Countering political violence:
Tackle the root causes

By James M. Dorsey

Synopsis

Nations across Europe, North Africa and Middle East have responded to recent attacks in France, Tunisia and Kuwait with lofty condemnations of violent extremism and kneejerk security measures that in isolation are unlikely to solve what is becoming a festering problem. To drain the swamps of radicalisation, governments will have to embed security measures in policies that give disaffected youth a stake in society.

Commentary

EUROPEAN OFFICIALS, describing recruitment efforts by the Islamic State in Bosnia Herzegovina, mired in a toxic mix of economic malaise and ethnic tension, reportedly fear they may regret having failed to tackle the country's structural problems in the two decades since the end of the Yugoslav wars.

The regret could apply to any number of failures to tackle root problems that have prompted lone wolves to strike fear in major European cities, at tourist attractions in North Africa, and in Shiite mosques in the Gulf. They also persuaded thousands of Europeans, Arabs and others to join the Islamic State as foreign fighters; and tens of thousands to seek refuge in Europe from civil war, brutal repression, and economic despair.

Band-aid solutions, knee jerk responses

Across the board, democracies and autocracies alike are experiencing the blowback of decades of Band-Aid solutions, policies that failed to give youth prospects for a future with a stake in society, and repression largely unchallenged by Western governments that pay lip service to adherence to political pluralism, inclusiveness, and human and minority rights in various parts of the world, particularly the Middle East and North Africa.

In the latest examples of kneejerk responses, Tunisia is deploying 1,000 armed policemen to tourist sites even as tourists leave the country en masse, and closing 80 mosques suspected of hosting radical clerics that is likely to push militants further underground. Kuwait, which displayed a remarkable degree of inclusivity with Sunnis and Shias joining hands in their condemnation of the

bombing of a Shiite mosque that left 27 people dead and more than 200 others wounded, is mulling adoption of a stringent anti-terrorism law while France is passing legislation that would authorise sweeping surveillance.

None of these measure address the sense of hopelessness that pervades predominantly Muslim minorities in Europe and is reinforced by increased prejudice sparked by violence and brutality perpetrated by Muslim extremists. That hopelessness is matched by despair and existential fears among youth, minorities, and alienated sects in the Middle East and North Africa.

In an article in the London Review of Books, Patrick Cockburn quoted a 29-year old Syrian who fights for the Islamic State as saying: "We are fighting because both the regime and the opposition failed us, so we need an armed organisation to fight for our rights." His words could just as well have been spoken by a European or a fighter from anywhere else in the Arab world.

A display of cynicism

Rather than reducing political violence, more than a decade of war on terrorism has produced ever more virulent forms of extremism and flows of refugees. The WOT had framed efforts to counter radicalization and persuaded Western governments to revert to support of Middle Eastern and North African autocrats in the name of ensuring stability.

In a display of cynicism, Western governments have exploited their support of autocracy to secure lucrative arms deals while failing to ensure levels of aid that would credibly address social and economic malaise in a country like Tunisia that is struggling with the transition from autocracy to democracy.

The result of exclusively security-focussed approaches coupled with the exploitation of economic opportunity, is an increasingly insecure world in which Western and regional powers have proven incapable of defeating non-state actors like the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), multiple militant militias in Libya, Islamist insurgents in Egypt's Sinai, and rebel Houthis in Yemen.

Said an Egyptian militant whose non-violent anti-government activism is as much aimed at opposing the regime of general-turned-president Abdel Fattah Al Sisi as it is designed to persuade increasingly frustrated youth that there are alternatives to nihilistic violence: "The strategy of brutality, repression and restricting freedom has failed to impose subservience. It hasn't produced solutions. Governments need to give people space. They need to prove that they are capable of addressing the problems of a youth that has lost hope. We have nothing to lose if they don't".

Shouldering responsibility

Meanwhile, European nations are struggling to cope with an onslaught of refugees forced in part to flee their homelands by the policies of the very autocracies the West supports. At the same time, those autocracies refused to absorb some of those fleeing conflicts in for example Syria, Yemen and Iraq that they have helped fuel.

Obviously, Western governments have a responsibility to put their own homes in order by matching lofty words of inclusiveness with actions that address high youth unemployment in migrant communities, lack of equal opportunity, and ensure that minorities are embraced as full-fledged members of society rather than perceived as a fifth column.

At the same time, Western governments would have to take a lead in pushing Middle Eastern and North African autocrats to change or drop policies that fuel radicalization and take measures that would address widespread grievances. Such measures would include:

• A halt to the global propagation of intolerant ideologies by some Middle Eastern governments and state-sponsored groups such as Saudi Arabia's interpretation of Wahhabism that contrasts starkly with that of Qatar, the world's only other Wahhabi state;

• Abolition of sectarianism in state rhetoric;

• Recognition of minority rights;

• Reform of brutal police and security forces that are widely feared and despised;

• Granting of greater freedoms to ensure the existence of release valves for pent-up anger and frustration and the unfettered voicing of grievances;

• A crackdown on corruption;

• Reform of education systems that produce a mismatch between market demand and graduates' skills.

To be sure, there is no magic wand that will overnight turn the tide or definitively eradicate extremism. But there are a host of steps that governments could take that go beyond desperately needed social and economic policies that would create jobs and give youth a prospect for the future. Such measures would start addressing root causes of extremism in a bid to persuade those segments of society susceptible to radicalisation that they have a stake in working within the system.

James M. Dorsey is a Senior Fellow at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS) as Nanyang Technological University in Singapore, and co-director of the Institute of Fan Culture of the University of Würzburg, Germany.