

## THE AUSTRALIAN

---

# It's absurd to deny jihadis act in the name of Islam

**HENRY ERGAS** THE AUSTRALIAN FEBRUARY 23, 2015 12:00AM

**WITH jihadist violence continuing to escalate, the acid test of today's national security statement will be the actions it proposes.**

But no policy can be effective without an honest diagnosis of the problem it is intended to address.

That is why Barack Obama's statement to last week's global summit on extremism was so disappointing. Coming from a man who ridicules the proposition that "guns don't kill people, people kill people", Obama's claim that "No religion is responsible for terrorism, people are responsible for terrorism", combined mendacity with hypocrisy.

The jihadis may indeed be "madmen", as Obama said; but to deny they act in the name of Islam is as absurd as denying the crusades were fought under the banner of Christianity.

Nor was Obama on more solid ground in blaming Islamic extremism on poverty and disadvantage. Few claims have been as decisively rejected by social scientific research; and so has the claim that the radicalisation of Muslim youth in western countries is caused by social exclusion.

On the contrary, the ringleaders of the Madrid train bombings, three of the four 7/7 bombers in London, Theo van Gogh's assassin Muhammad Bouyeri and the medical doctors arrested in the UK's "doctors' plot" all seemed to be models of successful integration. And well before the Copenhagen attacks, a study of 1113 young Muslims in Denmark found that the 24 per cent who sympathised with radical Islamism, were well educated, spoke fluent Danish and had (or could have had) good jobs.

Similar findings emerge from subsequent research by Johannes Kandel, who estimates that a third of Germany's Muslim youth now hold radical Islamist views, and from a just released RAND study on Islamist radicalisation.

Yet there is a sense in which Obama's views are understandable. After all, the belief that modernisation and secularisation are joined at the hip has long been the "master narrative" of Western social theory.

As the philosopher Charles Taylor has put it, that theory claimed economic development would inevitably transform societies in which it is "virtually impossible not to believe in God", into ones in which faith is merely "one human possibility among others". And as that occurred, a decline in religion's overall importance was also inevitable, as was religion's separation from state authority.

Seen within that prism, failures to secularise must be due to inadequate economic development: and the solution to religious conflict must lie in more rapid economic growth.

However, predictions that religion would fade as societies modernised have proven dismally

incorrect, and not just for Islam. Rather, religions as diverse as Judaism, Catholicism and Hinduism have all found renewed vitality, while Pentecostalism has experienced explosive growth. Islam's revival is consequently hardly unique; but what is different is its link to religiously motivated violence.

To say that is not to imply only Muslims engage in religious terrorism; nor is it to suggest jihadis are more than a small minority in the Muslim community. But it would be foolish to ignore the factors that have made Islam so hospitable to extremism.

Those factors are partly inherent in scriptural Islam itself. Extremists are more likely to invoke religious authority if they can find in it support for their extremism; and the obligation of jihad, the duty to make the whole world submit to the authority of God and the belief in the restoration of the Caliphate all lend themselves to that purpose, as does Islam's glorification of the Prophet's exploits in battle.

But what makes matters worse is that dangerous forms of those beliefs are not just held by extremists. Rather, they are widespread in Islamic communities, even in the United States, where (contrary to Obama's assertion that America is free of Islamism) the Pew Research Centre found 8 per cent of Muslims believe suicide bombings against civilian targets can be justified.

As a result, Muslim communities provide an environment in which extremism can grow deep, if often narrow, roots.

It was not, for example, jihadis who incited the hysterical reactions to the cartoons of the Prophet Mohammed; rather, virtually everywhere, those reactions involved the Islamic communities' mainstream.

And far from calming the waters, many eminent Islamic authorities encouraged the protests, with Denmark's leading clerics touring Muslim nations to claim that Danish Muslims suffered systematic persecution.

