

Centre on
**Religion &
Geopolitics**

**THE DEPTH OF
THE CHALLENGE**

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The Depth of the Challenge

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Originally I wrote this essay after the Charlie Hebdo attack in January. I then hesitated about publishing it. The Syrian refugee crisis and the mass murder in Paris, however, point to a dramatic need for a fundamentally new assessment of the challenge and the strategy for confronting it.

I don't think we are yet close to a proper understanding of the threat we face or the need for radical and decisive action to defeat it. We are only at the beginning.

Following the Paris attacks, we can see that Syria now embodies all our worst nightmares. Those who believed that the best thing was to stay out of it all may perceive that inaction can have as dire consequences as action.

We have terror outrages perpetrated in the heart of Europe, with live plots foiled on an almost weekly basis.

We have a refugee crisis in Europe and we're only at the onset of this crisis. We are in an impossible position. If we close our doors, we are inhumane. If we open them, which is the right thing to do when people have faced such suffering, we create a magnet for more refugees with no clear plan in place and no easy way of deciding who comes in and who doesn't.

We have ISIS and other jihadi groups in control of large parts of Syria and Iraq.

We have the continuing conflict in Syria itself.

The first priority is to defeat ISIS and defeat it completely. This in itself will increase the possibility of resolution of the Syria conflict.

The only answer to the refugee problem is in dealing with the origins of it, which is the war in Syria. Likewise the only way of getting a deal which ends the fighting in Syria is if we are prepared to commit ourselves sufficiently so that we will have the necessary leverage to get a deal which can stick and be remotely acceptable to a majority of the Syrian population.

The precise means of commitment can be the subject of expert military advice. It will include, first and foremost, stepping up the military action against ISIS as the USA,

UK and France and many others are now doing. It might include heavier arming of the opposition we support and telling the Assad regime that continued use of barrel bombs against civilians will result in direct military action to disable those attacks; establishing an enclave where the opposition and people can be kept safe and protected by airpower; and more direct on the ground assistance to those fighting ISIS.

The recent moves by the USA in this regard are vital and welcome.

But the key thing is that we show that commitment; that we make it crystal clear that we have an interest in a just outcome and are prepared to use force to achieve it.

FINDING A SOLUTION MEANS DEFEATING ISLAMIST EXTREMISM

All of this is fraught with difficulty. The risks of error, accident, escalation and miscalculation by other players are evident. This is why for four long years the West has kept out, as the UK Parliament vote in 2013 shows, a position now thankfully changed.

But, as should be now obvious, the alternative is also fraught. If Syria continues as it is, we will see a country in final disintegration, a refugee crisis we cannot handle followed by a terrorist challenge that we cannot prevent and a region in flames.

In this the USA obviously has an interest as the world's most powerful nation with traditional allies in the Middle East.

But Europe has the most direct interest in ending the war and seeking a just solution. Without it, Europe faces a clear threat to its security and stability.

Pulsating through this nightmare, is the spectre of Islamist extremism. The reason some people now cling to the notion that we would be better off with the Saddams and Gaddafis and Assads and the rest still in power is because as we learnt through our experience in Afghanistan and Iraq, removing the dictatorship is not the end of the story. After that, comes the battle with extremism.

The answer to such a strategy of 'better the dictators you know' is that it is – like it or not – one that is completely unacceptable to the young and frustrated populations of the Middle East and North Africa. Majorities excluded from power and repressed brutally sooner or later revolt. We might prefer to deal with the old dictators. *They* will remove them.

The challenge, as we have seen in the so-called Arab Spring, is that two different groups come together to do the removing: Islamists who are numerous and well organised; and true democrats, the liberal minded, who are numerous but badly organised. And when the fighting breaks out, it is those who are organised and those prepared to die who swiftly come to the fore.

In this way, a revolt which begins as an attempt to embrace democracy becomes a focal point for extremism. Once that happens, the result to a Western mind is confusion and therefore uncertainty as to who to back and what to do.

Hence the desire then to stay out of it in the hope it resolves itself.

But it won't.

The ultimate answer is not to stick with the dictators. It is to fight the extremism so that those – probably a majority in all of these countries – who actually aspire to what we want, are able to attain this aspiration.

This is not their struggle alone. It is also ours. The extremism threatens us directly as 9/11 and Paris show. But it also stands in the way of progress in many parts of the world turning countries which could be stable and prosperous into ideological and often real battle grounds. As the refugee crisis and the terror attacks in Europe demonstrate, in the end, this also comes to us.

