

THE HUFFINGTON POST

Terrorism in Paris: Why Do Western Governments Believe They Can Wage War Without Cost?

Doug Bandow

December 2, 2015

The atrocities committed in the latest Paris attacks rightly horrify us, but they should surprise no one, least of all the French. An outraged President Francois Hollande announced that "France is at war," but of course that had been the case for more than a year, since France started bombing Islamic State forces in Iraq and later in Syria. Why did he only announce the fact after French citizens had died? He apparently hoped that the war would not inconvenience his own people, perhaps that they wouldn't even notice the conflict.

Terrorism is monstrous. The targeting of civilians is morally wrong. However, it is sadly predictable, an almost common practice by weaker powers. A century ago an ethnic Serb triggered World War I with a terrorist attack. In recent years the most prolific suicide bombers were Tamils, fighting against the Sinhalese-dominated government of Sri Lanka. Sunni opponents of the newly empowered Shia majority in Iraq eventually took the lead in employing this hideous tactic. Now the Islamic State appears to be perfecting a weapon it had heretofore left to al-Qaeda.

There's no mystery as to why. It wasn't an attempt "to destroy our values, the values shared by the U.S. and France," as claimed by Frederic Lefebvre of the National Assembly. Rather, admitted French academic Dominique Moisi, the Islamic State's message was clear: "You attack us, so we will kill you." By now every government should recognize what America learned on September 11, 2001. Wandering the globe bombing, invading, and occupying other states, intervening in other nations' political struggles, supporting repressive governments, and killing residents for good or ill inevitably create enemies and blowback. Explanation is not justification. But any government that attacks the Islamic State should realize retaliation is likely, probably against people innocently going about their lives, as in Paris--and against Hezbollah in Beirut the day before and Russia in Sharm el Sheikh a bit earlier still.

This kind of terrorism simply is another weapon of war. Imagine if the Islamic State was a normal nation. No one would have been surprised had ISIL fighter planes shot down French aircraft engaged in France's nearly 300 bombing runs over the "caliphate." There might have

been shocked disbelief at such a defeat of French arms, but no moral outrage. The same would be the case if ISIL planes had retaliated by striking Paris. Again, that would have been a routine act of war. After all, France had attacked Raqqa, the Islamic State's de facto capital, in October. The U.S. has bombed the capital of every major adversary since World War II: Rome, Berlin, Tokyo, Pyongyang, Hanoi, Belgrade, Baghdad, and Tripoli.

ISIL undoubtedly had the desire but not the capability to retaliate directly. So it turned to terrorism. While President Hollande studiously ignored his role in the tragedy, the 130 people slaughtered on the streets of Paris ultimately paid the price of his government's decision to go to war. Of course, those killed did not deserve to die. But said one of the killers, "It's the fault of your president, he should not have intervened in Syria" and Iraq.

Kumar Ramakrishna of Singapore's Nanyang Technological University argued that the Islamic State made a simple strategic calculation: it cannot defeat the allies' conventional forces, but can hope to "raise the domestic costs of Western coalition diplomatic and military involvement in Syria and Iraq." After all, the 2004 Madrid bombing had a sobering impact on the willingness of the Spanish government to fight. If the response instead is more ferocious, as in the case of France, the expanded combat bolsters the Islamic State's claim of civilizational conflict.

Western governments which loose the dogs of war should stop assuming that their own people will not be bitten. Being a liberal democracy does not turn bombing and killing into an act of immaculate conception. Instead of pretending that their nations enjoy immunity from the inevitable horrors of war, Western officials should make the case to their people that the likely costs are worth the benefits. In this case that includes the possibility, perhaps likelihood, of terrorist attacks at home. There are no certainties even for America, which has done surprisingly well since 9/11.

Which brings up the obvious question, why are the U.S. and its European allies involved "over there"--and, in fact, currently intensifying their intervention?

The Islamic State is an evil creature and few tears should be shed for its followers killed by allied bombs. However, the same could be said for the foot soldiers of many a dictatorship. The bloodshed unleashed by ISIL is a tragedy, but is substantially less than that resulting from more conventional conflicts in Sudan, Congo, Liberia, Rwanda, Burundi, and many other lands. Indeed, Islamic State isn't even the most murderous terrorist organization. Nigeria's Boko Haram holds that record. During its rise the Islamic State didn't attack America or Europe (or Lebanon or Russia). After all, it's hard to build a caliphate, or quasi-state, if the U.S. is against you. And running a caliphate establishes a return address for retaliation after any terrorist actions overseas.

Of course, if successful, the Islamic State ultimately might have embarked upon a campaign of terrorism directed at America. (If defeated in that effort it might end up doing the same.) But there is no reason to believe that ISIL would do better than al-Qaeda post 9/11. Moreover, such a possibility would be best met by responding to any threat as it developed, rather than joining yet

another interminable sectarian war in the Middle East. Proposals to introduce tens of thousands of combat troops demonstrate the failure to learn anything from Iraq, let alone history. Attempting to remake the Middle East is a fool's errand for Washington.

