

Terrorism & Trump: New Challenges for Social Justice Organizations

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This piece was written to address the urgency of social justice organizations to develop a strategy that integrates a sophisticated understanding of the intimate interconnections of war, terrorism, racism and inequality, and between peace and justice at home and abroad, in order to successfully combat the far right.

The wake-up call is right there in the front page headline of the Dec. 11 *New York Times*: "Poll Has Trump Gaining Ground on Terror Fear."

Prior to the tragic burst of terrorist murders in Egypt, Beirut, Paris and then San Bernardino, Calif., significant aspects of U.S. politics were beginning to move in a positive direction. Pressure from #BlackLivesMatter and Raise the Wage campaigns was forcing issues of racism and economic inequality to the forefront of public debate. Climate change denial was increasingly on the defensive. Bernie Sanders' presidential campaign was giving voice to a broad anti-corporate agenda. And the Republicans seemed to be lurching so far to the right that they might self-isolate or split.

But in the wake of newly revived public fears about terrorism, and the right's orgy of war mongering, Islamophobia and racist demagoguery, "A plurality of the public views the threat of terrorism as the top issue facing the country," according to a Dec. 10, 2015 NY Times/CBS poll. "Americans are more fearful about the likelihood of another terrorist attack than at any other time since the weeks after Sept. 11, 2001."

Given the misery and strife of the ongoing conflicts in the Middle East and the powerful influence of ISIS (Daesh in Arabic), repeated Daesh-inspired or Daesh-organized terrorist attacks in the U.S. seem likely. Though limited in scale compared to terrorism in other parts of the world, such attacks do what they are intended to do: attract outsized attention and alarm the public. And, in light of its timing, the San Bernardino attack was not only deadly, but also exposed a potential path to the presidency and control of all three branches of the federal government by the nakedly xenophobic, racist and militarist tendency now utterly dominating the Republican Party. Even a victory by one of the so-called mainstream Republican conservatives would be a calamity with Congress, especially the House, in the hands of far right.

The attacks are also increasing the militarist and law-and-order tendencies of Hillary Clinton and other mainstream Democrats, tendencies that once led them to endorse George W. Bush's disastrous war in Iraq.

This essays calls attention to two crucial developments.

First, over the past six months or so the far right has taken dangerous steps even further to the right. They have legitimized the public expression of blatant racism and authoritarian policies toward Muslims and immigrants. The climate they have created has contributed to the recent shootings targeting Planned Parenthood and BlackLivesMatter protesters and led their supporters to brag about beating up opponents at campaign rallies. Their extremist policies and rhetoric have alarmed even many mainstream commentators, with some pundits even using the term “fascism.” Yet they are dominating the Republican Party to a greater degree than before and, in significant part due to playing the foreign terrorism card, are also garnering broader public support, threatening to shift the entire political spectrum another notch to the right.

And second, that first development urgently underscores, not for the first time, how crucial it is for social justice organizations to develop a strategy that integrates a sophisticated understanding of the intimate interconnections of war, terrorism, racism and inequality, and between peace and justice at home and abroad, if we are to mature as a major political force. Neglecting the central issues of foreign policy in the world’s only superpower is fatally narrowminded and politically self-destructive, especially when there is a direct line between U.S. foreign policy and terrorist actions in our own country. Racism and corporate interests animate our militarized foreign policy; U.S. militarism in turn, fuels racism, xenophobia and inequality, and a disastrous allocation of government resources at home.

Peace and social justice movements need to present a clear and credible explanation of the roots of extremist Islamic terrorism and an alternative path to preventing it. Otherwise, we cede the field to the rightwing on one of the most explosive issues of our time.

Individually, almost all progressives are antiwar. However, precious few of our social justice organizations reflect this in their mission, programs or organizing—and not enough of our peace organizations regularly cross over to domestic issues. Social justice organizations need to re-strategize.

Republican extremism has intensified the polarization already existing in U.S. politics. There is widespread revulsion at the naked racism of Trump and company. If galvanized by effective progressive action, this revulsion can lead to uniting a wide array of people to roll back the right’s momentum.

