



U.S.-Arab Counterterrorism Cooperation in a Region Ripe for Extremism

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SUMMARY

U.S. cooperation with Arab allies against terrorist groups is essential—and also problematic. Many Arab governments are fueling the very extremism they purport to fight and looking for cover from the United States for increasingly repressive policies. Washington needs a holistic counterterrorism strategy that ensures its Arab allies do not use U.S. assistance to perpetuate terrorism and that supports those in Arab societies best able to combat radicalization.

Recommendations for the U.S. Government

- **Initiate broad discussions with partners at every level, across agencies, about extremism's roots.** Every organ of the U.S. government that interacts with Arab partners—particularly defense and intelligence agencies—should engage in sustained discussions about a holistic approach to national security that includes human development, economic opportunity, and individual freedoms as critical tools against radicalization.
- **Push for a repeal or revision of antiterrorism laws that target peaceful dissidents and civil society.** U.S. agencies that interact with Arab security forces and judiciaries should be wary about how new terrorism laws in Egypt, Jordan, and the Gulf states can and are being used against political dissidents. U.S. diplomats should push for laws that target the unlawful use of violence rather than nonviolent opposition to the state.
- **Use security cooperation and assistance as tools to promote political and economic reform.** The United States should press for institutional reforms to tackle terrorism's real roots. This requires thinking creatively about ways to leverage defense relationships to promote reform, through key leader engagement, bilateral exchanges, and, where appropriate, conditionality on arms transfers.
- **Reinvigorate civil society assistance.** Washington should rethink and reinvigorate its support for youth, women, and civic groups that can spread the values of tolerance and pluralism to combat radicals' appeal.
- **Avoid an excessive focus on religion-based programs.** The United States should be mindful of the limits of religion-based counterradicalization programs advanced by state-sponsored clerics in Egypt and the Gulf who lack credibility among at-risk youth.

TURNING A BLIND EYE TO BAD POLICIES

U.S. officials are focused at present on military action to eliminate the threat from the militant Islamic State, an effort in which the cooperation of regional allies is essential. But it is equally critical that the United States avoid certain pitfalls when cooperating with Arab allies.

The failure of the 2011 uprisings to put affected Arab countries on a sound path toward more dynamic economies, polities, and societies—with the exception of the still-hopeful transition in Tunisia—has left the region open to militant groups ready to exploit unresolved grievances, including sectarian discrimination, unemployment, corruption, and human rights abuses. Governments have lost control of much of their territory in some countries (Iraq, Libya, and Syria), while in others, such as Egypt and the Gulf states, they have become increasingly repressive in an attempt to hold onto power through coercion rather than consent.

A problem that has already received well-deserved attention is that regional powers, including some Arab states, Iran, and Turkey, have at times supported terrorist groups in their attempts to steer outcomes in Syria and elsewhere, as well as in their power struggles with each other.

Just as important is that the United States and some of its main Arab allies differ significantly in their definitions of terrorism and how to combat it. Nowhere is this more evident than in the attempt by Egypt and Gulf Arab states to portray mainstream Islamist political movements such as the Muslim Brotherhood as terrorists, a definition that the United States does not accept. These countries have adopted, or are now considering, harsh new laws that not only criminalize free expression, free

association, and peaceful protest but in some cases actually define such activities as terrorism. Such measures are aimed not only at Islamists but also at many other critics including secularists and members of religious sects.

The resulting political repression and human rights abuses on a massive scale in Egypt, and on a smaller scale in Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), are antithetical to American values and threaten to push more recruits into the jihadists' ranks while alienating wide swaths of the population. Such an approach is likely to increase the problem of terrorism in Arab countries rather than reduce it, and perceived U.S. support for repression will increase public antipathy to the United States.

Meanwhile, Washington has focused on bolstering the technical and bureaucratic capabilities of Arab counterterrorism forces. But too close a reliance on local partners could not only further destabilize the region but also threaten U.S. interests. This approach leaves the United States with little oversight and control over how and against whom these capabilities are employed. And increasingly, this loss of leverage is not just confined to the domestic conduct of these Arab regimes. Some Arab partners are using U.S.-supplied capabilities to conduct an aggressive foreign policy under the guise of counterterrorism with scant regard for U.S. input.

