

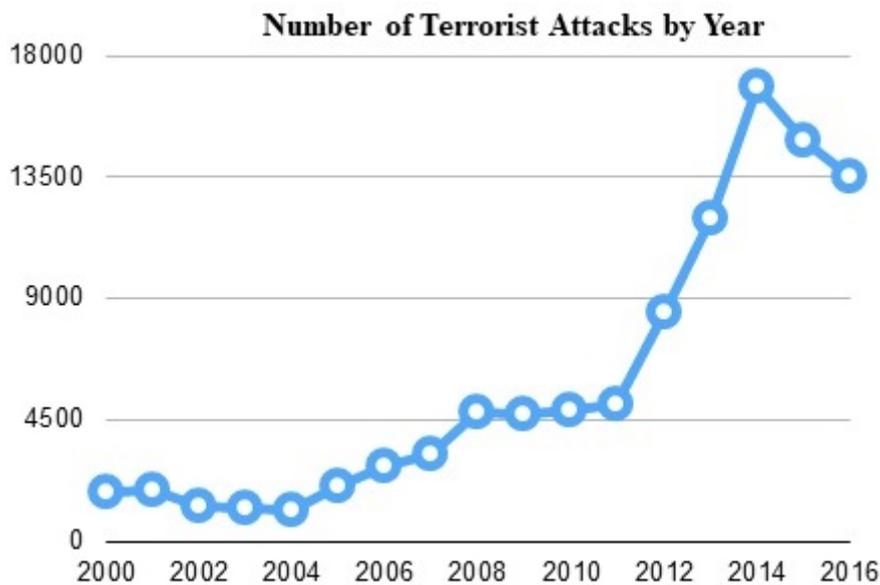
AN ALTERNATIVE APPROACH OF COUNTER-TERRORISM

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According to many scholars and institutes that specialize in the research of global counter-terrorism, the world has witnessed a transition of global strategy of counter-terrorism from eradication to containment in the most recent decades¹. However, the total number of terrorist attacks happening each year reveals that the improvement in strategy did not translate to a successful reduction of terrorist attacks. Certainly, it does not mean that current policies of counter-terrorism are utterly useless simply based on one single aspect; however, statistics do show that the attempt to contain terrorism has failed to deliver a desirable outcome, and therefore a new approach of counter-terrorism is needed.



Source : *Global Terrorism Database*

In fact, the idea of containing terrorism has its merits, as it acknowledges the fact that terrorism is something whose impact can only be limited but can never be eliminated. This realistic interpretation of the nature of terrorism has then served as the top guidance of global counter-

¹ Sources: *National Strategy Security of the U.S.A* – US Government Printing Office – 2006
The Strategy of Containment in Fighting Terrorism; Strategic Insights - Aggour Lora - California Naval Postgraduate School – September 2008
International Terrorism: the case for containment – Dr Julian Lewis – April 2012
Contain ISIS – Barry R. Posen– The Atlantic – 20/11/2015
America can't do much about ISIS – Stephen Biddle and Jacob Shapiro – The Atlantic – 20/04/2016 – 20/04/2016

terrorism actions. Nevertheless, it is important to understand that the policy of containment is a product of the Cold War, and the focus of this policy is on sovereign states, whose mobility and flexibility are constrained by their rigid internal structures. The current approach of containing terrorism did not develop very far from the means of containing communism adopted for the Cold War, and still focuses on setting up physical barriers by force to defend against the spread of terrorism.

But terrorist organizations do not operate like states ; as shown by the characteristics of the Islamic State and Al-Qaeda, they do not have definite boundaries, their ideologies are largely based on antagonizing the mainstream world, and their mobility and flexibility, superior to the states, allow them to diffuse quickly into an unaffected community without being immediately detected. Therefore, a barrier of force will not serve to contain terrorism firmly in a specified area, and this is why no matter how much money developed countries have spent on equipping the local forces in Iraq, Afghanistan and Mali, incidents of terrorist attacks still happen frequently all over the world, shifting to a neighboring region or OECD countries through transnational tactics. In order to really contain terrorism, a soft barrier should be built up by understanding, acceptance and development, instead of by force.

The current way to stop people becoming terrorists is either to cut off their access to the information propagated by terrorist organizations, or to disillusion and intimidate them by disclosing the reality of being a terrorist, but neither of them addresses the core of the problem. The real reason why those people want to become terrorists is that they believe they may find happiness, salvation and hope outside the mainstream society. Therefore, terrorism is a social issue and truly reflects the society. Just like Adichie² has written, “the real tragedy of our post-colonial world is not that the majority of people had no say in whether or not they wanted this new world; rather, it is that the majority have not been given the tools to negotiate this new world.” The majority choose to keep silent and accept the fact that they will continue to live on without the tools and the say. But a few of them, after realizing the reality, decide to fight for their tools within the mainstream society if they believe that hopes do exist in that circle, or to seek the tools and create the say elsewhere if they completely lose the confidence of the mainstream.

