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Alternatives to War Presentation
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Good afternoon and thank you for having me. So we're here, talking about the need to foster peace in the world. And we're also living in a time where most people in the United States under the age of 25 do not remember a time when the U.S. was not at war.

Following the attacks of September 11, 2001, the United States responded with military force. It invoked a set of extraordinary powers reserved for the extraordinary circumstances of war. Throughout the years that followed, the so-called "Global War on Terror" was used to justify multiple ground wars, drone strikes outside of war zones, military detention, torture masked as "enhanced interrogation techniques," and other lethal operations, all intended to rid the world of terrorism and keep America safe.

More than two decades later, the United States remains engaged in war with non-state groups in at least four countries: Iraq, Somalia, Syria, and Yemen. Since 2005, the U.S. has also been engaged in a program involving training and arming foreign forces and employing foreign surrogate forces to target non-state groups deemed to pose a terrorist threat. Between 2021 and 2023, the United States was engaged in military operations in the name of counterterrorism in 78 countries.

What has become increasingly clear is that this war-based, militarized response is neither successful nor sustainable. Between 2001 and 2018, "the number of terrorist attacks worldwide per year ... increased fivefold." From 2001 to 2015, "the number of terror attacks rose an astonishing 1,900 percent in the seven countries that the United States either invaded or conducted air strikes in." And In 2020, there were at least 1,000 attacks, massacres, and other violent incidents linked to non-state armed groups across Burkina Faso,

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Mali, and Niger—a sevenfold increase since 2017, when all three countries entered a U.S.-supported joint force to combat terrorism.

On top of this, the post-9/11 wars have resulted in the deaths of approximately 940,000 people, including approximately 432,000 primarily Muslim, Black, and brown civilians.

Shortly after the horrific Hamas attacks in Israel on October 7, President Biden drew a parallel to the attacks of September 11, 2001, in the United States. Remarking that in the aftermath of 9/11, “we felt enraged.” President Biden admitted that “we made mistakes.” Yet America’s response to 9/11 serves as not just a cautionary tale to other nations. It must also cause the United States itself to reflect on the lessons of the war-based, military-first approach to counterterrorism and turn the page on this damaging course.

The effort to prevent and respond to national security threats should not be seen as a choice between continuing war and doing nothing. Rather, the United States has a robust array of effective non-military tools to address these concerns, many of which are underappreciated, underutilized, and underresourced.

And I’m going to talk about three buckets of these tools today, which are 1) diplomacy; 2) peacebuilding; and 3) law enforcement, intelligence gathering, and restorative justice.

1. Diplomacy

So first, diplomacy. Elevating diplomacy as an intrinsic component of addressing international terrorism is critical to building an effective and sustainable approach to this complex issue. And don’t just take it from me! Upon taking office, President Biden called diplomacy “the grounding wire of our ... global power” and “America’s abiding advantage.” And Luke Hartig, former senior director for Counterterrorism at the National Security Council said that properly utilizing the power of diplomacy would “make counterterrorism more comprehensive and sustainable, and over time, less violent.”

Key to centering diplomacy within U.S. efforts to prevent and respond to international terrorism is ensuring that the State Department has sufficient

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experts on hand with the requisite expertise for such efforts and ensuring those experts are sent into the field when needed.

Research has found that the increase in transnational violent groups is primarily caused when states “have failed their citizens in one way or another, whether through marginalization, corruption, discrimination, or abuse.” Violent groups offer an alternative to those mistreated and victimized by their governments.

And unsurprisingly, responding with military force has been notoriously counterproductive. It has perpetuated cycles of violence and entrenched corruption. For example, since 2000 the United States has spent more than \$2 billion providing security assistance, weapons, and training to Nigerian forces, who have “not only failed to defeat militants but routinely commit grave human rights abuses in the name of counterterrorism.”

Another element of centering diplomacy in the response to international terrorism is using U.S. diplomatic leverage to help facilitate negotiated settlements to wars with non-state armed groups and assist with the implementation of peace agreements to ensure their long-term sustainability.

43 percent of conflicts with non-state groups have ended via “a peaceful political accommodation with their government.” By comparison, 7 percent of these conflicts have concluded as the result of military force.

The U.S. is currently using the most military force abroad against al Shabab in Somalia. Yet experts on the conflict say that al Shabab cannot be defeated through purely military means. Rather than prioritizing the use of force in the conflict, we need to use U.S. leverage to help facilitate a negotiated settlement between the warring parties. We need to deploy people who are experts on the country, are experts on the region, and who are experts on the negotiation and implementation of peace agreements. We need to invest in this expertise because this is the critical work needed to bring about peace. We need to stop looking to the military for solutions that will never come.

2. Peacebuilding

Next, I’m going to discuss peacebuilding.

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In the counterterrorism context, this means preventing and responding to the spread of violent non-state groups via programs that address the underlying causes of violence. These underlying causes include extreme inequality, oppression, marginalization, corruption, and resource scarcity.

These peacebuilding programs work to both prevent and resolve violent conflict through non-violent means. They work to break cycles of violence by supporting local programs that strengthen conflict resolution, change the relationships between parties to conflicts, and build community cohesion, while working to strengthen the rule of law institutionally.

And in keeping with the old adage of “prevention is better than cure,” peacebuilding programs to prevent and resolve violent conflict have proven to be extremely cost effective. The Institute for Economics and Peace found that every dollar invested in peacebuilding can save up to \$16 in the cost of war, which often requires substantial humanitarian aid and other costly endeavors.

