

Tony Blair's speech at the launch of the Commission on Countering Violent Extremism

8.30am ET Tuesday 23rd February

Center of Strategic and International Studies, Washington DC

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

The initiative of CSIS is timely. The threat of violent extremism is growing, casting its shadow over ever larger parts of the globe. There is a justified anxiety that we do not, as of now, despite all the experience and some progress, have a fully effective strategy to counter it.

Populist solutions which are not solutions at all, are gaining ground on both sides of the Atlantic. But the reality is this. There is no safety in isolation. This is a struggle with no borders, no zones of immunity, and no volition whether to participate.

And there is no solution founded on denial of the essential nature of the problem. At its heart is a struggle about and within Islam, a violent struggle played out with profound implications for our security, our cohesion and the future of a religion followed by over 1.6 bn people, a religion of peace and honour which is under attack from an enemy within.

We need allies. There are dimensions of this challenge that only allies particularly within Islam can lead. But without our leadership – 'our' meaning the West – this fight cannot be won.

There is an urgent need, therefore, to develop a strategy that is comprehensive, has weight, is capable of building the right alliances and can be a practical guide to those charged with the responsibility in office of defeating the threat.

Both Leon Panetta – with whom it is an honour to be serving – and I have experience in Government of dealing with this challenge. Providentially, we cover both periods of policy making since 9/11, in my case 2001-2007 and in

his from 2009-2013. The Commission assembled by CSIS has immensely distinguished people on it, with a broad range of expertise. CSIS has a top class group of researchers and thinkers.

So our aim is to produce something strong, clear and realistic. It is to offer an agenda for the successful surmounting of this challenge so that nations, faiths and cultures can live in harmony and peace with each other and so that our citizens can live free from the fear of the terrorism that over these past years has taken the lives of so many innocents.

We know that this issue is complex; and that it will take time to reach our goal. But the sooner we chart the right path forward, the sooner we will do so.

And we know that what we're doing at present is inadequate.

My Foundation's research arm – the Centre on Religion and Geopolitics – tracks extremism across the world day by day. It lists the various terror-related incidents and also produces in-depth analysis of the different groups responsible and the underlying issues connected with areas of conflict.

Take any day. Yesterday we reported on terrorism in Syria, missing radioactive material in Iraq found by officials, suicide attacks in Cameroon, roadside bombs in Somalia, Taliban claims to have blown up a girls' school in Waziristan, the beheading of a Hindu priest in Bangladesh, arrests of suspected terrorists in Indonesia, travel warnings by the Australian Government about Malaysia, Kurdish reports on the use of chemical weapons by ISIS, executions by Jihadists in the Sinai, Kenyan action against Al-Shabaab, the French PM in Mali amid concerns of al-Qaeda linked violence there and in Burkina Faso, arrests in Russia connected with extremism, and new moves to try to establish peace in the Philippines. One day.

Yesterday we published our first monthly monitor of extremism. It shows that, in January 2016 alone, over 20 different countries suffered terrorist incidents. Over 50 different countries were forced to take counter terrorism measures of one kind or another. Thousands died. Hundreds of thousands were displaced.

This problem is growing and it is global. We focus on the Middle East. But in reality Africa is suffering hugely; the Far East has a much bigger issue than is

generally understood; and Central Asia should be on everyone's watch list. Europe's security services are on constant alert as are those here in the USA.

Naturally, we tend to highlight the actual acts of terrorism.

But this is not the only consequence of extremism.

The transition taking place all over North Africa and the Middle East since the so-called Arab Spring, is complicated, distorted and thrown off course by extremism and violence. These countries have young populations, striving for political and economic change. But this takes time and best happens through a process of steady evolution; or where revolution has occurred, with some ability to manage events.

Countries with weak institutions need stability and political space to mature. Extremism and the terror it brings shred the stability and shrink the space. We saw this with the removal of the Taliban in Afghanistan and Saddam in Iraq. But since 2011 and the Arab uprisings we see it across North Africa and the Middle East – in Libya, Syria, Yemen, and even in Egypt and Tunisia.

When we participated in the military action in Kosovo in 1998/9 we were able to stop the killing and in effect remove the dictatorship of Milosovic. The road since then has been rocky and the tasks of reconstruction and reconciliation immense. But the absence of extremism afforded us the time and space. And for all the challenges which continue to exist, Serbia and Albania's leaders now cooperate with each other and both nations, which are functioning democracies, have candidate status with the EU. The Balkans remains tense but it no longer threatens the peace of Europe.

Unfortunately these conditions do not apply in the turmoil of the Middle East.

