MISSING THE FOREST FOR THE TREES: 
A CALL FOR STRATEGIC COUNTERTERRORISM TEN YEARS 
AFTER 9/11

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In all likelihood, every one of us here today remembers where we were the morning of September 11, 2001. I was at home, sitting down to tackle another chapter of my PhD dissertation. That was easier said than done, however, since I was also working full time as an FBI counterterrorism intelligence analyst. As the 9-11 Commission Report laid out in detail, the months leading up to 9/11 were full of the type of "chatter" that tells you enough to be on edge but not enough to empower agencies and departments to take particularly tangible action. Indeed, the operational tempo at the FBI shot sky high the previous year with the millennial crisis and then the bombing of the USS Cole and remained high through September 10, 2001. We all know what came next.

Together with my FBI supervisor, I had planned long in advance to complete all my outstanding projects by a certain date and then take off a random Tuesday to spend a full eight hours on my dissertation. In light of the pace of counterterrorism over the previous few months, I had accumulated significant extra leave time but was never able to use it. When eventually that random Tuesday came, I sat at my home computer focused not on al-Qaeda or other global jihadist groups but on terrorism in the Israeli-Palestinian context. I was working on a chapter on the November 1994 kidnapping and murder by Hamas of dual American-Israeli citizen Nachshon Wachsman when a news ticker across the bottom of the screen informed viewers that a small, private plane had just crashed into the Twin Towers. I rushed to the television just in time to see the second plane, United Airlines Flight 175, crash into the second tower. It quickly became clear that the first flight was not just some small turbo prop but a large jet, and that the combined crashes were a coordinated terror attack like nothing the world had ever seen before. Within hours, I was back at FBI headquarters where "flight teams" were assembled to investigate each of the four hijacked flights and search for leads pointing to the follow-up attacks we assumed were planned. I was assigned to lead the analytical team for United Airlines Flight 175.

Standing here in Israel today, marking the tenth anniversary of the 9/11 attacks at the International Institute for Counter-Terrorism's (ICT's) eleventh annual international conference on terrorism's global impact, I am struck by how much has changed and how much has stayed the same since that fateful morning. So many of the issues related to Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, and Jewish extremist groups that I was writing about in my dissertation that morning are as relevant today as they were then. And even as our government bureaucracies have grown and adapted over the past decade, and even given our counterterrorism successes targeting al-Qaeda, the threat of global jihadist terrorism remains acute. In their latest joint advisory statement, issued just days before the tenth anniversary of the 9/11 attacks, the FBI and the Department of Homeland Security warned of "threats related to the use of small aircraft as weapons."

Overall, we are safer today than we were ten years ago. The cumulative effect of our counterterrorism efforts, from border security and financial transaction reporting to information sharing and intelligence cooperation, means that our adversaries have a harder time traveling, communicating, raising and transferring funds, and carrying out spectacular attacks. But in many
ways, while the nature of the threat has evolved, the threat itself has not diminished. In some ways, the dangers are even greater today.

I am struck, also, by the still underrecognized thematic link between terrorism carried out by groups like Hamas and Hizballah, which mix radical Islamist and nationalist ideologies, and the transnational, takfiri, or Salafist-jihadist groups like al-Qaeda, its regional affiliates like al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), its like-minded coconspirators like Lashkar-e-Taiba, its wannabe admirers like Jaish al-Islam in Gaza and Salafist networks in Sinai, and others. To be sure, much separates these Islamist groupings from one another. Angry online debates between al-Qaeda and the Muslim Brotherhood exposed a lot of dirty laundry within the community of violent Islamists. But the violent Islamist ideology shared by these groups defines them at least as much as the differences between the priorities they set on various targets, their focus on enemies either near or far, and the importance they do or do not attribute to a particular nationalism (e.g., Palestinian, Lebanese, Iraqi). Indeed, it is these elements of their shared ideology that enable various types of terrorist groups operating across the spectrum of violent Islamist ideology to recruit and radicalize supporters and operatives at home and, increasingly, in the West.

The rise in homegrown violent extremism (HVE) in the West marks the most dangerous evolutionary change in the Islamist terrorist threat since 9/11. Increasingly, the greatest threat to America and its allies comes not from organized terrorist groups but from their anonymous, like-minded followers -- people who have not necessarily traveled to a training camp, donated money to an institution tied to a jihadist cause, or talked on the phone with a known terrorist suspect.