It makes the resolution of the different conflicts within each country harder.

If the extremism did not exist, then the only justification anyone could give for maintaining the Assad regime would disappear.

And if the extremism did not discolour and discredit the opposition – fracturing it and international support for change – then they could have had our support unqualified and absolute.

As it is, we now have a picture of such confusion and complexity that most people – in the West at least – just want to escape from it. When you think of the killing in Syria – its scale and its horror – the shock is how little outrage it musters not how much.

So we have to deal with ending the conflict in Syria sooner or later and the sooner the better.

A GLOBAL STRUGGLE

But 'solving' Syria alone will not end the war we're fighting against extremism. It is one theatre; but there are many.

We have to set the outcome in Syria within the broader canvas on which is painted the whole of the battle against Islamist extremism. At present we go to extraordinary lengths to avoid seeing this as one picture. Until we do, there is no prospect of success in erasing it; and we will remain in deep denial about its many dimensions.

We must revise urgently our response to this extremism and the Salafi-jihadism which accompanies it. If not, the proliferation and violence of groups like ISIS will intensify; we will face significant acts of terrorism in the West potentially bigger than the Paris attacks; and the carnage happening daily not only in the Middle East, but also Africa, the Far East and Central Asia, will increase.

This challenge is profound and global. To combat it effectively, we must recognise two things, which presently are in dispute with debilitating consequences for policy-making.

First, this is a struggle not simply against acts of violence committed by a relatively small number of fanatics; but against an ideology of extremism which has a much wider base of support. We have to fight the extremism not just the violence.

Secondly, this extremism is driven by a view of religion and this religious dimension, based on a perversion of Islam, cannot be ignored.

Following the Charlie Hebdo attack, during a stay in the Middle East, I picked up an Arab paper and analysed its contents. This was one paper; one day's news. In it were described the following events: a double suicide bomb in Lebanon; a kidnapping in Sinai; fresh fighting between Houthis and al-Qaeda in Yemen; the worst Boko Haram attack in 6 years in northern Nigeria with maybe as many as 2,000 killed; attacks in Afghanistan; the beheading of a Pakistani soldier by ISIS supporters; a Kenyan pastor gunned down during a church service; the arrest of two brothers in Ottawa on terrorism charges; the bombing of a German tabloid for reproducing the cartoons of Charlie Hebdo; the separate arrest of a suspected ISIS supporter in Berlin; 30 more Kurds killed by ISIS in Iraq; and of course the Charlie Hebdo march in Paris as the headline news.

In the months which followed since I first wrote this, we have to add: the slaughter of the children of Peshawar; the continuing deaths of civilians in Syria and Iraq; murders in the Philippines; the barbaric execution of Egyptian Copts

in Libya; the killing of tourists in Tunisia; the terrorist attacks on Egyptian soldiers in the Sinai; the downing of the Russian plane; the execution of the Japanese hostages; attacks in Denmark, Beirut, all over Africa.

The truth is that you could take any day virtually anywhere in the world and the same story could be told.

The Centre on Religion and Geopolitics established by my Foundation now tracks and collects this information on a daily basis. It is grim reading.

The attack of 9/11 came out of the terrorist training camps of al-Qaeda which the Taliban allowed and sponsored in Afghanistan. But today we have such camps all over the Middle East and North Africa. We have them on the doorstep of Europe. We have Western born fighters going to wage war and being trained in real combat with sophisticated weaponry. The extremist groups use modern technology to communicate, recruit and radicalise. The practices, the connections, the networks, the communications are levels above what was happening in Afghanistan prior to September 2001.

It is correct that the response of governments also has the embedded experience of the last 14 years; and has developed systems to meet the threat. But the fact is the threat continues to grow.

One part of the response concerns the measures we take domestically: security at airports and in our streets; foiling terror plots; counter-radicalisation initiatives, and so on. The cost of these over time since 9/11 has been enormous, but to a degree they have been effective.

However the anxiety, particularly with some 22,000 foreign fighters from 100 countries joining groups like ISIS, is that what happens abroad, results in a threat at home. This is now the central preoccupation of intelligence agencies. Thus it is increasingly clear that a purely defensive posture – trying to deal with the threat when it comes to our shores – is inadequate. The threat needs to be fought where it is originating.

It used to be said that ISIS and others see their main objective as taking territory in the Middle East, not directly targeting the West. This was always going to mutate. In the end, as Paris shows, they will see their advantage in coming to us. Over half of jihadi propaganda references targeting the 'far enemy' according to recent research from our Centre.

