

Why I Believe We Need To Talk To Extremists

Cynthia Keppley Mahmood

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Popular support for the "war on terror" being led by the US and Britain is beginning to show signs of fraying. After ten months, people are catching on to the fact that traditional means of dealing with terrorists – through isolation and eradication tactics – will simply not work.

According to traditional anti-terrorist approaches, terrorists should be isolated from their potential bases of support to prevent them spearheading a revolution. Techniques include "never negotiating with terrorists" and portraying violent activists as monsters. But this approach is no longer relevant. The idea that extreme groups are dangerous only if their ideas "catch on" in a wider forum is based on a world view centered on older weaponry and politics. Today, numbers matter less than technology in terms of the havoc a group is capable of wreaking. The penetration of mass media and the internet also makes isolation almost impossible.

Once isolated, the second traditional tactic is to wipe out the extremists. But his military doctrine evolved in a world in which political units were firmly territorially based. This is the major problem with the way the response to the events of September 11 is unfolding. Although contemporary strategists know well that Al Qaida is a globally dispersed and mobile enemy, they are choosing to fight a war as if the enemy were geographically constrained. The truth is that military might cannot work against this kind of enemy.

Despite these realities, the US, with Britain by its side, has taken this traditional approach. We have increased homeland security while not daring to say publicly that ultimately security is impossible in the current situation, just as the war as now framed is ultimately unwinnable.

Heretical as it may be in the climate of patriotic machismo that has developed around our response to September 11, the proposal that dialogue with radical Islamists may provide an effective alternative to classic anti-terror reactions deserves a fair hearing.

Dialogue with extremists is not in fact impossible, as the work of many anthropologists, sociologists, missionaries and peacebuilders in field settings indicates. This possibility often gets lost in the adrenaline-charged commentary of mainstream media coverage of "war" and in political analysis that excludes such interaction implicitly. Burgeoning areas of research exist that rely on face-to-face interlocution with radical activists across a range of ideological groupings in various parts of the world. Deconstructing myths about who these people are and what they want is essential for a peaceful global coexistence.

Whatever we may find it convenient to believe, it is not true that enemies of the US, Britain and their allies in this conflict have no political agenda. The fact that their grievances are coded in apocalyptic rhetoric and that their military psychology takes forms we fail to comprehend does not negate the basic fact that this is a war around specific politics and policies. And being eminently a matter of politics, it is eminently a matter that can be discussed in rational terms.

Unthinkable to talk to the likes of Osama bin Laden? Perhaps. More unthinkable, however, is real biological, chemical or nuclear warfare in the cities and countryside of western countries.

It is time to change our notions of what is thinkable and unthinkable. It is time for our leaders, and we who elect them, to come forward with the real courage to calmly assess this very new situation and not treat it as if it were a replay on a larger scale of some other battle in some other time. Nor is it a mythical battle between good and evil. It is an argument among men. Let us get them to sit down and talk about it. If they will not, let us elect others who have cooler heads in a world that is already too hot to handle.

Cynthia Keppley Mahmood is a cultural anthropologist and senior fellow at the Joan B. Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies, University of Notre Dame, Indiana.