The United States and its Western allies need to play the long game while dealing with the current crisis. Counterterrorism is much broader than military action. And it need not involve using repressive policies to crack down on forces calling for pluralistic governance, rule of law, transparency, and respect for human rights—the primary ways to enfranchise populations and combat radicalization.

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A narrow strategy of supporting repressive and exclusive regimes and relying on local counterterrorism forces and regime-affiliated religious institutions will simply fuel the very extremism the United States seeks to fight. In a volatile region with an enormous youth bulge, this is not an over-the-horizon problem but one that poses risks now and will continue to do so for the next several years.

A HOLISTIC U.S. APPROACH TO COUNTERTERRORISM

The United States should pursue a comprehensive counterterrorism strategy that includes persuading Arab regimes to tackle the root causes of radicalization—and at a bare minimum to stop feeding it.

Washington should make clear that it is not adopting a definition of terrorism that includes the political rivals of Arab governments, and it should tie security assistance to steps by those governments to address the political and economic grievances that are feeding radicalization. It needs to move beyond a state-centric focus to include direct support to societal actors—not government-backed religious institutions—capable of undermining the radicals' narratives. And perhaps most importantly, Washington needs to avoid being drawn into the region's increasingly polarized conflicts, where its Arab allies have used U.S. counterterrorism assistance for self-serving political ends that will ultimately perpetuate the terrorism problem.

There are specific steps the United States should take in order to ensure that cooperation with Arab governments against terrorism does not undermine the goal of destroying terrorist groups in the region.

GUIDING PRINCIPLES

Insist on discussing broad strategies against extremism. U.S. defense officials and diplomats should engage in sustained private conversations with Arab allies about the political, economic, legal, and security steps those governments are taking to address the causes of extremism. U.S. officials should make clear, privately as well as publicly, when they believe such steps are either inadequate or misguided—as in the case of cracking down on peaceful expression and political activity by Islamists or non-Islamists under the guise of counterterrorism.

Multiple U.S. agencies should take part in this effort, although the U.S. Defense Department and particularly the U.S. Special Operations Command (USSOCOM) should play a central role because of their extensive counterterrorism responsibilities. Every Department of Defense activity with Arab partners—whether training exercises, key leader engagement, security assistance, or bilateral exchanges—should be informed by linking political reform to a holistic definition of counterterrorism.

Increase scrutiny over assistance that the State Department and the Central Intelligence Agency provide to Arab intelligence services and Ministry of Interior forces. Much of the U.S. counterterrorism effort in the Arab world hinges on bilateral cooperation with Arab intelligence and security services. Leveraging their local access to and infiltration of terrorist networks, these services provide crucial intelligence that enables U.S. counterterrorism operations.

But the same services also collaborate in the repressive government policies that have spawned extremism. They may seek to steer counterterrorism cooperation with the United States against political Islamists

or other oppositionists that Washington does not classify as terrorists. Similarly, some of these intelligence services are trying to use radical al-Qaeda-affiliated clerics as counterweights to the Islamic State—which is akin to fighting fire with fire.

With this in mind, the U.S. intelligence community needs to be cognizant of the ways in which partners can play a double game that could eventually backfire. U.S. agencies should increase efforts to develop unilateral intelligence channels to avoid an excessive reliance on host-nation services.

Reinvigorate civil society assistance. In an era in which citizens and nonstate actors are gaining power while governments are weakening, civil society organizations have greater potential than in the past to advocate for values such as pluralism, rule of law, and respect for human rights with Arab societies as well as governments. U.S. officials have incorrectly interpreted government crackdowns to mean that foreign funding to such groups was a failure, when exactly the opposite was true. Governments targeted nongovernmental organizations because they were successfully mobilizing people, particularly the youth, to take part in activities such as journalism, electoral politics, and watchdogging government. The United States should rethink its methods and reinvigorate support for these groups, including those with significant involvement from youth or women, which can make a critical difference in resisting radicalization and the repression that fuels it.