LEARNING FROM OUR EXPERIENCES

So what can we learn from the policies pursued thus far? To answer this, let us divide policy-making into two periods: the period after 9/11 including the wars in Afghanistan and

Iraq; and the period up to the present day.

We occasionally treat the time since 9/11 as if it were shaped by one unbroken, uniform policy. But of course the two periods are quite distinct, the policy of the second period in part formed in reaction to the first.

Let us start with the lessons of military action and regime change. For these purposes leave aside whether you agree or disagree with the decisions. Just focus on the practical lessons.

The practical lessons of the engagements in Afghanistan and Iraq are quite clear.

When you remove the dictatorship of a Muslim country where extremism, Sunni or Shia, is a factor, you end one struggle only to begin another. The new struggle is to stabilise the country in the face of forces whose very purpose is de-stabilisation.

The military response to this terrorism requires a quite different doctrine and strategy than conventional warfare.

The states where 'strong men' rule are often weak, without proper institutions or capacity. This complicates the task. So you have to try to build them.

Nation-building, however, is very difficult when terrorism is used with extraordinary brutality against the civilian population.

You have to wage this struggle in alliance with local people and Muslim countries; otherwise it is perceived as a battle about Western interests not universal values.

These are the lessons from 2001 – 2007/8.

The policy since then was essentially framed by the speech of President Obama in Cairo in March 2009. This was – as one would expect – a thoughtful and intellectually coherent explanation of why Western policy should change.

It spelt out the important insight that terrorism could only be defeated finally by an alliance with and within Islam. It had a prescient warning to his audience as to why countries in the region had to reform and evolve or they would face problems from their population, particularly the youth.

And it marked a shift from stepping out to stepping back; from a more confrontational approach to a more cautious one; from a belief in the limitless might of Western power to an appreciation of its limits.

From 2009-2015, this policy has governed our approach.

However, since the 2009 speech we have had the trans-

formative events beginning in 2011 of what used to be hailed as the Arab Spring. The significance of this upheaval is still not properly appreciated in the West or the degree to which it was itself framed by the very forces we are confronting more broadly.

It has pushed the questions of intervention or not, and the nature of the threat and how to combat it, back onto the agenda. This has been acute for us in respect of Libya and Syria (and for the Arab world in respect of those countries and Yemen).

So since 2001, there are four primary examples of the West seeking regime change in majority Muslim countries: in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya and Syria. (I will put Yemen to one side though some of the same elements are present there too.) In Afghanistan and Iraq, during the first policy period, we removed the regime relatively easily, but then went through the immensely painful exercise of trying to stabilise the country using our own troops. The history of these interventions, their costs and their risks, we know well.

In respect of Libya, we removed by force the Gaddafi dictatorship; and we were able to do so partly because, as a result of his cooperation with the West in 2003, he had given up his Weapons of Mass Destruction programme and helped in the fight against terrorism, so he was militarily weaker. Once negotiation was off the table, it was right that he went. Otherwise he might have tried to do what Assad has done in Syria. But in this case, for reasons which are completely understandable given our experience in Iraq and Afghanistan, we did not put in troops to stabilise the situation.

Libya today is exporting terror, money and weapons across the region and down into Sub-Saharan Africa. Boko Haram has unfortunately benefited greatly from this. So has al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb and other groups in Mali and the Sahel.

As for Syria, again for completely understandable reasons, we insisted Assad should go and supported the opposition. But Assad's removal was militarily harder partly because he had not cooperated with the West but maintained Russian built air defence systems and had an alliance with Iran (and thus with Hizbullah which was prepared to do the ground fighting). We were therefore reluctant to bring about what we were passionately advocating. We called for him to go; but wouldn't participate militarily in removing him; he stayed; the opposition fractured and became, in part, taken over by extremes (to a degree encouraged by a deliberate strategy of Assad to focus his efforts on the more moderate opposition).

Syria's situation should have had the world clamouring for action long ago. But, until recently, there has been no

clamour. More dead than in the whole of Iraq or Afghanistan; entire villages wiped out and its people subject to barrel bombs and even chemical weapons; 10 million refugees, the worst crisis since World War II; the region destabilised; ISIS able to base itself in Raqqa and create its ghastly shadow state in Syria and Iraq.

Fortunately there is now a political process. But that road is bound to be long and hard.

What should be very obvious is that, up to now, we have not yet found a policy in the face of this extremism which works. We have found it dangerous to intervene; and hard to stay out.

So how do we learn the lessons of both periods and can we move to new policy which is a synthesis of the previous two?

