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The West's failed counter-terrorism strategy requires a complete rethink

DAVID KILCULLEN THE AUSTRALIAN NOVEMBER 01, 2014 12:00AM



Iraqi special forces search a house in the Jurf al-Sakhr area, north of the Shi'ite shrine city Karbala. Source: AFP

THE events of 2014 — Islamic State in Iraq, the Syrian civil war and its spillover into Lebanon, the collapse of Libya, what looks increasingly like a Taliban comeback in Afghanistan, the string of Boko Haram atrocities in Nigeria, terrorist attacks in Mali and Somalia, the unprecedented flow of Westerners to terrorist groups, and attacks in Ottawa and Melbourne — represent nothing less than the collapse of Western counter-terrorism strategy as we've known it since 2001.

After 13 years, thousands of lives and hundreds of billions of dollars, we're worse off today than before 9/11, with a stronger, more motivated, more dangerous enemy than ever.

Whatever the reason — and there's more than enough blame to go around, in many countries and on all sides of politics — the result is that governments are suffering “task saturation”. So much is happening, simultaneously, in so many places that leaders are struggling to decide what to do, in what order. The danger is that we will engage in panicked, knee-jerk responses rather than taking time to consider what an effective strategy looks like.

The first step, of course, is to admit that this really is, every bit, the strategic failure it seems. US president George W. Bush's large-footprint approach, invading and occupying Iraq and Afghanistan, then rebuilding those countries from scratch at vast cost in time, troops, money and blood — what Maajid Nawaz, the former Islamist radical who now heads the London-based Quilliam Foundation, describes as “spreading democracy at the barrel of a gun” — bogged down the US and its allies in a decade-long counter-insurgency fight that demanded immense sacrifices

from our troops, cost us our strategic freedom of action and eroded the legitimacy of a cause that, at the outset, enjoyed huge global support.

President Barack Obama's strategy of precipitate withdrawal then pulled the rug out from underneath whatever progress had been made in stabilising Iraq and Afghanistan, neutralising those sacrifices and making a bad situation even worse. His passivity in the face of crises in Egypt and Libya, failure to support democracy movements in Syria and Iran, and reliance on unilateral drone strikes, raids and targeted killings — again, in Nawaz's formulation, "getting rid of the democracy but keeping the gun" — telegraphed weakness to adversaries such as Iran and Russia, enabled the rebirth of Islamic State from the ashes of al-Qa'ida in Iraq, allowed a humanitarian tragedy in Syria and ultimately failed just as badly.

America's allies — Australia, Canada, Britain and the rest of NATO — went along out of solidarity, while corrupt, non-inclusive governments in Iraq, Afghanistan and elsewhere have been as responsible as anyone for the dire outcomes in their countries. Nobody's in the clear: this is a bipartisan, multinational, equal-opportunity screw-up.

The second step is to realise that this truly is, as many have argued, a long war. There's no magic bullet, no instant solution, let alone some carefully calibrated combination of firepower, diplomacy and technology that can quickly put the genie back in the bottle. Many Islamic State fighters are sons of Iraqis imprisoned by occupation forces a decade ago; many al-Shabab fighters in Somalia and Boko Haram militants in Nigeria are teenagers. Today's Taliban members are younger, more radical, more battle-hardened and better trained than those we fought in 2001 — they have plenty of energy, and all the time in the world.

There are more than 30,000 fighters in Islamic State and about as many in the Taliban and other extremist movements. The rise of Islamic State, the stimulating effect of its rivalry with al-Qa'ida, the Taliban resurgence and, above all, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's declaration of the caliphate are breathing new life into a global movement that seemed to be declining — proving that the ideology, like the movements defined by it, is tough and resilient. This conflict will not be over quickly or cleanly. On the contrary: it is, and will be, a multi-generational struggle against an implacable enemy, and the violence we're dealing with in the Middle East and Africa is not some unfortunate aberration — it's the new normal.

Nor can we pull up the drawbridge, disengage from the world and somehow avoid the fight. For one thing, there is no drawbridge: we live in connected societies whose prosperity and success rely on trade, travel and free intercourse with the world. Particularly for Australians, as citizens of a multicultural nation, plugged into the global economy, a key player in regional and world events, opting out just isn't feasible.

For another, if we fail to face the threat where it is today — primarily overseas — we'll suffer the consequences at home. This isn't to rehash some Cold War domino theory in which we "fight them there or we'll fight them here". It's just to recognise the reality that a purely isolationist, defensive, policing strategy — protecting ourselves at home rather than seeking to defeat terrorism abroad — ultimately means the end of society as we know it. Mass surveillance, secret police, a national-security state, guards on every gate, a garrison society: that's what a "defensive" strategy actually entails.

While ever there's an entity — Islamic State, al-Qa'ida, the Taliban — that can attract and motivate disaffected young people in our societies, preying on their idealism and alienation, drawing them into what the late, great Time magazine Baghdad correspondent Jim Frederick called a "hyperviolent, nihilistic band of exterminators", the threat will remain. We can lock

down our societies, destroying them in the process, or we can seek to remove that entity.

