

The Cordoba Foundation

Reflections on the Paris Attacks

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The attacks in Paris on Friday 13 November 2015 were the worst on French soil since 1945, where more than 125 people died and hundreds more injured. And among the dead and the maimed were a number of Muslims. For the first time, the country was confronted by suicide bombers in the heart of Paris.

Unlike the *Charlie-Hebdo* and the kosher store attacks in January 2015, the perpetrators this time targeted public places, chosen not for their symbolic character, but ordinary people out on a Friday night. The intent: to inflict maximum casualties and victims as well as disrupting ordinary life. Sadly, the perpetrators were largely successful.

Emotions in France and around the world are understandably deep and very palpable now. However as we reel from the magnitude and soreness of what just happened, we should not shy away from asking tough questions: Who stands to benefit from these attacks? What are the immediate effects and risks to us? What consequences can we anticipate and how best can we respond both at the domestic and international levels?

One very likely risk from the attacks is that the French may be pushed to blame Muslims in France for the actions of a few suspected deranged Muslims. Their actions will no doubt play into the hands of the National Front which is already on the ascendency in the country. With regional elections in December, the National Front has a high chance of coming out as the winner in the elections. This is especially the case in regions like the Provence Côte d'Azur or Nord, where if they succeed, they will gain considerable political and financial clout.

Right wing parties, and especially the Les Républicains led by Nicolas Sarkozy, are calling for proposals and laws that can only be described as draconian and undemocratic to provoke and sow divisions in French society. They are demanding that thousands of “suspected Islamists” be placed under house-arrest; they are asking for the adoption of a French version of the American Patriot Act of 2001 (“Uniting and Strengthening America by Providing Appropriate Tools Required to Intercept and Obstruct Terrorism”).

The French government has already installed a “state of emergency” and put under house-arrest over a hundred people. In the immediate aftermath of the Paris attacks, we have witnessed a surge in attacks targeting mosques, Islamic centres and adherents of the Islamic faith in France and in other parts of Europe.

It is well-known that that one of the aims of the so-called Islamic State, better termed as Daesh, is “the extinction of the grey zone” i.e. to polarise Western society by provoking Islamophobia. In Daesh’s official magazine, *Dabeq*, it states:

“Muslims in the crusader countries will find themselves forced to abandon their homes and live under the *Khilāfa* [caliphate], as the crusaders increase persecution of the Muslims residing in Western lands. [...] Eventually, the grey zone will become extinct and there will be no place for greyish calls and movements. There will only be the camp of *Iman* [faith in Allah] versus the camp of *kufr* [disbelief]”.

We should not fall into this trap.

France is also a key target of the extremists like Daesh because it, along with the United States, is the most engaged militarily from Mali to Syria, and from the Central African

Republic to Iraq. But its policy is incoherent and we should critically review the "war on terror" promulgated immediately after the September 11 attacks and re-launched after the capture of Mosul by Daesh in the summer of 2014. The failure of the War on Terror strategy is obvious: there have been more attacks, not less and very often in Muslim countries themselves. Within the last few weeks, we have witnessed bombings in the Turkish city of Ankara; the attack on a Russian-operated plane that came down over the Sinai Peninsula in Egypt, killing all 224 people on board; and suicide attacks in Beirut in a popular suburb.

Never have so many people, especially the youth, been more engaged in extremist and violent groups like al-Qaida or Daesh, committed to what they believe is a resistance to international aggression against Muslims the world-over.

We should try to decipher the dynamics on the ground and grasp the context that render the Middle East a complex geography and reality. In this sense, it is unhelpful for pundits to simply reduce the current crisis in the region to solely Daesh. Rather, we must address the problems of poverty, education, foreign meddling, development, etc.

Is it not high time to think about the region as a whole and not only in military terms? We must confront Daesh to rid the world from its menace, but this can't be achieved through bombing only. Instead, privileging a political solution is likely to yield in better results – and hopefully more lasting for a region that has been characterised by a spiral of chaos and instability especially since the US intervention in Iraq in 2003.

It is time too to push all regional powers, which have in their own way, compounded the Syrian conflict. The Vienna meeting which saw the participation of all these powers is

perhaps a step in the right direction. It is also high time to robustly push for the solution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict by ending the occupation. And last but not least, we should reconsider the demands voiced by the masses during the Arab Spring and the fulfilment of these demands is the best route to stability for the long-run.

Prioritising diplomacy and political solutions over bombings is the best strategy for France.

*A French journalist, Dr Alain Gresh is former editor of *Le Monde diplomatique* and the current editor of OrientXX1.info (online magazine). A specialist on the Middle East, he is president of the Association of French journalists specialised on the Maghreb and the Middle East (AJMO). His books include *The PLO, The Struggle Within* (Zed Books, London, 1986), *Un péril islamiste?* (Complexe, Bruxelles, 1994), *Israël-Palestine, vérités sur un conflit* (Fayard, Paris, 2001). He co-authored, with Dominique Vidal, *An A to Z to the Middle East* (Zed, 1990, and I B Tauris, 2004); *Palestine 1947, un partage avorté* (Complexe, Bruxelles, 1987); *Golfe: Clefs pour une guerre annoncée* (Le Monde éditions, Paris, 1990); and *L'Islam, la république et le monde* (Fayard, 2004). Gresh co-authored, with Didier Billion, *Actualités de l'Etat palestinien* (Complexe, Bruxelles, 2000) and, with Françoise Germain-Robin et Tariq Ramadan, *L'Islam en questions* (Actes-Sud/Sindbad, 2000).

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