Nor was it the jihadis who advocated the murder of Salman Rushdie. Rather, it was the Ayatollah Khomeini, whose fatwa found broad support from Iran's fiercest enemies in the Wahhabi authorities of Saudi Arabia. In that instance as in many others, the fact that Iran and Saudi Arabia are militant theocracies bolstered the forces promoting extremism, giving the backing of powerful states to millenarian versions of Islam.

The appeasers therefore have "a lie in their soul", as Plato would say. Their hope appears to be that internal change will make Islam a "nicer" religion, much as happened with post-enlightenment Christianity. However, as the seemingly inexorable decline of Sufism (perhaps the gentlest form of Islam) demonstrates, the trend is, if anything, in the opposite direction.

All that means the future may well bear out Samuel Huntington's grim forecast of a "clash of civilisations", in which religion is "a central, perhaps the central, force". And history shows religious conflict lasts far longer, and is far more savage, than almost any other, as the calculus of costs and benefits gets drowned in the passion of belief.

That is the threat the national security statement must tackle. The jihadis may well be lunatics,

as Obama suggests, living and dying in a fantasy world in which they play out terrifying video games. But if so, they are, to use Marianne Moore's phrase, "real toads in imaginary gardens". And at the heart of those gardens lies Islam. Until we squarely face that truth, we won't know how to deal with it.

×

## Share this story

**Facebook** ([http://facebook.com/sharer.php?u=http://www.theaustralian.com.au/opinion/columnists/its-absurd-to-deny-jihadis-act-in-the-name-of-islam/story-fn7078da-1227234580895&t=It's absurd to deny jihadis act in the name of Islam](http://facebook.com/sharer.php?u=http://www.theaustralian.com.au/opinion/columnists/its-absurd-to-deny-jihadis-act-in-the-name-of-islam/story-fn7078da-1227234580895&t=It's%20absurd%20to%20deny%20jihadis%20act%20in%20the%20name%20of%20Islam))

**Twitter** ([https://twitter.com/intent/tweet?url=http://www.theaustralian.com.au/opinion/columnists/its-absurd-to-deny-jihadis-act-in-the-name-of-islam/story-fn7078da-1227234580895&text=It's absurd to deny jihadis act in the name of Islam](https://twitter.com/intent/tweet?url=http://www.theaustralian.com.au/opinion/columnists/its-absurd-to-deny-jihadis-act-in-the-name-of-islam/story-fn7078da-1227234580895&text=It's%20absurd%20to%20deny%20jihadis%20act%20in%20the%20name%20of%20Islam))

**LinkedIn** ([http://www.linkedin.com/shareArticle?mini=true&url=http://www.theaustralian.com.au/opinion/columnists/its-absurd-to-deny-jihadis-act-in-the-name-of-islam/story-fn7078da-1227234580895&title=It's absurd to deny jihadis act in the name of Islam](http://www.linkedin.com/shareArticle?mini=true&url=http://www.theaustralian.com.au/opinion/columnists/its-absurd-to-deny-jihadis-act-in-the-name-of-islam/story-fn7078da-1227234580895&title=It's%20absurd%20to%20deny%20jihadis%20act%20in%20the%20name%20of%20Islam))

**Google** (<https://plus.google.com/share?url=http://www.theaustralian.com.au/opinion/columnists/its-absurd-to-deny-jihadis-act-in-the-name-of-islam/story-fn7078da-1227234580895>)

**Email** ([mailto:?body=http://www.theaustralian.com.au/opinion/columnists/its-absurd-to-deny-jihadis-act-in-the-name-of-islam/story-fn7078da-1227234580895&subject=It's absurd to deny jihadis act in the name of Islam](mailto:?body=http://www.theaustralian.com.au/opinion/columnists/its-absurd-to-deny-jihadis-act-in-the-name-of-islam/story-fn7078da-1227234580895&subject=It's%20absurd%20to%20deny%20jihadis%20act%20in%20the%20name%20of%20Islam))