COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT: A NON-LETHAL STRATEGY FOR COUNTERING THE EMERGENCE OF EXTREMISM IN THE EARLY 21ST CENTURY

Rohan Gunaratna[*]

Abstract

The terrorist threat by groups and homegrown cells did not plateau after al Qaeda mounted attacks against the US mainland on September 11, 2001. The US led coalition intervention in Afghanistan dispersed the threat and the ideology of al Qaeda spread into the Muslim communities. Today, the terrorists are relying on their social networks and the social media to disseminate their viral ideas, ideology, and the narrative.

Ten years after 9/11, it is clear that without winning over the communities at risk, terrorism will continue and may even escalate. The communities targeted by the terrorists for recruitment and support needs to be engaged by government committed to reducing the threat. Without engaging the very communities producing the terrorists and supporters, the threat will persist and even grow. To defeat terrorism and its antecedent extremism, community engagement is a global imperative in the 21st century.

Introduction:

One of the most enduring lessons identified during the last decade is responding appropriately to threats. Rather than overreacting or undereacting to a threat, states should develop the discipline and the patience to carefully craft and deliver a well targeted response. A review of the terrorist threat after 9/11 demonstrates that the global threat of terrorism escalated after the US over-reacted to the threat.[1] The US intervention in Afghanistan was supported globally but the US invasion and occupation of Iraq was reluctantly supported by the West. The US invasion of Iraq, driven by flawed understanding of the threat and faulty intelligence, was a major turning point in the loss of Muslim public

---

[*]   **Rohan Gunaratna,** Head of the International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research and Professor of Security Studies at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies in Singapore.

[1]   Global Pathfinder 2, Database of the International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research, Singapore (accessed on October 21, 2011).

support to fight terrorism.[2] The civilian fatalities and casualties in Iraq and Afghanistan reduced America's "brand," image and its reputation in the Muslim World.[3] The resultant global Muslim suffering, anger and resentment were exploited by terrorist and extremist groups to generate support for the contemporary wave of extremism and terrorism.

Global counter terrorism policies, strategies and procedures are largely shaped by the West. Although over 95% of terrorism originates in the global south, the US, Europe and Australia play a significant role in building counter terrorism capacities in the south to fight terrorism. As the Western centric counter terrorism strategy did not focus on the public, the extremist ideologies and narratives driving the terrorist threat continue to grow. As government and terrorists compete for a common pool of community support, to build social resilience, it is essential for governments to involve ordinary citizenry to counter the emergence of extremism.

The Context:

Towards forging common understanding, future stability, and enduring peace, rather than government deciding and informing the community, building a collaborative relationship between government and community is essential. Rather than consultation and involvement, engagement and partnership within diverse communities and between governments and communities is paramount. To establish and sustain an engaged relationship with the community, government engagement should be not only with formal but informal representatives of the community providing community views.

Government must understand the local community (its nature, population, socio-economic characteristics, history, culture and interests), engage in dialogue, and ensure effective participation and informed decision-making in planning process to address issues and bring about

2 Mark Mazzetti, Spy Agencies Say Iraq War Worsens Terrorism Threat, New York Times, September 24, 2006 and at < http://www.systemicpeace.org/> (accessed on October 22, 2011).

3 Thomas M. Sanderson, "The Future of al Qaeda and Associated Movements: Implications for Southeast Asia", Centre of Excellence for National Security, S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, November 1, 2011.

4 Country Reports on Terrorism and prior to 2004, the Patterns of Global Terrorism produced by the US Department of State demonstrates this trend. at <http://www.state.gov/s/ct/rls/crt/132196.htm> (accessed on October 22, 2011).

5 Robert Johnson, "America Has Failed To Reduce The Terrorism Threat Level Around The World Since 9/11", *Business Insider*, September 9, 2011.

change.[6] To reach out to a cross section of the community, government must identify and build relationships with well established fora, networks of groups and individuals. Rather than a one way relationship, it should be both ways, and the interaction should be monitored, evaluated, and reviewed. These developmental partnerships, when resourced and financially supported, form the basis for a strong society and effective government. In addition to participation, the private sector can play a vital role. In case the government lacks resources, the private sector can step in and assist to build the community engagement initiatives.

Rationale:

With the spread of extremist ideology and terrorist methodology through the internet and other platforms of communication, community engagement and terrorist rehabilitation has emerged as a vital pillar in counter terrorism. The four pillars of counter terrorism are:

1. counter terrorism intelligence
2. counter terrorism operations
3. counter terrorism investigations
4. community engagement and terrorist rehabilitation[7]

As opposed to traditional counter terrorism, it is critical to explore a population centric counter terrorism strategy. In such a strategy, governments must take into consideration the individual, the family, the community, and society seeking to win them over. By preventing extremism, the antecedents of terrorism, rather than reacting, government has much more to gain. By problem solving, engaging and building partnerships with the community, law enforcement and intelligence agencies can share the responsibility for fighting terrorism with the community.[8]

---

6   Stuart Hashagen, "Models of Community Engagement", Scottish Community Development Centre, May 2002.

7   It is debatable if terrorist rehabilitation should be categorized as a separate pillar. For the successful reintegration of rehabilitated terrorists back to society, community engagement is a must. If the community is not willing to accept those rehabilitated, the beneficiaries of rehabilitation will still remain in the margins of society susceptible to terrorist re-radicalization.

8   Drawing from the International Conference on Community Engagement (ICCE): Countering Extremism and Building Social Resilience in Singapore in September 2011, this paper will focus on community engagement.