Title	The Rise of Trump and Its Global Implications "Radical Islamic Terrorism": What's in a Name?
Author(s)	Kumar Ramakrishna
Citation	Kumar Ramakrishna. (2017). The Rise of Trump and Its Global Implications "Radical Islamic Terrorism": What's in a Name? (RSIS Commentaries, No. 023). RSIS Commentaries. Singapore: Nanyang Technological University.
Date	2017
URL	http://hdl.handle.net/10220/42105
Rights	Nanyang Technological University

The Rise of Trump and Its Global Implications

"Radical Islamic Terrorism": What's in a Name?

By Kumar Ramakrishna

Synopsis

The new Trump administration has made the eradication of "radical Islamic terrorism from the face of the earth" a policy priority. However such terminology reveals a flawed understanding of the true nature of the ongoing transnational terrorist threat.

Commentary

NEW US President Donald J. Trump has made it very clear that a central focus of his tenure will be, in his own words, to "eradicate radical Islamic terrorism from the face of the earth". In adopting such rhetoric Trump has gone further than Barack Obama and George W. Bush, his immediate predecessors. Both took care to avoid associating Islam with the terrorist threat posed by the likes of Al Qaeda and later the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). That Trump means business was illustrated by the attack by US Navy Seals on 28 January 2017 on the Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) network in Yemen, in which 14 militants were reportedly killed, along with an American soldier.

The raid demonstrated that Trump not only has ISIS in his crosshairs; other terrorist networks with transnational reach such as AQAP – which was implicated in the *Charlie Hebdo* attacks in Paris two years ago - are being targeted as well. In keeping with a campaign promise, Trump has given the Pentagon 30 days to come up with a strategy for defeating ISIS. Trump even mentioned that he has an "extremely tough secret plan" to defeat ISIS that will "knock the hell out of them". When such a plan does materialise, it will likely be one in which military force will play the dominant role in the ongoing struggle against "radical Islamic terrorism". But how effective will it be?

The Metastasising Threat

Since the Twin Towers tumbled, transnational terrorism remains a concern and has even metastasised. A 2016 study by the US-based Investigative Project on Terrorism showed that in the five years after September 11 there was an annual average of 2,508 terrorism-related deaths globally. In the following five years till 2011, another 3,284 were killed annually. By 2013, the annual terrorist death average had tripled to 9,537 and another two years on, that number tripled yet again, hitting an unprecedented 28,708 annually.

The study attributed this exponential rise to the fact that more terror groups ideologically similar to Al Qaeda have emerged in the Middle East and Africa. Moreover, ISIS – a particularly brutal offshoot of Al Qaeda – has itself expanded its influence in the Middle East, Africa and even Southeast Asia. Thanks to the emergence of cheap smartphone technology and Internet broadband access, the rise of popular social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, WhatsApp and Telegram for instance, violent narratives of such terror networks have been enabled to fuel the rise of low-signature lone wolf attacks over and above the residual threat from established terrorist networks.

Against this backdrop, the Trump administration's designation of "radical Islamic terrorism" as the threat and the likely emphasis on a largely militarised strategy targeting it, is unlikely to be an optimal response. There is a need to unpack the phrase "radical Islamic terrorism" itself to gain deeper insights into this matter.

Problematic Assumptions Underlying "Radical Islamic Terrorism"

Firstly, the phrase "radical" needs re-examination. Terrorism scholar Alex Schmid suggests that an analytical distinction between "radical" and "extremist" is important. While radicals preach a root-and-branch transformation of society, they need not necessarily do so violently. They may be debated with and even won over to one's side, such as the former British Hizbut Tahrir activists Maajid Nawaz and Ed Husain, who nowadays engage in the ideological counter-attack against the likes of ISIS with the needed familiarity and nuance.

Schmid reckons that it is rather the extremists – those activists who possess supremacist leanings twinned with ideological justifications for the violent seizure of power - that pose the real threat. They should never be negotiated with, and the full force of the law should be applied against them. Anjem Choudary in the United Kingdom and Aman Abdurrahman in Indonesia are examples of such extremists in recent times.

Secondly, use of the term "Islamic" is unhelpful. Islam the religion is not the problem. It is the power-driven, organised violent Islamists who are. Technically therefore the Trump administration should be targeting Islamism and not Islam. At the moment, though, ambiguity seems rife. While some senior officials have apparently identified the religion itself, rather mistakenly, as a "cancer", others argue the real problem is "enemy doctrines" and the "ideology".

Whatever the case, semantic ambiguity is problematic. It can influence policy - such as the highly controversial travel ban affecting citizens from seven Middle Eastern countries - that unwittingly suggests that all Muslims are the enemy. The impression of Islamophobia encouraged by such heavy-handed policy measures is highly counterproductive. It merely reinforces the violent Islamist narrative that the US and its allies are indeed at war with the world's 1.6 billion Muslims, the vast majority of whom reject the invidious supremacist goals that animate Al Qaeda and ISIS networks.

Thirdly, the term "terrorism" seems rather narrow. The administration appears aware that it is not just the physical networks but the "enemy doctrines" driving them that are of concern. Terror cells and extremist Islamist ideology aside, what terrorism scholar Scott Atran calls the "passive infrastructure" or the supporting ecosystem of Islamist extremism should also be targeted.

Hence closer intelligence co-operation with precisely those "countries of concern" on whose citizens the travel ban has been imposed, remains critical. These national jurisdictions should be mapped much more granularly to identify specific smaller "communities of concern". They are where extremist ideology - for historical, socio-economic and political reasons - have incubated within closed networks of individuals, educational institutions, places of worship and other social spaces.

In turn this suggests that military force mounted by any additional "boots on the ground" must be closely calibrated and integrated with political, socio-economic, educational and counter-ideological efforts. This should be done in partnership with local communities, businesses, municipalities and other relevant stakeholders, customised to each specific locale. This entails hard work and resources, but really, that is the only sustainable way to "eradicate" the threat.

The Real Enemy: Extremist Islamist Ecosystems

In short, the term "radical Islamic terrorism", while perhaps a pithy sound bite, is nevertheless not optimal policy-wise. While the Trump administration is energetically engaging with this issue, what it really should be targeting is more precisely termed "extremist Islamist ecosystems". Furthermore, rather than raw military power alone, a judicious and customised use of hard and soft power – "smart power" if you like, remains the way forward.

If 16 years of the struggle against extremist Islamist terror networks have taught us anything, it is that no "secret plan" based largely on military force can bomb them into oblivion. They will merely mutate into something else. Sun Tzu's ancient adage thus remains as pertinent as ever: "Let us fight with wisdom, and not just force alone".

Kumar Ramakrishna is Associate Professor, Head of Policy Studies and Coordinator of the National Security Studies Programme in the Office of the Executive Deputy Chairman, S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University, Singapore.