

Does Trump Have a Counterterrorism Strategy?

By Max Abrahms

My main empirical finding over the years has been that terrorism tends to backfire on the perpetrators politically by shifting electorates to the right, empowering hardline candidates, and thereby reducing the odds of government concessions. Trump is illustrative of this historical pattern. In his victory speech, he should have thanked the San Bernardino and Paris attacks – not *Breitbart*, the Tea Party movement, WikiLeaks, FBI director James Comey, Vladimir Putin, or even Hillary Clinton’s surprisingly inept campaign manager.

But does Trump actually have a strategy to fight terrorism? The conventional wisdom is that the travel ban is not only xenophobic against Muslims, but also counterproductive for combating terrorism. First, it is often said that the ban risks stoking Muslim grievances, incentivizing those on the fence to turn to terrorism. Second, the ban will lower trust between American Muslims and the government, disincentivizing them to share intelligence when a member of their community exhibits signs of radicalization. And third, the ban puts at risk international cooperation especially from targeted countries like Iran at the forefront of fighting Islamic State. This is why Iraq was belatedly removed from the list of banned countries.

I am not a supporter of the ban for many reasons. But there is arguably some strategic logic to it. A classic debate among political scientists is whether terrorists are motivated by the Grievance Model of Terrorism or the Opportunity Model of Terrorism. As its name suggests, the Grievance Model posits that people turn to terrorism when they suffer political grievances, so the key to counterterrorism is alleviating them. By contrast, the Opportunity Model posits that terrorists tend to thrive where conditions are most favorable for them to operate, so the key is to deny them the chance to infiltrate, associate with other radicals, and commit attacks.

Although he surely doesn’t realize it, Trump subscribes to the Opportunity Model of Terrorism. His main domestic approach to counterterrorism is to close down the borders to Muslims and surveil them. Clearly, the President is less concerned with exacerbating their grievances than offering conditions for the tiny number of potential extremists in their midst to strike. The Opportunity Model of Terrorism also undergirds his counterterrorism approach abroad. Especially in recent years, Trump has been a vocal critic of regime change in Iraq, Libya, and Syria. Saddam Hussein, Muammar Gaddafi, and Bashar Assad certainly exacerbated grievances in the Muslim world, but weakening them created power vacuums that have given terrorists the opportunity to exploit. Hillary Clinton, on the other hand, subscribes to the Grievance Model of Terrorism. At home, she favors courting Muslims. And abroad, she has advocated removing unpopular strong-men in Iraq, Libya, and most recently Syria. In my courses at Northeastern University, I try to show how theoretical debates can elucidate contemporary ones fundamental to national security.