

Column: Combating radical Islam may take generations

BY HENRI J. BARKEY | Posted: Wednesday, January 6, 2016 12:00 am

The Sinai Peninsula. Paris. Mali. San Bernardino.

We keep trying to find our way out of this recurring nightmare of terrorist attacks. The United Nations unanimously adopted a resolution to use “all necessary measures” to combat the Islamic State. Security services remain on the highest alert worldwide. For New Year’s, Brussels canceled its festivities, Moscow shut down Red Square, and thousands of soldiers and police officers patrolled New York, Paris and London. But protecting every “soft target” in the world around the clock is impossible. We know more attacks will come.

The scale of the problem is far larger than most of us want to acknowledge. Even if the Islamic State is dealt a devastating defeat, it is just the current chapter in a line of modern concepts of jihad-ism since Iran’s 1979 revolution. Three broad trends indicate that the fight to overcome this strain of violence will be a long one.

First is the large number of young men (and in some cases, women) vulnerable to recruitment by such millenarian-type organizations. The Muslim world is replete with uneducated young people for whom religion is their life’s organizing principle and a substitute for education or opportunity. They fight for goals that defy rational explanation and in the service of a perverted interpretation of religious ideology, which, by its very nature, is closed to any reasoning.

Illiteracy in Afghanistan is greater than 60 percent; in Syria, the education system has collapsed as a result of the conflict there and hundreds of thousands of children have no schools. The same is true in parts of Iraq. Even where there remains a semblance of an education system, such as in Pakistan, the populace is fed anti-Western diatribes originating from religious or state authorities.

With each passing year of war, shuttered schools and collapsed governance manufacture a new class of these susceptible youngsters. Uneducated 13- to 15-year-olds are the perfect recruiting pool for the Islamic State. They are easily brainwashed, obedient and unlikely to be swayed by reason or outside influences. For deeply alienated immigrant youths living in Western societies, the Islamic State and its ideology offer a sense of belonging, identity and acceptance facilitated by



U.S.-backed alliance faces challenges as a force in Syria

Kurdish fighters flash victory signs in Syria in May. Some allies of the Kurds are not overly fond of them.

social media.

A second worrying development is signs of escalating competition between terrorist groups attempting to demonstrate their own prowess. The Islamic State has eclipsed al-Qaida; its November attacks in Paris were an attempt to hijack the world stage before the Group of 20 summit—a horrific televised propaganda campaign to lure new recruits.

Coming just a week later, the Mali attack that left 20 hostages dead appeared to be al-Qaida's response through its Maghreb affiliate. Belittling the Paris carnage, al-Qaida boasted afterward that it knew how to conduct terrorist attacks in a less indiscriminate manner with fewer Muslim casualties. The prospect of a competition for which group effectively kills more “infidels” would sow more fear to domestic politics of the U.S. and countries in Europe.

Third, decisively vanquishing jihadist groups has proved to be impossible. This is because the fight is not against a nation, but a religion-based and deeply rooted ideology. Defeated in one location, adherents regroup and resurface.

The Islamic State has managed to put together a state-like apparatus in Syria, which makes it vulnerable to a determined military ground assault. That wouldn't, however, halt the ideological contagion. The Islamic State is the offspring of al-Qaida in Iraq, which the U.S. had successfully put out of business. If the Islamic State were to be destroyed, its remnants would metastasize into something else just as deadly.

This will be the longest war in modern times. Since 2001, the U.S. has been in a state of permanent war with the likes of the Taliban, al-Qaida, the Islamic State and their offspring, such as the Shabab and Boko Haram. As these groups split, merge and mutate, Washington will be drawn into fights wherever they spread: Yemen, Libya, Nigeria, Somalia, the Sinai Peninsula and more. American special forces contingents already have been sent to Syria and Cameroon.

Expanded security measures will not be sufficient; we need to target the source of the ideology. Specifically, Saudi Arabia's policy of supporting schools, mosques and groups that spread the religious dogma at the core of this extremist belief system has to end—as does direct funding to terrorist groups by wealthy Saudi individuals. The West, and the U.S. in particular, has been too accepting of these practices for decades. Saudi Arabia also needs to change its cultural narrative, which demonizes the “other,” whether that is the Shiite Muslims or all non-Muslims.

Uprooting radical ideologies is difficult, but possible. Indonesia, the world's most populous Muslim-majority nation, has experienced horrific terrorist attacks, most memorably in 2002 in Bali. Today, the country is consciously focused on spreading respect for minority rights. Nongovernmental organizations following in the footsteps of the late former President Abdurrahman Wahid are actively countering extremist groups, some funded by Saudis. The country's largest religious organization, the 50 million-member Nahdlatul Ulama, is campaigning for a “mental revolution” and promoting the archipelago's tolerant brand of Islam as a counter-identity to fundamentalism worldwide.

The Islamic State's heinous attacks might finally be the thing that pushes other Muslim-majority countries to realize they can't remain bystanders in the fight against extremist ideology. And we will need their help if this longest war isn't to become an eternal one.

Henri J. Barkey is the director of the Middle East Program at the Woodrow Wilson Center. He wrote this for the Los Angeles Times.