

July 01, 2016, 03:11 pm

# Trump's torture stance is bad counterterrorism policy

By Ivan Sascha Sheehan, contributor



Getty

Recent **terrorist attacks** in the U.S. and Europe have struck a nerve in the U.S. and renewed security concerns that must be taken seriously.

But torture is not the answer. And barbarism should never be construed as resolve.

Presumptive Republican nominee **Donald Trump's** renewed **calls for torture** in the wake of a trio of deadly suicide attacks at Istanbul's Atatürk Airport on June 28 are not just illegal under domestic and international law; they undermine U.S. security interests.

The rhetoric also reinforces concerns by **prominent Republicans** that Trump lacks the temperament necessary to occupy the Oval Office and that he must do more to persuade **national security conservatives** that he is listening to their counsel.

Bipartisan members of the **military**, intelligence, legal, policy and human rights communities have widely criticized the utility of torture as a counterterrorism tool. Evidence-based counterterrorism scholars who work with open-source terrorism incident data also routinely dismiss the tactic as ineffective.

Simply put: Torture makes for bad counterterrorism. Whatever its merits in terms of intelligence, the overall effect of torture is counterproductive.

Insights from a variety of literatures suggest that the impact of force, as a counterinsurgent or counterterrorist strategy, is mitigated by other variables including the level of force, the discrimination of the force used, an expansion of issues and parties, changes in information and misinformation, and — most importantly for Trump — whether force disintegrates into "barbarism," i.e., torture.

When force disintegrates into barbarism in asymmetric conflicts, as it was shown to do in footage released in 2003 depicting abuse and humiliation of Iraqis at Abu Ghraib prison, the negative effects are magnified. The photographs of U.S. soldiers and CIA personnel abusing Iraqi prisoners was not simply, as Fareed Zakaria (2005) put it, just "bad public relations":

Ask any soldier in Iraq when the general population really turned against the United States and he will say, 'Abu Ghraib.' A few months before the scandal broke, Coalition Provisional Authority polls showed Iraqi support for the occupation at 63 percent. A month after Abu Ghraib, the number was 9 percent.

The lesson: When you brutalize the enemy, there are negative consequences.

And the implications can be long-lasting. Consider that the anger born during the period of U.S. occupation continues to have security implications in the present (see the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, or ISIS).

Evidence-based analyses that I published in **2007** and **2009** concluded that during the period between the onset of the so-called War on Terror in October 2001 through December 2004 — a period when "enhanced interrogation techniques" were used against individuals deemed to be "enemy combatants" and when the U.S. embraced policies that indemnified U.S. officials in the event that torture was used by third-party countries provided U.S. officials did not intend for such torture to take place — there was a 74 percent increase in the number of transnational terrorist incidents and a 168 percent increase in the number of deadly incidents over and above the previous 8 3/4

years.

Prominent scholars, such as Andrew Mack and Thomas Schelling, have argued that the key variable in asymmetric conflicts is resolve or will. Larger nations lose those conflicts, including those against guerillas and terrorists, when their will falters. This argument, put forth in Mack's "Why Big Nations Lose Small Wars" in 1975, is consistent with rational choice models that posit that rational actors will back down or shift into lower-level violence in the face of superior force or signaling of force.

But resolve is not all that matters in countering terrorism. Ivan Arreguin-Toft has proposed that what is critical in such conflicts is "strategic interaction." In his analysis of more than 200 asymmetric conflicts, he found that strong actors employing "direct" methods of military force (attrition or blitzkrieg) almost always fared poorly against weak actors who used "indirect" methods (e.g., guerilla war or terrorism). He attributes these results to the fact that weak actors have the advantage of time whereas stronger actors risk looking incompetent. Also, strong actors may become impatient and resort to "barbarism," i.e., a violation of traditional laws of war (e.g., indiscriminate bombings, rape, murder, or torture). In such instances powerful actors lose credibility and their resolve is weakened.

Suicide attacks are the most lethal form of terrorism and studies suggest that they are pursued because they are effective in as many as 50 percent of the cases in which they are used. Consider, for example, that the tactic was effective in compelling American and French military forces to leave Lebanon in 1983, Israeli forces to abandon Lebanon in 1985, and Israeli forces to quit the Gaza Strip and West Bank in 1994 and 1995. The tactic was also temporarily effective in getting the Sri Lankan government to tolerate a de facto Tamil state between 1990 and 2009, when the Tamil "state" was crushed, and getting the Turkish government to grant autonomy to Kurds in the late 1990s.

As scholars develop fresh insights into the problem of **suicide terrorism** and the best means to counter it, it is important that policymakers not pursue strategies that have proven less than effective or ones that will increase the terror threat.

Writing in the 18th century, the Prussian general and military theorist Carl Von Clausewitz observed that "There are very few men — and they are the exceptions — who are able to think and feel beyond the present moment."

The Republican candidate may be tapping present emotions in the wake of despicable acts of violence to appeal to voter anger, but his recommendations will lead to a world more victim to the violence he purports to counter.

Candidates in both parties need to understand that torture is not just wrong. It also leads to ineffective counterterrorism policy.

**Sheehan** is director of the graduate program in Global Affairs and Human Security in the School of Public and International Affairs at the University of Baltimore. Follow him [@ProfSheehan](#).

**TAGS: Donald Trump, Torture, Terrorism, counterterrorism, suicide bomber, suicide bombing**

The Hill 1625 K Street, NW Suite 900 Washington DC 20006 | [202-628-8500](tel:202-628-8500) tel | 202-628-8503 fax

The contents of this site are ©2016 Capitol Hill Publishing Corp., a subsidiary of News Communications, Inc.

---