I believe we can and must.

But we have to clear the debris of political angst and partisan disagreement to do so.

If we find this problem difficult, the reason is not stupidity on our part. It is that the solution, like the problem, is really tough – unlike anything we have faced before – and hard to understand.

OUR POLICIES ARE NOT RESPONSIBLE FOR EXTREMIST VIOLENCE

The starting point of such understanding is this: we didn't cause the problem; we got caught up in it.

It is true that on the long view of history, colonial legacies have played their part. We bear some historic as well as contemporary responsibility for the Middle East as it is today.

But there was never anything inevitable about the extremism or its impact on any individual country which has meant that even when we have tried to help a nation our help has been thwarted.

We are hamstrung by the determined insistence across a significant part of Western opinion, that our policies have 'caused' this extremism or at the very least have exacerbated it.

So we are told: the concept and even the words 'war on terror' were wrong and helped radicalise the Muslim population; the invasion of Muslim countries like Afghanistan and Iraq provoked the terrorism because they were seen as part of a modern day 'Crusade'; new laws post 9/11 'stigmatised' Muslims; the Charlie Hebdo cartoons are a 'provocation.' And just as intervention in Iraq is a 'provoca-

tion,' non-intervention in Syria is also a 'provocation.' When we intervene to protect the innocent, this is also somehow provocative. (Actually failure to intervene in Bosnia in the 1990s is often regarded as first radicalising UK Muslims.) But Libya too and Mali are now cited as reasons for the actions against France. In Kashmir, it is anger at the absence of a political settlement and this is used to justify terrorism against India. In Xinjiang in China it is unfair treatment of the local population that is the 'cause.' In Russia, it is the refusal to allow a separate Muslim state.

In Pakistan the cause is often simply the failure of any government or state to adopt sufficiently strict religious practices. In Bangladesh, we now see a similar movement of violence beginning.

Belgium and Norway are on the front line of the plots to commit acts of terrorism, where just being part of the West seems sufficient 'cause.'

And if the cause of the terrorism in Iraq or Afghanistan was the presence of foreign troops, why does the terror increase when we withdraw not decline?

Again study of the propaganda of these groups reflects this, thriving on narratives where invaders are presented as 'Crusaders' and withdrawers as weak and therefore worthy of attack.

And how exactly, in any event, are we oppressing a Muslim country when we remove a dictatorship and allow the people a free vote on their Government with the full support and approval of the UN and massive financial support.

Are not the majority of victims of the terrorism Muslim?

Where does 9/11 back in 2001 sit in all this? How was that 'caused' by our policy?

None of this is to say that there are not real grievances which fuel alienation and hatred. Of course social deprivation can provide fertile ground for extremism. Of course injustice is a powerful galvanising sentiment. There are territorial disputes which are hard to resolve and in respect of which feelings run very high. But in truth the terrorism makes all these challenges tougher. It solves nothing.

There are some people who would agree up to this point but who would argue that the Palestinian issue is a 'cause' of terrorism. It is indeed a real and genuine cause of grievance.

But the key point is however great the injustice to the Palestinians and however legitimate their demand for their own independent state, the terrorism is largely promoted by those who do not accept the two state solution. In other words they don't want a successful peace process they want what the international community will never agree to,

which is the end of the State of Israel. Those advocating or engaging in terrorism are actually the enemies of Palestinian statehood since they make it harder to achieve.

When first writing this essay, I reflected on the Charlie Hebdo episode.

I can see why the cartoons offend. I am not saying I would publish them. But I am uncomfortable with the description of them as a 'provocation,' a word very commonly used even by those who completely condemned the murders of the magazine's staff. If we're not careful the use of the word slips easily into a zone only a small distance from the beginning of justification. The proper response to someone offending your religious sensibility is indifference or disagreement; it could even be anger, protest or contempt. But it can't ever be said to 'provoke' murder.

Examine the narrative of extremism and you find any grievance, any injustice, any perceived slight or injury, any claim, any demand, is used as a 'cause.'

Our research has found that in over a third of jihadi propaganda perceived 'humiliation' by the West and the need to avenge it, is a major part.

Then there is the more nuanced version of the 'provocation' theory: our policies created the opportunity for the extremists to flourish.

There can of course be a perfectly sensible debate about whether policy responses worked or did not, were right or not.

But we have to be careful of tripping into a claim that by our actions we 'unleashed' the extremism.

