies, recruit and incite violence, and amplify the perceived power of their movements."² Basically put, Violent Extremist Organizations are using the tools of our modern age to extend their recruitment efforts to an international audience, all while making themselves next to impossible to trace. This internet self radicalization is proving difficult for authorities to track. Journalists Eric Tucker and Brian Melley point out that "it's been far more challenging for law enforcement to identify each and every individual who self-radicalizes online, a process the Islamic State has facilitated with slick Internet propaganda aimed at the disaffected."³ All of this poses a unique problem for U.S. authorities: how exactly do you combat terror recruiters operating online? Freedom of speech is a key U.S. value cherished by its citizens. Freedom of the press, a part of freedom of speech, is also an important American value and is essential to any real republic. A press controlled by the state simply cannot exist in a true republic, something many so called "democratic republics" have often failed to respect. However, this freedom of speech also allows foreign and domestic terrorists a public voice to express their desires and attempt to recruit disaffected westerners to their horrendous causes. What this means is that the United States, if it seeks to preserve its most fundamental values, must find a way to both combat violent extremist organization recruitment efforts while at the same time suffering the existence of a terrorist siren song to the disaffected.

² Ibid.

³ Tucker, Eric. Melley, Brian. California Shooting Shows Difficulty ID'ing Attackers *ABCNEWS.CO.COM* 9/8/15. <http://abcnews.go.com/US/wireStory/couple-practiced-shooting-ranges-california-attack-35638663>

Besides from using an open press, in this case the internet, as a recruitment tool, violent extremist groups can also utilize the free and open press to score propaganda hits on their superior foes. Israel has learned this lesson multiple times during its history. Historian Max Boot writes of an incident in 2006 in which an Israeli air strike hit an apartment building. Boot writes that "the resulting footage of mangled bodies being pulled out of the wreckage, which Hezbollah made sure received widespread distribution, increased pressure on Israel to halt its offensive, which was said to be 'disproportionate.'"⁴ Although Israel was the original victim of Hezbollah attacks, Hezbollah's master manipulation of the media allowed the terrorist organization to frame itself as the victim to an oblivious media looking to publish exciting articles in order to sell papers in order to boost the number of readers looking at their sponsor's advertisements would be boosted. As the United States increasingly deals with violent extremist organizations it shall have to be weary of falling into similar traps that Israel has previously fallen into. No matter how powerful it's military, a modern democracy must keep public opinion on its side at all times or it shall loose. In an age in which everyone with a camera is a journalist and the truth is considered secondary to emotional appeal the United States, its military in particular, will have to tread carefully when selecting operations and ensure that it is the first one to tell the public enough of the truth and enough of what they want to hear in order to keep them on their side.

In order to deal with the persistent and growing threat posed to the United States by violent extremist groups, the United States shall have to use every instrument of power at its disposal, with special attention being focused on Intelligence operations as well as traditional military strikes. For in this new conflict, information is power in far more ways than it has been in the past.

To begin with the United States shall have to keep the diplomatic channels open with nations both victimized by terror and those who possibly support it. In our increasingly globalized world, a terrorist in Russia can become a terrorist in the United States tomorrow in as long as an international flight can allow, the little brat kicking his seat only adding fuel to his radical fire. This is not mere speculation, as the 2013 Boston Bombings revealed. Reporter Peter Cooney points out that "Russian authorities warned the FBI in 2011 about Tamerlan Tsarnaev, one of two Chechen brothers accused of carrying out last year's Boston Marathon bombings, but U.S. authorities missed chances to detain him."⁵ In this case U.S. authorities failed to successfully act on Russian intelligence, but for each failure how many successes never make it to media headlines? By having a diplomatic relationship with the Russian Federation, even a strained one, Russian authorities were able to inform U.S. authorities about terrorists operating within their midst. In the future, it might not be elite special forces neutralizing a terrorist cell on the eve of its attack in time

⁴ Boot, Max. *Invisible Armies: An Epic History of Guerrilla Warfare From Ancient Times to the Present* (New York, Live Right Publishing Corporation, 2013), Pg.511-51

⁵ Cooney, Peter. Russia Warned U.S. about Boston Marathon bomb suspect Tsarnaev Reuters 3/25/14 <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-explosions-boston-congress-idUSBREA2P02Q20140326>

for medals and happy hour but instead a call from Saudi intelligence to a U.S. police department warning them of notable suspects resulting in warrants, arrests, and thankless paperwork. As more nations come to understand the threat violent extremist groups pose to international stability, they should become more willing to make those calls and help each other detect and neutralize these threats before they can strike, and open diplomatic channels will be required for this information to flow. Who knows, in the future information about probable terror suspects might become some sort of diplomatic currency.

