



BGS Senior Counselor Secretary Leon Panetta And Former British Prime Minister Tony Blair To Launch A Commission On Countering Violent Extremism

Tony Blair, Leon Panetta to launch antiterrorism commission

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By Elise Viebeck

Former British prime minister Tony Blair and former U.S. Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta are launching a commission on violent extremism that will aim to help the next U.S. administration counter radicalization among Muslims.

The soon-to-launch effort, which also hopes to guide European leaders, will unite experts to study extremist groups like the Islamic State and recommend ways to blunt their appeal among disaffected youth. It is being sponsored by the CSIS Commission on Countering Violent Extremism.

Commission organizers said they plan to produce a report by the end of July to coincide with the Republican and Democratic political conventions, where party nominees will be decided.

“Whoever is the next president is going to have to deal with this,” Blair said Sunday during an interview in Washington.

“I want to produce a practical policy handbook ... something that, if I was sitting in office today, would give me a comprehensive view of the different dimensions of this issue.”

Panetta, who led the CIA from 2009 to 2011, said government leaders do not yet fully understand the problem.

“We haven’t been very effective at developing a strategy to reduce the allure of extreme ideologies both at home and abroad, to understand what we can do to undermine this narrative that attracts so many recruits to violence,” he said in a phone interview on Friday.

The problem of competing for the hearts and minds of Muslim youth has dogged experts for years. But the rapid rise of the Islamic State, also known as ISIS, and recent attacks in Paris and San Bernardino have made a solution more urgent for world leaders.

Radical Islam has also become a topic of discussion on the presidential campaign trail.

Amid a contentious primary, Republican frontrunner Donald Trump has vowed to “quickly and decisively bomb the hell out of ISIS ... [so] no one will mess with us.” At one campaign event, candidate Ted Cruz said he would “carpet bomb” ISIS “into oblivion.”

“I don’t know if sand can glow in the dark, but we’re going to find out,” Cruz said.

While declining to criticize the candidates directly, Panetta lamented the “simplistic solutions” offered on the campaign trail and suggested the commission could broaden the debate.

“It is is our nature to want to hear simple solutions to complex problems,” Panetta said. “But the reality is that this threat, which I think is a clear and present danger, requires a much more thoughtful and comprehensive approach.”

Blair argued that Republicans’ plans to counter to ISIS with vast bombing campaigns are unwise.

“Anything that ends up alienating a large part of the Muslim world is counterproductive. So let’s be clear: We need allies in this fight, and they are our allies. They’re also the biggest victims of this terrorism.”

“The religion of Islam in its nature is peaceful and honorable and has

made great contributions to the world,” he added.

For Panetta, the venture represents a kind of unfinished business in Washington. Since 2013, the former congressman has been retired in California, running his Panetta Institute for Public Policy and tending his walnut farm. Few expected him to return to D.C. for commission work.

“Whether it was a Republican or Democratic administration, I think a lot of the response to the terrorism threat has been based on the crisis of the moment,” said Panetta, who has criticized President Obama’s leadership on foreign policy. “What we have not done is taken in the bigger picture of violent extremism and tried to understand the root causes.”

Asked what would constitute success for his effort, Panetta called it a “damn good question.”

“A lot of these commission reports have stayed on the shelves for a long time,” he said, pointing to the failure of the 2010 Simpson-Bowles deficit commission to produce reforms. “But history tells us that if we care enough about a problem we’re confronting, that ultimately we can find a way to deal with it. For that reason, I think this effort is worth it.”

The commission’s executive director is Shannon Green, a former Obama administration official who worked on the National Security Council and in the U.S. Agency for International Development. Green is director and senior fellow with the CSIS Human Rights Initiative.

Members will include academics, former government officials and several technology leaders, including Microsoft President Brad Smith and Google general counsel Kent Walker. The presence of tech executives speaks to the need to counter ISIS and other groups online, where they maintain vast recruitment and radicalization networks, organizers said.

Blair, who served as prime minister during the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, and was criticized for involving British troops in the invasion of Iraq, works on issues of radicalization at his Tony Blair Faith Foundation.

Officials at CSIS called him a natural fit to lead a commission on violent extremism.

He argued against using the term “clash of civilizations,” a favorite of GOP presidential candidate Marco Rubio, to describe conflicts between the West and extreme versions of Islam.

“I don’t think it’s accurate,” he said. “The majority people in Islam want to counter this. ... It’s a tragedy that their religion is hijacked by the extremists but that’s a reality that we have to face and have to deal with.”