If we can do the necessary re-strategizing to accomplish this, we can avoid potentially disastrous results in the 2016 election and be in position to build the kind of durable progressive current that is needed well beyond the election.

High Stakes

Most of the progressive movement has failed to concretely address terrorism, leaving the issue to the right and far right, which are exploiting it spectacularly. Perhaps our reluctance is due to justifiable fears of getting trapped into supporting reactionary military adventures, illegal spying or the undermining of civil liberties. We are also now paying a price for failing to sustain the antiwar movement of the early 2000s, and for

allowing connections between domestic issues and war and militarism to dim on the radar screens of most sectors of the social justice movement.

But with ISIS/Daesh and others encouraging global networks of supporters and sympathizers to ‘take action’ wherever they are, we must prepare ourselves politically as well as emotionally for the possibility of more internationally inspired attacks in the U.S. It is important—but not nearly sufficient—to point out that, within the U.S., more mass killings are committed by right-wingers and white supremacists than by people claiming inspiration from some strand of Islamic extremism. The origins, purposes and politics of U.S. rightwing terrorism are completely different. We need a clear view of what it will take to radically mitigate the threat of terrorism that arises from Islamic fundamentalism.

The stakes are high: if the rightist narrative about “jihadi-style” terrorist incidents wins out, the momentum we have built on domestic social justice issues may be totally reversed. Despite the utter failure of the “war on terrorism” since Sept. 11, the right will seek to double down on its most disastrous elements. They will move to reintroduce massive ground troops into the Middle East, move hard against immigrants and Muslims, reinforce racist police brutality and mass incarceration, limit civil liberties, destroy an already-weakened trade union movement, even more drastically restrict abortion rights and access to birth control, impede progress on LGBT rights and gender justice, and crack down on all who oppose their agenda. Via voting rights restrictions, more gerrymandering and naked intimidation, they will seek to institutionalize one-party control of the federal government for a generation or more to come.

The Republican Party already controls 33 governorships and more than 30 state legislatures where they have set in place key elements of their reactionary program. They control both houses of Congress and the federal judiciary and, from Donald Trump and Ted Cruz through Marco Rubio and Jeb Bush, their presidential aspirants are using racist fear-mongering and Islamophobia to gain control of all three branches of the federal government and impose their agenda on the entire country.

Fear of terrorism is not limited to the rightwing and its presidential candidates. Much of the base of the Democratic Party, and certainly Hillary Clinton, is also moving rightwards in reaction to Islamic extremist terrorism and, in the absence of a strong progressive pushback, this tendency will likely be accentuated if there are more attacks. Without such a pushback, progressives will be exiled to the political margins even should the Democratic nominee (likely Hillary Clinton) win.

Progressives cannot meet these challenges unless we effectively tackle the issue of ISIS/Daesh-inspired terrorism, among ourselves and in the battle to shape public opinion. The basis to prevail in this fight is present: even among conservatives there is widespread recognition that the Iraq and Afghanistan wars were failures. If we can build on that sentiment and effectively explain how terrorist “blowback” is directly related to U.S. militarism in the Middle East, we can mount a formidable fightback against the rightwing narrative. (See the Talking Points at the end of this essay for an example.)

The need to address foreign terrorism and unite against the right is not just a short term proposition, pushed to the forefront by this electoral cycle. In a country where the proportion of the white population continues to shrink, and in a world where U.S. economic and political dominance is slowly but surely in decline, the reactionary social base for an appeal to “Make (white) America Great Again” is not going to disappear. On the contrary, whatever the outcome of the 2016 elections, the hysterical demand for the use of any and all means to preserve an illusory “security” is likely to remain a permanent strand of our politics, producing constant pressure for more wars, more racism and a crackdown on all those resisting the right’s agenda.