The assumption behind this version of 'provocation' is that without such policy 'errors' the extremism would be 'leashed,' dormant. If this were a problem limited to a small area or group of countries, such a view might be tenable. But this is a global threat. It arises in respect of countries whose policies cover the entire policy handbook, from the most bellicose to the most pacific.

Do not be seduced into the narrative that we have created, caused, or contributed to the extremism.

So what is the cause?

Islam, as practiced and understood by the large majority of believers, is a peaceful, honourable faith which has contributed greatly to human existence and progress. Read the Quran as a whole, accept the spirit of its revelation and teaching (rather than every literal sentence which like most scripture can be taken out of context and used to justify actions contrary to that spirit), and its true and decent nature is very plain. It is a tragedy that the faith has been used

by some in a way which distorts and twists its true meaning. Ultimately only from within Islam will the re-taking of the faith for reason and peace be achieved.

But there has to be an end to denial about the reality of what we face.

The cause of the problem is an abuse of the religion of Islam. It is the systematic teaching and promulgation of an ideology – based on a perversion of Islam – which has at its core the belief that everything should be subordinated to that ideology; and that those who do not share it are mistaken and misguided and should be brought to accept it.

It represents a fundamental politicisation of Islam i.e. a view of religion which should govern the polity of the world and therefore all aspects of political, social and economic life. It is only one view of Islam but the adherents regard it as the only legitimate view. It is the antithesis of modern, religiously tolerant, open-minded society. And it is a threat because those who believe this ideology regard it as their duty to impose it.

The cause of the violence is the ideology of extremism; the violence is the product of it. I agree that those who use or advocate violence are relatively small in number – though enough to inflict a lot of suffering – but the number who share the thinking behind the ideology are unfortunately much larger.

That is why I say we're confronting a spectrum not a fringe. The violent fringe grows out of the wider spectrum. It comes in many different varieties – and across the Sunni/Shia divide. Sometimes the link between various groups is tenuous; at other times it is very strong. But the point is that there is a shared way of looking at the world that has the same characteristics and has the same inimical attitude to those who do not follow that way.

This is what it has in common with the ideologies of the 20th century. It is a mono world view that is all-encompassing in an age defined by diversity and pluralism.

People can believe in this world view without being terrorists or criminals. But they share a perspective which is incompatible with the development of modern societies and peaceful co-existence. That is why the challenge is not violent extremism. It is extremism. It is not only the acts of violence; but the ideology behind them.

This is the essential bridge of understanding which we have to cross.

We keep looking for the compromise, for the 'give and take,' for the very Western notion of 'let's agree to disagree.' This misunderstands the ideology. It isn't one that co-exists. It is one that prevails.

It comes in different forms – the Muslim Brotherhood, the theocracy in Iran, elements which have promoted very conservative religious thinking from Gulf States and exported it round the world; and now it has spread to many places where, only a generation ago, such an ideology would have been regarded as completely alien.

Of course some, in time possibly many, of the adherents of this world view may change it, moderate it, or evolve it. Tunisia provides some hope of this. I am not suggesting that all members of the Muslim Brotherhood think exactly the same.

And in any event where people behave within the law, then argument not force should be the counter.

But I do say we have to wake up to the prevalence of this world view and its inherent extremism.

Of course the overwhelming majority of Muslims in all countries condemn ISIS and its terrorism.

But the Pew Global Attitudes Survey of 2011 found that in the Muslim countries surveyed – which included the Middle East countries and Indonesia, Pakistan and Turkey – a majority did not think that Arab terrorists were responsible for 9/11. In some, almost a majority thought the USA and Israel were responsible not al-Qaeda. Just reflect on that for a moment. How have people – large numbers of them – come to think that what is palpable nonsense is true?

The reactions across the Muslim world to the Charlie Hebdo attacks echo this. Mostly and thankfully there was condemnation (though often heavily qualified with 'provocation' language). But significant figures in leading papers in several countries also said the attacks were the work of the French authorities or Jews.

There are a host of radical clerics who preach or sympathise with some of these views. Their following on social media runs into the millions. Again my Foundation collects a lot of the material. Go and read it. You will be shocked.

Anti-Semitism is back stalking Europe. But it is no surprise. This has been a long time coming.

Individuals and groups world-wide who share these views are adept at using social networks, community organisations, and above all education institutions. Sometimes this is done by exercising great influence over formal school systems (even in countries whose leadership is moderate) such as the Al-Majiri network of Islamic boarding schools in Northern Nigeria; and sometimes through informal systems in after-school religious programmes and of course social media.

