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Commentary: Defeating terrorism

By Alon Ben-Meir and Jason Ben-Meir
UNITED PRESS INTERNATIONAL

New York, NY, Jun. 28 (UPI) -- To prevent new attacks, and ultimately defeat terrorism, the next administration must develop a comprehensive strategy comprised of 10 critical domestic and international policy agendas on which it must act. The following is the third of 10 policy papers:

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Sustainable projects: Critical to combating terrorism

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The war on terrorism must be waged on a number of fronts. A major objective in this many-pronged response must be to prevent terrorist organizations from easily recruiting future generations of terrorists. For these efforts to be successful, we must lift many Arab and Islamic nations out of their endemic poverty through sustainable participatory-development projects. Only if the United States commits itself fully to such initiatives will we impede the spread of international terrorism and stand a chance of eventually defeating it.

In December 2002, Secretary of State Colin Powell, speaking before an audience at the Heritage Foundation, remarked on the emergence of Islamic extremist movements:

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"A shortage of economic opportunities is a ticket to despair. Combined with rigid political systems, it is a dangerous brew indeed."

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Given the increasingly dangerous world we live in, few would argue with this assessment. To many, however, the real question remains: Is the international community, led by the United States, willing to offer real economic assistance to the poor nations of the Islamic world in the form of aid that directly reaches communities and those most vulnerable to heeding the call of terrorist groups?

The situation in this regard is acute and worsening fast. America, which had been among the top donor nations, has fallen to No. 22, below the Western European countries and Japan. According to Robert J. Lieber of Georgetown University, a leading researcher on aid to poor nations, during the Kennedy presidency, the United States spent 1 percent of its gross domestic product on aid to undeveloped nations. Under President George W. Bush, aid has declined to 0.2 percent and comprises about 4.5 percent of the Defense Department's annual budget.

In Afghanistan alone, we spend nearly \$1 billion a month on military operations and \$25 million on aid. What has further aggravated the situation is that we now provide aid to underdeveloped nations on the condition that the money be spent on services or materials mostly provided by U.S. companies, which limits a recipient nation's ability to deploy the aid where it chooses. In addition, our aid often goes to serve our own political interests rather than to the eradication of poverty.

Globalization, which during the 1990s created trillions of dollars in wealth for the industrialized nations, left more than 2 billion people, mostly in Africa and Asia, poorer than in the two previous decades -- earning on the average less than \$1 a day. According to some, foreign aid has been

used to line the pockets of corrupt officials and support vain projects, military build-ups or strictly geopolitical outcomes. If, instead, Western countries vigorously supported sustainable projects in Islamic nations, an era of regional stability and international security would ensue.

Throughout the winter and spring of 2003, community members, government officials and non-governmental organization representatives met in the high Atlas Mountains, south of Marrakech, Morocco. The villages in this region are among Morocco's poorest, with extremely high rates of infant mortality (mostly due to unclean drinking water), illiteracy, and joblessness. Local dependence on fuel-wood for cooking and on grazing animals as the main source of income has contributed to massive deforestation and mountain erosion.

The 2003 meetings resulted in a \$10 million development plan for the region. When funded, the plan would significantly help secure the economic, educational, health and environmental future of 50,000 people by establishing projects in potable water, modern irrigation, fruit and forestry tree planting, school construction, women's cooperatives, food production, mountain terracing and water-generated electricity. Such an outcome is not improbable -- rather, the opposite. In general, community-wide participation in the design and management of development projects creates socioeconomic progress through a pluralist democratic process because communities have a strong incentive to maintain the projects created by their own members.

Case studies from almost every country show that local and national self-reliance is fostered when communities collaboratively design and implement projects to better their lives. Self-reliance is generated because interactive dialogue among community members draws forth information from a variety of perspectives,

thus increasing the ability of participants to make informed decisions. Self-reliance is also encouraged when projects are developed that, based on local capacities and know-how, actually restructure the local economy.

In contrast, in Iraq and Afghanistan, the billions spent in reconstruction projects handed over to foreign companies disempower local communities. In the process, they foster resentment toward the international coalition, particularly the United States.

Rarely do projects requested by local leaders emerge after a genuine process of community participation. Lessons from development interventions around the world over decades indicate that the long-term sustainability of projects is undermined by this type of development assistance.

