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Ending Terrorism

In terms of death tolls, terrorism is not even close to being the most pressing problem facing the modern world. In the United States, one is thirty five thousand times more likely to die from heart disease than a terrorist attack, or two thousand time more likely to die from an automotive accident (Washington’s Blog). However, in terms of psychological effect, terrorism is much more frightening. The reasons for this are manyfold. For one, many of the biggest killers in the US are health conditions, which usually occur in the elderly as just another part of the human cycle of life. In the case of accidents such as car crashes, the victim at least has some sense of control over the situation, and many believe themselves to be more than competent drivers. However, when a terrorist attack occurs, the targets are indiscriminate and completely out of control of their destiny. Add on top of this the fact that terrorist attacks make interesting news stories, and the psychological threat of terrorism tends to outweigh the threat of other far more deadly killers.

It is for this reason that terrorism needs to be addressed. Perhaps it does not need to have the priority that it is currently given, but just because the death toll does not compare to things such as disease does not mean it is a non issue. Most Americans are afraid of terrorism to some degree, even though most have never known someone who has been the victim of a terrorist act, let alone be a victim themselves. If nothing else, the psychological damage from terrorist actions is something to be dealt with.

Many methods exist for dealing with terrorist groups. One of the most obvious is military action. By conducting military operations against terrorist groups, the hope is that due to the relatively insignificant size and poor levels of equipment of terrorist organizations, a concerted effort by a national or even international military force could completely overcome terrorist groups. This has proved to be more difficult than simply trying to steamroll terrorist factions with superior military might. Because terrorists are not associated with any nation, they are not beholden to treaties banning certain tactics, and they have no reason to not hide behind civilians in cities, forcing powerful military forces to restrain themselves from bombing innocents. As such, tactics have evolved beyond just attacking enemy targets to more advanced methods, such as targeting leadership or encouraging local police forces.

Another method for lessening attacks is to try to bring stability to regions that house terrorists. By providing services such as education, healthcare, and political institutions the hope is that the disadvantaged in society get to a better place. Terrorism often springs from those who are disadvantaged in live, and by providing services to support these people one cuts off the problem at the source. People who live stable, content lives have no reason to turn to terrorist actions. In practice, this usually means sending in foreign aid in the form of teachers, political consultants, and institutions such as Medecins sans Frontieres.

The final method discussed in this paper is one that is not often talked about: that is, mitigating the psychological effect of terrorist attacks. This method is based in the reason for committing terrorist actions themselves. Terrorist attacks are meant to spread terror, it’s in the name. Usually, they aren’t made to rack up large numbers of kills, neither are they used to destroy critical infrastructure. Terrorist attacks are psychological in nature, and in the case of Islamic extremists, are usually used to alienate the muslim population of the world from the rest of the world. However, if people fail to react to terrorist attacks in any substantial ways, such as growing suspicious of muslims or being afraid of terrorism, then terrorism becomes a worthless strategy.

All of these methods for dealing with terrorism have their benefits and drawbacks, so which is the best? That is a difficult, if not impossible question to answer. In fact, none of these solutions on their own would be enough to end terrorism. Instead, what will be necessary is a mix of all of these elements.

Military intervention is necessary as a precursor to stability. It is difficult to bring aid to areas where armed conflict exists. Therefore, the goal of armed intervention should be to create areas where stability can blossom, protecting institutions necessary to a smoothly functioning society. However, this means that military intervention will not be a successful strategy in the long term. Unless the problem is addressed at the source, nothing will change. This is perhaps the equivalent to stopping the bleeding on an injured man. He will still need stitches in order heal properly, but you must make sure he doesn’t die before you can perform surgery;

If military intervention is stopping the bleeding, stability is the stiches. Stable regions do not breed terrorists, so in the long term, stability is the ultimate goal. However, stability is a long term goal, and as such is not effective at quickly stopping terrorism. In addition, in order for stability to exist, you first need to lay a foundation. It is difficult to bring stability to unstable regions, and that is why armed forces are necessary. This means that stability is a nearly impossible goal on its own, and must be accompanied by some shorter term solution.

Finishing the medical analogy, where armed intervention is used to stop the bleeding and bringing regional stability and aid is stiches, lessening the psychological damage of terrorism is the equivalent of avoiding dark alleys in the bad part of town. If we make terrorism an ineffective tactic, terrorists will have to use some other means of accomplishing their goals. This could be something worse than current terrorism, or it could easily be something much better, such as using diplomacy to get what they want. This is another reason why a strong military is useful. With a powerful military, terrorists will be more likely to look to less violent methods so as not to enrage a powerful military.

There is no one best strategy when it comes to dealing with terrorism. Most of the strategies do not hold up on their own, and are dependent on the others. This means that in dealing with terrorism, we must be open to many options and be able to incorporate these many options into plans to prevent terrorism.

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