

Is Islam a Threat?

CSIS Congressional Forum on Islam

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People talk about “Islamic terrorism,” but we should talk instead about “terror in the name of Islam.” While a great deal of terrorists in the world act in the name of Islam, the majority of the victims are Muslims themselves. If we are to see things clearly, we will understand that Islamism is not committing acts of violence, but individuals are trampling on the rights of others using Islam as an excuse. We need to see Islam for what it is: a complex phenomenon like any other religion.

KEY POINTS

- Terrorism is a product of brainwashing. Extreme religious views are used as a tool in this indoctrination, but this should not be taken as a reflection on the religion as a whole. The political radicalization of religion creates violence and violence-prone ideologies.
- Terrorism is not principally an economic problem. Many terrorists are well educated and come from middle class backgrounds. This was the case with the 9/11 hijackers and with the perpetrators of other recent attacks.
- The approach that asks questions such as “Why do they hate us?” and describe “militants and their grievances,” is too simplistic. So is the Manichean approach, which divides the world “between “us” and “them.” Each approach is too simple, and each plays into the hands of those hostile to our ideals.
- Victims must demonstrate restraint in the wake of terrorist attacks, lest indiscriminate retaliation perpetuate cycles of violence.
- Moderate voices within Islam need to be heard, and we must help amplify them. Moderation, in this context, is demonstrated by acceptance of the principles of nonviolence and peaceful coexistence.
- The swamps of recruitment and armament must be drained.
- Westerners and Muslims alike need to know more about each other through both study and people-to-people exchanges.
- The fight against terror in the name of Islam must be seen as a long-term project which may endure for a generation or more.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- The U.S. government needs to address religiously charged conflicts with active diplomacy. Two urgent priorities are the Arab-Israeli conflict and Kashmir.
- Western countries must support alternatives to extremist *madrassas*, especially in Pakistan, which teach violence, and create terrorist networks.
- The battle cannot be fought with money alone. Hatred and intolerance masquerading as religious teaching should be exposed, and violent ideologies must be defeated or replaced by better ideas.

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