Indigenous capacities to manage development are simply unable to reach their potential when local people are not in full control of rebuilding major sectors of their own economic life. Sustained development and genuine reconstruction require establishing projects designed by entire local communities.

This is why funding projects across Iraq and Afghanistan developed by local communities through facilitated interactive dialogue will significantly facilitate economic and political transformation in only a few years. And in both countries, the process will also marginalize secular and religious extremists and terrorists.

Members of the community, local teachers, government and NGO personnel, among others, can all be effective facilitators of meetings once they receive training in techniques of consensus building and in organizing interactive dialogues.

Inclusive direct dialogue among community members -- including women -- in planning local development is an inherently political

process. Community empowerment occurs through a gradual, non-violent and, as examples show, widely accepted process because of the many collective and individual short- and long-term benefits the community experiences. As people gain their own interests, they feel less alienation and greater tolerance because the underlying conditions that fuel extremism are being directly addressed. Those affected are then less likely to channel hatred toward outside players.

Additionally, in the Muslim world, as the majority of people in communities, regions and nations come to enjoy the benefits of the local development approach, the more emboldened will they become to fight domestic extremism.

With the Muslim world's public perception of America at an all-time low, an October 2003 State Department-sponsored study of U.S. public diplomacy in the Muslim world reported that Egyptians are thankful to the Japanese for funding their opera house, but were "unaware that the United States funded Cairo's sewer, drinking water and electrical systems and played a key role in reducing infant mortality."

If communities are fully engaged in the design, implementation and management of projects that influence their daily lives, then foreign aid as a tool of public diplomacy will be effective. Such clearly has not always been the case in the state-to-state aid the United States has provided, not only to Egypt, but also to other countries such as Jordan.

Communities are generally not involved in determining the investments funded by the United States, and thus the public is unaware of the magnitude of the foreign aid given to their nation. In contrast, American support of locally designed projects generates enormous public goodwill and thus is an excellent form of public diplomacy.

By engaging whole communities, these projects make people feel they are involved in a development process that is for once responsive to their needs. This perception engenders in the beneficiaries feelings of trust and acknowledgement toward those organizations and agencies that have made such an experience possible, including the providers of financial assistance. Further, the trust that is built offers the opportunity for the United States to explain its intentions in the Middle East to a more receptive audience.

Compelling evidence suggests that if the international community significantly increased financial support for community-based economic development managed by local communities, millions of people would be able to realize opportunities that seemed impossible. International relations and security would be significantly strengthened, extremism marginalized and a horrific clash between the Muslim world and the West averted.

Wealth and poverty are relative terms; a family of four in America that lives on an annual income of \$12,000 is considered poor, as defined by their living below the U.S. poverty line. In contrast, a similar family in Bangladesh or Namibia that lives on \$300 a year is also poor, as defined by its members living under their nation's poverty line. The dollar's multiple-buying power in Third-World nations can, therefore, virtually revolutionize the socio-economic conditions for many.

For example, in a typical Third-World country, \$5,000 can provide clean water for a village of 400 to 500 people and directly decrease child mortality. On average, 100 fruit trees can provide an income for a family of five for one year. Fifty to 70 cents can buy a tree ready to be planted, and \$5,000 can buy 10 incubators to hatch chicken eggs, thereby creating wealth within 6 months for an entire village of 500 people, sharing their expertise through community groups working together.

On a larger scale, we must increase our foreign aid, at a minimum, to 1 percent of our GDP, or to about \$120 billion annually, channeling these funds to sustainable projects through already existing agencies that at present lack the resources to expand operations.

Among these organizations are the U.S. International Development Agency, the World Bank, the Peace Corps (which can be quadrupled in size), a variety of relevant U.N. agencies, and other non-governmental organizations. We should also provide tax incentives to American corporations that, operating internationally, allocate money to sustainable projects.

The following five initiatives will encourage broad participation in the design, management and support of development projects in communities throughout a Third-World nation.

-- Establish agencies of coordination. A major challenge to achieving inclusive participation in local development is bringing all interested parties into the dialogue process. An "agency of coordination" is an administrative framework that organizes and facilitates meetings among communities, government agencies, and NGOs for planning and implementing development. It has the flexibility to operate at local, provincial, national, and international levels to negotiate partnerships promoting community objectives. The composition of the agency would be determined by the host country through a trusted intermediary, who would establish the initial direct contact.

