

Danger of Islamist Terrorism: Be Not Afraid

by Michael Curtis (April 2016)

No good deed goes unpunished. The campaign by the U.S., Western countries, Kurds, and Russia against ISIS has succeeded up to a point. ISIS, the self-created Islamic Caliphate is shrinking. It has lost about 40 per cent of the territory it held in Iraq, and 20 per cent in Syria, and lost cities including Mosul, Ramadi, and Palmyra, the UNESCO World Heritage Site, and is in danger of losing Raqqa. However, as a result, ISIS has changed its priority. Its objective now is to increase influence, not expand territory, and to export terrorism.

The ISIS Caliphate poses a greater danger to the world by sending its critical mass of foreign fighters, who swear allegiance to ISIS, back home to their countries to become sleeper cells, preparing to inflict mass casualties in cities in their own country.

In Britain, MI5 reports that 25 serious attacks are being planned by at least 50 of the 450 jihadists who have returned to the country. Spain has received threats primarily because it had ended Muslim rule in Andalusia in 1492 after Muslims had ruled there since 711. The danger is serious because of the high degree of organization and logistical skills manifested by the jihadists, and their ability to obtain weapons. The terrorists killed and arrested in Brussels in March 2016 had an arsenal of home made bombs, containing chemicals, nails, and screws. What is frightening is the increasing skill and sophistication of the jihadists in mounting attacks, and ability to use encryption for electronic communication.

Indiscriminate random Islamist terrorism is not new. It was evident in the attacks on the Paris Metro in 1995, and the attacks on U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in 1995. What is new is the increase in the scale of the Islamist challenge. Optics are important and the belief that Islamist extremism is winning attracts people. A Western particularly U.S. administration policy of restraint is not sufficient to meet and overcome that challenge.

Expressions of anger and outrage, though understandable, are not enough. French Prime Minister Manuel Valls has used the right vocabulary in speaking of "war" against the Islamist challenge. That approach is not an expression of unwarranted fear, or an exaggerated response to what has been regarded by some in the U.S. administration as simply "political violence." To respond strongly to the challenge of those who seek death for themselves and for innocent people is not to take ill-judged and counterproductive actions.

For some time western European countries have been targeted, largely because of their diversity and considerable Muslim population that makes them an easy target. In those countries ISIS terror cells are present. More than 31,000 foreigners from 129 countries have gone to Syria and Iraq to fight for ISIS , and of these more than 400 fighters have been sent from Syria to Europe to carry out multiple attacks. Their task has been made easier by the Schengen open borders arrangement allowing free movement between countries, thus allowing terrorists to move around freely, making the task of policing difficult.

Though western liberals and leftists are reluctant to acknowledge it, western democratic countries are in for a long war. The list of major cities attacked continues: Madrid in 2004, London in July 2005, Paris in November 2015, Brussels on May 24, 2014 and again in March 22, 2016. The terrorists are likely to strike anywhere in the world. Their goal is destruction, not integration into democratic societies.

It is particularly poignant that terror has been inflicted a number of times on Brussels, the de facto capital of Europe because it is the site of both the EU and NATO, that has in effect become the jihadist capital where terrorist attacks have been planned and the terrorists have hidden,

The essential problem is that Europeans have been reluctant to adopt a unified response to the terrorist threat and have found it difficult to agree on the migrant crisis. It is clear that some supposed migrants seeking refuge in Europe have been terrorists in disguise. Arrests have shown that two of the attackers in Paris in November 2015 entered Europe, from Greece to Belgium and France, by claiming to be refugees.

Europe does not have enough police resources to trace the false immigrants. But it also needs to recognize that the issue is not a police problem but a national

security problem.

Events over recent months have demonstrated missed intelligence opportunities, and incompetence in handling of Islamist networks. One striking case involved Abdelhamid Abaaoud, a Belgian of Moroccan origin who organized a number of attacks in Belgium and France and was the mastermind of the Paris attack on November 13, 2015 that killed 130 people. European intelligence authorities could not detect he was linked to a number of international groups and to various terrorist acts such as the Paris-Amsterdam train attack, and attack on the Jewish museum in Brussels in 2014. He proclaimed he was proud of overcoming the "bloated image of the Crusader intelligence."

Another case relates to Salah Abdeslam, Belgium born French national of Moroccan descent, involved in and alleged ringleader of the attack on Paris. He was able to rent cars and hotel rooms, and received considerable support while a fugitive before he was arrested in Brussels on March 18, 2016. He was linked to 3 men posing as Syrian refugees in southern Germany before the Paris attacks.

European authorities acknowledge the inadequate performance of surveillance groups: the Club de Berne (European Security Services), Club de Madrid (European Intelligence Services), Europol, and the Situation in the European Commission. But Europol has not been successful in sharing information across the 28 states of the EU.

It is time for western leaders to recognize the true nature of the enemy. In the past early history of Islam the rulers imposed obligations and taxes on non-Muslims but did not demand their death. The Islamist extremists today are based on Salafism, the return to "true" Sunni Islam, the policy of "pious predecessors," stressing martyrdom and millennial aspirations, and espousing violence and jihadism.

ISIS targets individual citizens of democracies, countries that do not base public policy on religious principles. The terrorists have not only killed numerous innocent people, they are also changing the life and habits of democratic citizens, as some of whose habits might offend Islamist extremists.

Western countries must improve surveillance and policing, and this means sharing information in the effort to overcome and end terrorism. They must employ tactics to overcome it as France has done in adopting strong measures, such as

putting terrorist suspects under house arrest and giving the police authority to search premises without judicial warrants. Everyone is conscious that in democratic societies there must be an appropriate balance between civil liberties and security. But the overriding fact is that Islamist terrorists have forced war on the West. The root causes of Islamist terrorism are Islamist terrorists, and they must be ended.



Michael Curtis is the author of more than 35 books on the fields of political theory, comparative government, the Middle East, and European politics, but especially on the history of French political thought, focusing on the importance of that history to the development of political ideas in the rest of the world. In 2014, he was awarded *Chevalier* in the French [Legion of Honor](#) (*Légion d'honneur*), the highest decoration in France.

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