There will be no defeat of the violence unless there is a

defeat of this world view; until the idea of a politicised Islam, designed to dominate the world, with all its attendant prejudices and poison, is confined to the same ideological junkyard as the 20th century ideologies that devoured so many lives and visited such destruction upon the innocent.

If we persist in believing and, more important, acting as if the problem is a tiny band of psychologically warped fanatics, we will continue to make a grand strategic error.

Their fanaticism has roots. The kidnapping of girls by Boko Haram has its roots in a far more widely shared view that women should be subordinate to men. The idea that the cartoon makers should be killed has its roots in the belief that those who print such cartoons are committing a wholly unacceptable act worthy of punishment. When the Governor of the Punjab was assassinated for arguing to change Pakistan's draconian law on blasphemy, there were mass protests in support of his killer. The protesters are not killers. But the thinking behind their protest gives rise to the murder.

The numbers who believe in such extreme positions are not the majority; and in that is salvation. But they're a substantial minority and any strategy which fails to take account of this will never get to the root cause.

This is a new type of battle. We have never faced anything quite like it before. It involves non-state actors; but the ideology can develop strong pockets of support in states and even, as we have seen with Iran, state sponsors. It can hold territory. It can embed itself deeply within a society and get to work over a long period of time. And the ideology crosses all frontiers of nation and race.

This is the root cause. We have to build the alliances within Islam to uproot it.

Here is the great advantage we have now, as we learn the lessons of both periods of policy-making and are able to enter into a new policy synthesis. After 9/11, our alliances within Islam were weak. There are many reasons for this, though I am fully prepared to say those leading at the time, including myself, share responsibility.

But today we have real allies who will stand with us including many internationally respected clerics. It is Islam itself which can help lead this fight against extremism.

In doing so, it can share the burden of fighting the terrorism, fight with us its causes and conduct its own process of theological revision.

In the 7th – 12th century there is no doubt that Islam represented a major advance socially, scientifically and politically.

But by the Middle Ages, as Christianity underwent its transformation, Islam did not. There was no great agonising debate, no theological dispute that marked the changing of the times, or political awakening which reshaped the settlement between religion and the state. The result was a situation in which the religion did not modernise and proper politics, at least in the Middle East, never matured.

European religious strife caused hundreds of years of bloodshed before the Enlightenment. If, as some suggest, Islam is on the verge of its Reformation, it must learn from Europe's bitter experience of sectarian conflict.

Islamism is a spectrum of course, and that means that many on it would reject fiercely those on the outer fringe. These more 'moderate' groups would disagree with groups like ISIS, even abhor them. But they share the broad objective of a highly politicised Islam to which all must conform.

So over these decades, they have been working to achieve this objective. They're dug deep into the edifice of society even in the West. They're highly organised, well funded, disciplined, and global. They use front organisations and understand the importance of the media, conventional and social.

The result is clear. A country like Nigeria which used to have good inter-religious relations, and where Christian/Muslim marriages would be common, is now beset by violence and ideology totally alien to its traditions. In the Far East, even in countries like Malaysia and Indonesia, practices and thinking which bear no resemblance at all to their historic culture, have been imported in a way which can cause disharmony and discord.

Of course they often seize on what may be genuine local grievances. But they then drive the manifestation of those grievances into language and action which is extreme and hostile to compromise.

All over the world Islamist parties are springing up, advocating a return to an imagined version of 'pure' Islam not as a way for people to live their own lives but as a way for politics itself to be dominated by it.

This ideology does not represent Islam as it has been through history. But neither is it true that it is a transient irritation, a passing phase from which, if we hold our nerve and don't over-react, we will soon be free.

Islamism and jihadism are, in one sense, thoroughly modern movements. Nonetheless they have developed over the past almost 100 years and particularly in the last half century.

This is why it will take a much more concerted, coordinated and comprehensive strategy to defeat it.

The policy of the first period – stepping out boldly, in the aftermath of 9/11 – lacked full appreciation of how profound were the forces at work. We stepped into too much that was unknown.

The policy of stepping back in the second period has been based partly on an anxiety about the costs political, military and economic of that first period and a laudable desire to avoid casualties; and partly on a belief that in the end, if we refrain from anything too dramatic, this threat will work itself out.

But this assumes that the problem will work itself out. Here is where the uneasy parallel with the 1930s has relevance. People believed for many years that fascism would burn itself out; hence the policy of appeasement, a word which, at the time, had positive connotations. There were even some people who, however misguidedly, believed there was some justice to the Nazi cause, that policy towards Germany had contributed to it and even justified its sense of avenging humiliation. They thought that once Germany had risen again, the nastier side of it would diminish.