Though the right’s bellicose response to terrorism (including carpet bombing) is being used to mobilize and broaden its base, fighting terrorism is not an inherently rightist position. In response to the gruesome terrorist attacks on trains in Madrid in 2004 which massacred 191 people and injured nearly 2,000, the Spanish people moved to the left, deposed the prime minister and reversed Spain’s policy in favor of war in Iraq. Since that time there have been no Paris- or San Bernardino-like terrorist incidents in Spain.

The Current Situation

The dangers of the current situation result from the confluence of at least the following main developments:

1. The ongoing Western interventions, civil wars, power conflicts between Middle Eastern governments, reactionary dictatorships, and ethnic and sectarian fighting have intensified and there is no end in sight. Death, misery, starvation and migration are the orders of the day for tens of millions of people. Desperation and hatred of the West roil the region. No less than eight countries and numerous ethnic, religious and political factions are involved in the tragedy of Syria, the conflict which has most recently contributed to intensified military action, the growth of terrorism, mass migration and despair.

2. IS/ISIS/ISIL/Daesh (four names for the same entity) has emerged from the militarized misery now afflicting the Middle East with far greater power than any (non-state) terrorist group of the last 40 years, and the recent attacks show that they are now actively pursuing an international strategy.

Daesh’s leadership has its origins as part of al-Qaeda in the war in Afghanistan from 1979 to 1989 where the U.S. helped recruit, organize and train them to fight the Soviets. After the Soviet defeat the terrorists trained their guns on the often corrupt and authoritarian regimes in the Middle East and on the West. They gained new life and momentum in response to the U.S. wars in Iraq and the Middle East in 1991 and since September 11.

In 2012 Daesh formed from a split with al-Qaeda. Due to the U.S.’s fatal construction and backing of a sectarian Shiite regime in Iraq and that regime’s sharp attacks on the Sunnis, ISIS/Daesh was able to recruit segments of Saddam Hussein’s regime (Sunni political and military leaders) as well as Sunni tribal chiefs, and to win economic and political support from some of the former Iraqi ruling classes and social base.

Daesh now controls swaths of land, economy and population, including significant oil areas in Iraq and Syria, and is trying to move into and recruit in Libya. Their military capacity now rests on this economy and political support and is greatly bolstered by the expertise of many of the battle hardened generals and command staff of Saddam Hussein's army. Their influence extends into Africa, West and South Asia, and Europe.

Their goals are utterly reactionary: the establishment of a theocratic dictatorship (Caliphate) premised on a brutally hierarchical and patriarchal version of Islam that runs counter to that of the overwhelming majority of Muslims. Unless they (and other terrorist groups) are defeated, or at least seriously undermined, many in the region will suffer and it is hard to imagine that terrorist attacks in the U.S. and elsewhere will not continue and possibly grow more frequent and more intense. The attacks in Boston and San Bernardino appear to have been carried out by people who supported and were inspired by extreme Islamic terror groups but whose attacks were not directed or organized by any group. It is not clear whether ISIS has attained organized operational capacity in the U.S., but it seems a likely goal – the prevention of which is a high priority.

3. In the U.S. the political atmosphere is pervaded by mass shootings (often racist or misogynist in motivation), racist police murders and the terrorist attacks internationally, but also in Boston and now San Bernardino. It has recently been revealed that, on average, there is a mass shooting in which four or more people are shot every single day in the U.S. The New York Times reports that "Since Sept. 11, 2001, nearly twice as many people have been killed by white supremacists, antigovernment fanatics and other non-Muslim extremists than by radical Muslims."

Until the recent spike in foreign terrorist attacks it seemed that the antiracist forces, spearheaded by #BlackLivesMatter and mobilizing against state violence, were gaining important momentum, and that the rightwing might isolate itself with its bombastic rhetoric. But the Islamic extremist terrorist attacks are providing a basis for the rightwing to reinvigorate their call for a hard militarist/police line against all who they brand as "criminals," domestic or foreign.

The racist far right has been seething since the election of the country's first Black president. It is enraged by what it sees as recent attacks on the police and law and order by #BlackLivesMatter and criminal justice reformers. And now their wrath has been energized by the ultra-right presidential candidates and the prospects of a new "war on terrorism at home and abroad."