Push back against repression of nongovernmental organizations. The United States should make unambiguous its objections to the increasingly harsh laws, extralegal practices, and intimidation used against civil society organizations that

support human or civil rights, particularly in the Gulf states and Egypt. While this may not be enough to stop such government practices altogether, it may curb some excesses and will signal to Arab publics where the United States stands on these issues.

Do not rely primarily on religion-based counterradicalization programs. Several Arab states have offered counterideology and deradicalization programs as a centerpiece of their contribution to the fight against the Islamic State, while semi-independent clerics have sought to demonize the group. While these initiatives can be useful, they have limitations and drawbacks. Religion-based programs often focus on elements of radicals' discourse that target Arab regimes while leaving in place more intolerant, sectarian, and anti-American aspects. And because many of the clerics delivering these messages are funded by Arab regimes, they lack legitimacy in the eyes of at-risk audiences.

Washington should support these types of initiatives—but cautiously. The United States should not allow regimes to use such programs as a pretext for avoiding more substantive political and economic reforms. It should insist that these programs be accompanied by reforms that address the root causes of radicalization.

COUNTRY-SPECIFIC STEPS

The Gulf States

Push for revision of antiterrorism laws in the UAE and Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia and the UAE have enacted sweeping antiterrorism regulations that have been heralded by some in Washington as a much-needed step to combat the Islamic State. In practice, however, the definition of terrorism embodied in these codes encompasses nearly every form of peaceful political and intellectual activism. It is geared specifically

toward criminalizing Gulf branches of the Muslim Brotherhood.

Given that the broad enforcement of these laws could radicalize the disenfranchised, the United States needs to make their revision a centerpiece of its diplomatic push. While securing these countries' assistance against the Islamic State is important, Washington should communicate that draconian judicial measures and long-term incarceration of political Islamists will breed new generations of more violent radicals.

Leverage U.S. security cooperation and security assistance activities in the Gulf to promote reform. To stave off potential radicalization, the United States needs to ensure that its counterterrorism cooperation with the Gulf does not eclipse its reform agenda. In an era of robust Gulf repression and securitization, Washington will need to think more imaginatively about ways to promote change. The United States has well-established defense relationships with all the Gulf states that can be better leveraged to advance meaningful reform—both in the security sector and in the political and economic realms.

Not all traditional areas of Defense Department engagement—including training, joint exercises, arms sales, and senior leader diplomacy—are appropriate for delivering a pro-reform message. But the United States should look for fresh ways to reconfigure International Military Education and Training (IMET) programs to adopt a holistic view of counterterrorism that emphasizes the rule of law, transparency, and pluralistic governance as pillars of national security.

There may also be instances in which the United States can condition the transfer of certain military items on specific regime steps toward reform. This must include setting key benchmarks for reform and clearly

communicating them to governments.

Beyond these measures, the United States can use multilateral Gulf initiatives like the State Department's Security Cooperation Forums and the Defense Department's ministerial forums to make internal political reform a topic of discussion among participating foreign and defense ministers, respectively.

Encourage far-reaching legislative, judicial, and security-sector reforms in Bahrain.

Among the Gulf states, Bahrain has long been the most problematic for the United States because of the presence of the U.S. Navy's Fifth Fleet in the country and significant ongoing dissent from the Shia majority.

In 2011, the Pearl Roundabout uprising shook the tiny island state, raising the possibility that the ruling al-Khalifa family might make meaningful reforms. But the regime has skillfully dodged such change and arrested activists, all while taking actions that stir up sectarian tensions. As a result, a new, more radical opposition strain has begun using increasingly violent tactics against security forces.

Manama has signed on as a counterterrorism partner against the Islamic State. But the danger is that Bahrain's participation will blind the United States and its Western allies to the reform stagnation on the domestic front that will very likely foster increased radicalization among disaffected Shia youth. Such dynamics could lead to a new terrorist threat directed specifically against the Fifth Fleet and U.S. interests. The United States needs to ensure that its cooperation with Manama does not distract it from pushing for much-needed change that could mitigate this growing threat.