For people living in the developed countries, the rising inequality, social alienation and difficulty to have any change in their lives have given them a sense of despair. Of course, education and immigration policies are the tools that government could use to make or keep a coherent society – either by indoctrinating everyone with the same set of basic ideology to at least maintain a certain level of commonality in belief, or by selecting the entry of immigrants who are determined and able to conform to that set of ideology. If the government is cogent enough in legislating and implementing correct economic, education and immigration policies, the basic level of the society’s homogeneity will be sustained. However, as seen from many countries’ cases, without any substantial efforts from the government to implement economic, education and immigration policies that could mitigate the growing

² Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie is a Nigerian writer of novels, short stories, and nonfiction.

social conflict, resentment of the alienated or neglected people toward the mainstream society and the establishment has grown more and more concrete and wild. Once they are convinced that they will live like that for the rest of their lives in the current society, they will try to seek solutions elsewhere, probably from terrorist organizations – a place totally different from, or even a reverse of the mainstream society, where they might find new purposes and hope.

On the other hand, for people living in developing countries, joining terrorism is not so much a choice as a necessity, as it keeps food on the table, instead of starving, and gives them a thing to do, instead of idling. It is important to understand that it is not that most people want to be terrorists, but that they are much forced to become terrorists. Thus, in regions where more than 25% or 50% of the population live with less than \$1.9 per day, the promise from Islamic State to their fighters of a base salary of \$50 a month plus basic food and accommodation, extra allowance for wife and children – in most cases this amounts to about \$100 per month – and 80% of whatever they loot, has a very significant power of attraction.³ Another example of the persuasive power of the economic argument is Somalia and its terrorist group Al Shabab. A recent study performed by the Finnish NGO Finn Church Aid showed that “27% of respondents joined al Shabab terrorist group for economic reasons. 15% mentioned religious reasons - and 13% were forced to join ».

Although the rise of internet has made the world flatter than it used to be, it has also catalyzed the process of “terroristization.” According to a new report published by Nanyang Technological University, “the global jihadist movements, principally the so-called Islamic State (IS) and Al-Qaeda, have glocalised to exploit indigenous grievances, recruit aspiring jihadists and fight for local and global causes.” The word “glocalise” has actually captured the essence of the internet’s role in propagating terrorism; by being global and local at the same time, it could project everything happening in the world to a rather small area and magnify its influence. Thanks to the internet, the ability to publicize information has been decentralized to everyone, and social inequality, exclusion and global imbalance of development, reflected by words, pictures and videos on the internet, are made aware to people who might not realize their existence or seriousness in the past. In the meantime, radical ideas, which were exclusive to only a few people, have now reached their global audience. As a result, people around the world who share the same frustration of those problems are united by social media, attracted by radical ideas, and eventually gathered to form terrorist organizations.

As Tolstoy wrote, “happy families are alike; each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.” Although it is admissible that there is at least one complete and rational set of ideologies which could be considered as the mainstream, it is difficult to believe that many people really share that. So it is surely possible to generalize it to most individuals and say, each person is suffering in his or her own way, but people’s definitions and desires of happiness are much alike. Even for the people labeled as “terrorists,” they still share the same definition of happiness as « ordinary » people do, and the reason they have become like that is that the society did not provide them opportunities to fulfill their happiness.

³ Source: *My Journey Into the Heart of Terror: Ten Days in the Islamic State* - Jürgen Todenhöfer - April 2016

Therefore, to bring about the success of counter-terrorism, terrorists and would-be terrorists need to be convinced that they can achieve their happiness in this mainstream world, not the world created by the fantasy of terrorist organizations. And to make that happen, it is necessary to, as it has been said earlier, contain terrorism in a soft barrier of our understanding, acceptance and efforts of development. Developed countries should work on the improvement of social equality and inclusion so that people can feel their active ownership of the society. Once each one of them realizes that he or she is indeed an indispensable member of a greater society and is included in the process of societal development, they will naturally distance from terrorism, as at this time they have already felt that happiness can be achieved in the mainstream society.

In developing countries, emphasis should be made on the promotion of local economies through instituting more developmental projects, thereby reducing people's reliance on terrorism as a source of income. There might be many ways to promote the local economy and education in areas vulnerable to the infiltration of terrorism, but project-based promotion is the quickest and the most effective way at a micro-level. Even within a country, each local community may have its own problem; for some it might be a stable access to food, for others it might be water. The project-based promotion, with its small scale and ease to commence, can target the most urgent needs of specific communities in a most timely fashion. In addition, it also allows a greater participation of the outside world, for it does not require much funding, compared with large public projects, and does not involve a significant collaboration from the government. It is like dividing an area into numerous small communities; when a project is successfully set up in one community, this community will become less susceptible to terrorism, and a "soft barrier" is established. The more projects are set up in one community, the stronger the "soft barrier" is; the more projects are set up across communities, the longer the "soft barrier" is. Furthermore, "soft barriers" have to be adapted to the different characteristics of the respective societies, so the problems of terrorism in two societies have to be solved differently.

