Why Islamic moderates are no ally in the Global War on Terror?

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For seven years the West has been fighting a “global war on terror” against Islamic religious extremists. The war is globalized because the extremists are located throughout the world as they are as widespread as the religion of Islam itself. The GWOT is not only a politically charged phrase but also carries some normative connotations as well. In fact, it is well-known that the US administration now regrets coining this phrase to talk about US strategies against extremists throughout the world. It may be more appropriate to consider terrorists as insurgents who employ terror tactics as part of their grand strategy. I believe this description more closely portrays the actual situation. An insurgent is a person who takes part in forcible opposition to an established authority whereas a terrorist must have clearly identified political goals and not all of the groups using terror acts listed in the next paragraph have clear political goals. Additionally, insurgent groups do not always engage in terror acts and a terrorist must engage in a terror act at all times by definition.

Conceptual problems with understanding terrorism

Catch-phrases aside, there are several analytical difficulties present with respect to understanding the GWOT. First, there is confusion as to whether the terrorism is domestic (e.g. the FLQ versus the Canadian government; the Black Panthers versus the US government), international (e.g. bombing of US Marine barracks in Lebanon; FLN in Algeria versus the French government or, more generally, where a group targets what it sees as a foreign occupier) or transnational (e.g. 9/11, where foreign insurgents caused the deaths of people from many nations in one incident). Second, terrorism is a misnomer for when groups use terror acts such as highjackings, kidnappings, bombings, assassinations etc as part of a larger political strategy. Those same groups using terror acts at times also use other more criminal acts other times. For example, groups like IRA, FARC [Columbia] and Hezbollah regularly used robbery, burglary, drug and human trafficking to raise funds for other acts. Thus, groups that engage in terror acts tend to complement those with other domestic criminal acts at different times. Third, there are about as many definitions for terrorism as any other complex activity. In fact, one can find several distinctly different definitions used by the US government depending on whether one reads the federal penal code or the different definitions provided by the CIA, FBI, and State Department. If the branches of a single government cannot agree on a definition, it is no surprise as to why no single definition can be adopted internationally. Finally, the factors encouraging groups to engage in terror acts are not the same across groups. At least five types of factors are identified as motivating groups to use terror acts: 1) National-Separatists factors (e.g. Irish Republican Army,
Basques [Spain], FLQ [Canada]); 2) Reactionary-Right Wing factors or groups that want to keep the status quo or return it to some earlier state (e.g. Patriot/Militia groups such as the Michigan militia [US] or Hate groups such as the Neo-Nazis, KKK [US], and Afrikaan Resistance Movement [South Africa]); 3) Revolutionary-Left Wing groups (e.g. Japanese Red Army, Shining Path [Peru], Red Army Faction [Germany]); 4) Religious groups where there are traditional/fundamentalist groups (e.g. Hezbollah, Al Qaeda, World Church of the Creator) and cult/apocalyptic (e.g. Aum Shinrikyo [Japan]); and 5) Single Issue/Special Interest groups which focus on a unitary issue like pro-life (e.g. Army of God [US], Lambs of Christ [US]) or environmental rights (Environmental Liberation Front [US]). Since there are a large variety of factors motivating groups to engage in terror acts, there is an equally large variety of possible policy responses on the part of government to deter these acts and coerce these groups to engage in the political process instead of terror acts to achieve change.

The strategy of intragroup policing

Among tactics for fighting against extremists, the West has employed the tactic of encouraging more moderate Muslims to help identify their more extremist brothers and sisters so that they may be regulated using existing legal means. As such, this approach sees terrorist acts as closer to domestic crimes than acts of international war. While this approach was used extensively during the “Red Scare” in the McCarthy era in US history, its success is debatable. Additionally, this approach was used with “some” success by the British government to deal with the issue of Northern Ireland but this was only AFTER there was political accommodation. Since leaders prefer to apply tactics which may have worked in the past, it seems reasonable to believe intragroup policing may be an effective strategy for dealing with Al Qaeda.

The intragroup policing strategy is based on the simple and attractive idea that all Muslims are distributed like any other normal population of religious adherents in a standard normal curve (i.e. a normal distribution similar to the figure above). Where at the left hand side of this continuum is those Muslims who are nomatively Muslim but are not highly participatory in the religion this is very similar to what could be called non-practicing Christians who only go to church on holidays. This group comprises a rather small percentage of the population (about 2.2% of the population). The largest portion of the group situated in the middle of the distribution are moderate Muslims or practicing Muslims who are generally against the jihad but can be convinced to commit terror acts by others when presented convincing evidence. The final group is the extreme Muslims who occupy the right tail of the distribution. Though this group is small in number (about 2.2% of the
population), they are extremely committed to the cause and are highly likely to engage in terror acts because of their extreme commitment to the fundamentals of the Islamic religion. A conservative estimate of the number of Islamic extremists currently places the number at 2% of the Muslim population. The Council on American-Islamic Relations estimates there are 1.2 billion Muslims in the world. Thus, the estimated population of Islamic extremists is about 24 million or 4/5 the population of Canada making it an extremely large population to accurately identify and police on a global level. In an idealized world, the moderates would ally with those countering the terror acts and identify the extremists who could then be easily policed in the existing legal system.

**Why intragroup policing will not work?**

Herein lays the crux of the problem, since truly fundamentalist Muslims seek the return of the caliphate. The caliphate is a single Islamic state extending as far as the furthest reaches of the empire from Indonesia to Morocco even to parts of Spain and France. This state supersedes current national boundaries and has no necessity to accommodate democracy since all of its 1.5 billion citizens would be bound to Allah. The original caliphate was created after Mohammed’s death in 632 A.D. and extended as large as the original Ottoman Empire into the Middle East, North Africa, and Central Europe. In uniting and purifying the caliphate, Muslims can attain prosperity. “True” Muslims seek the return of the caliph which is a fundamental desire of Islam since many fundamentalists see Islam as being corrupted by Western materialism and see the caliphate as a return to traditional values such as tolerance and compassion.

To the extremists anyone who does not support the return of the caliph, Muslim or not, is an infidel and should be eliminated. Therefore, the moderate Muslims are pulled in two directions as their brothers suggest Muslims not willing to use violence to seek the return of the caliphate are not truly committed, thus, inhibiting the “true” believers from seeking their goal, whereas Westerners believe moderate Muslims because of their moderated beliefs are the best suited to helping identify the extremists. However, in identifying extremists the moderates also identify themselves as being less than extreme, or less than committed to the cause, thus becoming a target for elimination by extremists themselves.

**A strategy leading to misinformation**

If identifying potential targets for the West provides information that would make oneself targeted, then what is the incentive to cooperate and ally with the West to provide this information? At best, these incentives lead to a strategy of sending mixed and often contradictory signals to the West about the identities of potential extremists to preserve one’s own life which could be a potential explanation as to why so many terror suspects are imprisoned in the Middle East, Cuba, and other secret prisons while so few have been placed into the legal system for trial proceedings. This strategy is similar to going to a restaurant and asking if the food is good, a question frequently heard at restaurants, the logic of this question is bordering on foolish because what restaurant employee would tell a potential customer the food is bad, unless if the employee does not mind impending unemployment. Yet, we ask Muslims to identify themselves as moderates relative to others as being extremists, thus asking themselves to stand
in the middle of the cross-hairs. While certainly many brave moderates have taken the risk to identify their extremist brothers, the average response by the moderates is probably no information or, even worse, misinformation, either of which can have enormous consequences, particularly when the receiver believes the information to valid, complete, and reliable.

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