In short, what we've been doing has failed: we need a complete rethink. That rethink, I would suggest, needs to start with a threat analysis. What exactly is the threat we're facing and how can we address it in ways that are cheap enough, effective enough and non-intrusive enough to be sustainable across the long term, without undermining the openness, democracy and prosperity that make our societies worth defending in the first place?

IN my view there are four distinct (but related) threats to consider. In order of priority these are domestic radicalisation, foreign fighters, the effect of Islamic State on regional and global jihadist groups, and the destabilising effect of conflict in the Middle East. Let's consider each issue in turn.

Domestic radicalisation — the mobilising effect of overseas terrorist groups on people in our own societies — is the most immediate threat. Last week's attack in Ottawa, attacks on police and members of the public in Australia, last year's Boston Marathon bombing, and the horrendous attack in which two Muslim converts ran down off-duty soldier Lee Rigby with a car, then beheaded him in a London street in broad daylight, are examples of "self-radicalisation" or "remote radicalisation".

The randomness, unpredictability and copycat nature of these attacks, which require little preparation, give few warning signs, and are difficult to prevent, is what makes them so terrifying.

Attackers are often disenfranchised, alienated, marginalised young people, frequently converts: society's losers, who see radical Salafi-jihadist ideology as a way to be part of something big, historic and successful. They're not really self-radicalised. Rather, they often access online terrorist materials (increasingly in English) for inspiration, instruction and training, or link up online with radicals who groom them for action.

Defeating this threat is partly a matter of community policing to identify and engage at-risk individuals, and partly a matter of detecting and monitoring access to online forums, radicalisation networks, social media and online training materials.

Despite the fear these attacks create, police and intelligence agencies have a pretty good handle on this type of threat, but in the long term this brings a potential cost to civil liberties and community cohesion. This is because, more broadly, domestic radicalisation occurs amid alienation, authoritarianism and conservatism within some majority-Muslim communities, and hence suspicion of those communities from the rest of society. Ironically, it's the ultra-conservatism and lack of freedom for young people in these communities that make radicalism so attractive and exciting.

Western governments have been their own worst enemies here: the tendency to treat Muslim communities as a special case, to think that "mainstream" society can deal with "the Muslim community" (whatever that is) only through self-appointed, often conservative, authoritarian elders and notables, is to deny people the individual freedoms that belong to them, by right, as members of our society while absolving them from the responsibilities that go with those freedoms.

It's to set up an unelected, often illiberal intermediary between our wider society and the idealistic, motivated young people who deserve — and from whom society has a right to expect — the same rights and responsibilities as anyone else. So the right strategy for dealing with

domestic radicalisation is more freedom, not less — but with it must come more individual accountability.

The second threat is that of foreign fighters, people who travel from our societies to join terrorist groups overseas. The pace and scale of foreign fighter flows into Syria, and now Islamic State, have been unprecedented, 10 to 12 times the size of anything we saw during the Iraq war. And many of these people are “cleanskins”, people with Western passports, Western faces and no known previous connection with violent radicalism.

The threat that such fighters, blooded in Iraq or Syria, may return to target their home countries is real and serious, though in practice many become disillusioned, are killed overseas or fail to return. Still, it would take only a small proportion of the dozens of Australians fighting with Islamic State in Syria to return home to pose a serious threat. Combined with self-radicalised individuals in their home communities, these people could form the nucleus of a serious domestic terrorist threat.

The appropriate strategy here seems to be a combination of policing and community engagement at home, and intelligence gathering overseas. Much as for domestic radicalisation, foreign fighters belong to communities and have families who care about them, and want them home and safe — for many, reintegration and monitoring may be the right approach. For others who commit atrocities overseas, participate in direct combat against their countrymen, or seek to bring their lethal skills back to target their home societies — well, the battlefield is a dangerous place, they take their chances, and many may not come back.

For those who seek to return, robust monitoring, border security and the ability to revoke or suspend travel documents may be all that's required. Experience has shown, though, that it's unproductive to treat all returning foreign fighters as a threat — debriefing, deradicalisation and reintegration programs can work, though results have been patchy.

These first two threats, then — domestic radicalisation and foreign fighters — are best dealt with through a strategy that combines policing, community engagement, intelligence work and border security. Australians, by global standards, are well served by institutions that are effective and generally bound by the rule of law and respect for civil liberties. But the ratcheting effect of these kinds of security measures — think of airline security since 9/11 — is such that if this is all we do, we'll eventually find ourselves living in a garrison state, with para-militarised police and intelligence services that are more effective at stifling freedoms in the name of safety than in providing security.

Dealing with the last two threats — the regional effect of groups such as Islamic State and the destabilising effect on the Middle East — requires overseas engagement because only by removing that overseas threat and its magnetic effect on marginalised individuals at home can we ultimately dial back the securitisation of our society and thus preserve individual liberty.

