International Affairs Program
Research Report

Responding to Mass Violence in the Aftermath of Beirut and Paris

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ISIS, the World System, and the Need for New Politics

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Let me begin by saying how very saddened I am by the recent ISIS atrocities in Paris, Beirut, and on the Russian plane. The media and politicians have focused on Paris, as if there were a hierarchy of victims. But such hierarchy is in fact a feature of our world-system, which is what I want to focus my remarks on. When we analyze occurrences such as the ISIS atrocities, we need to take into account both endogenous factors and forces and exogenous factors and forces. That is to say, jihadism may be the cancer within the dar-ol-Islam, but the Muslim world exists within a larger world-system characterized by political and economic inequality, militarism, and battles over identity. My presentation highlights the repetition, over decades, of misguided foreign policies and their consequences, because history matters, too.

People who watch films or newsreel of the Middle East in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s are always amazed at the absence of veiled women in the urban settings, given that today the majority of women are veiled. Veiling came about with the rise in the late 1970s of Islamist movements and their subsequent expansion across the Muslim world in the 1980s. At the time, talk was of “Islamic fundamentalism” but “radical Islam” was also a term used. Jihadism was first supported by the U.S. in Afghanistan in the 1980s, where a tribal-Islamist rebellion fought a modernizing left-wing government, calling their rebellion a jihad. That particular jihad – also funded and supported by Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and Kuwait – generated Osama bin Laden (later responsible for the 9/11 attacks) and the pathologically violent Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, who brutalized Shia Muslims in Iraq after the 2003 US invasion and occupation. Other jihadists – who had been encouraged by the so-called victory in Afghanistan or who were products of the extremist Wahhabi ideology at Saudi-funded mosques in various parts of the world – went on to carry out attacks in Algeria, Jordan, Egypt, Morocco, Somalia, Nigeria, France, England, Spain, India, Kenya, Tunisia, and elsewhere. In the 1980s, US policy-makers thought they could trust “their” jihadists in the battle against communism, and that the US alliance with Saudi Arabia was strategically smart, but “blowback” occurred with 9/11 and the other assaults in the 1990s and into the new century. Afghanistan today still lacks the literacy levels, modern infrastructure, and the social development of its neighbors.

If we can draw a straight line from the US support for the Afghan Mujahidin to 9/11, we can also draw a straight line from the US invasion of Iraq to the violent power of ISIS/ISIL/Da’esh, but this time via Western destabilization of the Libyan and Syrian regimes. When the leaders of the US, France, and UK decided in 2011 that Ghaddafi had to go and that Assad had to go, their decision – quickly endorsed by Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and other Gulf sheikdoms – had the following effects: it encouraged the armed rebellions and jihadists in both countries, overthrew the Libyan state, created chaos and misery for the people of Libya and Syria, generated spillover effects in neighboring countries, produced the refugee crisis that EU countries are confronted with, and allowed ISIS to blow up the cultural heritage of Syria and murder innocent Shia Muslims in Beirut. In Benghazi in 2011, four Americans were killed after the “liberation” of Libya; most recently, innocents in Paris were murdered and maimed.
After all this, former CIA director James Woolsey had the unmitigated gall this past weekend to blame Edward Snowden for the suffering in Paris, ludicrously claiming that Snowden “had blood on his hands” because his revelations led to restrictions on intelligence gathering and the like. Woolsey is really trying to deflect blame away from decades of wrong-headed US and European foreign policies and onto poor Snowden. Meanwhile other pundits blame Assad for the rise of ISIS. This is not political or historical analysis, this is sheer propaganda.

What have the “war on terror” and all the invasions, occupations, drone attacks, the NATO adventure in Libya, attempts to dislodge the Assad regime, and non-resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict brought about other than civilian deaths, the unraveling of development, and more recruits for violent extremism? How have gigantic military expenditures benefited societal security, sustainability, and well-being, when what is really needed is reallocation of resources toward investments here at home in affordable healthcare and housing, infrastructural upgrading, decent jobs with decent wages, quality public schooling, and affordable university education? Why do the US and UK prioritize military sales to countries like Saudi Arabia rather than development assistance to, and foreign investment in, peaceful and democratizing countries like Tunisia? Why have Western policies on, and responses to, multiculturalism, conflicts, and refugees been so incoherent and inconsistent? Is it any wonder that both extreme right-wing and far left-wing parties are winning elections in Europe?