4. The populist rightwing in the U.S. has moved another big step to the right in the last six months. The contemporary populist far right coalesced in the racist backlash to the Civil Rights and Black Power movements, especially in the white South. It was greatly expanded by white flight suburban tax revolts and the white middle and working classes whose former stability and hopes were destroyed by deindustrialization, corporate globalization and economic polarization beginning in the 1970s.

Rather than identifying corporate capital as culpable for their plight, those that moved to the far right instead blame people of color and immigrants to the U.S. for "stealing their

jobs.” They fear that the steadily increasing proportion of voters of color means that white people will be relegated to second class citizenship. From their vantage point, people of color at home and abroad are also responsible for the declining power of the U.S. on the world scene. They see themselves as righteous soldiers in the fight to save white power within the U.S. and in the world.

(A somewhat similar process in much of Europe is underway in which openly fascist parties are manipulating the immigration issue to gain impressive support and power.)

There is no end in sight to the demographic, economic and political changes that the right so powerfully rejects. The increase of people of color, especially in the electorate, is one of the main bases for confidence that progressives can prevail if we refuse to self-isolate and instead throw ourselves into mass politics. And the historic level of economic inequality, while painful, also presents us with a tremendous organizing opportunity for the future.

Before the latest terrorist attacks this new level of extremism looked like it might cause a more open and politically significant split between different far right factions and between the far right and the conservatives in the Republican Party. But terrorist attacks within the U.S.--and the prospect of riding public anxiety about them to total control of the federal government--might strengthen their common cause.

On the other hand, a powerful progressive public response can aggravate splits within the right which are a necessary condition for their defeat. Among other things, it is imperative, not optional, that progressives, especially whites, do the hard work of organizing among the many whites, including economically depressed white workers, who are now attracted to the far right. We cannot stay holed up in Blue bastions and cede the rest of the country to the tender mercies of the right.

The presidential election has elevated all of these developments, providing hyped-up media platforms and massive audiences for the most irresponsible and reckless political rhetoric and one-upmanship, but also for well-organized progressive forces.

Progressive Response to Terrorism

In response to Islamophobia many progressives have moved to express solidarity with the Muslim community in the U.S., and this is, of course, essential. Likewise, antiwar organizations are striving to re-energize and get a wider hearing. But these steps alone are not sufficient to answer the right's drive toward war and incitement of racism and xenophobia. Progressives that are focused on domestic issues or climate change must now find a way to incorporate a response to terrorism into our ongoing work, as well as respond quickly and powerfully to specific events as they unfold.

Of course this is easier said than done. Social justice organizations are already overloaded with tasks. Moreover the barriers between domestic social justice work and international peace and solidarity work are formidable. Foundation funding has given these divisions a structure and financial basis. Precious few social justice organizations threw resources against the recent Iraq war, even though opposition to it was tremendous among members

and staffers. And though a breakthrough was achieved when, for the first time in its history the AFL-CIO came out against a U.S. military action abroad by opposing the bombing of Iraq, most unions were unwilling or unable to link militarism to domestic economic inequality or to put the kind of resources into antiwar education and organizing that would have prepared their members for a long haul fight against U.S. militarism.

But now practical domestic politics force us to make a renewed and more successful attempt to tackle this shortcoming. Though it will be a difficult shift, it is crucial for social justice organizations to begin to integrate the struggle for peace and against terrorism into their basic vision, values and programs.

Here are some thoughts about how we might meet this challenge.

1. Name and highlight the struggles for peace and security, and against violence in our domestic social justice work. The struggle for peace and security and against violence are both a condition of and inherent in every social justice issue: on the job, in our communities and schools, in our homes and for our environment. Large segments of the U.S. population, most especially but not limited to poor communities of color, suffer from violence on a daily basis. Opposition to state, racist, intra-community, religiously motivated and domestic violence should be integral to our fundamental values, programs and communications, linking our struggles for social justice to the struggle for peace and security, and against terrorism.

