# Our Overreaction to Terrorist Attacks Like Paris Is Only Making Things Worse

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*Editors Note: "Rethinking Intelligence" is a project of the Brennan Center for Justice at New York University School of Law that examines the contemporary U.S. intelligence community, which fellow Michael German argues "has grown too large, too expensive, too powerful, too ineffective, and too unaccountable to the American people."*
*In this occasional series, Defense One presents a selection of commentaries and interviews conducted by the Brennan Center with officials from defense, homeland security, federal law enforcement, Congress, intelligence, and other groups who present their ideas to improve the business of American intelligence.*
*Their arguments tackle three fundamental questions: what is the scope of the new intelligence community, why does it sometimes fail, and how should the US reform it? For more, visit the Brennan Center online.*

I am troubled by what the Paris terror attacks say about our country's continuing failure to properly understand terrorist methodologies and formulate more effective counterterrorism responses. I'm particularly troubled by the sensationalistic U.S. media coverage of them. If we continue to aggrandize the violent acts of a handful of marginalized individuals into existential threats to western civilization, our over-reactions will to continue sapping our resources while empowering extremists of all sorts.

Anyone following the events in Europe as they unfolded would have seen familiar tropes playing out in the media. The first is that terrorism in the West is primarily, if not exclusively, a Muslim problem. Many commentators viewed the three Paris terrorists as representative of an alienated European Muslim population vulnerable to the call of terrorism. But the selfless courage displayed by the Muslim police officer they killed and the Muslim deli employee who helped save Jewish customers were more authentic examples of a larger, law-abiding and peaceful French Muslim community. No one pondered what *their* actions said about the nature of Islam. In fact, Muslims account for only a small percentage of the terrorism in Europe over the last several years. Most politically-motivated violence there is carried out by nationalist and sectarian groups, yet the government and the media don't treat these threats the same. Anders Breivik killed 77 people in separate gun and bomb attacks in 2011, including many children. Many people in Europe share Breivik's xenophobic, ultra-nationalist, anti-Muslim ideology, but we

don't hold them collectively responsible for his decision to employ violence to further those views. We don't call for a war on his beliefs; we demand his criminal prosecution.

A similar phenomenon occurs here in the United States, where most media outlets covered the distant Paris attacks far more closely than domestic shooting sprees by white supremacist Fraizer Glenn Miller, or anti-government extremists like Curtis Wade Holley, Eric Frein, and Jerad Miller, who assassinated four police officers in separate instances last year.
The Combatting Terrorism Center at West Point documented 3,053 injuries and 670 fatalities in the United States from far right violence from 1990 to 2012. A 2014 University of Maryland surveyindicates U.S. law enforcement now view Sovereign Citizens as the greatest terror threat they face. Yet the federal government effectively treats these acts of politically-motivated violence as hate crimes or lone attacks rather than terrorism. This may explain why an attempted firebombing at a Colorado NAACP office building the day before the Paris attacks received little media attention.

I spoke with New York University adjunct professor Arun Kundnani, author of "*The Muslims are Coming!: Islamophobia, Extremism, and the Domestic War on Terror*," about the disparity between the way we treat different forms of political violence (we spoke before the Paris attacks) The point of noting this disparity in reaction isn't to say one ideology presents more or less of a threat. All terrorism is reprehensible. But thankfully, it's also rare. Deaths attributable to terrorism here in the U.S. are a tiny fraction of the roughly 14,000 homicides committed each year, one-third of which go unsolved. Yet we devote far more resources to uncovering potential terrorists than to finding actual killers. The purpose of putting terrorist acts in context is to better understand how we might respond in a more effective manner.

The second prevalent theme in the early coverage of the Paris attacks was the tendency to exaggerate the capabilities of Muslim extremists. With very little information available — save a brief video showing the execution of a wounded police officer — many counterterrorism officials and policy makers didn't hesitate to call it a "sophisticated" attack that represented a new and "more complex" threat. The FBI and DHS backed this description in a law enforcement bulletin, claiming the Paris attacks "demonstrated a greater degree of sophistication and advanced weapons handling than seen in previous coordinated small-arms attacks, such as the 2013 Westgate Mall attack" in Nairobi, Kenya. The Somali militant group al-Shabaab claimed credit for the armed assault on Westgate Mall, which killed sixty-seven people. Details regarding the attack and whether some perpetrators escaped are still mired in controversy.