Washington should remain focused on pushing the Bahraini regime, particularly its more pragmatic and liberal factions, toward

substantial reform. Crucial areas include the election of a parliament with greater oversight and legislative authorities, judicial improvements, and the integration of Shia into the security forces. Corruption, housing and land shortages, and a lack of government transparency are other key drivers of dissent. Although the U.S. State Department should take the lead on these interactions, the Department of Defense can reinforce these messages through senior-level engagement with Bahraini defense officials. Easing up on these areas to secure Bahrain's participation in current counterterrorism efforts would mean trading a fight against the near-term threat of Sunni extremism with the potential for a longer-term threat of Shia extremism.

Iraq

Help Iraq build an army and security forces that are inclusive, representative of different sects, respectful of human rights, and controlled by elected authorities. Iraq is a

pivotal frontline country in the fight against the Islamic State, and its battered army and security forces are considered crucial partners in stemming the advance of the terrorist group and restoring effective governance in the country. But the United States needs to ensure that its efforts to help build up the Iraqi state do not sow the seeds for future radicalization by creating judicial and enforcement capabilities that will be used to stifle political oppositionists.

Security sector capacity building and technical assistance that is not accompanied by effective political oversight and good governance is profoundly destabilizing—and is highly conducive to radicalization. Under the U.S. occupation and especially after the withdrawal of U.S. troops at the end of 2011, the Iraqi Security Forces became effectively “captured” by the then prime minister, Nouri

al-Maliki, and his inner circle who purged the country's senior leadership of effective Sunni leaders and turned elite units into private militias. Maliki also used the forces that the United States helped build up to arrest a wide array of Sunni political actors, labeling them “terrorists” under a repressive antiterrorism law.

The United States must help Iraq establish effective mechanisms of political oversight to ensure that such repression and nepotism is not repeated. U.S. advisers from the Department of Defense working with the reconstituted Iraqi army should demand that the force's officer ranks be broadly representative of various sects. Similarly, U.S. diplomats and military personnel should scrutinize the Ministry of Interior to ensure that it does not facilitate excesses by Shia-dominated militias. The plan for integrating Sunni tribal militias into a national guard must proceed with a clear understanding of the guard's command relationship with the regular army and civilian oversight at both the national and provincial levels.

Jordan

Cooperate on intelligence but push for broader economic and political reforms.

Some observers have championed the Jordanian intelligence service as a vital frontline partner in the U.S. war on the Islamic State. Washington does indeed need Jordan's assistance: the Jordanian intelligence service has extensive knowledge of the Islamic State and played a prominent role in the 2005–2007 Sunni Awakening against the group's progenitor—al-Qaeda in Iraq. But the United States also needs to ensure that its entire bilateral relationship with Amman does not become captured by the counterterrorism imperative.

Future cooperation with the Jordanians is fraught with risks. Like the Saudis and the Emiratis, the Jordanians have arrested Brotherhood leaders under an antiterrorism judicial framework. Jordan's intelligence service has also taken the surprising step of releasing from prison al-Qaeda-affiliated, Salafi-jihadi clerics, such as Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi and Abu Qatada al-Filistini, who it believes can be controlled and used to dissuade young Jordanians from joining the Islamic State. Meanwhile, Jordanian interrogators who are effective in prying secrets from al-Qaeda suspects have also contracted themselves to the Bahraini security forces, and in that work they have earned a reputation for ruthlessness by imprisoned democracy activists. Finally, it should be remembered that the Jordanians had an indirect hand in the genesis of the Islamic State: draconian prison conditions in Jordan radicalized Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, who went on to become the leader of al-Qaeda in Iraq.

Washington needs to devote the same amount of attention it pays to intelligence cooperation to pushing for substantive political reforms beyond the economic fixes, such as subsidy reform, that the king has put forward as evidence of progress. These additional steps include reforming the electoral law to replace the single nontransferable vote system with one that encourages parties and carrying out the king's promise of allowing an elected cabinet and a prime minister.

