

Finding the fortitude

BY PIALUISA BIANCO

What happened in Paris could have happened in Berlin, Brussels, London or Rome. Europe feels angry and humiliated, a continent under siege. On the one hand, along its southeastern edge, European governments have been overwhelmed by the sheer volume of people escaping from Middle Eastern hotspots and looking for refuge. The Paris atrocities, the murderous work of the self-styled Islamic State, on the other hand, reinforce just how easily the Middle East's brutal civil war can reach deep into the European continent.



The Paris attacks have changed the world in fundamental ways. The targets struck were “soft”; they were chosen, if not at random, then in some unpredictable fashion. It is hardly possible to protect every restaurant, tavern or music venue. The intent of this heinous attack was to terrorize and shake an entire society, and it will take some time – despite the very reassuring words of political leaders – before widespread awareness is achieved to thwart this goal.

Most likely, there will be more such events. The hard fact is that we live in an age of systemic disorder. As we might have learned from New York, Madrid, London, Mumbai, Beirut, Paris and Bamako, there is scarcely any hiding place from Islamic terrorism. It would be wrong to dismiss the Islamic State as a regional concern. Its threat is global. And the only aim commensurate with this is to crush it and eliminate its stronghold in Syria and Iraq. Yet the difficulty in figuring out how this should be done is also part of the problem.

The broader question is what, if anything, Europe can do to reduce the risk of such attacks becoming a recurring horror. A political establishment that cannot make its people feel secure is a leadership that itself is not secure. It will not endure.

French president François Hollande called the murders “an act of war.” They were certainly that. But this is not a war as we would normally understand it. IS has seized territory in Iraq and Syria, but its potency lies in the fact that it is as much an idea and ideology as an organization. In Europe it wants to provoke a backlash that will feed it with more recruits from Muslims there. These latest murders, IS claimed, were retribution for French bombing of their fighters in Iraq and Syria. That was part of it, but no one in Europe should imag-

ine they could exempt themselves by washing their hands of the Middle East.

The immediate demand is for answers and action. Could the plot have been uncovered? Did the intelligence services miss something? How important was the complicity of French citizens mentioned by Hollande? Were others radicalized in Europe before being trained for this jihad? Is it time for Europe to reset the balance between personal liberty and collective security?

The attacks come at a moment of acute vulnerability for Europe as it struggles to cope with a migrant and refugee crisis originating in North Africa and the Middle East. Millions of desperate people have been fleeing the kinds of mindless barbarity, now spreading through the streets of Paris. But amid the carnage of Paris lies the raw material for demagoguery. Europe will veer to populism – perhaps to the extreme.

In dealing with this unprecedented crisis, it is proving hard for Europe to pick a path between humanitarian generosity and hard-headed pragmatism. It is one thing to tell a people that large-scale immigration will cost them some money. It is quite another to say it will make you less safe. That, of course, will be the message, and it will resonate. The bitter truth is that no European country has found the ideal balance between accepting diversity (which is the natural impulse of a liberal democratic state) and demanding adherence to a common set of values. This is because no perfect balance exists – balance is always dynamic and dependent on an ever-changing context.

The medium-term response in France – and elsewhere in Europe – must be to address the alienation of a minority of its own citizens attracted by the cause of violent extremism, at home or abroad. The challenge is to keep that minority small and make sure that the rest of society, including the rising generation of Muslims, plays an active part in this. But such security policies are only ever likely to work on the basis of further integration. Yet the risk of demonizing the minority communities comes with demanding their compliance. Achieving the right balance is hard, if not impossible.

The longer-term response has to include crushing IS in Syria and Iraq – even though this will not eliminate the jihadist terrorist threat. In much of the Middle East the state system bequeathed a century ago by Europe's departing imperial powers has broken down. In this part of the world, terrible shootings and bombings such as those in Paris have become almost commonplace. Globalization, identity politics and technology have provided the transmission mechanisms for spreading terror across borders and continents.

Militarily IS can easily be beaten. However, after the protracted and inconclusive Western interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan, it is reasonable to ask if this would be adequate. It is also reasonable to question whether military action will only have the effect of creating more recruits for IS as more blood and treasure is squandered. It would seem that the political will for any military action – however feasible – is still lacking.

Terrorism can never be completely defeated. The battle will be long. Islam is in a state of fervent crisis, riven by the regional battle of Sunni and Shia interests afflicted by a metastasizing ideology of anti-Western fundamentalism. The scourge it contains can only be defeated from within, by millions of Muslims who are people of peace and are as shocked as any sentient being at the Paris massacre. Yet their sentiments need to find an unambiguous voice.

One impulse will be to say it is time for Europe to throw up the barricades. Leave it to regional powers to fight it out. Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Iran, after all, have given life to IS by incorporating the Syrian Civil War into the struggle for dominance between Sunni and Shia. Let them suffer the consequences. As for Russia, well, Vladimir Putin has already paid IS back with bombs for its downing of a Russian civilian jet carrying more than 200 tourists – which itself was payback for Russia's bombs.

An opposing response will be to “double-down.” We were the ones who allowed IS to gain and hold territory. By pulling out, the West has given jihadis the opportunity to turn local organizations into a global ideology. IS

can now claim the allegiance of tens of thousands of so-called foreign fighters – many of them from Europe – and affiliates reaching across the Middle East, Maghreb and deep into Africa.

As is often the case, what's needed is a balance between the two impulses.

The case for a more ruthless assault on IS territory is a powerful one. This time, though, the West must remember what it forgot after the 9/11 attacks. There can be no exclusively military solution, nor can there be an exclusively political one. And the hard reality is that destroying IS both militarily and politically – as recent experience shows – would require a massive invasion, occupation and a decades-long effort of nation-building. Who is even remotely prepared to commit to this? Currently nobody, but in the event of future attacks, combined with a greater collaboration between countries, this may just be the most effective solution.

Obviously ending the Syrian Civil War, and thus depriving IS of its organizing mission, requires an international agreement. Most probably it will be an unappealing one to some. Western leaders will almost certainly need to retreat from past rhetoric. In any case, Europeans will feel safer in their cities only when there is a settlement of sorts in Iraq and Syria.

The civilized world needs collective courage in the face of such outrage; this entails heightened vigilance and intelligence sharing, as well as political and military cooperation in a common cause. Fresh and intense coordinated action is demanded by all concerned powers to destroy this totalitarian menace on the ground. IS exudes the mystique of a powerful organization, one that abides no opposition and contemplates no compromise as it proclaims an apocalyptic ideology that transcends both geography and time.

As ever with such attacks, the terrorists are intent on killing ideals, as well as individuals. They are targeting the values of open societies, of individual liberties and collective rights. It is vital that these values are defended, rather than diluted – to garner the fortitude we will need. The essence of democratic societies is not an “openness” that often covers for craven passivity, but a combative spirit that fights for an understanding of freedom it is continually redefining. In that spirit is the source of our fortitude. So now is not the time for dithering that would mask a fearful retreat. It is time for further engagement – cautious, intelligent and determined – with the world's most troubled regions.