The appeasers weren't all fools or villains. They were often well motivated. But at the heart of their policy was a misjudgement, namely that the ideology was capable of being appeased or would wither of its own accord. In fact, it had to be defeated and by strong and sustained actions.

Similarly, back then, we heard all the arguments as to why the alternative to appeasement was worse. To war weary nations, the arguments were very persuasive. But, unfortunately, they missed the essential point: the ideology couldn't be contained in that way. It is the same with Islamist extremism.

RESPONDING TO THE CHALLENGE

If the challenge is global, deep-rooted, wide in its support, and with violence a product of the ideology, then any strategy to defeat it must similarly be global, put down roots, win support and counter the ideology as well as the violence effectively.

The architecture of such a strategy would have these component elements to it:

1. *In the short term, build a force to defeat jihadis on the ground.*

We have to put our best military minds on the task of constructing the force capability, drawn from willing nations and people, which can go and fight on the ground where the extremists are engaged in actual violence. Dealing with the long term takes time. In the immediate and medium term they have to be fought against. They must never think

they're going to operate in any part of the world without challenge.

The alliance must be as broad as we can make it and must include strong participation and leadership from the Muslim nations.

However we resolve the immediate battle to defeat ISIS, this issue of force capability, and our willingness to use it, will not go away.

What I am suggesting is that, for the medium term, we coordinate, at an international level, the creation of the right capability to be able to conduct this new type of warfare. This would have components which would include the actual fighting forces; intelligence capacity; airpower and logistics.

The coalition providing such capability in any given situation will be different. But the effort has to be coordinated; information and thinking has to be shared. And, crucially, those who are going to do the fighting have to be willing combatants. This is especially so if they will include, as they should, the soldiers of Western nations. There is a case for a specific and different contract of engagement for those who would volunteer for such missions.

This struggle by its very nature is completely different from conventional warfare.

Otherwise we're left with a series of ad hoc responses, with the West often giving valuable support, but without the coordination we need.

At present Nigeria does its best to fight Boko Haram though now with significant help from allies. France takes the strain in Mali. In Libya, the regional powers try to protect their own security from the fall out. In Syria we have taken time to assemble the right coalition. In Yemen, we're taking on al-Qaeda but this left us with a real dilemma over the Iranian-backed Houthis trying to subvert the government and so we're now backing the Saudi/UAE led attempt to stop them.

We cannot intervene in all situations. But we should have the ability to act quickly and decisively where it is clear the extremists are going to take hold.

Right now none of the existing military alliances or structures fit the challenge.

There could be any number of different ways of constructing the necessary capability which different nations or blocs could bring to the table. For example, Europeans could work together to pool assets; NATO could play a logistics and coordination role; the Gulf States, as they have expressed a desire to do, could develop a unified strategic defence capability; and the countries of the East who also are affected

by this threat could contribute. Does China not have the strongest possible interest in defeating this terror?

Different situations will require different combinations, alliances and leadership roles. The USA will of course be critical both in terms of firepower and diplomacy. But it would be so much easier to persuade America to participate if they thought they would have allies standing alongside them.

We have to uproot the pernicious education of millions of the world's youth to a closed mind and replace it with education for the open mind.

2. *Oppose narrow, prejudiced education systems that provide soil for extremist narratives.*

We can no longer indulge the spread of narrow-minded, religiously prejudiced teaching which tells young people that those who do not share this view are the enemy, are infidels, and which propagates myths about other cultures and other societies. Long ago we refused to accept that nations could deny responsibility for the environment and could carry on with pollution on the basis that it is their right to do as they please in their own country. However inadequately, the environment is today considered part of the global responsibility of a country. It should be the same with religiously tolerant education. It should be an internationally accepted duty.

This is the crucial missing element of our strategy. Millions – literally millions – of young people across the world are taught every day a view of the world completely at odds with peaceful co-existence. Sometimes this is in the formal education systems of countries. Sometimes it is in informal madrassas.

It is not limited to predominantly Muslim countries. It can happen in any culture. But it has a vast impact. It is the soil in which the fanatic grows.

There is no broad or deep analysis of global education systems which focuses on this issue. Yet its importance is so obvious when we think about it. If a young person is brought up to believe that those who do not share their way of life are their enemy; if they're not given any accurate information about other religions or cultures; if they're taught for example that Jews are hateful or that America is Satan or indeed Islamophobic teaching that all Muslims are terrorists, why are we surprised that at the fringes of such thinking people turn to violence?