The facts don't support the hasty conclusion that the Paris attack was as sophisticated as originally claimed. While one or both of the Kouachi brothers may have travelled to Yemen and received some training from al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, their attack on the Charlie Hebdo offices was almost derailed because they went to the wrong address. They had to ask a maintenance man for directions. They caught a lucky break by finding an employee outside the office who they forced to punch the code necessary to enter the building. After the shooting, they crashed their escape vehicle and left identification papers behind when they abandoned it.
Co-conspirator Amedy Coulibaly's spree appeared even less organized, shooting a police officer, a street sweeper and a jogger before storming the kosher supermarket. The weapons Coulibaly and the Kouachi's used weren't financed or provided by organized terrorist groups,

but underlined purchased from a known criminal for less than 5,000 euros, which Coulibaly obtained through a fraudulent bank loan.

They did succeed at killing 17 people, which is tragic. But spree shooters here in the United States racked up similar death tolls, in some cases before graduating high school, or saddled with serious mental illnesses. It doesn't take sophisticated training to pick up a gun and kill lots of unarmed people.

Presenting Muslim terrorists as lurking super-villains generates unwarranted public fear, which benefits governments and security officials who exploit it for their own benefit. I talked with Ben Friedman of the Cato Institute about Americans' security demands, the politics of fear, and the difference between risk and vulnerability.

As Friedman has argued, accurate information about the nature and probability of threats, and the cost-effectiveness of various solutions could help correct the impulse toward the overwrought fear of remote threats like terrorism. In a perfect world, the intelligence community would provide that reliable threat information to the public, so overreaction could be avoided. We don't live in that perfect world, as Friedman suggests, because the intelligence agencies are also incentivized to inflate threat assessments.

Threat inflation benefits intelligence officials by making it easier for them to obtain new resources and authorities. A perfect example is Director of National Intelligence James Clapper's 2014 threat assessment, in which he claimed the United States is "beset by more crises and threats" than any time in his 50-year career. He makes the same claim every year, but the idea that current threats compare to the possible global nuclear annihilation faced during the height of the Cold War is almost laughable. In fact the world is measurably safer.

Driving up public fear also dissuades demands for accountability for intelligence or operational failures. Indeed, as was the case in several recent terrorist events, the perpetrators of the Paris attack were well known to law enforcement and intelligence officials long before they acted. Two had only recently been released from prison after serving time for terrorism-related offenses. All three were under government surveillance, and were on the U.S. no-fly list. Yet instead of being called to the carpet to explain why the expanded intelligence authorities and aggressive counterterrorism measures adopted since 9/11 didn't work, America's European intelligence partners are demanding even greater powers.

Treating terrorism committed by Muslims as categorically different from other terrorism forfeits the ability to learn what responses are effective in other contexts. When a far right extremist like Tim McVeigh, Eric Rudolf or Frazier Glenn Miller commits mass murder, government officials and media commenters rarely suggest they were extremely sophisticated, even though these three Army veterans had far better military training than anything offered in Yemen. We treat these terrorists as the common criminals they are. We don't fear their ideologies, which earn every bit of their unpopularity. We wrap up their co-conspirators using traditional law enforcement tools and we try them openly in criminal courts, where their weakness, cruelty and bankrupt ideas can be exposed for public opprobrium.

When current and former government officials go on television or through the halls of Congress to exaggerate the impact and meaning of terrorist attacks, whether here or abroad, they only encourage more violence. Telling every anti-social misfit and petty criminal that they can achieve notoriety and influence government policy by acting out violently with whatever tools are at hand isn't an effective counterterrorism strategy.

The terrorists' goal is to spread irrational fear and cause costly overreactions that divide society along the lines they choose. Our intelligence officials shouldn't be helping them. There will always be those that use violence to make political points. Recognizing this is a sign of weakness rather than strength will help us build a stronger and more resilient society that fear could never defeat.