Our world-system is broken, the core countries are in disarray, and the hegemon can no longer lead, much less inspire. We need another world, one where conflicts, wars, and hyper-masculine rivalries can no longer be generated by arrogant powers; a new globalization, more people-oriented rather than profit-oriented; a world where citizens can live in peace, dignity, and prosperity in their own countries rather than be forced to flee whether as refugees from conflict or as economic migrants from unemployment or poverty. Let me end with my “variation on a theme” of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s, famous I Have a Dream speech:

All countries would reduce their military spending to under 2% of GDP while increasing their budgets for healthcare, public education, and social provisioning. Diplomacy, dialogue, and cooperation would replace rivalry and aggression. Development assistance would increase to 1% of GDP, and the “Tobin Tax” on financial speculation would finally be implemented. Working mothers would be entitled to paid maternity leave of one year, followed by affordable and quality childcare and pre-school. Religious studies would be taught at high school and a second language taught from primary school onward so that youth would acquire cross-cultural competence earlier in their lives. And all countries would meet the Sustainable Development Goals, whether through their own budget allocations or through international development assistance.

Imagining another world is not an exercise in futility – it is a necessity, given the various crises our world has been facing. Here at Northeastern, especially in this College and certainly in the International Affairs Program, we encourage our students to “think outside the box”; to ponder issues critically, creatively, and constructively; to pose research questions, identify problems, and find solutions; and to imagine a world in which human security, human development, and human rights are paramount.
Mai’a K. Davis Cross
From the perspective of European politics, EU counter-terrorism policy has developed rapidly since 9/11, and the recent Paris attacks have triggered further common responses from the EU.

- Before 9/11, the EU and its member states had very little in place to tackle terrorism. Only four counties had even defined terrorism: Spain, Portugal, France, and the UK.
- After 9/11, there was a huge increase in international security integration. Many policies that had been slowly making their way through the pipeline suddenly all got the green light. To name a few:
  - European Arrest Warrant
  - European Evidence Warrant
  - Mutual recognition of judicial orders, including freezing and confiscating assets and finances
  - Eurojust
  - Europol, which shares information and threat assessments across Europe
  - Schengen Information System – common law enforcement tool, database
  - Counterterrorist Group – heads of national intelligence agencies
  - Action Plan on Combating Terrorism, EU counter-terrorism strategy
  - And the external dimension: the 2003 European Security Strategy, which provides funding to 3rd countries to help stop terrorism
  - Frontex- ensures high standards of surveillance along external borders
- This is the policy context that existed when the Paris attacks happened. There were many policies in place, but they weren’t enough to prevent the attacks.
- Why did the Paris attacks happen when they did? We can really only speculate, but one explanation is that around 2,000 French citizens have gone to the so-called Islamic state, and some have come back.
  - Moreover, it has now become more difficult to go to Syria. For example, Turkey’s border is becoming less porous
  - This is combined with the fact that ISIS has lost 20-25% of its geographic territory in Iraq and Syria
- What has been the impact of the Paris terrorist attacks in Europe?
  - The attacks have created a stronger impression now that ISIS isn’t just confined to its geographic region but can have an impact at home
  - Crucially, the EU has for the first time activated its mutual defense clause, and the decision was unanimous.
  - The mutual defense clause is article 42.7 of the Lisbon Treaty, and states that, “If a member state is the victim of armed aggression on its territory, the other member states shall have towards it an obligation of aid and assistance by all means in its power.”
  - France specifically asked for help in its external military operations (France now has 7,000 troops deployed overseas in multiple places)
  - The choice of the EU’s mutual defense clause is important because France could have pushed for NATO’s Article V instead, but President Hollande instead chose to work through the EU. This is in line with past EU
integration as well as the French desire to not have too much control stemming from Washington over policy strategies.

- This decision to work through the EU and the mutual defense clause may be largely symbolic since many of the EU allies have already been participating in the coalition against ISIS (i.e. France, UK, Denmark, the Netherlands, and Belgium), but it is still a big step for the EU. Crises tend to lead to a more resilient EU with more resolve to integrate further.

- Besides the implications for the EU, France has also formed a “home guard” with its reservists, and has created 8,500 new jobs in police, justice, and border administration.

- Overall, we have to remember that combatting ISIS will require non-military strategies too. ISIS is not just an organization, but a network and an ideological movement that works based on inspiration. If the Paris attacks indicate that ISIS may increasingly use the internet and other means to radicalize people without having them come to Syria or Iraq for training, then it is important to use non-military means.