Middle East Insights

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Countering Political Violence:
Give the Disaffected a Stake in Society

By James M. Dorsey

European, North African and Middle Eastern nations have responded to recent attacks in France, Tunisia and Kuwait with lofty condemnations of violent extremism and kneejerk security measures that in isolation are unlikely to solve what has become a festering problem. To reduce feeding grounds for radicalization, governments will have to embed stepped-up security measures in policies that ensure that disaffected youth gain a stake in society.

That realization was evident in fears expressed by European officials that recruitment efforts by the Islamic State in fertile Bosnia Herzegovina, seemingly mired in a permanently toxic mix of economic malaise and ethnic tension, would make them regret having failed to tackle the country's structural problems in the two decades since the end of the Yugoslav wars.

In fact, the regret could apply to any number of failures to tackle root problems that have prompted lone wolves to strike fear in major European cities, at tourist attractions in North Africa, and in Shiite mosques in the Gulf; persuaded thousands of Europeans, Arabs and others to join the Islamic State as foreign fighters; and tens of thousands to seek refuge in Europe from civil war, brutal repression, and economic despair.

Across the board, democracies and autocracies alike are experiencing the blowback of decades of Band-Aid solutions, policies that failed to give youth prospects for a future that would guarantee them a stake in society, as well as repression largely unchallenged by Western governments that pay lip service to adherence to political pluralism, inclusiveness, and human and minority rights in various parts of the world, prominent among which are the Middle East and North Africa.

In the latest examples of kneejerk responses, Tunisia is deploying 1,000 armed policemen to tourist sites as tourists leave the country en masse and closing 80 mosques suspected of hosting radical clerics that is likely to push militants further underground. Kuwait, which displayed a remarkable degree of inclusivity with Sunnis and Shias joining hands in their condemnation of the bombing of a Shiite mosque that left 27 people dead and more than

200 others wounded, is mulling over the adoption of a stringent anti-terrorism law, while France is passing legislation that would authorize sweeping surveillance.

None of these measure address the sense of hopelessness that pervades predominantly Muslim minorities in Europe and is reinforced by increased prejudice, itself intensified by violence and brutality perpetrated by Muslim extremists. That hopelessness is matched by despair and existential fears among youth, minorities, and sects in the Middle East and North Africa.

Similarly, Western government have focused on countering the Islamic State on the Internet which they see as one of the group's foremost recruitment tools. Despite the fact that the Islamic State has used the Internet and social media to its advantage, a recent study published by the New York-based Council of Foreign Relations concluded that taking down violent videos and suspending social-media accounts has had little effect and has raised concerns about restrictions on free speech.

"The priority for the United States is to craft an online counterterrorism strategy anchored in liberal principles that delivers legitimate and effective actions from the public-private collaboration needed to respond to (the Islamic State threat," the report said. It said that US and European governments should "ensure that online counterterrorism avoids the worst political outcome for a liberal democracy—public and private behaviour that is unprincipled and ineffective."

At the root of the political violence that shook Tunisia, France and Kuwait is Islamic State's ability to capitalize on government policy failures. "Many youth today are facing injustice, inequality and high unemployment rates in their home countries. This is where ISIL is capturing our youth, through their appealing ideologies, which the masses of our youth are unfortunately viewing as an alternative," Al Jazeera quoted UAE political analyst Abdulkhaleq Abdulla as saying using the acronym used by the Islamic State before it last year changed its name.

In an article in the London Review of Books, Patrick Cockburn quoted a 29-year old Syrian who fights for the Islamic State as saying: "We are fighting because both the regime and the opposition failed us, so we need an armed organisation to fight for our rights." His words could just as well have been spoken by a European or a fighter from anywhere else in the Arab world.

Rather than reducing political violence, more than a decade of war on terrorism that framed efforts to counter radicalization and persuaded Western governments to revert to supporting Middle Eastern and North African autocrats in the name of stability, has produced ever more virulent forms of extremism and ever larger flows of refugees.
In a display of cynicism, Western governments have exploited their support of autocracy to secure lucrative arms deals while failing to ensure levels of aid that would credibly address social and economic malaise in a country like Tunisia that is struggling with the transition from autocracy to democracy.

The result of exclusively security-focussed approaches coupled with the exploitation of economic opportunity is an increasingly insecure world, in which Western and regional powers have proven incapable of defeating non-state actors like the Islamic State, multiple militant militias in Libya, Islamist insurgents in Egypt's Sinai, and rebel Houthis in Yemen. Meanwhile, European nations are struggling to cope with an onslaught of refugees forced in part to flee their homelands by the policies of the very autocracies the West supports. At the same time, those autocracies refused to absorb some of those fleeing conflicts in for example Syria, Yemen and Iraq that they have helped fuel.

To be sure, there is no magic wand that will overnight turn the tide or definitively eradicate extremism. But there are a host of steps that governments might take, including desperately needed social and economic policies that would create jobs and give youth some prospect for the future. Such measures would start addressing the root causes of extremism in a bid to persuade those segments of society susceptible to radicalization that they have a stake in working within the system.

Obviously, Western governments have a responsibility to put their own houses in order by matching lofty words of inclusiveness with actions that address high youth unemployment in migrant communities, as well as the lack of equal opportunity, and ensure that minorities are embraced as full-fledged members of society rather than perceived as a fifth column.

At the same time, Western governments would have to take a lead in pushing Middle Eastern and North African autocrats to change or drop policies that fuel radicalization and take measures that would address widespread grievances. Such measures would include:

- A halt to the global propagation of intolerant ideologies by some Middle Eastern governments and state-sponsored groups such as Saudi Arabia's interpretation of Wahhabism that contrasts starkly with that of Qatar, the world's only other Wahhabi state;
- The abolition of sectarianism in state rhetoric;
- Ensuring that disaffected groups have a stake in society by countering discrimination and ensuring in deed rather than only in word that they are equal and respected contributors to society's welfare;
- Recognition of minority rights;
- Reform of the brutal police and security forces that are widely feared and despised;
- Granting of greater freedoms to ensure the existence of release valves for pent-up anger and frustration and the unfettered voicing of grievances;
- A crackdown on corruption;
- Reform of education systems that produce a mismatch between market demand and graduates' skills.

"The government and civil society institution are required to provide suitable alternatives in every field of democracy be it freedom of opinion, social justice and the fight against poverty, and especially to combat ignorance. We have to be careful and prevent politicians and clerics from spewing religious doctrines that fuel sectarian and ideological views to avoid the events of Friday from reoccurring," said Kuwaiti journalist Dahem al-Qahtani.

With little indication that Middle Eastern and North African governments will follow al-Qahtani's advice, an Egyptian militant whose non-violent anti-government activism is as much aimed at opposing the regime of general-turned-president Abd al-Fattah al-Sisi as it is designed to persuade increasingly frustrated youth that there are alternatives to nihilistic violence warned: "The strategy of brutality, repression and restricting freedom has failed to impose subservience. It hasn't produced solutions. Governments need to give people space. They need to prove that they are capable of addressing the problems of a youth that has lost hope. We have nothing to lose if they don't."

*A version of this article appeared as an RSIS Commentary

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