

Paris Attack Assembly

And so it is happening again. On Friday evening we were all shocked to see the images emerging from Paris. At least seven brutal and callous murderers rampaged through the city, coordinating six separate attacks that have taken the lives of at least 129 innocents. Many hundreds of others have been severely injured. There were explosions outside the Stade de France. People enjoying drinks and meals at Parisian cafes and restaurants were gunned down, leaving piles of bodies amongst the overturned chairs and tables. The Les Halles shopping centre was attacked. Worst of all, a concert hall was attacked and hostages taken. The terrorists fired indiscriminately and threw grenades into the crowd before they were themselves shot down by the French security forces. Paris is now under curfew, a city absorbing an evening of horror, in which loss of life, life changing injuries, and psychological trauma were unleashed.

We know little of the attackers – all but a few of their names are unknown; their faces would pass unnoticed in a crowd. We do know what they said as they murdered indiscriminately. They shouted out “This is for Syria.” That last phrase makes it clear that they acted in revenge for French attacks on Islamic State in Syria and Iraq. So it was no surprise when IS claimed responsibility for the attack. The French president, M. Hollande, has called the atrocity an act of war and has tightened security on the French borders.

And of course this is not an isolated incident. Another attempted outrage took place in August, on board a French railway train. The would-be murderer was prevented only by a misfiring weapon and by the bravery of other passengers. Less than a year ago, again in Paris, the satirical magazine Charlie Hebdo was attacked, as was a Jewish supermarket.

The template for the most recent Paris attack was set a few years ago in Mumbai, where the same process of multiple simultaneous attacks was used: marauding gunmen, armed with Kalashnikovs and explosives, who are determined to cause maximum loss of life over the longest possible period of time to ensure extended media coverage.

Meanwhile, in Syria the carnage continues, causing a movement of millions of refugees, some of whom are creating a humanitarian crisis in Europe unknown since the end of the Second World War. Elsewhere in the Middle East, conflicts rage. In Egypt, 224 Russian holidaymakers were blown out of the sky by another Islamic State attack. In Tunisia, more than 30 holidaymakers were shot whilst they sunbathed on the beach. And Libya, Yemen and Iraq are also in flames.

What are we to make of these scenes of horror? For the first time in centuries, large parts of the world are inaccessible and shunned by travellers from the Western world. But the violence cannot be contained and isolated. It spills over and bursts into flame in cities across the world. We are not immune. We know that last six months alone our security services foiled seven terrorist plots, which were directed at British citizens. It is an inevitability, a matter of time, before the scenes we watched on Friday in Paris are repeated in the streets of London.

We are told that this is a generational battle with Islamism. One that will not be resolved, if at all, for a significant part of the lifetime of those gathered in this Hall. And let us make no mistake – no one religion has a monopoly on terror. Fundamentalists of all religions: Christian, Hindu and even Buddhist, are currently murdering others somewhere around the

world. And other ideologies, which have elements in common with religion, such as Communism or Nazism, have been responsible for the deaths of hundreds of millions in the last century. The combination of religious thinking and politics has always been toxic.

So what are the terrorists trying to achieve? Why are attacks mounted on Western cities? What would motivate an individual to believe that a family enjoying a meal in a restaurant is a legitimate target for random killing? These are acts of terror, but to what end they directed? It used to be said that Britain and America's foreign policy adventures in Iraq and Afghanistan were a motive and a justification, but those wars are over. The troops have come home and elected local governments are in place, yet the attacks continue.

It seems that no course of action is helpful. We intervened in Libya to overthrow Gaddafi, and created a chaotic wasteland of warring militias. We did not intervene in Syria to overthrow Assad, and are accused of creating a chaotic wasteland of warring militias. There is no obvious motive for what happened on Friday in Paris and will happen again on many future occasions around the world. But let me, if I may, suggest one.

I suspect that the real battleground for the terrorists is not physical but mental. They are not trying to control territory; they are trying to influence the way we think. For the fundamentalist, and the terrorist, the world is sharply divided between us and them, between the saved and the damned, between good and evil. It is a binary world, as black and white as the colours of the IS flag.

Most of us do not live in such a world. We live in a world of shades and colours, where there is diversity, complexity, and tolerance. In other words we do not inhabit the black or the white, but the grey. This is a place where opposites can meet, and can coexist. It's a mental space that the terrorists hate because they do not understand it and because they fear it. The purpose of the bombs and the gunfire in Paris is to drive you out of the grey and into a world that is sharply divided. The terrorists want to make you think like them and if we let them, they will have succeeded.

If you allow yourself as a consequence of this, or any other attack, to brand people, or a religion, in stark and divisive terms, the terrorists have won. If you allow yourself to see the challenges of the refugee crisis as a flood of potential murderers, the terrorists have won. In fact those refugees are fleeing the ideology of the murderers in Paris, they are not the architects of it.

So the war against terror continues. It will be fought with weapons. It will be fought with bombs and tanks and jet planes and drones. But that is not where the war on terror will be won. It will be won in our heads and in our hearts. If you recoil from the horrors of Paris - the violence and the intolerance that sends pieces of metal through the bodies of innocents - then victory will not be won with hatred, it will only be won with love. It will not be won by dividing the world into us and them, into good and bad. It will be won in the grey area of tolerance, diversity, and complexity.

Let us never allow the actions of terrorists to make us think like terrorists – instead, let us follow the words of Shakespeare, from Henry 6th part 2:

A world of earthly blessings to my soul,
If sympathy of love unite our thoughts.”

Let us, together, have a moment in solidarity with France. We will hear M. Vignal and give one minute of silence for the victims of Paris. Let us reflect upon those who have lost their lives, those who are wounded in body or spirit. And in reflecting, let us pledge ourselves anew to the values and principles that underlie our culture, that are the bedrock upon which we will build a brighter and better future.