

The Anti-War on Terrorism

Joshua J. Kassner

Sadly, the international community is yet again dealing with a horrific attack in the heart of Europe by home-grown terrorists. In response, politicians from across the political spectrum have made public commitments to do whatever is needed to win this "war."

We should reject this characterization. Continuing to conceive of the effort to defeat terrorism in general, and ISIS in particular, through the lens of war clouds our thinking and fails to address the full complexity of the social and political precursors upon which the viability of organizations like ISIS depend.

This is not to say that the rhetorical use of "war" doesn't have its place. When used metaphorically it helps to convey the seriousness of a challenge and the nature of the sacrifices that will likely be needed to meet it. When used this way, it is done with the understanding that it is rhetoric, not reality.

When, however, this line is blurred and rhetoric is taken for reality, the complexity of the problem is lost, and the lens becomes a narrow one in which the challenge and its solution are thought of primarily in terms of force. Take, for example, the "war on drugs"; by failing to maintain the distinction between the metaphorical use of the term with the reality of the problem being faced, the fight against illegal drugs in the United States employed coercion and force indiscriminately against all on the other side — suppliers, dealers and addicted. In the end, this resulted in policies that were ineffective at best and unjust at worst.

Similarly, if our efforts to defeat terrorism are constructed through the lens of war, we will fail to adequately address the root causes that lie at the heart of each terrorist organization's appeal. We need to understand why young men

and women from modern Western liberal societies are choosing to fight on the side of terrorists. If our leaders are truly committed to doing all that is required to defeat terrorism and terrorist organizations like ISIS, these causes need to be taken as seriously as the symptoms.

In addition, by adopting a perspective that embraces the idea that we are at "war" with terrorism unwittingly elevates the moral status of those supporting or fighting on behalf of organizations like ISIS. It turns criminals into soldiers. We shouldn't participate in any practice that creates moral ambivalence around what those in Paris or Brussels did. When someone intentionally kills civilians we ought to consider them murderers, not soldiers.

One might argue that terrorism is different. These aren't just individuals acting alone. Rather, they are connected to a much larger ideologically driven organization that uses violence against civilians to achieve its aims. This is no doubt true, but that larger ideological context doesn't change the fact that they are criminals acting on behalf of a criminal organization. They are involved in a particularly heinous crimes, but that is all that they are.

Here, one might object, that one man's criminal is another's "freedom fighter." This may be a reasonable argument to make if ISIS confined itself to fighting against those who pose a direct threat to them and their aims: soldiers and security forces confronting them in the Middle East. That is not the choice they have made. They have sought out "soft" targets and chosen methods that are intentionally directed at those who pose little to no threat. The fact that their cause may be hopeless without such arbitrary violence is not a reason to look upon them differently.

Finally, one might claim that such soft-headed ideas fail to appreciate the real and potent threat we face. This is based on a faulty assumption that we can either confront ISIS through force or deal with the underlying causes driving so many to join its ranks. This is a false dilemma. Doing one does not preclude the international community from doing the other. If our leaders are

truly committed to doing all in their power to defeat ISIS, then both paths need to be pursued.

The threat of global terrorism is a complicated political and social problem. To continue to look at it through the lens of "war" is to simplify it to a point of uselessness. Only a willingness to confront it in all of its complexity will lead to solutions and ultimately to the defeat of ISIS.

Joshua J. Kassner is an associate professor of philosophy at the University of Baltimore. His email is jkassner@ubalt.edu.