An aspect of power that few think about but that affects all and that could prove to be a very handy tool in combating violent extremist organizations is economics. Text messages and make it yourself websites are cheap and easy for today's busy terrorist on the go but when it gets down to it international flights, improvised explosive device components, weapons, and top of the line cameras to record uncle Osama's cave side threats, all have a price tag. DVD compilations of ISIS's best beheadings are not going to generate the necessary funds. All of this requires money. While it might be wise for terrorists to store their money in their mattresses, most prefer banks. This can play right into the U.S. government's hands, especially when it comes to domestic terrorists and those seeking to make a donation to Jihadists without Kalashnikov's. A major tool in combating these terrorist bank accounts, those storing funds for use by violent extremist organizations, not accounts in banks with outrageous fees and terms of use, is to simply freeze the assets within the account. If terrorists cannot withdraw their money, they can't use it to terrorize the west. In the United States, this freezing of bank accounts is carried out by the United States Department of the Treasury with authorization by Executive Order 13224, which deals with "blocking property and prohibiting transactions with persons who commit, threaten to commit, or support terrorism."⁶ On the Treasury Department's website there is a long list of organizations targeted by this policy. without their money, there is little chance of them conducting major terror attacks on the United States in the near future. Napoleon once said that an army marches on its stomach and in a way this freezing of assets works in a manner of military strategy as true in Napoleon's time as our own, cut off your enemies' ability to supply and equip their troops and you cut off their ability to harm you or your citizens.

Another way the economic instrument of power can be used to combat terror will be far less popular with the taxpaying public though could prove useful. That method would be investment in the economically devastated regions where so many recruits are found for violent extremist organizations. As poor economic climates provide fertile soil for extremist recruiting, limiting these environments could result in limiting potential recruits for these organizations. No recruits equals no terrorists which equals no terrorist attacks. The leaders of these organizations aren't strapping bombs to themselves or running down the streets of Paris shooting innocent people. They need brainwashed kids to do the dirty work for them. By investing in economically devastated areas, and by making sure the people receiving the funding know where it's coming from, the United States could not only

⁶ <https://www.treasury.gov/resource-center/sanctions/Programs/Documents/terror.pdf> United States Department of the Treasury Washington DC, 7/21/2015

buy some international good will but also deprive violent extremist organizations of fresh recruits. However, short of using the army to hand out these investments it would prove difficult if not impossible to ensure that the involved money and resources reached the people who both needed it and could use it to build a better society instead of buying shiny new machine guns for the dictator's troops to terrorize the people with while he is driven by in a top of the line European sports car protected by last centuries top of the line Soviet tanks.

While in most other respects combating domestic terror shall most likely prove more difficult than foreign terror, this one might play into the hands of domestic policy makers and authorities. Whereas in the rest of the world poor economic conditions result in easy pickings for terrorist recruiters, those living in the United States are not so lucky as to be able to simply pick a poor kid that looks willing to blow themselves up for some virgins. Domestic terrorists are primarily recruited from young adults who feel like outsiders in their communities. Tucker and Melley point out that, "The Obama administration, mindful of the problem, has created an initiative called Countering Violent Extremism that encourages communities to steer vulnerable young adults away from radicalization, though it's unclear how successful that effort is."⁷ The exact results of such an initiative can never truly be known. However, by making these young people feel a part of their community they shall be far less likely to want to bomb it, thus denying violent extremist organizations another recruit.

The next instrument of power that the United States shall need to use in combating violent extremism is the most obvious, the most exciting, and the most risky: the military instrument of power. Without military strikes against violent extremist organizations, their power and influence shall rise allowing them to not only recruit fresh recruits but to also breed a terroristic veteran NCO and officer corps. By not thinning the herd of the most dangerous actors, we would only be allowing violent extremist organizations to place significant numbers of operatives everywhere in the world and thus conduct attacks at will anywhere on the planet. Thankfully, the United States has not forgotten that violent extremist organizations are a military threat. The United States Department of Defense has stated that "the United States will continue to take an active approach to countering these threats by monitoring the activities of non-state threats worldwide, working with allies and partners to establish control over ungoverned territories, and directly striking the most dangerous groups and individuals when necessary."⁸ Despite what the "national security experts" on Facebook think direct military intervention is essential in dealing with this threat, and while large mouthed small minded internet experts demand a hundred different policies ranging from inviting the terrorists to have a sit down meeting discussing how their actions hurt our feelings to outright thermonuclear annihilation of the middle east, the United States government is thankfully taking logical and practical steps to combat the threat posed by violent extremist organizations. While there is most likely highly

⁷ Tucker.