It is in this arena -- countering violent extremism -- that the struggle against the scourge of terrorism will be won or lost. The outcome will not be decided on the battlefield or in the courtroom, as important as those venues are to counterterrorism. Yet sadly, countering violent extremism is the very area in which we remain most vulnerable and least prepared.

Considering that shared Islamist ideology has long been a powerful bond between terrorist groups as disparate as Hamas and al-Qaeda, our lack of preparedness on this front is hard to explain. Four years after the 9/11 attacks, for example, U.S. intelligence agencies were aware that successive losses at the hands of counterterrorism forces led al-Qaeda operatives to recruit Hamas activists into the al-Qaeda fold in order to replenish its depleted ranks. According to FBI director Robert Mueller, the bureau was concerned "about the possibility that individuals who are members of groups previously considered to be peripheral to the current threat could be convinced by more radical, external influences to take on facilitation or even worse -- an operational role -- with little or no warning." While Mueller simply highlights the "possibility" of such a situation, it is important to note that recruitment itself was actually happening. According to the FBI, "al-Qaeda commanders and officials stationed in Western countries, including the United States, have recruited operatives and volunteers to carry out reconnaissance or serve as couriers." Moreover, an FBI search warrant affidavit confirmed that the post-September 11 crackdown on al-Qaeda spurred the organization to place "renewed emphasis" on finding
"confirmed jihadist supporters in the United States by trying to enlist proven members of other groups such as Hamas to make up for the vacuum on the field."

Fast-forward to today. For all our tactical counterterrorism successes over the past ten years, strategic achievement in the field remains elusive. Despite losing safe havens, facing financial strain, and dealing with the constant pressure of losing leaders to drone and Special Forces attacks, al-Qaeda, its affiliates, and its followers remain capable of recruiting foot soldiers and executing attacks. Thus, the loss of operational leadership might translate into less capable operatives attempting simpler and smaller -- but likely more frequent -- attacks.

The threat we face is, correspondingly, more diverse geographically and ethnically than ever, emanating not only from the al-Qaeda core but from a variety of affiliates and randomly radicalized individuals inspired by the al-Qaeda message. Speaking three months after the U.S. Special Forces raid on Usama bin Laden's safe house in Abbottabad, Pakistan, President Obama stressed that al-Qaeda today is "a much weaker organization with much less capability than they had just two or three years ago." As a result, he warned, "the most likely scenario that we have to guard against right now ends up being more of a lone wolf operation than a large, well-coordinated terrorist attack."

And yet the remnants of the al-Qaeda core and its increasingly dangerous affiliates like AQAP remain intent on carrying out spectacular attacks targeting the West. Over time, some of those attempts may succeed. Consider, for example, that Faisal Shahzad's attempted Times Square bombing -- an operation tied to Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan -- was not foiled; it just failed.

Ten years after 9/11, law enforcement and intelligence agencies grapple with the challenges presented by the need to engage in robust counterradicalization efforts while protecting basic freedoms. Today, according to FBI assistant director for counterterrorism Mark Giuliano, "Thousands of extremist websites promote violence to a worldwide audience predisposed to the extremist message, and more of these websites and U.S. citizens are involved in internet radicalization." To further complicate matters, the radicalizers creating the environment that predisposes people to extremist ideology are geographically and demographically diverse. "We have seen internet radicalization in individuals as young as fourteen years old," Giuliano noted in a speech at The Washington Institute. "What makes these HVE subjects most dangerous," he explained, "is [that] they demonstrated the willingness to take overt, operational steps as well as the ability to procure the materials necessary to carry out their terrorist actions. Finally, and most importantly, they demonstrated the resolve to act."

Clearly, failing to develop a comprehensive approach to countering the ideology of Islamist extremism would have terrible consequences. Yet dealing with radicalization offers a much stiffer challenge than breaking down its component parts.
Radicalization itself lies at the intersection of grievance and ideology. However, whereas grievances are ever-present and very few individuals choose to act violently based on their grievances, ideology offers a blueprint for action that mobilizes people, for good or for bad.

