



Don't let hawks exploit terrorism fears

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In the wake of the Paris and San Bernardino attacks, polls show surging public support for a more aggressive response to the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). Yet while the current concern about terrorism is understandable, it would be a tragic mistake to let the hawks hijack the public's emotional response in the service of misguided policies. Calls for carpet bombing and immigration bans may be satisfying in the short run, but giving in to fleeting fears will only make us sorry in the long run.

A recent CNN/ORC poll found that 68% now believe that the Obama administration has not been aggressive enough, and that for the first time a majority of Americans supports the use of ground troops to fight ISIS. And as Tuesday's debate demonstrated, Republican candidates looking to score easy political points are happy to stoke the public's fears reflected in such views, and to propose hasty, ill-considered, and un-American responses.

Indeed, upset with President Barack Obama's halfhearted campaign against ISIS to date, and fueled by public frustration over recent attacks, the hawks' calls for more aggressive efforts have grown more intense.

Take Ted Cruz, who reaffirmed his plan to "carpet bomb where ISIS is..." This after having earlier told a crowd in Iowa that "We will carpet-bomb them into oblivion. I don't know if sand can glow in the dark, but we're going to find out!" Not to be outdone, Donald Trump argued that the United States should begin "going after the families of terrorists" in order to deter ISIS. Even Ben Carson shrugged off his evangelical reputation to reassure the audience that he would be ready to order the use of military force that would lead to the deaths of innocent people.

The trouble is that indulging the knee-jerk response to strike harder at ISIS in Syria and Iraq risks getting us bogged down in not one, but two nation-building projects in the region. The United States has already spent 12 years in Iraq and 14 in Afghanistan, along with trillions of dollars and thousands of American lives, without much to show for its efforts.

The reality is that an expanded bombing campaign and a few thousand more ground troops aren't going to be enough to dislodge ISIS from the territory it holds. And once we go back in, we not only ensure greater costs and more casualties, we also risk letting our desire to "win" drag us back down the slippery slope to a full-on war and occupation, this time complicated enormously by the presence of Russian and Iranian forces.

In fact, perversely, an expanded U.S. military campaign will very likely lead to more terrorism, not less. Lost in the emotional response to ISIS's gruesome tactics is the simple fact, first noted by the bipartisan 9/11 commission, that Islamist terrorists are not attacking the United States because they hate our freedoms or way of life, but in response to U.S. foreign policy and intervention in the Middle East. In Paris at the Bataclan concert hall, the attackers yelled "This is for Syria" as they opened fire.

Moreover, it is crucial to remember that ISIS emerged from the chaos of the Iraq War in the first place, when Islamist emotions were running hot against the American intervention. The United States, like France, can expect continued payback for intervention in what is a transnational Middle Eastern civil war. Expanding U.S. involvement will only increase the incentive for ISIL - another term for ISIS -- to strike American targets.

A hasty response to terrorism fears also portends problems on the home front as hawks offer to secure the homeland by shredding the Constitution. Trump has been the worst (though not only) offender, promising to send back Syrian refugees, calling for a ban on Muslims from other countries trying to enter to the United States, at one point appearing to back the creation of a database of Muslims in the United States, and arguing for bringing back waterboarding. In Tuesday's debate, meanwhile, Carson repeated his calls for monitoring "any place -- I don't care whether it's a mosque, a school, a supermarket, a theater, you know it doesn't matter." And while neither Trump's nor Carson's outrageous proposals don't yet have majority support, they do have majority support among Republicans, giving fearmongers incentive to repeat them.

Lest we imagine that such outrageous proposals could never become reality, we only have to remember the passage of the Patriot Act and the countless violations of civil liberties condoned after 9/11 in the name of security.

Beyond the danger they pose to civil liberties, these extreme proposals have also inflamed anti-Muslim sentiment here in the U.S., spawning ugly incidents of discrimination and violence against American Muslims. Such rhetoric and actions not only abandon our shared history as a nation of immigrants and our values of religious and ethnic tolerance, they also risk spawning longer-term social conflict by encouraging American Muslims to identify as Muslims, rather than as Americans, and to become angry with how they are treated by society at large.

After 9/11, Americans eventually realized that actions taken in the heat of the moment -- like the Patriot Act or the invasion of Iraq -- are very often actions that create lasting damage that cannot be easily undone. Like then, the public's current fears about terrorism will inevitably recede with time. We cannot let the hawks use public fear to rush us into overreacting to ISIS.

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