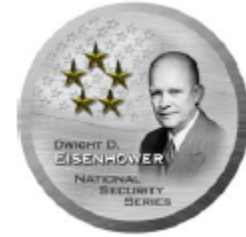




**Woodrow Wilson
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Meeting the Challenge of Islamist Militancy: A Counter-Epidemic Approach

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Speakers: **Paul Stares**, Vice President and Director of Research and Studies, United States Institute of Peace
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This meeting, jointly sponsored by the Woodrow Wilson Center's Division of International Studies and Middle East Program, the RAND Corporation, and the U.S. Army's Eisenhower National Security Series, was part of an ongoing series on terrorism and homeland security.

The 9/11 Commission report's conclusions highlighted that the United States lacks a long-term strategy to address the generational challenge posed by Islamist terrorism. No post-9/11 analogue exists to the Cold War-era strategy of containment. The reasons stem both from the complexity of the challenge (specifically the difference between a state-based threat like the Soviet Union and a transnational actor such as Al Qaeda) and the complexity of the response. As a result, no consensus exists on strategic goals and priorities, on a systemic conception of the challenge, and on a comprehensive integrated response.

To inform the current policy debate, Paul Stares and Mona Yacoubian have developed a novel methodological approach that analogizes from the discipline of epidemiology to address Islamist militancy as a global social contagion. The classic epidemic model focuses on the interaction between the *agent*, the *host*, and the *environment* (factors conducive to the transmittal of the disease). In this application, Islamist militant ideology is the agent, terrorist cells and organizations are the hosts, and an amalgam of political, economic, and social conditions comprise the hospitable environment. The most significant trend in the evolution of Islamist militancy over the last 25 years has been the rise of transnational Islamist militant groups with a global agenda (e.g., Al Qaeda). A major future danger is that these new transnational groups will align with nationalist Islamist militant groups such as Hamas and Hizbollah.

Counter-epidemic strategies focus on preventing the epidemic from gaining critical mass and momentum, protecting the at-risk population, and eliminating the infectious agent. Extending the epidemic analogy, a counter-terrorism strategy should seek to contain and contract Islamist militancy networks ("marginalize the militants"), to protect and promote high-risk communities in the Muslim world ("mobilize the moderates"), and to reassure and renew the Muslim world

("diminish the divide"). The strategy should sever the links between agent, host, and environment in order to deny the militants the channels of recruitment and mobilization. That will entail developing "ideological antidotes" to challenge Islamist militancy, destroying and disrupting terrorist cells and organizations (as well as holding out the possibility of "political rehabilitation" for those who renounce terrorism), and addressing the conditions that create a fertile environment for the spread of Islamist militancy through "societal immunization." The aim is to separate and isolate the militants, while contracting the pool of individuals (so-called "susceptibles") who might be drawn into terrorist organizations or activities.