This is why I propose an internationally agreed Global Commitment on Education with a set of principles which all nations agree to enforce in their education systems, formal and informal. This would include the teaching of religious tolerance and the prohibition of religious prejudice. It would insist that boys and girls have equal rights to education. It would

help promote programmes which encourage inter-cultural dialogue.

There may, in certain cases, even the case of America, be constitutional articles which inhibit making such education illegal and anything advocated has to be culturally sensitive. But there should at least be transparency about what is happening and the requirement for Governments to promote good practice and deter bad.

The UN already has most of what would be needed set out in various different charters and resolutions. But it has to be brought together in one Commitment and given real political weight. We have Rapporteurs for the UN on Human Rights. Very often they're resented by countries which fear their findings. But at least some account is then made of what is happening. At present we allow this form of education – which is incubating the ideology – to go unnoticed and unhindered.

3. *Combat extremist ideology and propaganda through civil society.*

We need to build resilience within civil society to combat the ideology and propaganda of the extremists. This includes the ability to attack the ideology on social and conventional media; to expose groups that are fronts for the activities of those with a hidden agenda; and more positively to create organisations which promote tolerance and understanding.

Theology is a vital part of the strategy. It is absolutely necessary that those who are being asked to change an attitude of religious hostility to others, are given the spiritual and theological justification for change. They have to come to believe that the extremism is not just socially or politically wrong but religiously misguided.

This work has to be led by respected clerics and theologians within Islam who have the knowledge and credibility to provide the scriptural reasoning for peaceful co-existence.

As I set out in my recent speech at the 9/11 Memorial and Museum, there are real signs of this happening within Islam. The Al-Azhar Mosque in Cairo with a long and great history of Sunni theology is focusing on ensuring that the Imams taught there get a sound grounding in other religions and promoting peaceful co-existence. Sheikh Abdullah Bin Bayyah is leading a group of clerics which met earlier in the year in the UAE in providing theological coherence and scholarship for a modern, peaceful and intelligent vision of Islam and what it can give to the world. In the last weeks the leading Indonesian Muslim organisation with 50m members is also taking on the challenge.

The work needs to be given prominence and used effectively to counter the religious narrative of extremism.

4. *Build institutions in weak states to prevent the growth of extremism.*

We need to create a smart, non-bureaucratic mechanism for capacity building in countries which lack the institutions to prevent extremism from growing.

I have had the opportunity over the past few years to study the concept of nation building. Generally, this activity is regarded as desirable but impossible. There is evidence to support this view especially when nation building is taking place against a background of violence. However it is also clear from work on governance from round the world that there are things that do work, that do genuinely improve the quality of a nation's institutional capacity and where there is political will and determination, results can be achieved. And one thing is for sure: where there is an absence of institutions capable of governing, the terrain is wide open for the extremist groups to move in and to proliferate.

For a fraction of the amount we end up spending when the security situation has deteriorated, and a country is in chaos and exporting it to its neighbours, we could prevent it by helping countries at risk to build institutional capacity.

But again it needs organising. It is not as if we don't spend

through the various multilateral bodies a fortune in all kinds of interventions and relief. As the World Bank's Jim Kim has rightly pointed out, we could do so much more with what we do spend if we did it learning the lessons of governance particularly from our own experience in the past decade.

MOVING POLICY FORWARD

These are the elements which could create a genuinely comprehensive strategy to fight the threat we face. It will require a lot of coordination, strategic thinking, alliances that are strong and leaders who are willing to think long term and take the necessary decisions to protect our future. But we have to start to join up the events across the world and make sense of them not individually but as a whole. We have to move policy forward. We have to move from reaction to action.

In conclusion, we need a strategy which fights extremism not only violence. We have to recognise its religious nature not deny it. We have to build the alliances within Islam with the many open-minded Muslims who are prepared and willing to take on this fight. And we have to make the strategy global and comprehensive.

This is urgent.

ABOUT *the* CENTRE ON RELIGION & GEOPOLITICS

Across the world, the interaction of religion and conflict is making its impact felt. Political ideologies and events are exposed to the pressures of religion. Policy makers can no longer ignore the threat posed by violent religious ideologies, but if they are to be defeated, they must be understood.

Through evidence-based reports, media commentary, high-level events and policy briefings, the Centre on Religion & Geopolitics (CRG) provides that nuanced understanding. We present informed analysis on the interaction of religion and conflict globally, offering policy options to meet the scale of the challenge.

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