Egypt

Limit security assistance to press the Egyptian government to stop fueling radicalization inside Egypt. Egypt has a serious problem of terrorism carried out by small jihadist groups, such as the Sinai-based Ansar Beit al-Maqdis, that appear to be

unconnected to the Muslim Brotherhood. But President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi has overseen a massive campaign of killing, arrest, delegitimation, and public demonization of the Brotherhood of deposed president Mohamed Morsi since July 2013. This struggle not only undermines the economic recovery the country needs desperately but also fuels extremism in Egypt as well as neighboring areas, such as Libya and Gaza. The United States should press Sisi to reverse course, and in particular to end the unprecedented human rights abuses associated with the crackdown. Until this happens, the United States should keep security assistance to a bare minimum.

Condition terrorism assistance on viable strategies. The United States should insist, as a condition for providing counterterrorism weapons and assistance, that the Egyptian government adopt a strategy to address the chronic economic and political problems that have disenfranchised the population of the Sinai, as well as other marginalized areas, such as the Western Desert and parts of Upper Egypt. The fight will be unending if the government continues to rely primarily on counterinsurgency tactics in the Sinai instead of more sustainable development, infrastructural, and political strategies. In addition, the United States should explore thoroughly whether weapons such as Apache helicopters and Hellfire missiles have been used for collective punishment in the Sinai, and if so, it should withhold such weapons until Egypt discontinues such tactics.

Devote a much larger share of overall U.S. assistance to higher and vocational education scholarships and support for civil society. The United States should support vigorously the rights of Egyptian

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organizations that promote human rights, rule of law, and citizenship—exactly the values that can counter extremism but are under intense pressure from Sisi's government. In order to support Egypt's disillusioned and disenfranchised youth, scholarships for private university or vocational education will be far more promising avenues than official religious institutions, such as al-Azhar and Dar al-Ifta, which are seen as government mouthpieces and enjoy little credibility among those vulnerable to extremist recruitment.

Libya

Withhold any U.S. military assistance to the Libyan army or counterterrorism assistance until a new unity government is in place.

The United States should use such assistance as leverage to help bring about a broad-based political reconciliation in which the factions agree upon a new defense structure and lines of authority. As of October 2014, the internationally recognized Libyan parliament based in Tobruk and the cabinet in nearby Bayda are attempting to solicit outside counterterrorism assistance to defeat a Tripoli-based coalition of rivals drawn from Misrata, Islamist factions, Imazighen (Berbers), and western towns that has declared its own parliament and occupies government ministries.

There is no doubt that Libya faces a violent jihadist threat in the form of the U.S.-designated terrorist group Ansar al-Sharia in the east. And there are recent indications that Islamic State sympathizers have taken root in the eastern city of Derna. But hardline elements in the Tobruk-based parliament and the Bayda-based cabinet, and their supporters in Cairo and Abu Dhabi, have conflated this radical fringe with more mainstream political Islamists like the Brotherhood. Washington needs to avoid falling into this trap.

Much U.S. military assistance to Libya is framed as a capacity-building effort under the terms of U.S. President Barack Obama's recently unveiled counterterrorism strategy, which relies heavily on training and mentoring local special operations forces. But undertaking such an effort amid Libya's fractured politics could risk exacerbating its civil war by causing Libya's mainstream Islamist factions to become more militant in the face of a crackdown supported by outside powers.

The United States should pause training the Libyan military and counterterrorism forces until a national reconciliation is enacted and a unified government is in place. It should work toward creating security forces that are representative of all of Libya's tribes and regions, and it should ensure that these forces are placed under the close control of an inclusive, civilian, and elected government with broad national representation.

THE LONG VIEW

Washington needs to work collaboratively and cooperatively with its Arab allies to face the imminent threat from the Islamic State. But it needs to do so with attentiveness to the broader domestic trends inside Arab states that are not fostering the sort of durable social and political peace required to defeat the radicals' narrative once and for all.

The United States should pursue holistic measures that emphasize political reform and civil society assistance as fundamental pillars. It must also be more sensitive to the limits and drawbacks of Arab assistance on the counterterrorism front, as well as the ways in which U.S. technical assistance can be used for political ends that not only run contrary to American values but could inflame the very terrorist problem Washington is trying to combat. **C**