

What next after Paris?: Nonviolent solutions to Violent Politics

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Every single human being exists in relationship. If we wish those relationships to be peaceable its vital that we practice the golden rule and treat others, as we would like to be treated. As Levinas said, we do this best by “accepting unconditional responsibility to and for the welfare of the Other except when that other is causing suffering in which case we have a responsibility to stop the suffering.” This is an important rationale for nonviolence and it’s an important understanding in terms of weighing decisions to go to war or not.

The whole point of terrorist political violence is to generate an enemy over reaction that will advance the cause and justify the violence that has occurred and future threats. Unfortunately we (i.e the media and political leaders in the West) have responded to the appalling terror attacks in Paris of a week ago, in a way that is already an over reaction. If this over reaction is followed with political decisions to expand and deepen military intervention it will undoubtedly complicate what already is an extremely complicated situation and it may do more harm than good. In which case it will perpetuate rather than end the suffering.

It is understandable that Europe and Europeans are feeling somewhat challenged by the events of the 13th November. It is important that we mourn and grieve for all those that have lost their lives in this gratuitous violence. But it is also important that we keep a sense of proportion about our response and what can be done about this particular tragedy. Europe and the West are using this incident to justify a significant expansion of the war in Syria. It is important that we contextualise what happened.

The European media have devoted wall to wall coverage of a largely indigenous (French and Belgium based) ISIS cell creating mayhem in Paris. They killed 130 people, injured many more and traumatised French taken for granted notions about their way of life and security. None of these events in and of themselves justify a declaration of war as Hollande promised. Nor does this coverage show any inclination to analyse root or proximate causes of this particular violent episode.

The fact is we are reacting with deep shock because our own kith and kin were shot in cold blood. This is perfectly understandable. The attack was totally unacceptable, unethical and appalling. But our “Western” shock at these deaths is not carried over to the deaths of the 43 people killed by the ISIS in Lebanon on the 12th November. Nor has it been carried over to the killings of 23 in Mali by another terrorist group over the weekend. The reality is that the groups we wish to grieve for and act on behalf of are

our own privileged Western tribe.

So, the first point I want to make is that we need to expand our views of who we wish to mourn and grieve for if we are to respond to violence with understanding and a desire to break, rather than perpetuate, vicious cycles of violence and revenge. It is important that the Western media and people mourn and grieve for all those who have lost their lives in preventable violence.

We need to be able to think of the faces of and families of all the millions killed and displaced in Iraq Afghanistan, Nigeria, Pakistan, Syria, India, Yemen, Somalia Libya and Thailand. These 10 countries (according to the 2015 Global Terror Index) accounted for most deaths from terrorist violence in 2015. Each one of these persons is as deserving of our empathy and concern as the 130 killed in Paris.

Second its important to put terrorist violence –appalling though it is—into perspective. The global homicide rate was 13 times the global terrorism rate. 437,000 people dying from homicides compared to 32,685 from terrorism in 2014. Each one of these deaths was in principle preventable as well. But where is the war on homicide? Where is the war on domestic violence which very often ends up in homicide and where is the war on the direct violence that generates the conditions within which both homicide and terrorist violence takes place?

Third, its vital to remember that 88% of all terrorist attacks since 1989 have occurred in countries that were experiencing or involved in violent conflict. Less than 0.6% of such incidents occurred in countries without any ongoing conflict or any form of political terror. (Global Terrorism Index 2015) . Terrorist incidents in Paris, London and Brussels, therefore are an aberration rather than the norm.

70% of terrorist deaths in the west were committed by lone wolf terrorists. Of these incidents 68% were political, 20% were inspired by Islamic fundamentalism, 11% racial religious supremacists and 1% individual grievance. Instead of responding to the events in Paris, therefore, with a widening of war in the Middle East its critical to think about ways of ending the violence throughout the region and in other parts of the world if we want to deal with incidences of terrorism.

Fourth, it's crucial to understand something of the internal as well as external drivers of terrorism. The incidents of international terrorism in Europe and the West are likely to be caused as much by domestic as global drivers. Wherever individuals and groups are systematically discriminated against, humiliated and not treated with dignity and respect it is highly likely that they will eventually snap and engage in acts of political violence as a way of drawing attention to their plight. In addition to deep conflicts over the wearing of the veil there are some other brutal facts, which also need to be taken into account. 70% of all prison inmates in France, for example, are people of colour or of Moslem descent. One could be forgiven for thinking that these people and their families

have some legitimate grievances about police and judicial treatment. These violent acts will be justified in terms of jihadism or ISIS but their roots will be much deeper.