The emergence of Islamic State has reinvigorated a global movement that seemed to be flagging after the death of Osama bin Laden and in the wake of the Arab Spring. Salafi-jihadist groups in North Africa, South Asia, Indonesia, The Philippines and even Latin America have been re-energised by the movement's success in Iraq and Syria, and by the declaration of the caliphate.

It's worth noting that Baghdadi, unlike bin Laden, claims an actual religious qualification — a PhD in Islamic jurisprudence — and claims to be a Qureishi, from the tribe of the prophet Mohammed. When a man such as that gives a public sermon in the main mosque in Iraq's second city, Mosul, a city occupied by Americans only a few years ago, then declares a caliphate,

announces his intent to expand that caliphate by conquest and calls on all true Muslims to join him and build a new, triumphant Islamic state, this has a huge effect on Salafi believers worldwide — at least some of whom may feel a sense of obligation to support him, while many others feel a stirring of excitement and historical purpose.

The regional strategy to deal with such a challenge is one area where Australia, at least, has had a good track record since 9/11 — one of close co-operation with, support for, and assistance to partners such as Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore and The Philippines.

Australian co-operation with Indonesia, for example, though it has had its ups and downs, has generally had an extremely favourable impact on the capability of Indonesia's police and legal services, on information sharing and on regional security, with support for jihadist groups dropping steadily across time. Australia's diplomatic leadership, peer-to-peer co-operation among police and law enforcement, and carefully tailored foreign assistance and intelligence partnerships have made Australians and our regional partners safer, and at a modest cost.

Continuing and deepening this co-operation at the regional level is a key component, then, of our overall strategy — as well as extending it to other parts of the world such as Africa, parts of Europe and Latin America.

Finally, the threat that has received most public attention in the past few months, that of destabilisation and conflict in the Middle East, clearly demands the strongest military response we can muster. Islamic State is a state-building enterprise, with a government, territory, an economy, a population under its control and an aggressive agenda of expansionism and sectarian violence. If we are ultimately to remove the other threats, Islamic State has to be destroyed.

Today's strategy — of airstrikes, limited ground engagement in Iraq and training and logistical support to Syrian nationalist rebels — is fine as far as it goes, but there are some serious problems in its execution, and one fundamental flaw: the lack of a clearly defined regional end-state. Ultimately, the tough choice will be whether to tolerate the continued misrule of Bashar al-Assad in Syria or to seek a transition — most likely through a negotiated process — to a new regime.

This will be difficult, but it's essential if the strategy is to have any chance of succeeding. At present, air attacks on Islamic State are simply creating room for the Assad regime to expand its control. This is why the Turkish government has been reluctant to commit to an effort that favours separatist Kurds and the Baathist government of Syria at the expense of regional stability, and it's why so few Syrian nationalist rebels — so-called “moderates” — have come forward for training.

Until Western powers commit to the ultimate replacement of the Assad regime with a transitional unity or ultimately a secular democratic government — something the original democracy protesters called for in 2011, right at the beginning of the war — it's hard to imagine any Syrian volunteering to fight with us against Islamic State. In any case, it will be months or more before Iraqi and Syrian forces are sufficiently trained to take the fight forward effectively.

Australia has a role in this, and an important one, both in the air and on the ground. But we should remember that of the four threats posed by Islamic State, this is last on the list for the simple reason that it's a huge and complex challenge that is beyond Australia's ability to address alone.

OUR goal seems to be — as it should be — to contribute where we can, participate as a valued

and capable member of the coalition, and help develop a longer-term strategy as part of that coalition. At the same time, we shouldn't make the mistake of meekly going along with a strategy with no clear or viable outcome in sight: Australia's contributions in Afghanistan and Iraq have earned us the respect, and the right, to have a say in the strategy, and we should exercise that right vigorously.

The bottom line is that 2014 has exposed the weakness of a strategic approach that for too long focused just on neutralising terrorist plots and killing or capturing senior terrorist leaders. This approach looked, and often felt, as if it were proactive — taking the fight to the enemy. But in reality, as this year has shown, it was too narrowly focused to succeed.

The silver lining in this year's crisis is that it forces us to a rethink. Australia should use that opportunity to broaden the strategy, building an integrated and sustainable approach that focuses on the four areas in priority order while exercising the right, earned across more than a decade in the war against terrorism and more than 70 years as a leading US ally, to have a say as to how that campaign develops.

And as we do these things, we should remember our fundamental strategic purpose: to preserve a free society, connected and integrated with the world and within itself, free from external terror and internal oppression.

This is truly an enormous challenge, but meeting it is essential if we are to rise from this year's crisis to a counter-terrorism strategy that can be maintained for the duration of this long conflict.

Australian David Kilcullen is a US-based counter-insurgency and intelligence analyst and a former adviser to General David Petraeus in Iraq. He will deliver the 2014 John Bonython Lecture in Sydney on November 12 for the Centre for Independent Studies, What are We Fighting For? Islamism and the Threat to Liberal Ideas.

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