Compared with the work in developed countries, containment of terrorism in developing countries is much more difficult to address. In developed countries, governments and other social institutions tend to run more orderly and effectively, and problems could be solved within the governments and institutions' capability. Whereas in developing countries, social issues are easily neglected and are piling up, which eventually could precipitate irremediable disasters, like the radicalization of Northern Mali. Hence, between two different groups of societies, the balance of focus has to be heavily tilted to the developing countries' side, especially to the establishment of soft barriers by setting up more local projects.

For example, in Northern Chad, where the annual rainfall is generally less than 30 centimeters, people chose to become terrorists mostly because they were unable to obtain potable water throughout the year; otherwise, they might die from dehydration like many of their relatives. The presence of terrorist organizations fills the vacuum of water provision so that local people could use the water for living and making economic gains, and in the meantime, offers the youth something they could do as a means and will of living.

Nevertheless, what many people do not know is that there is less than 10 meters below the ground level an abundance of underground water. Hence, by setting up water stations with solar pumps, one could provide local residents enough water not only to drink, but also to irrigate their agricultural products and graze their cattle. Water stations, in this context, serve exactly as a soft barrier that precludes people from approaching terrorism. These stations will give people suffering from the lack of water a means to sustain their livings by farming and grazing without having to turn themselves against the mainstream world. Similar situation also happens in Niger, Mali and Mauritania. If this water station project could be extended across the whole Sahel Belt, the barrier between terrorism and not only these countries but also the rest of the world would be pushed even norther to the deeper Sahara, where the effects of terrorism are minimized.

In more densely populated urban areas such as townships and cities, where access to modern technologies is more feasible and residents generally do not participate in agricultural production, different measures should be taken to construct the soft barrier, such as instituting professional training programs. For example, in Bamako, one of the most frequently attacked city by terrorists, many people have noticed the huge imbalance of wealth distribution in this country. They realized that no matter how hardworking they are in this current society, it is impossible for them to climb up the social ladder. In order to achieve self-fulfillment, they have to take a different path that deviates from society's common values. In this particular situation, joining terrorism is no longer an attempt to make for a living but a quick way of fulfilling their ambitions. Therefore, the soft barrier that should be built there should focus on capacity-strengthening of the young and middle-aged people, which includes providing professional training that best caters to the need of local or regional job markets, connecting trained labor forces to employers and assisting them to initiate small businesses. Similar to the previous case, once people become well-trained and find jobs that could provide a steady flow of income, they will stabilize and not try to look for ways of self-fulfillment from other sources. The key here is that the level of training provision that a lot of NGOs are doing right now should not be stopped; instead, more care should be taken about whether those trained labor forces can find jobs after their trainings, since all efforts are basically useless and they will return to their previous lives and temptations if no help is provided to find jobs. In fact, instituting training programs should not only limit to Bamako; all cities and townships that have high unemployment or semi-employment rates could adopt this measure as a defense against the infiltration of terrorism.

On a larger scale, economic development and initiation of joint projects is also the approach chosen by Russia in Afghanistan with local government to defeat terrorism and bring peace back in the country. Despite many years of military presence and investments in security measures, the country is still the theatre of many terrorist attacks every year and the situation is deteriorating with Islamic State gaining ground and Taliban being still powerful. Since 2017, the Afghan government supports several projects involving Russian and local companies in various sectors such as energy and agriculture. The development of local economy aims at reducing the attractiveness of those terrorist organizations and also their drug trafficking revenues allowing them to pay the wages of thousands of gunmen. According

to Nikolay Patrushev, Russian Security Chief Council, terrorism could not be defeated “*without achieving national reconciliation taking into account the interests of all ethnic groups*” along with “*the country’s economy, the growing welfare of the population, declining unemployment, and higher levels of education*”.

As the global war against terrorism intensifies, terrorist attacks have become more decentralized, and the difficulty of countering them has also increased accordingly. Foreseeing a further decentralization of terrorism, the world shall become aware that soft barriers are in fact stronger and more impervious than hard barriers of force. Indeed, they are trying to save people from terrorism by concrete actions that could convince people mainstream side is better, instead of merely building a “great wall” of military actions that threaten people from going to the other side, which does not address to the root of the problem at all. Meanwhile, because most of the terrorist groups are rooted on or target countries engaged in violent conflicts or using state sponsored terror⁴, it is also important to recognize that the project-based promotion solution in these regions could not work without proper pacification or protective measures, involvement of local politics and self-determination. Likewise, it would be presumptuous to not recognize that although socio-economic factors are playing a key role in terrorism expansion, it is also necessary to take into account group, religious, cultural antagonisms, and reflect the image displayed by OECD countries or International Organizations.

Finally, the importance of synergy in the process of containing terrorism; governments and large organizations are not the only ones that ought to take actions, everyone who feels responsible of the world, who wishes a better tomorrow, who sympathizes with the unfortunates, and who do not want to see any terrorist attacks happening should participate in the building of the “soft barriers.” And it is always good to remember, the more people are mobilized to stand on the project promotion side, the less space it is left for terrorism.

⁴ Source: *Global Terrorism Index 2016 report*