Fifth, terrorist incidences worldwide have jumped dramatically as a result of the Syrian Civil War. The challenge, therefore, as everyone says is to deal with the current epicentre, which is Syria and Iraq, and this is where it gets extraordinarily difficult. There are no simple solutions to any of the presenting problems and certainly no problem that will be resolved with further bombing and an expansion of military activity. In the first place there is the question of what gives the West and Russia the right to impose deeper military solutions on a region that has already suffered from misguided military interventions for the past 14 years. Security Council Resolution 2249 does not give any state a licence to declare war. The resolution asks members to "take all necessary measures to prevent and suppress terrorist acts committed specifically by IS and to eradicate the safe haven they have established over significant parts of Iraq and Syria". It also speaks of being determined to combat IS by all means. It did not, however, evoke Chapter VII of the Charter which specifically sanctions military action it was also not a formal decision of the Security Council rather a request for action from states. The challenge lies in what "All measures" means? Does it authorise the West to use nuclear weapons? That would certainly put an end to Daesh but this would not be an acceptable measure to employ under international law. So what can be authorised under this measure and who is accountable for decisions that are made? The reality is that there is a very cloudy area here. France, the US and Russia have been bombing in Syria, and Britain is killing jihadis in drone strikes, using the argument of self defence – but there is no part of international law which justifies the use of force in self defence thousands of miles away from home. If it became an acceptable part of international law it would basically legitimate any country taking military action anywhere in the world by invoking the right to self-defence. This is not an argument that the West would allow for North Korea, for example, so why is it acceptable for the West?

Sixth, almost all commentators have agreed that that bombing thus far has not stopped ISIS nor any of the other groups at play in Syria. It is not at all clear that a bombing strategy alone will do anything about degrading or stopping ISIS. So the recommended solutions are more extensive and intensified bombing and "Boots on the ground" but whose boots will these be and what will be their legitimation? More importantly what are the short and medium term goals of more military activity in relation to Daesh? What will happen to the other heads of this violent hydra, e.g. Boko Haram which killed more people than ISIS in 2015, Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, or Al Shabaab? Is there a Western desire to physically eliminate all these groups and their supporters? Where will it leave Bashar Assad who is a top down terrorist who has brutally killed and tortured thousands of his own citizens? Are we in the West about to enter into a Faustian deal with Russia, Assad, and the Syrian Army to defeat ISIS? The Syrian army has already lost 47,000 troops over the past 4 years, why do we think that invigorating and bolstering this army and the Syrian regime against ISIL will generate peace? There is no clarity about short or long term objectives here. The

Syrian, regime, for example, is quite willing to buy oil from ISIS while declaring its deep loathing of the same group. Are we really wanting to move deeper and deeper into the murky world of Middle Eastern politics? It did not work in Afghanistan and Iraq; there is absolutely no reason to expect that it will be any different in Syria,

Seventh, in all of this what about the people on the ground? The people who are fleeing violent conflict in their millions? How are they to be protected? How can “the West” establish safe havens and humanitarian access corridors if it is simultaneously expanding an appallingly complex civil war? What about the Kurds, the Yazidis and the Turks in this equation? What are the risks of a major regional conflagration precipitated by self-righteous national leaders declaring war and more violence to deal with the violence?

Eighth, Is it too late to think about nonviolent strategies? I don't think so. It was Bettelheim who said “Violence is the behaviour of someone incapable of imagining other solutions to the problem at hand” and Gandhi who said “I oppose all violence because the good it does is always temporary but the harm it does is permanent”.

So what might be some nonviolent solutions to Paris? There are some short, medium and long-term things that we could contemplate.

In the short term it is vital that:

- We mourn and grieve with those who lost their lives in Paris and with all those who have lost their lives in preventable violence everywhere. Now is the time to expand boundaries of care and compassion rather than become tribal in our affiliation.
- Our primary human responsibility is to stop and or alleviate the suffering. We need to be dedicating much more attention, therefore, to ways of ensuring that there are safe havens and places of refuge for the millions afflicted by this violence. This means a politics of inclusion rather than exclusion. It means being generous to those who are entirely innocent and fleeing violence. This is the time to practice an ethics of welcome and hospitality-the surest way to make friends of potential enemies.

In the medium term:

- We need diplomatic solutions rather than military ones. Even at this late stage is it possible to think of something that might persuade Daesh to change its behavior through positive incentives rather than negative sanctions? If it's not possible then what graduated nonviolent sanctions can be brought to bear before expanding the violent responses?

In the long term:

- It seems absolutely clear to me that old colonial borders are not going to prevail in the Middle East. Although this is extremely challenging it seems to me that this might be a moment to catalyse some medium to long-term discussions about new territorial arrangements in the Middle East that might satisfy a variety of deep-rooted identity needs. Is it possible for the UN to catalyse conversations that will generate security for the Sunni heartland, protect Shia' interests and create a separate state for Kurds and other minorities living in Kurdish areas? We need a different vision of how to organize

these diverse identity groups in both territorial and political arrangements which all find acceptable. Without such a vision there is no acceptable end game for military action.

- For those interested in a caliphate is it possible for the West and others to recognize ISIS in return for a cessation of internal and external violence. I have a feeling that this might be more desirable for Baghdadi than a protracted war for the next decade. If the West can do deals with a Saudi regime, which is as barbaric in its implementation of law as is Daesh, recognition in return for changed and verifiably changed behaviour might be acceptable.

So instead of jumping into ever-deeper violence it seems to me that we should use the tragedy of Paris to pause, to imagine some nonviolent alternatives. In doing so we need to create opportunities for all discontented groups –who see no alternatives to violence– to air their grievances so that the world community can ascertain their needs and work out ways of satisfying them in return for nonviolent politics. We have to work out ways of appealing to the better angels of all our violent natures?

Is this too idealistic? I don't think, so the reality is that the West did get us into this mess. The invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan and support for armed opposition in Syria are first causes of these calamities. There is a need for recognition of this and some processes for adequate atonement before we allow our self-righteous indignation to generate more violence and more calamity.