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How Education Can Help Decrease Terrorism

By Tony Blair

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In November, I spoke at the United Nations Security Council for the first time in 13 years. It struck me how different the mood is now. In September 2000, the world seemed very different. We were trying to articulate the new security order in the decade after the fall of the Berlin Wall. Of course there were challenges. But the atmosphere was light, even positive, as we discussed eradicating poverty in the developing world.

This time, the mood was dark. And the first days of 2014 have made it darker still. Scroll down any day's news summary, and you find stories of terrorism and violence perpetrated in the cause of a false view of religion. Some of it is committed by nonstate actors, and some of it by state actors. But all of it is committed in the context of division and conflict defined by differences of religious faith.

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This is the new struggle of the 21st century. We will not win it unless we fight its root causes as well as its ghastly consequences.

Today, in an arc that stretches from the Far East through the Middle East to the streets of cities in Europe and the U.S., we face a scourge that has taken innocent lives, scarred communities and destabilized countries. It is a threat that is constantly evolving, growing and mutating to counter our fight against it.

The extremists propagating this violence have networks of outreach to young people and know the power of education, whether formal or informal. Extremists are filling young minds with the belief that anyone who disagrees is an enemy — and God's enemy.

The security debate has understandably often focused on the consequences. After an attack, states consider immediate security measures. Terrorists are hunted down. Then we get back to our daily lives, until the next time it happens.

But lasting change depends on dealing with the root causes of extremism. Of course politics plays its part. And the extremists are good at jumping on the back of political grievances. But the soil in which they plant the seeds of hate is fertilized with ignorance.

That is why we need to start thinking of education as a security issue.

The extremists justify killing in the name of God. This is an obscene perversion of proper religious faith. It is a menace, both for the harm that it does directly and for the damaging division and sectarianism that it nurtures indirectly. Every killing is a human tragedy. But it also causes a chain reaction of bitterness and hatred. There is real fear in the communities plagued by such extremism, fear that paralyzes normal life and pushes people away from each other.

Globalization is intensifying and multiplying this extremism. Not limited by borders, it can spring up anywhere. We are more connected than at any point in human history, and more people come into contact with those who are different from them. So the need to respect a neighbor who is not like you is much greater. At the same time, however, the scope to identify him or her as an enemy is also greater.

And this is not only about Islamic extremism. There are extremist acts perpetrated against Muslims because of their religion, and today there are fanatical Christians, Jews, Hindus and Buddhists who disfigure the true nature of their faith.

That is why education in the 21st century is a security issue for all of us. The challenge is to show young people who are vulnerable to appeals from terrorists that there is a better path to having their voice heard, a more meaningful way to engage with the world.

The good news is that we know how to do this. I use my Faith Foundation only as one example.

Our schools program promotes cross-cultural dialogue among students aged 12 to 17 around the world. Reaching students in more than 20 countries, our program connects students via a secure website, where they interact from their classrooms under the guidance of trained teachers.

Through facilitated video conferences, students discuss global issues from a variety of faith and belief perspectives. They gain the dialogue skills required to prevent conflict by breaking down religious and cultural stereotypes. For schools in the poorest areas, we use special arrangements because they cannot access the Internet themselves.

To be sure, we are only a drop in the ocean. But we now have experience in more than 1,000 schools. More than 50,000 students have been taught, and we are working in countries as diverse as Pakistan, India, the U.S., Jordan, Egypt, Canada, Italy, the Philippines and Indonesia. I have been privileged to witness these students becoming at ease with the cultures, faiths and beliefs that inspire so many people around the world.

There are many other fantastic examples of this type of work. But they lack the resources, weight and recognition that they need.

We need to mobilize to defeat extremism. And we need to act globally. All governments must take seriously their responsibility to educate young people to accept and respect people of different faiths and cultures.

There is no issue that is more pressing. There is a real danger that religious conflict replaces the ideologically based struggles of the last century in an equally devastating form.

It is up to all of us to show people that we have a better idea than the extremists have: to learn from each other and live with each other. And this needs to be a core part of young people's education.

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