-- Set up community development planning and training centers. Situated in the communities and locally managed, the centers will facilitate an interactive process that helps communities to determine their priority goals and then to design and implement projects to achieve them. Centers also provide training in facilitation, modern agriculture, health, fundraising, and other skills desired by the local population.

They are also able to assist in reconciling conflicts among diverse groups and can play a key role in the reconstruction of entire countries like Iraq and Afghanistan.

-- Nurture democratization. Two fundamental principles of pluralist democracy are the dispersion of power toward the interior (localities) and the inclusion of all social groups in decision-making. Agencies of coordination and community planning as well as training centers are pluralist democratic institutions because they strengthen the capacities of communities to manage their own development. They are also powerful vehicles for promoting democracy through development assistance. Developing this kind of leadership sets the stage for internal political transformation. Delaying too long in building democracy through development assistance in post-conflict areas such as Iraq and Afghanistan only allows government officials to become more entrenched and unwilling to give up any of their power.

-- Implement fruit and forestry tree planting and irrigation improvements. Around the world, tree planting is regularly identified by rural and urban communities as a top priority. Trees provide income and jobs, while enhancing food production and protecting the environment. Modern irrigation maximizes the utility of water supplies, increases yield, lays a foundation for potable water, and, by bringing water to land once barren, creates the opportunity for the construction of schools, clinics, and other service centers. In addition, planting a tree is considered an "act of faith" in Islam and as such can engender genuine trust between local people and funding agencies.

-- Fund community development. Foreign assistance in the form of funding community-designed projects across the Muslim world is of paramount importance; the extremely high success rate of these projects will allow the United States and its partners to help achieve long-term peace and progress. America must take the lead

and pay its allocated share, thereby encouraging other nations, equally affected by international terrorism, to follow. From these seeds, a multinational initiative could grow. Right now, there is evidence of public support within the nations that give aid for increasing their contributions. This new and radical approach -- a shift from large-scale aid to governments themselves or in the form of massive state-controlled projects -- to smaller, community-directed initiatives across countries -- will reap revolutionary benefits.

Supporting communities to reach their self-described goals will marginalize secular and religious extremists, strengthen international security and improve our image worldwide, particularly in Islamic countries. In providing a vehicle for successful public diplomacy, the United States will foster an environment receptive to mutual understanding on broader geopolitical issues.

These profound benefits are achievable by communities advancing socio-economically via a pluralist democratic process. By transforming the economic and political landscape, this process can bring peace and prosperity to millions. The United States should make funding of community-initiated development its highest priority and so open the door to a new era of Western-Islamic relations.

There are those who argue that we are not in a position to provide massive help to underdeveloped, especially Islamic, nations because we cannot meet our own needs. American public schools are crumbling; millions of our own children are living without health care, with many of these also going to sleep hungry; crime remains an enormous problem; and the burdens of the inner cities continue to fray our social fabric. Most of these ailments stem from terrible mismanagement of our economic resources, and to a lesser extent, the forces of free market that inadvertently leave many behind.

But even if we were to provide healthcare to every American child, rebuild and well-equip every school, and eliminate poverty, these achievements -- great and desirable as they are -- would not guarantee our long-term national and economic security or make us immune to terrorism.

Addressing these issues is critical, but to end international terrorism, we must allocate the necessary resources to lift other nations from poverty and dependence on extremist groups or rogue states that harbor deep-seated hatred and animosity toward us. If we fail to rise to this awesome task and responsibility, the increased poverty, despondency and hopelessness of hundreds of millions in many underdeveloped Arab and Muslim nations will plague us; the terrorism of today will pale before that of the future.

This nation's history, especially in the 20th century, offers a vivid reminder of what happens when we decide to marshal our national resources, be it to wage war against Nazi Germany, raise Europe from the ashes of World War II, or bring about the demise of the Soviet Union. In each of these enterprises, we showed our formidable capacity to accomplish "miracles."

The war on terrorism is not only global; it is increasingly showing signs of being a religious war, or at the least, an ominous clash of cultures. We must change our ways of thinking about our approach toward the Arab and Muslim worlds and begin a new era and a new dialogue with sustainable participatory development at its center.

No victory against terrorism is possible if millions of men, women and children continue to be added daily to the ranks of the suffering and the disdained. In the end, it is by restoring human dignity to those who have lost their human face and who feel they have no place left to go that we will win the war on terrorism and build a relation of mutual respect with those who

currently see us as their enemy.

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