



405

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THE BROADER CONTEXT OF TERRORISM IN EUROPE

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More people were killed or injured in terrorist attacks on New York in 2001, Madrid in 2004 and London in 2005 but the perpetrators, who belonged to Al-Qaeda, were thwarted in further attempts they made to mount spectacular attacks. Since the terrorist attacks on Paris last year and Brussels last month, ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria) is a more potent threat. Unlike its predecessor, it does not hold out in the fastness of Afghanistan but has used the Syrian civil war to train more than 5,000 sympathisers and build a network to foment violence across Europe. We may bemoan the threat to our civil liberties than this has entailed, and wonder why such restrictions do not appear to have improved our security - so far.

It is important however that the response of political leaders should not increase alarm and spread more despondency. Unfortunately, it is often petulant, misinformed, and simply downright demagogic.

European political leaders, notably in France, have responded by staging a public debate which is framed in terms of a “war of identities”, if not a “war of civilisations”. Much of the media has responded eagerly. Home searches, house arrests of people suspected of salafism, increased surveillance has promoted a public discourse which stigmatises mosques and Islam. Our leaders forget the terrorists met in prison, not in mosques. Salah Abdeslam can be seen in videos drinking alcohol in a night club in Brussels recently. He may wrap himself in Islam, as General Franco waved the banner of the Catholic Church but that does not make him a true believer. The French prime minister is a keen player of this game but he is focusing on the wrong target. We certainly need surveillance and policing to be shared more effectively in Europe, we certainly need to degrade ISIS in Syria, Iraq and Libya but, as neither America nor the EU are prepared to put boots on the ground, we must prepare for the long haul.

The kamikaze that played a key role in both capitals were mostly well known to the French and Belgian police and security services. They belonged to networks of organised crime, be it theft, armed robbery or drugs which operate within the framework of poor ghettos where most young people are poorly educated and unemployment often runs to 50%. Over the past five years, they have often deviated towards an overtly religious inspired form of behaviour. Their basic mindset

does however seem to have been shaped by watching violent American video games which glamorise the bad guy and films on gangland rather than by any deep religious call. They have become local mafia bosses who operate in tightly knit ethnic communities where *omerta* is the rule, as is true in Sicily and was in Northern Ireland.

France's public discourse is out of kilter with reality. Religious radicalisation was a good take on what was going on in the 1990s – jihadist terrorists then had a revolutionary and anti-capitalist view of the world and were convinced that armed struggle was the answer to the ills of the world. In that they were not dissimilar to many extreme left-wing groups in Europe and America. The foot soldiers of this type of terrorism agreed with the thinking heads of al-Qaeda that the answer lay in returning to the ways of Islam as it was practised at the time of the prophet Muhammad.

By the turn of the millennium however two distinct phenomena had appeared. First those salafis who preached and practised a very radical "way of living" including women adopting the veil which was peaceful in intent even if when it offended most Europeans. The second was adopted by young men and women who do not speak classical Arabic and was closer to a "war of identities" than any religious theology. Lack of understanding of these two strands of thought and behaviour is characteristic of the reaction of many European political leaders and media. Furthermore, it mirrors the view of the world ISIS promotes – it amounts to falling into their propaganda trap.

Eschewing clichés is essential to any understanding of the wave of violence Europe is facing. The very word "radicalisation" refers to a police category not to an academic attempt to understand the peculiarity of jihadist commitment. This must be first of all placed in a broader context of social revolts which from Madrid to Occupy Wall Street have brought onto the streets of Europe and America hundreds of thousands of often young people protesting the growing income disparities brought upon by economic globalisation and the fall out of the 2008 financial crisis. These people felt they could no longer articulate their hopes and needs through traditional political parties, trade unions or churches. The Arab revolts for their part have resulted in huge disenchantment (Tunisia), bloody repression (Egypt) or bloody chaos (Yemen, Libya and Syria). Politicians in Europe, America and beyond appear incapable of providing solutions to ever more complicated problems which confront the people they rule or represent – hence the rise of xenophobic or separatist parties in the UK, France, Germany and Spain.

The corruption of national politicians in many European countries – most notably Belgium, Italy and Spain adds to the sense of disarray. Belgium appears very much as a failed state, where the security forces - whose resources are limited, and the courts are dysfunctional, where poorer people, including those who hailed from the ghetto of Molenbeek have no hope of a better future. Alongside such outsiders are an army of well paid European and NATO civil servants and well healed middle and upper middle class people who must appear to their poor neighbours like zombies from another planet.

The poorer districts of Brussels are not dissimilar from those which ring Paris except that in France there is a greater sense of belonging to a French nation than in Belgium; 15% of recruits to the French army are Muslim and none have deserted in recent years. As European political leaders conjure up new words to address problems they have often failed to acknowledge and still fail to understand, they are mercilessly ridiculed on social media. The more they tweet, the more they turn into caricatures and lose any sense of gravitas, a key element of authority for those in power.

Brussels has emerged as the jihadist centre of Europe after the British authorities clamped down on radical Islamic groups after the bombing of the London underground in 2005. Geographically, Europe's diplomatic capital is close to two major airport hubs (Frankfurt and Paris), two major ports (Antwerp and Rotterdam) and has excellent train connections. Weapons can be purchased much more easily in Belgium than in neighbouring countries. ISIS will be hard put to find such an attractive base from which to operate in the future.

Onto this rich soil have been thrown the seeds of trouble - endless TV and social media pictures of the brutalities of war in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya and Syria which western journalists are prone to portray as related to Islam when raw power politics are usually at play. Islam is conflated in so many ways by European, American and Arab politicians that one of the world's great religions has been turned into the ultimate cliché. For many in the West adherence to Islam explains why the Middle East has failed to adapt to the modern world, to democracy. Conversely, a deadly eschatology has taken root in the minds of some young men, mostly but not all Muslims who see no hope on this earth and crave martyrdom.

For decades now, Europe's political class and media, with some exceptions have underestimated the economic and social deprivation in their midst and not just that endured by their Muslim compatriots. They have underestimated the growth of jihadist movements. Others meanwhile have sought to promote a form of multiculturalism which explains and excuses forms of behaviour - *vis a vis* women in particular - which are far from admitted norms in Europe. They never stop apologising for Europe's colonial behaviour but fail to understand that there is a battle royal going on for the soul of many Arab, Berber, Turkish and Iranian people. They never mention the disastrous impact of Saudi Wahabism, an extreme form of Islam which a kingdom (one of their main purchasers of weapons) has spent an estimated \$50-70bn propagating across the world since the mosque in Medina was seized by fanatics in 1979.

Many Muslim men and women are fighting for greater separation between state and religion, greater personal freedom to express themselves and less conformity to old social rules. That multifaceted fight meshes in with what promises to be a bloody fight between and within Middle Eastern and North African states many of whose citizens want to belong to the modern world and to the growing viciousness of the Sunni Shia divide promoted by Saudi Arabia and ISIS. What happens to Europeans of Muslim descent is not only crucial to the future of Europe but will help define the future of the Middle East. The other key factor at play is that western counter terrorism strategy has failed. No where is this more lucidly explained than in David Kilcullen's *Blood Year* (Hurst 2016). This Australian officer who was seconded to Washington where he became Chief Strategist in the US Department of State's Bureau of Counterterrorism, has written a chilling account of 15 years of wasted money, lives and illusions. The sooner we admit our failure the better we will be in a position to understand the rise of ISIS and the terrorism which is devastating the Middle East and threatens our democratic ways in Europe. This book also points to an oft forgotten truth - soldiers can be more honest analysts than their political masters.