The United States supports local initiatives and those carried out by international non-governmental organizations through funding key programs administered by the State Department and U.S. Agency for Development Aid (USAID). An example of these programs is when the U.S. leveraged USAID’s Complex Crises Fund when violence broke out between Christian and Muslim communities in the Central African Republic. With these funds, local peacebuilders were about to train a diverse cohort of 391 community leaders in mediation, conflict analysis, and conflict resolution as part of an 18-month program. At the end of the program, there was a 178 percent increase in the number of people who trusted the “other” group within their community and 220 fighters led by 10 separate commanders voluntarily disarmed.

Now, to compare this to the military response, we can look to how the U.S. has engaged with Burkina Faso in West Africa. So, Burkina Faso was considered to be fairly stable, and had experienced only “relatively low levels of terrorism” when the United States began providing training and equipping government forces to respond to terrorism with lethal force in 2009. This significantly contributed to the “overly militarized and violent counterterrorism response” in the country, cost U.S. taxpayers more than \$1

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billion, and intensified the conflict, and laid the groundwork for a military coup in 2022.

Instead, we need to support these peacebuilding programs, which are far more effective and significantly less costly. And the U.S. Congress can help do this by providing more funding for key peacebuilding funds. These include the Complex Crises Fund that I already mentioned, which enables rapid response funding by USAID where early warning signs of escalating conflict arise, the State Department's atrocities prevention programs, and USAID's reconciliation programs, which support the peaceful coexistence of different ethnic, religious, and political groups in conflict-affected communities.

Investment in these programs is essential to bring stability to the countries and communities ravaged by decades of militarized counterterrorism.

3. Law enforcement, intelligence gathering, and restorative justice

Finally, the third bucket of non-military tools that I want to discuss is law enforcement, intelligence gathering, and restorative justice.

Moving away from a war paradigm and getting back to a baseline of peace, underpinned by international human rights law is something that was discussed regularly as an important and achievable goal during the Obama administration.

In 2012, then-Obama administration Defense Department General Counsel Jeh Johnson spoke of a "tipping point," at which the armed conflict paradigm for responding to international terrorism would end and the "law enforcement and intelligence resources of our government [would be] principally responsible ... to address continuing and imminent terrorist threats."

Johnson said: "War should be regarded as a finite, extraordinary, and unnatural state of affairs." After more than two decades of a harmful and unsuccessful war-based strategy, Johnson's tipping point has unquestionably arrived.

But it's also worth knowing that in addition to the militarized counterterrorism that has characterized the post-9/11 period, the United States has, in tandem, continued to successfully respond to international terrorism threats via the

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law enforcement approach, undergirded by human rights law and due process.

Studies have shown that a law approach “has been responsible for the demise of 40 percent of groups who commit terror attacks.” And the Obama administration acknowledged that “the best way to ensure that a terrorism suspect can be brought to justice in the long term is often through prosecution in the criminal justice system.”

Throughout the so-called “War on Terror,” prosecutions for international terrorism offenses have proven extremely effective at obtaining both convictions and actionable intelligence. At least 113 international terrorism suspects have been captured abroad and convicted in U.S. federal courts, including many high-profile individuals.

These include Osama bin Laden’s son-in-law, Sulaiman Abu Ghaith, who was captured in Turkey; Ahmed Abdulkadir Warsame, who served as a liaison between al Shabab and al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula and was captured in the Gulf of Aden between Somalia and Yemen; and Ahmed Abu Khattala, who captured in Libya and convicted of crimes related to the 2012 U.S. embassy attacks in Benghazi.

I do want to note that terrorism prosecutions have raised human rights concerns, in particular concerning due process violations and conditions of confinement. We need to work to rectify these issues while we also work to move away from a wartime frame and from lethally targeting members of non-state armed groups as a matter of first resort.

When we look at the systematic targeted killing of terrorism suspects—including many high-profile individuals, in a practice known as “leadership decapitation”—the evidence shows that this has failed to dismantle violent extremist groups. Instead, between 2001 and 2018 the number of Sunni Islamist-inspired fighters grew by 270 percent.

Part of this growth was due to the considerable number of civilian casualties caused by U.S. military operations, including drone strikes, which groups like ISIS and al Qaeda have exploited to bolster their recruitment efforts. U.S. strikes have also involved incidents where innocent individuals were

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mistakenly targeted, such as the tragic 2021 strike in Kabul that killed 10 civilians, including seven children, after an aid worker was misidentified as an ISIS fighter.

Finally, as part of the effort to move off a wartime frame for responding to international terrorism and toward one that is centered in peace, the United States should do more to support the rule of law, access to justice, and restorative justice in countries experiencing violence and war.

Such practices help reduce the grievances that drive affiliation with non-state armed groups and the choice to use terrorism as a tactic, while working to heal impacted societies and reintegrate former fighters back into their communities.

Key tools for supporting these efforts include increasing support for hybrid courts, such as the Central African Republic Special Criminal Court, which provides justice at a local level with the engagement and support of international actors.

It is long past time to move away from the strategy of killing suspected terrorists abroad and shift to a baseline of peace, providing due process through the courts to terrorism suspects, which is grounded in international human rights law.

Conclusion

So, I've just discussed three critical buckets of non-military tools for preventing and responding to national security threats that don't involve the use of military force.

These solutions lack the simplicity of war. They are complicated, they are nuanced, they are multifaceted, and they are interconnected. But they are effective. And investing in them and promoting them is what is needed to turn the page away from war and toward peace. Thank you.