2. Understand that the fight against racism cannot be won just by struggling around domestic issues. Similarly, international peace cannot be won without a struggle against racism in the U.S. U.S. wars are largely rationalized by racism—the dehumanization and demonizing of people into enemies on the basis of their color or culture to the point of justifying their mass murder and the violent crushing of their economies, homes, public health and schools. The struggle against racism and for peace are potently linked and this needs to be reflected in our strategies and organizing.

Every dollar spent on war and militarism is a dollar robbed from improving social and economic conditions at home and abroad. The civil rights movement and the war on poverty in the 1960s were hugely undermined by massive spending on the Vietnam War. The continuous wars in the Middle East are sucking the resources that should be used to improve the quality of life in the U.S. and abroad. Fear of terrorism can quickly give rise to racist criminalization of Muslims and people of color at home. The military-industrial-prison-police complex is a major rightwing force in politics and in action. The cost of U.S. wars “against terrorism”—about \$4 trillion since Sept. 11 and \$7.5 billion just to fight ISIS/Daesh – should be a constant theme in our mobilizing for social programs at home.

The fight against war and militarism is a fight for peace and security at home. Reckless wars and conflicts we cause abroad may cause some of our opponents to strike us at home. The world has shrunk and become more interconnected than ever. We cannot bury our heads in the sand like isolationists. We must become knowledgeable international anti-racists dedicated to peace, non-intervention, self-determination, equality and a steadily improving quality of life for all peoples.

3. Project our outright opposition to terrorism from any source, and to Daesh in particular. There is no political or religious justification for the random murder of innocent people, or their reactionary, dictatorial, patriarchal agenda.

Unfortunately, given the momentum of forces devoted to terrorism in the name of Islam, we are likely to confront this form of terrorism for some time to come. Nonetheless, the defeat of terrorism cannot be accomplished primarily by military means. It will take steadfast international coalition-building, a strong democratic motion among the peoples of the Middle East, massive aid to improve the lives of the people, skillful diplomacy and many other forms of struggle.

It will require a massive shift in the fundamentals of U.S. foreign policy principles, particularly moving away from a military-first foreign policy to one based on international law, human rights and equality for all.

It will likely take some time to build the kind of democratic motion and international coalition that is required. Most of the democratic minded forces in the Middle East have been massacred in the last three decades by a deadly combination of Western imperialism, Israeli attacks, reactionary government repression and terrorist groups. Among other things we must end the U.S. blank check support of Israel, which is a constant source of anti-west sentiment.

And what about a U.S. military role? There may be rare situations where we would consider supporting some U.S. action: for instance, providing assistance to democratic forces who are facing ISIS/Daesh on the ground. Or participating in some coalition led by peoples of the region that has been sanctioned by the United Nations and follows international law. Even these possibilities are dicey given the history of U.S. 'mission creep.'

Progressives might well disagree with each other on the specifics of each particular case. But dealing with an exceptional case where a U.S. military role might be warranted is not our problem today. Rather we are faced with the uphill task of stopping the current use of substantial military force, from special operations to drones to flooding the region with arms to backing brutal reactionary regimes such as Saudi Arabia--as well as staving off the escalation of military action demanded by every Republican and some Democratic presidential candidates.

We will also need to combat the rightwing illusion that perfect security is achievable. No amount of military action abroad or surveillance at home can completely prevent the occasional eruption of violence or terrorist attacks motivated by reactionary religious fundamentalism. We need to challenge the simpleminded reduction of safety and security to ending terrorism--to the exclusion of good jobs, housing, equality and justice, peace in our neighborhoods and homes, and environmental sustainability.

4. Combat racist Islamophobia and immigrant bashing; defend basic civil liberties and multicultural democracy. We should more purposefully and regularly promote strong

relationships, understanding and common cause among people of different faiths, ethnicities, sexual identities and racial groups in the course of fighting for social justice. Multiculturalism is not just for mushy liberals; it is a crucial necessity for winning racial justice and building a democratic society. If terrorist attacks continue, the right's unconstitutional proposals to repress Muslims and immigrants will increase and possibly resonate much further.

