



Counter All Extremism

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President Donald Trump's administration is currently undertaking a review of federal programs established under the rubric of "countering violent extremism." The White House, however, should take note that it is just as important to counter nonviolent extremism.

The term "violent extremism" began to circulate in policy circles during the George W. Bush administration. The "struggle against violent extremism" was seen by some as a more favorable term than the "war on terrorism" since it broadened the concept beyond the military element of national power. Then-Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Richard B. Myers said in 2005 that he "objected to the use of the term 'war on terrorism' before, because if you call it a war, then you think of people in uniform as being the solution." But Bush publicly rejected this more nuanced rebranding, saying "make no mistake about it, we are at war."

The Obama administration was less interested in emphasizing "war" as a concept and embraced "countering violent extremism," particularly with respect to programs promoting domestic outreach from law enforcement to Muslim communities. However, the Obama team never understood the threat; the White House was fixated on countering violence more than extremism.

The most salient example of this confusion was the Obama administration's optimistic response to the popular uprisings in the Middle East during the 2011 Arab Spring. Since the political changes were for the most part peaceful, at least initially, the White House concluded that this would "damage al-[Qaida] by undermining the group's narrative." The Muslim Brotherhood's 2012 electoral victories in Egypt were hailed as progress because "people who once might have gone into al-Qaida see an opportunity for a legitimate Islamism," and a senior State Department official said "the war on terrorism is over."

Yet the Muslim Brotherhood was an explicitly anti-Western, anti-liberal, radical Islamist organization. The "legitimate Islamism" that the Obama White House touted was fundamentally indistinguishable from the political objectives of al-Qaida or other such groups. Al-Qaida leader Ayman al-Zawahiri had to correct the Obama team by pointing out that, from his point of view, the Muslim Brotherhood's victory was a positive step, and the Arab Spring in general was a logical consequence of the September 11, 2001 attacks. In a letter written shortly before he was killed, Osama bin Laden himself wrote that "what we are witnessing these days of consecutive revolutions is a great and glorious event... the beginning of a new era for the whole [Muslim] nation" and "the most important events that the nation has witnessed for centuries." The Obama administration, in other words, failed to understand the nature of the struggle, which was as much against extremism as it was against violence.

This concept was well understood 70 years ago, in the wake of World War II. The 20th Century had unleashed revolutionary extremism of the right and left, and U.S. policy sought to reinforce the traditional western liberal alternative. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, proclaimed by the United Nation's General Assembly in 1948, sought to enshrine a sweeping vision of individual and community rights in the face of these extremist challenges. Significantly, Soviet bloc countries abstained from voting on the declaration. So did Saudi Arabia.

In the 21st century, the challenges have shifted, but the baseline should remain firm. Anti-liberal, anti-Western ideologies are a threat, whether violent or not, and whether they are promulgated by nonstate actors or by recognized governments. Some use terrorism to promote their extremist views, but they also exploit other means of influence, such as information and psychological warfare, or leveraging finance, diplomacy, technology and any other tools at their disposal. We cede the extremists an important advantage in the battle of ideas if our focus is only on violence.

Thus, rather than "countering violent extremism," America's emphasis should be on eliminating extremism per se. Whether domestic or foreign, the strategic focus should be on discrediting and delegitimizing groups and states that promote anti-liberal, anti-Western belief systems, and targeting any ideologies hostile to the U.S. Constitution and American values. And the most important way to start is by making a strong statement of American values, and affirming them as universally good.

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