In the countries of the Northern part of Sub-Saharan Africa extremism and terrorism are probably the single biggest inhibitor to development. Poverty and poor governance are usually cited as the reasons for lack of progress. This is true. But extremism makes all these problems worse and harder to resolve.

Resolution of the conflict in Syria is undermined and complicated by the presence of ISIS and other radical groups which confuse the outside world whose help is so desperately needed for the Syrian people; and provide some

colour of excuse for Assad as he seeks to retain power against the wishes of a majority.

In turn, this has created a crisis in Europe. Hundreds of thousands of people fleeing from Syria and other conflict zones are making their way across Europe. Their plight is tragic.

But it is important to understand why Europe finds this challenge so difficult. Of course we should be generous and welcoming to those fleeing persecution. The vast majority of those wretched and dispossessed people are refugees risking their lives for freedom. They deserve our compassion and our help.

However, the debate in Europe is also a security issue. Screening entrants is tough to do with certainty. In addition, we are bringing people in from a very different culture with in some cases different norms of behaviour and a different understanding about citizenship. This can be overcome, but not easily and not at speed with these numbers.

The presence and fear of extremism complicates the resolution of the refugee crisis, making the host nations afraid to do what otherwise would be difficult but tolerable.

Added to all of this is the massive cost of the security measures nations are forced to take round the world to prevent acts of terrorism.

So it is not just the acts of terror alone and their impact on the innocent victims, their families, friends and neighbourhoods, which trouble us. The consequences go far and wide, are geo-political as well as parochial, affect the development of nations and not only the well-being of communities, stunt progress and cause harm, de-railing positive change, advancing negative change, entrenching attitudes of fear and division rather than welcome and co-existence.

Yet we still have no consensus as to how we define the nature of the threat. We can all agree on the need to fight terrorism. But I mean we do not as yet have a full explanation of how this threat has arisen, why it is so rampant, what are its drivers and what are its root causes.

To what extent is it about religion or is it rather the product of social and economic factors?

Does it help to call it Islamist extremism or does that alienate the very people we need onside to defeat it?

Above all, is the problem a fringe group of fanatics addicted to violence? Or is the root cause a spectrum of opinion within Islam united by an ideology of extremist Islamism which has a far greater sway and includes at the one end of it the Jihadists and at the other those who may not support violence but nonetheless share much of the same world view?

If the latter how do we define it and how do we defeat something that is plainly much bigger and more pervasive than the small number of those attracted to groups like DAESH?

These are highly contestable questions. But they do require answering.

I have studied them in office and out of it for over 15 years. I am roughly twice a month in the Middle East. I have watched this debate evolve through 9/11, the conflicts of Afghanistan and Iraq, the 7/7 attacks in London, the Arab uprisings of 2011 which have convulsed the region, the battles in Libya, Syria, Yemen, the twists and turns of Egyptian revolution; and I have been engaged in one form or another throughout in the Middle East peace process or lack of it.

In addition through my Africa Governance Initiative, I have witnessed the efforts of Presidents in Nigeria, Kenya and elsewhere to stem the tide of terror attacks and seen countries in Asia with significant Muslim populations, whose cohesion and tolerance have been put under pressure from radicalising elements totally at odds with the countries' traditions.

I believe – but of course this is something the Commission should test - that the problem is not a fringe of fanatics but a spectrum with an ideology; that this ideology has its roots in a perversion of religion – the religion of Islam - and a world view derived from it which is innately hostile to the West and to peaceful co-existence between those of different faiths; and that if we do not challenge and defeat this ideology we will never eradicate the violence which is the product of it.

Islam as practised by the overwhelming majority of Muslims is a peaceful faith which has contributed greatly to human development. This ideology is not true to the proper and historic traditions and beliefs of Islam – indeed it is contrary to them. But neither is it a recent phenomenon – a fad, a transient explosion of aggression unconnected to a deeper way of thinking. It has grown – at first almost unnoticed - for more than half a century.

It has, unfortunately, a reach way beyond the activities of a few fanatics measured in the tens of thousands. The ideology or at least significant parts of it are accepted by those measured in the tens of millions.

Most of those will be opposed to violence. But they share the closed-minded view of religion that is hostile to those who do not share it.

Defining the challenge is pre-requisite to defeating it, because it changes critically the policy responses, both their substance and their scope, and the alliances necessary for victory. In particular, it moves us from a pure security / de-radicalisation response – important though that is – to a much wider and more profound engagement around ideas, relationships and attitudes.