Final Thoughts

The danger of continued foreign terrorist attacks is clear and present as is the urgency of a strong social justice movement that can help build a wide and powerful anti-right alliance for 2016 and beyond. Terrorism, the far right run amok and the possibility of strong rightward moves by mainstream Democrats underscore the need for progressives to make a big turn: to both broaden our social justice agenda to peace and safety at home as well as abroad, and to strengthen our attention and link all issues to the leading edges of struggle: war and racism. This will not be a quick or easy process, but it is a necessary one if we are to emerge as a significant force for social progress and against the right.

The 2016 election season has already been a donnybrook, replete with unexpected twists and turns. Now foreign terrorist attacks, and the prospect of more, have thrust an explosive dynamic into U.S. politics, electoral and non-electoral. The far right has radicalized another notch and ratcheted up its bellicose and racist rhetoric. It is implicitly sanctioning – sometimes outright encouraging--both police and vigilante violence against opponents. Still the far right has deepened its domination of the Republican Party, gained a broader hearing from the public than ever, and pulled the whole political spectrum to the right. The result is that it is now possible to glimpse a potential path for an extremist Republican to win the White House. And it is also possible to envision scenarios where a “mainstream conservative Republican” or Democrat will escalate U.S. military involvement in the Middle East (or Asia) with disastrous results, especially since Congress is firmly in the hands of the Republicans.

But political polarizations don't always produce the results that demagogues intend. The U.S. public is scared of ISIS-linked terrorism, but it is also weary of ground wars in the Middle East and worried about the economic future of their families. Much of the public is appalled by the naked bigotry and sheer dishonesty of the far right. Progressives can tap into these sentiments and appeal to peoples' “better angels” as well as their better judgement if we can craft a clear and inter-linked foreign and domestic political program and message.

We will need to learn by doing. If we can stay at it through our inevitable mistakes and shortcomings, we could become a real factor in 2016 and make strides toward building the program, strategy and alliances necessary to become a force to be reckoned with now and in the future.

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Talking Points

Terrorism in the name of Islam aimed at the U.S. is a monster of our own invention.

There were no terrorist attacks in the U.S. carried out by Muslims or Arabs prior to the first Iraq war of 1991.

Short-sighted, wrong-headed military interventions created the problem. The same approach cannot be expected to solve it. It will exacerbate it instead.

The only thing we can be completely sure of in this extremely volatile and complex situation is that, the more we bomb and invade, the more we create the conditions that encourage a turn toward terrorist tactics.

A problem of longstanding and tangled roots demands the development of long-range thinking and carefully considered solutions, i.e., the opposite of bomb them into oblivion.

In a world of near universal access to assault weaponry, absolute safety from terrorism, either domestic or foreign-inspired, is, unfortunately, illusory.

Our first priority should be strong opposition to the escalation of U.S., European and Russian military intervention in the region.

A second, critical priority is the support and protection of anti-autocratic, anti-terrorist voice and leadership in the region – including both Muslims and secularists – over the very long term.

A third priority is the development of multiple, long-term diplomatic initiatives aimed at isolating ISIS/Daesh, protecting civilian populations and restoring a measure of stability to the region.

A fourth priority is to stem the tide of weapons into the region, as well as easy access to assault weapons here at home.

A fifth priority is to welcome and provide for refugees fleeing the horrors of war.

There are two scenarios that may warrant limited military action: (1) the pursuit and capture (not assassination) of specific individuals who have committed terrorist acts; and (2) multi-lateral action, under international law, for the protection of civilians subject to genocidal attack.

Terrorism in the name of Islam will persist until there is a qualitative realignment of religious, political and military forces in the Middle East. The U.S. cannot lead or force that realignment.

We should demand that our government develop solutions to the problem of terrorism that are not solely or principally reliant on military action. We have already proven, time and again, that militarism is the source of the problem, not a solution to it.