Anyway, ISIL is unlikely to succeed in establishing a durable state. The Islamic State's apparent strength mostly reflects its opponents' obvious weaknesses. Indeed, the jihadist haven has been losing ground and is under increasing pressure from its many enemies. The caliphate has had to threaten its own fighters with death to stem defections. If nations such as Saudi Arabia and Turkey ever get serious about destroying ISIL, the caliphate will quickly disappear.

Admittedly, Washington's allies are a remarkably corrupt, faithless, incompetent, and feckless lot. But almost all have demonstrated resolve when their own survival was threatened. They won't, however, act so long as Washington insists on doing the job for them. Indeed, virtually all of the Arab members of the administration's grand anti-ISIL coalition have essentially dropped out. Apparently they discovered that they, like Dick Cheney during the Vietnam War, have "other priorities" and prefer to leave the fighting to others. America should stop playing the sucker.

There is much foolish talk, especially on the right, of the U.S. being involved in World War III or IV. For instance, desperate to catch up in the presidential race Jeb Bush argued that "Radical Islamic terrorists have declared war on the Western world." Sen. Marco Rubio, who exhibits an astonishingly simplistic view of the world despite his claimed foreign policy credentials, similarly asserted: The terrorists "hate us because of our values." Which raises the question why ISIL killed 43 Lebanese in a Hezbollah neighborhood in Beirut and 224 Russian passengers bound for Moscow. France, Russia, and Hezbollah were united not by liberal tolerance and Western civilization, but brutal combat: all were at war with the Islamic State.

The Manchester Union-Leader offered a similarly wrong-headed analysis mixing the 1972 Palestinian murder of Israeli Olympics athletes, 1983 bombing of the U.S. Marines barracks in Lebanon, 9/11 strikes, Paris attacks, and more as evidence of America's "long-running war" with radical Islam. Yet Palestinian terrorism against Israel was geopolitical, not religious. Indeed, Fatah is secular, which is one reason Israel and the onetime terrorist movement made a deal on the West Bank. It was Ronald Reagan's decision to have U.S. combat forces take sides in Lebanon's bitter civil war, not religion, which turned American forces into targets there. Most terrorism, Islamic and other, is combat by other means in geopolitical struggles. Thus, intervening in fewer conflicts abroad is the easiest way to reduce the number of enemies determined to do one ill.

We should have learned this lesson by now. Retired Lt. Gen. Michael Flynn, who commanded U.S. Special Forces in both Afghanistan and Iraq and ran the Defense Intelligence Agency, recently noted that the Iraq invasion and overthrow of Saddam Hussein is what unleashed the Islamic State. Doing so was "a huge error," Flynn added.

Moreover, even at its worst terrorism does not pose an existential threat to America, Europe, or Washington's Mideast allies. Nearly 3000 dead from 9/11 was an awful toll. But World War I killed upwards of 20 million people. World War II consumed at least 50 million, and as many as 80 million, lives. Double those numbers and add a few more to get total casualties. The economic cost was beyond counting. Even "little" wars in Korea and Vietnam killed tens of thousands of Americans and millions of Koreans and Vietnamese. Treating terrorism as an equivalent threat is simple nonsense.

The most obvious victims of the Paris attacks are those killed and wounded, and their families and friends. But perhaps the greater outrage is that after turning his nation into a target President Hollande used the new attacks to justify more intervention, telling the French parliament that Syria is "the biggest factory of terrorists the world has ever known," a manifest untruth. After downplaying the risks of war, failing to even admit that France was at war as it bombed other nations and killed other peoples, the French president emerged surrounded by his security detail to pose as a decisive political leader. He then demanded that the U.S. and Europe join him in escalating.

Worse, the Paris attacks encouraged Republican presidential candidates to become even more irresponsible, calling for more war against more people. Already some 3500 American military personnel are active advising and training Iraqi troops. Special Forces also have been involved combat operations, or "direct action on the ground," as Defense Secretary Ashton Carter put it; one died in a raid to free ISIL prisoners. The administration has introduced Special Forces in Syria to aid favored insurgent groups as well and just announced it is sending a "specialized expeditionary targeting force" to fight in both Iraq and Syria. The president also apparently is contemplating sending a squadron of Apache attack helicopters, with substantial ground support, to Iraq. If these operations fail to roll back ISIL, as is likely, pressure will grow for Washington to escalate. So far every time the administration has faced a similar choice, it has doubled down.

The GOP candidates are demanding enhanced operations against Bashar Assad as well as ISIL. War-happy Senators Lindsey Graham and John McCain suggested an international force of 100,000 against the Islamic State. "I want to destroy them," the former exclaimed. Yet none of the Republicans explained how deeper involvement in the Middle East's burgeoning sectarian conflict would promote U.S. interests let alone protect U.S. security.

Terrorism is evil and awful. But the best tactic against it is to stay out of other people's wars. That should be the principle lesson of Paris, like 9/11. With the U.S. election less than a year away, voters desperately need a candidate willing to put their interests before that of neoconservative ideologues and foreign monarchs. Until then Americans are doomed to fight more unnecessary wars and risk more unnecessary terrorist attacks.

Doug Bandow is a senior fellow at the Cato Institute, specializing in foreign policy and civil liberties.