Winning the War of Ideas

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THERE IS A BROAD CONSENSUS THAT THE UNITED STATES AND THE WEST ARE LOSING THE MESSAGING WAR AGAINST THE ISLAMIC STATE, AL-QAEDA, AND LIKE-MINDED TERRORISTS. Indeed, there has been much focus on terrorists' use of social media to spread their message and attract thousands of followers from the heart of the Middle East to America's heartland.

The challenge from this ideology and global movement, however, is often reduced to a problem of messaging or public diplomacy. The reality is that we are losing more than just a battle in the media and on the Internet.

We are losing the broader "battle of ideas" against a violent extremist ideology that is infecting a whole new generation of Muslim millennials and defining what it means to be Muslim in the twenty-first century. In failing to recognize this broader challenge, we are failing to confront the real-world manifestations of this ideology.

The Islamic State—with its wanton barbarity and declared "caliphate"—represents the latest manifestation of an ideological movement birthed by al-Qaeda. The underlying terrorist manifesto and heroic mythology of a religious obligation to fight against an assault on Muslims is heralded through ideological outposts in satellite sermons, garage mosque meetings, and Facebook friends. With a vast recruitment pipeline, slick media products, and targeted use of social media, new recruits and identities are forming.

With 62 percent of 1.6 billion Muslims worldwide under the age of 30, this is a generational threat. And the terrorists know this—using schools, videos, and terror—to inculcate a new generation with their message. Some children attending ISIS-controlled schools have been reported to declare, "ISIS is like Disneyland."

In concert, ISIS is recruiting young girls and women to drive the spread of the ideology in new families while dispatching women to ISIS outposts well beyond Syria and Iraq to help regenerate radicalization. The radicalization of women and their willingness to become involved in all phases of terrorist operations is worrying security officials and families around the world.

But it's the survival of the "Islamic caliphate" and continued ISIS governance in major Middle Eastern cities and territory that fuels the underlying romantic vision of this identity and a medieval Islamic state. It's the ability of extremists to intimidate and force ideological change that is impacting globally.

This violent ideological movement is altering the political landscape and erasing national borders. In so doing, they are destroying evidence of peoples, history, and culture that threaten their worldview. If they succeed, the world will lose proof of the diversity of religious belief, including within Islam, and the heritage of ancient civilizations.

The destruction of peoples and heritage represents these extremists' ideological battle brought to life.

This requires societies to embrace and defend historical diversity like antibodies as a bulwark against modern extremist division.

We must save persecuted minorities and the threatened sacred sites—from revered tombs and ancient monasteries in the Middle East to temples and statues in Asia. This involves helping mobilize a set of actors and networks already committed to the preservation of peoples, texts, and languages—including archaeologists, heritage trusts, museums, and libraries.

Extremism also threatens to silence courageous moderate voices. Terrorists have assassinated writers and activists in Muslim societies challenging violent extremist orthodoxy. In Bangladesh this past year, moderate bloggers have been butchered in front of loved ones. These voices have to be amplified, networked, and protected.

The baseline ideology is slowly erasing the richness of local cultures—replacing the colorful, traditional clothes and lifestyles of women from Africa to Central and Southeast Asia. And their attacks are deepening social and political fissures, even changing the shape of Western societies—with attacks like those in Paris that accelerate Jewish migration from France.

The embedding of this ideology in conflict zones can track with the outbreak of disease. These extremists have often helped polio reemerge in hotspots—like northern Nigeria, western Pakistan, Syria, and Somalia—where their ideology teaches that vaccines are a plot by the West to harm Muslims. Vaccination teams

have been banned, harassed, and even killed. The international health community and those like the Rotary Foundation committed to the eradication of polio need to be supported, with Muslim clerics, leaders, and countries finding ways to deliver vaccinations and counter the false narrative of the extremists.

This ideology has also spawned some of the worst human-rights abuses and war crimes in the twenty-first century—from mass executions and attempted genocide to the institutionalization of sexual slavery and child soldiers. Merely documenting the atrocities or having #BringBackOurGirls go viral to raise awareness of Boko Haram abductees should not comfort us. The human-rights community needs to find more effective, sustainable, and creative ways to deter and counter the spread of such atrocities and their animating ideology.

Terrorist groups are putting the environment at risk as well. There is growing concern that militant groups of all stripes—to include al-Shabaab, the al-Qaeda affiliate in Somalia—are funding their conflicts through the industrialized poaching trade in Africa, fueled by exploding demand in China and Asia. Elephants, rhinos, and other endangered species are at imminent risk. This requires a concerted global effort—to curb demand, dismantle networks, interdict shipments, and protect the animals and their ecosystems. The administration's strategy to confront wildlife trafficking aggressively is an important but insufficient step.

Through two administrations, the United States has struggled to counter this ideology. The U.S. government is neither expert nor credible in confronting

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an ideology grounded in interpretations of Islam. Yet we cannot abdicate taking the ideological fight to the enemy nor hope that these groups will alienate themselves into extinction with their brutality.

Muslims themselves—to include our allies in Muslim-majority nations, local leaders, and communities—must confront this problem directly, deny it funding, while also defining and respecting modern, diverse Muslim identities. This requires curtailing and challenging the most extreme dimensions of radical Islamic proselytizing and recruitment globally.

But we cannot simply assume that our allies—especially in Muslim communities—can defend against the threat of terror and the allure of the ideology on their own. America must lead—empowering, enabling, and defending networks, communities, and individuals willing to confront the ideology.

The White House and United Nations summits to counter violent extremism held in 2015 were opportunities to advance a serious, dedicated campaign to undermine the credibility of the terrorist ideology. Though important, the summits did not recognize fully that the world must confront directly the outbreaks and manifestations of this ideology—like it does a pandemic.

This requires empowering a new type of coalition—a network of networks—that not only counters the extremists' narrative and seeks to intervene and replace it, but also gets ahead of it through inoculation. How? We must first directly confront the sources and manifestations of the radical ideology plaguing the world.

Former extremists have organized to counter recruitment and the ideology on the streets, in campuses, and online. Attempts to amplify these and other credible voices and create new platforms for expression and a sense of modern identity not dictated by terrorists—like local radio programs run by kids in Mali or street theater in Luton, UK—have worked on a small scale. All of these efforts must be scaled up dramatically.

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And the new and virulent manifestations of these threats offer opportunities to create new alliances and networks to confront the ideology—from human-rights and women's groups to archaeologists and conservationists. International security forces and private stability operations teams could be enlisted to protect vulnerable populations, sites, individuals, and species against violent extremists.

This ideological fight is not just about terrorism. These are enemies of humanity—attempting to spread their ideology like a virus while reshaping borders, history, and identity. It's time for a new coalition of global actors to take on and win this generational fight. This will require more than just creative messaging. It demands stopping the manifestations of the ideology itself. ◻