

Op-ed for – Professor Adam Szubin  
From: David Lee  
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Warren Weinstein wanted to change the world. At Columbia University he earned MA and PhD in international law and economics to that end. He married. He served in Peace Corps in Togo. He learned Urdu, French, and Swahili. In 2011, Weinstein was taken captive by al-Qaeda. For 4 years he battled fear. In 2015, he was accidentally killed by a U.S. drone strike.

Could Weinstein have lived? The U.S. could have met al-Qaeda's demands for release. Extrication, prisoner swap, giving money but then blocking access were also options. The U.S. government deemed none feasible. And all would have been costly, even incentivizing al-Qaeda to kidnap more innocents.

At the heart of the issue is counter-terrorism financing. Terrorist groups like al-Qaeda require money to recruit and operate. Besides kidnapping, their methods include hacking banks and other Western institutions and individuals, drug trafficking, human trafficking, and soliciting donations from various Islamic charities. With time their methods have grown more sophisticated, requiring more sophisticated response.

Our costs have been heavy. Since 9/11, the U.S. has spent \$2.8 trillion on counter-terrorism. Hundreds of thousands of innocents worldwide have still died. Countless more lives have been disrupted in Syria, Yemen, and elsewhere.

Or, would it have been better to prevent at the roots? Case-by-case responses to terrorism would likely still have been necessary. But could they have been reduced over time? Maybe one case that didn't happen could have been Weinstein's.

Islamic terrorists feed on ideologies propagated by their leaders like Osama bin Laden. Bin Laden's doctrines were widely rejected by Muslim leaders worldwide. Could the U.S. have worked with Muslim leaders in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, and elsewhere to define and spread correct ways to interpret Quran?

New terrorist recruits are often motivated by money and security for themselves and their families. Could that financial and physical security have been provided by the U.S. and its allies by unambiguously committing to the countries long-term? Could the U.S. have fostered investment in such countries to improve their economies, so the terrorists would lose money as a tool for recruitment?

Hostility against the U.S. and its allies can also motivate terrorists. Could the U.S. have spent more time and resources developing military operations and culture at the Pentagon that reduced civilian casualty? Could it have built more hospitals and schools for the people whose feelings it depended on for its long-term interests?

The answers are all yes. Achieving their success is tricky, but possible. Let me explain.

In Christianity or Judaism, correct interpretations of the scriptures vary by people. Broad concepts like prohibiting murder win debates easily. Narrower ones like whether a prophet's massacre justifies massacre may lead at least some astray. What prevents this is a broad agreement against strictly literal interpretation of all parts of the scriptures. So the Muslim leaders must more actively debate ways of interpreting Quran. Getting the theocracy in Saudi Arabia, for example, with invested interests in its doctrines to do this would be difficult. But have we really tried?

Committing to stay in the trouble spots of the world is also troublesome. During the Vietnam War the now-falsified Domino Theory, the belief that a country falling to Communism would lead others in the region to fall, kept the U.S. united in the beginning. Absent such irrefutable belief, the public is likely to decry prolonged, visible intervention abroad. But how many of our leaders have truly tried to incite and sustain the public will for lifesaving intervention abroad?

The U.S. public wants to see short-term progress. Building schools, hospitals, and infrastructure to win hearts and minds takes time. And its impact, compared to that from bombing, is less obvious. Which is why we have not tried enough of this.

Avoiding casualty means the military would have to distinguish terrorists from civilians. But terrorists don't wear uniforms. They strive to blend in. But have we tried, the way we did on the Manhattan Project to achieve the unthinkable?

All these choices, like FDR's decision to aid Great Britain against the Nazi Germany, are quintessential American. They are difficult. But they are possible. And we must try. For countless lives, including our loved ones', depend on our trying. And our endless war against terror may end with victory.