I think the problem is not simply terrorist action; but extremist thinking: that there is a connection between the belief that women are the property of men to the kidnapping of Nigerian girls; that support for draconian blasphemy laws gives succour to those who kill the opponents of such laws; that preaching Anti-Semitism motivates those who attack Jews; that teaching that Islam is under assault from the West, creates an intellectual environment in which violence is incubated; that disrespect for those who are of a different faith leads to a culture incompatible with a modern world which only functions through diversity and respect for difference.

So the Commission will analyse and debate these arguments. It will focus on every aspect of the challenge. It will seek to provide what I might term a practical policy guide and handbook for those currently or prospectively in office.

Let me describe three areas of inquiry.

First we will analyse the motivations, triggers and drivers of Islamist extremism. This will obviously concern how people become radicalised but it

also allows us to go into the deeper ideological nature of the threat and the degree to which the ideology behind the extremism drives the violence.

One especial area of inquiry is around the systems of education, formal and informal in different countries (including our own) and an examination of whether the teaching of a narrow religious curriculum creates a potentially dangerous learning environment.

Another is the degree to which the deprivation of political rights encourages the development of extreme thinking.

We will analyse the abuse of religion in fomenting extremism and how mainstream religious voices can help defeat it theologically as well as politically.

We will probe the position of women both as victims and as those who might join Salafi-Jihadist groups; and as advocates of counter-radicalisation.

The point is that our interest is not simply in looking at radicalisation in the conventional sense i.e. those who become involved with groups like DAESH or al-Qaeda; but in looking at the underlying factors and their origins, the world view that sees those who do not share a particular religious position as heretics and infidels.

Secondly, in respect of the security dimensions of the issue, we want to go further than merely what we do to keep our nations safe, the counter terrorism measures, important though these are.

We also want to look at the lessons we can learn from the military engagement of the Jihadist groups – what are the effective ways of confronting them, eliminating their ability to hold territory, and what methods yield the best results with the maximum speed.

It is central to the recruitment strategy of the Jihadists that they are able to proclaim a so-called Caliphate, able to present as being masters of a space they govern. Wherever they manifest themselves it is crucial that they are confronted immediately. But how do we develop the capability to do this? What forces and type of coalition do we need?

When they get a foothold, what is the best way of dislodging them quickly before they get traction? How do we achieve early warning of potential problems and deal with them preventively?

This leads to the third issue which is how to create the necessary partnerships and alliances.

Confrontation of Jihadist groups is rarely undertaken by one country's forces on their own; and even when it is, there is outside support usually necessary. So nations are inevitably pooling efforts, combining force capability and working together on the battlefield. Yet this happens at present on an ad hoc basis, with a series of hastily put together coalitions.

Maybe this is unavoidable. But it is absolutely germane to examine whether there couldn't be a more systematic way of assembling the right capabilities in rapid reaction to a Jihadist threat.

Combatting extremism within societies requires partnerships of a different kind. We need to work out what narratives work best to counter those of the extremists and who are the best people to formulate them; how we mobilise credible voices; how we develop persuasive content; how we use the internet effectively; the role of the private sector; and how we disseminate effectively a correct theological interpretation of Islam?

To summarise: there is much anxiety right now amongst our people. We see regions of the world in chaos and we fear the possibility of terrorist attacks in our own countries.

We have been through wars and various elements of military engagement, a broad range of security measures, diplomatic activity, attempts at stopping radicalisation, Government programmes and civic society responses, and we have now a wealth of often harshly gained experience.

Yet the anxiety increases. The challenge grows.

It is affecting the domestic politics of our own nations. There are those on the left who want us to dis-engage, who believe that our policies are largely the cause of this extremism and that if we leave well alone, it will resolve itself. There are those on the right who believe Islam itself is the problem, thus in a

strange way affirming the position of the extremists that the West and Islam are in immutable conflict with each other.

This polarisation of the debate is mirrored both sides of the Atlantic and the casualty is serious policy making.

Both far left and far right come together in advocating solutions that make a tweet but not a policy.

We need a new approach - what I might term a more muscular centrist one - which in a sense is a synthesis of the lessons of the whole period since 9/11 and can unify our people behind it. We require a combination of military and security capability to counter the violence; together with a deep strategy to counter the ideology of extremism which breeds it.

This comprehensive approach needs the heft, the coverage and the intelligent formulation to rally our own opinion, to build the essential alliances, and give us the confidence that this is a threat we can and will overcome.

It is urgent for sure. We face not the possibility but the probability of serious terrorist attacks in Europe in the time to come. Even the prospect is altering our politics fundamentally. Think what the reality could do.

The only answer is to have a plan that is radical but sensible, which deals with the problem head-on, but in a way that is consistent with the values of our society not a diminution of them.

This Commission seeks to make such a plan.