⁸ "Sustaining U.S. Global Leadership: Priorities for 21st Century Defense," United States Department of Defense, (Washington, DC: GPO, 2012)

secretive black ops sort of operations being conducted around the world to combat extremists, the favored policy of the United States has overwhelmingly become the airstrike. U.S. airstrikes against violent extremist organizations such as ISIS are the wet dreams of policy makers. Instead of putting the lives of ground forces on the line in massive and costly invasions, the United States military can instead deploy aircraft to drop bombs on extremists and their operations from tens of thousands of feet in the sky, far out of Kalashnikov and IED range. No American lives are significantly endangered, no multi-billion dollar invasions are budgeted, and the pilots get combat flight hours to impress bar floozies at happy hour. And besides being relatively cheap, airstrikes are also quite effective. Reporter David Alexander reports that "US-led air strikes against Islamic State militants in Iraq and Syria have damaged or destroyed 3,222 targets since August, including 58 tanks, 184 Humvees, 673 fighting positions and 980 buildings or barracks."⁹ All of those airstrikes have dealt a blow to Islamic State militants. Extremists are dead due to those attacks, their equipment destroyed, the charred remains of their treasure and lives lay scattered on the desert sands. There are results, 3,222 of them to be exact, and they cannot be argued with. When a violent extremist organization provides a legitimate target, it is in the best interests of the United States to eliminate that target. Airstrikes are a highly capable target elimination tool. The only problem is, how do you determine what a target is?

To answer that question the United States government needs to employ the final instrument of power, information. When people think of this instrument of power their mind goes to the world of James Bond, that is exciting gun battles, alcoholism, and sex with beautiful women. While this world is possibly true for one spy or two, resulting most likely in a thousand power point lectures with the general topic of don't do what that guy did, most of the world of information gathering is, bluntly put, boring to the general public. But this boring martini-less aspect of international relations and military operations is essential in this age of modern terror. When combating violent extremist organizations one must first know where to strike, and this is the problem. As previously mentioned violent extremist organizations don't have to have convenient capitals marked "drop bombs here" and they don't wear uniforms. They operate in the shadows, hiding away like serpents waiting to strike. This clandestine nature of violent extremist organizations is heightened when the extremists originate domestically instead of in some foreign land. Reporters Eric Tucker and Brian Melley report that these extremists are "not communicating with a terrorist organization, they're not doing those other things that we have typically looked for when we're looking for terrorists," said John Cohen, a former Homeland Security Department counterterrorism coordinator."¹⁰ As extremists can hide so easily in our midst it is important that those tasked with combating them learn how to detect them, and the only way to do that is to gather intelligence on those who could legitimately be involved in

⁹ Alexander, David. Here's The List Of What 3,222 US-Led Airstrikes Against ISIS Have Destroyed Since August. Business Insider 1/7/15 <http://www.businessinsider.com/r-us-led-air-strikes-have-hit-3222-islamic-state-targets-pentagon-2015-1>

¹⁰ Tucker.

international terrorism. Bombing ISIS positions in the Middle East and arresting those plotting attacks in the United States is all well and good but before you do any of those things you must first know what positions are held by ISIS and who exactly in the United States is plotting a terrorist attack.

One way to do this is to use the free and open press as a tool for intelligence agents. Violent extremist organizations use the internet to attract potential recruits and the internet is available to everyone with an internet connection, be they disaffected young people or government agents. By simply looking at chat groups and websites used by these extremist organizations, government agents can get an idea of who the extremists are and what, if anything, they are plotting. Already U.S. counterterrorism agents have had success with these methods, as Tucker and Melley report, "America's counterterrorism infrastructure has had success flagging individuals who try to travel abroad to fight alongside militants, fund operations overseas or who communicate online with overseas terrorists."¹¹ By monitoring communications between members of violent extremist organizations, U.S. agents have been able to track suspected member's movements around the world, figure out who's funding who, freeze the funding accounts, and gain vital intelligence of when, where, and how possible future terrorist attacks are going to go down. But internet communications are not the only ones that must be monitored in order to protect from future attacks.