Identifying radical Islamist ideology as the driver framing, motivating, and justifying Islamist-inspired extremism and terrorism must top Western governments' to-do lists for counterradicalization. In Australia, in particular, the small but growing number of nationals making contact, training, and engaging with violent extremists in the Middle East and Somalia led the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade to conclude in a classified "Red Book" briefing for then incoming Foreign Minister Kevin Rudd that "the increased terrorist involvement of Australians underscores the need to align our international approach with domestic activities, especially in the area of countering violent extremist views in at-risk communities." But even as governments come to this conclusion, developing effective programs has proven difficult because Western governments are uncomfortable challenging an ideology, especially one that asserts its claims in religious terms.

The radical narrative promulgated by Islamist ideology provides the intellectual basis for violence carried out in the name of Islam. This ideology, and not only the individuals acting based on its tenets, must be the focus of our policies and actions. Moreover, counterradicalization should not seek primarily to prevent persons already radicalized from carrying out an act of violence -- at such a point, these individuals are the clear responsibility of law enforcement and intelligence agencies. Instead, it should center on contesting radical ideologies and preventing people from being radicalized in the first place. The United States and its allies cannot simply capture and kill their way out of the terrorism problem; they must find a way to take on the extremist ideology directly. "Quite simply," State Department coordinator for counterterrorism Daniel Benjamin concluded, "we need to do a better job to reduce the recruitment of terrorists."

Counterradicalization involves two equal parts: addressing local grievances through efforts to integrate immigrant communities and contesting radical ideologies. And both integration and counterterrorism efforts have been largely successful, with ideas abounding on how to further improve their effectiveness. But the binary notions of community engagement and sharp-end-of-the-spear counterterrorism elicit confusion on the bureaucratic level. Agencies tasked with engagement focus exclusively on integration efforts and devote little attention to contesting the extremist narrative, while security agencies concentrate on preventing the next attack. Countering extremist ideology ends up falling into the gap between these two poles.

For example, a key criticism of Britain's "Prevent" counterterrorism strategy involved its failure to recognize the importance of ideology in the radicalization process, as evidenced by government partnerships with nonviolent Islamist organizations. Though many of these groups reject violence against the UK itself, they are either silent about or supportive of attacks against Israel or coalition troops in Iraq. Counterradicalization efforts cannot be effective when partnerships include those who explicitly reject liberal values and fail to reject violence against civilians of any nationality.
The consequences of failure are not limited to domestic security. As governments around the world consider how to react to the uprisings across the Middle East, they would do well to reread British prime minister David Cameron’s February 5, 2011, speech at the Munich Security Conference. Cameron cautioned that while Islam is not the problem, Islamist extremist ideology is. As one moves along the spectrum of Islamist ideology, one will encounter both violent and nonviolent extremists. Both, Cameron stressed, are cause for concern. "As evidence emerges about the backgrounds of those convicted of terrorist offences," Cameron explained, "it is clear that many of them were initially influenced by what some have called 'nonviolent extremists' and then took those radical beliefs to the next level by embracing violence."

In March of this year, the Washington Post quoted an anonymous U.S. government official on the idea of reaching out to Islamist groups in the context of the "Jasmine revolutions" or Arab Spring. The official said, "If our policy can’t distinguish between al-Qaeda and the Muslim Brotherhood we won’t be able to adapt to this change. In reality, however, to adapt to the present changes and be on the right side of history, the United States and its allies must seriously consider the appropriate threshold for partnering with the West and participating in the democratic system. Failure to do so has already led to the establishment of governments led by Hamas in Gaza and Hizballah in Lebanon. Being less than al-Qaeda should not suffice. Tolerance, respect for women's rights, establishment of a strong civil society that promotes liberal values, and honoring international agreements and borders are more likely to produce the type of truly free and democratic societies that promote long-term stability. Looking around the region today, it is clear we have a long road ahead of us.

After 9/11, the obvious counterterrorism priority was to stop the next attack. And while there is no such thing as 100 percent success, we have truly remarkable tactical counterterrorism systems in place today to do just that. But ten years on, it is clear tactical counterterrorism is absolutely necessary but not enough. The good news is that it is well within our collective capabilities to counter violent extremist ideologies. The challenge will be to complement our tactical innovations and successes with similarly creative and determined strategic counterterrorism efforts targeting the radical Islamist ideology that, absent a concerted effort, will continue to draw new recruits to al-Qaeda and its ilk.