

How the West can crack down on Islamist terror

[Henry Ergas](#) 11:00PM November 6, 2020



French President Emmanuel Macron pays his respects by the coffin of Samuel Paty, a teacher who was beheaded for showing cartoons of the Prophet Mohamed in his civics class. Picture: AFP

As the West battles the coronavirus, the terror attacks in France and Austria come as a stark reminder of the threat for which there is neither a cure nor a vaccine. And the terrorists' choice of targets — a schoolteacher, decapitated for displaying a cartoon of the Prophet Mohammed; churchgoers in Nice, murdered for their Christian faith; innocent Viennese, shot as they enjoyed their evening close to the city's central synagogue — highlights every bit as starkly that threat's horrific nature.

At its origins lies the great transformation that occurred in the late 1980s. Until then, terrorism had been primarily political, with that coming out of the Middle East representing the last exhausted gasp of militant Arab

socialism.

Modelled on the “national liberation” movements of earlier years, groups such as George Habash’s Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine were unabashedly secular, with their goal being to destroy the states and regimes that, they claimed, stymied the aspirations of the Arab masses.

But as those movements withered, an even deadlier form of terrorism was emerging that, instead of having political objectives, cast the global struggle in existential terms. Spearheaded by Abdullah Azzam, Osama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri, its focus was only incidentally on hostile states and regimes; rather, it was on the civilisation that it believed immutably defined their character.

Repeated in innumerable sermons and manifestos, its Manichean view of the world was simple. On the one side stood the Jews, along with the Christians who, in launching “crusade” after “crusade”, were their stooges. On the other were the Muslims, reeling under the onslaught of the “Jewish-Crusader Alliance” and suffering “blows and massacres in every part of the world”.

Moreover, in attacking Muslims, the “Jewish-Crusader Alliance” was not motivated by political or economic goals. Rather, said bin Laden in 1996, it was driven by an implacable hostility against Islam, with its aim being nothing less than the “liquidation of the Muslims” and the devastation of their holiest sites.



People light candles at a makeshift memorial at the scene of a terror attack last Monday in which a gunman shot a number of people, on November 5. Picture: Getty

As a result, the conflict could be resolved only by a fight to the finish, whose end point would inevitably be Islam's triumph.

Since then, the Islamist movements those apocalyptic fantasies spawned have experienced myriad vicissitudes. But far from weakening, their ideological matrix has permeated ever deeper into the Muslim world, seeping, in one form or another, into the core beliefs of groups that stretch from the pietists of the Tablighi, through the Salafi and the Muslim Brotherhood, to the many varieties of jihadi.

And as well as a vast Sunni ecosystem, its crucial elements have been integrated into Shia Islam and are now central to the rhetoric of its powerful political offspring.

There is no reason to believe that those movements are about to go into retreat. They are, on the contrary, firmly entrenched in virtually every Western country, and — as Bernard Rougier and his colleagues recently showed in their detailed studies of France and its near neighbours — the

intense competition between them fuels their sustained expansion.

Additionally, the emergence of Recep Tayyip Erdogan's Turkey as an aggressive sponsor of the Muslim Brotherhood's growth in the West has directly increased the Islamists' reach and provoked the sponsors of rival groups to redouble their efforts, making that expansion all the greater.

And the Islamic countries' continuing — and in many places, worsening — woes have accentuated their leaders' attempts to cast Muslims as the victims of the West, while placating and seeking to control their own religious establishments. Yes, those leaders routinely condemn terrorism; their rhetoric, however, more often than not strengthens its legitimacy.

All that makes it certain that the attacks will continue and escalate. What is much less certain is whether the West can cope.

Nowhere are the difficulties clearer than in Europe, where the ongoing radicalisation of domestic Muslim communities, the return of hundreds of "foreign fighters" from Syria and other conflict zones, the release from jail of the first generations of jihadis, and the influx of illegal migrants from Central Asia, the Middle East and Africa are already imposing unsustainable burdens on policing capabilities.

Meanwhile, the courts, both at a national and at a European level, are compounding those pressures by overruling restrictions (such as the closure of Islamist mosques) that seek to curb the spread of terrorism and by hindering, where they cannot entirely prevent, the deportation of illegal aliens.

With well-funded non-government organisations — often backed by the churches whose clerics and members the Islamists wantonly murder — underwriting the challenges and campaigning against every attempt at eliminating the legal loopholes, the attacks are increasingly due to terrorists who were allowed to slip through the net.

It is hopelessly naive to think that those woolly-headed efforts will preserve liberal democracy. Rather, they are likely to do the exact opposite.

They will, to begin with, make fear ever more pervasive, giving added impetus to groups advocating draconian, often profoundly illiberal, restrictions on Islam and on Islamic communities.

At the same time, they will, on the other side of politics, strengthen the defeatists who, in their eagerness to pacify the Islamists, are ready to sacrifice core values such as the freedom of expression — having forgotten that plans to appease wolves by throwing them carcasses may start with other people's but invariably end with one's own.

And as those opposing forces clash, social cohesion risks being corroded to the breaking point, further undermining a fragile and bitterly divided West.

The alternative is a dose of realism. Liberal democracy is not a suicide pact: it is a system that, precisely because it rests on the solid foundations of the Western legal tradition, can tolerate the measures that are necessary to ensure its perpetuation.

Just as the Patriot Act did not herald the death of American freedom, so there is plenty more the Western countries could do to repress those whose goal is to butcher our citizens and extinguish our liberties. And there is also more that will need to be done to strike at the Islamists wherever they hide, while bringing the states that support them into line.

None of that will happen, however, without an unequivocal reaffirmation of the West's core beliefs and commitments. That is why the strong stance France's Emmanuel Macron and Austria's Sebastian Kurz have adopted merits Australia's unqualified support.

Ever since September 11, the peoples of the advanced democracies have had illusion after illusion scraped from them by the pumice-stone of harsh experience.

Now, as one crisis piles on top of another, it is the culture and civilisation the Islamists detest that will once again provide the wisdom and endurance we need if we are to shine through.

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