

Foreword

While it is understandable that Western governments should want to respond in some way to vicious terrorist attacks within Western countries, there is a good deal of evidence to suggest that violence rarely solves the problem of violence, that violence leads to new forms of violence (often after a delay or in a new location), and that terrorist groups are rarely brought to an end through military means. In general, waging war on rogue factions without addressing the grievances that nurture them is a policy practice with a poor record of success. While the idea that one can create peace by physically eliminating all the ‘evil’ people retains a strong hold on the imagination of many policymakers and other citizens in the West, this approach dangerously disregards the processes by which people become violent.

We also know from many crises around the world that when actors present themselves as combating some kind of ‘evil’, there tends to be a great deal of impunity for those claiming to sign up to this fight. Once powerful actors on the ground realise which kinds of ‘evil’ Western governments are currently combating, these local actors have frequently constructed their strategies accordingly – even to the extent of nurturing the enemy that is being so loudly and widely denounced. These are not new lessons; they can be gleaned from Vietnam and Guatemala, as well as (more recently) Sudan, Sierra Leone, Iraq, Sri Lanka, Somalia, Yemen and many countries around the world. We are learning them again – or perhaps not learning them – in relation to Syria.

Despite (and arguably *because of*) the huge and ongoing ‘war on terror’ since September 2001, according to the Global Terrorism Index the number of terror attacks in the world has risen very sharply – from 3,329 in 2000 to 29,376 in 2015.¹ A large proportion of these attacks have been within Iraq and

¹ Global Terrorism Index 2015 (2016).

Afghanistan, where much of the ‘war on terror’ has been concentrated. Meanwhile, the number of fighters in Islamist-inspired terrorist organisations more than tripled between 2000 and 2013 (from 32,200 to in excess of 110,000).² In many ways, it is precisely the ongoing failure of the ‘war on terror’ that has created pressures for its continuation: the intensifying ‘security threat’ is held to demand ‘more of the same’.

Meanwhile, the ongoing ‘war on terror’ has come at a huge financial cost. In fact, in large part because of a felt need to wage war on terrorism, global military spending remains very close to its all-time peak despite the end of the Cold War. The opportunity costs of this spending – for example, the forgone opportunities to promote development – are enormous.

Today the idea that violence will solve the problem of violence retains considerable popular appeal. However, by the time we wake up to all the violence we have nurtured and encouraged in the name of eliminating evil, it is often – as the citizens of Aleppo could testify – too late.

In the 2015 discussion paper, *Dilemmas of counter-terrorism, stabilisation and statebuilding* published by Saferworld, I provided a review of global evidence on the impacts of existing approaches, and suggested a number of constructive directions for improved policy, including:

- avoiding defining conflicts narrowly as problems of ‘terror’, ‘extremism’ or ‘radicalisation’, and instead adopting a more impartial, holistic and sustainable approach to resolving them
- changing international and national policies and approaches that fuel grievances and undermine human rights
- redoubling efforts for diplomacy, lobbying, advocacy and local-level dialogue to make the case for peace and adherence to international law by conflict actors
- looking for opportunities to negotiate peace – balancing pragmatic considerations with a determined focus to achieve inclusive and just political settlements in any given context
- considering the careful use of legal and judicial responses and targeted sanctions as alternatives to the use of force
- taking greater care when choosing and reviewing relationships with supposed ‘allies’

² Goepner (2016), p 113, citing annual reports from the Department of State and data from Stanford’s Mapping Militant Organizations Project.

- supporting transformative reform efforts to improve governance and state-society relations and uphold human rights
- choosing not to engage if harm cannot be effectively mitigated and no clear solution is evident

Saferworld has since published case studies exploring these themes in relation to Afghanistan, Egypt, Kenya, Somalia, Tunisia and Yemen. This discussion paper aims to stimulate further debate and reflection on these themes by examining the roles of different actors in the Syrian war system. It situates the international ‘war on terror’ within the context of the war system being played out in Syria, and describes how the incentives of different actors involved in the Syrian civil war have led them to perpetrate and support extreme violence. Based on this, it draws lessons that could assist those who are engaging in the hope that they can respond in a more holistic and constructive way.

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