While the internet is a hotbed of extremist communication, it is not the only place where extremists can exchange plans, recruit new members, and exchange funny camel pictures. When it comes to international communications the internet can't hold a candle to cellular communications. The numbers are staggering. Dennis Murphy explains that "mobile is pervasive in the third world. 97% of Tanzanians have access to mobile phones. Mobile coverage exists throughout Uganda. There are 100 million handsets in sub-Saharan Africa. Radio is the only media device more prevalent than mobile. Consider the economic implications of mobile technologies as well. 59% of mobile phones are in the developing world—over seven million mobile subscribers in Kenya alone."¹² What this means is that while many people in these impoverished countries don't have internet access or access to television news they do have access to cell phones and thus can communicate with the world. With these cell phones extremists can coordinate their actions and reach out to new members. Murphy goes on to describe all the ways that cell phones are used in some of these nations, all of which go beyond mindless texting and avoiding eye contact with strangers. Cell phones are used as credit cards in Kenya. You can pay for cab fare or for fish at the market with your cell phone. Cell towers are being raised in Lake Victoria to allow fisherman to call to shore with their catch numbers as they set out to market."¹³ In this world cell phones are not just a means of communication they are a means of economic exchange and are a vital tool for everyday life. People can purchase goods and services with

¹¹ Tucker.

¹² Murphy, Dennis M. *Fighting Back: New Media and Military Operations*. Carlisle Barracks, PA: US Army War College, 2008.

¹³ Ibid.

them, they can communicate with them, and they can receive calls from their friendly neighborhood Al Qaeda recruiter with them. If the United States wishes to monitor violent extremist organization activities, it will need to look beyond the world of the internet, perhaps the territory of only the established terrorists, and instead look at cellular communications where plans and operational information are far more likely to be exchanged.

Finally, this new world of mobile communications can be used as a weapon by violent extremist organizations just as well as bullets or bombs. This was made clear earlier when discussing the free and open press, but it warrants restatement. In order to be successful in combating violent extremist organizations the United States shall have to keep public opinion on its side. Dennis Murphy points out the bluntly obvious by stating that "the current information environment has leveled the playing field for not only nation states, but non-state actors, multinational corporations and even individuals to affect strategic outcomes with minimal information infrastructure and little capital expenditure."¹⁴ All the extremists need to do is find the United States doing something politically unpalatable in their area of operations, take a quick picture with their camera's phone, and upload it for the world to see. Luckily for the impatient terrorist they don't really even need to find actual evidence of such an act on the part of the United States, they only need to make it look real enough to fool enough of the public to sow some seeds of domestic disharmony. Once it goes viral it's true, whether it's fact or not is irrelevant. What is the United States going to do, sue some impoverished African or Middle Easterner for libel? In this modern world of anyone with a camera and an internet connection can be a respected journalist and people only look at articles with exciting titles and can't be bothered to check facts, an extremist need never hurt anyone. Why bother when they can play reporter and use the power of public opinion against their selected enemy? In order for the United States to compete with violent extremist organizations, it is going to have to not only successfully monitor their communications but also stay one step ahead of them in the vital battle for public opinion.

The fact of the matter is that violent extremist organizations are a major threat that the United States is going to have to learn to both identify and combat. The exact nature of these groups will always be in flux, be they religiously motivated groups like ISIS or Al Qaeda or economically motivated groups such as the Mexican cartels to a degree these groups shall always exist and shall always be a threat to the people of the world who desire rule of law and a stable world to live in. Unlike more traditional threats these half specter gangs of assassins, bombers, and missinformationalists shall prove themselves a slick and very difficult foe to defeat. They have no convenient capitals for the bombing, they wear no uniforms revealing their allegiances, and they can attack and disappear seemingly at will. To combat them, the United States is going to both have to use every tool in its toolbox while at the same time publically restraining itself from taking their bait and conducting some action that could result in losing public favor. This modern conflict shall be as much a war for spin masters and intelligence agents as it shall be for soldiers. In fact, it shall be more a war of information and precisely targeted actions than any seen before in the military history of the United States. It shall bear more resemblance to the Cold War spy

¹⁴ Ibid.

dramas military experts had hoped was behind them, than the epic battles of the Second World War they so crave. But the United States is a dynamic nation capable of adapting to modern threats once it learns that it has no choice. Already U.S. agents are monitoring radical chat rooms and phone conversations. Suspected terrorists are being properly watched for the most part and warrants are being written for their arrest and searches of their property. U.S. agents are involved in dialogues with foreign intelligence services to help combat international terrorism and U.S. airmen are conducting bombing raids of known terrorist positions, resources, and personnel. The United States is adapting to this modern conflict and shall not only persevere through it but apply the lessons learned from it to combat future threats.