

The Obama Foreign Policy Record

WASHINGTON – The almost universally accepted narrative dished out daily by the serious, high brow U.S. media is that come January 20, 2017, with Donald Trump as President, we shall have 4 years of “*Amateur Hour*” in U.S. foreign policy. This dismal prospect is of course a far cry from the thoughtful, insightful and properly balanced foreign policy agenda expertly crafted and implemented by President Barack Obama and his top-notch foreign and national security policy team.

The incompetents are taking over

We are told by savvy analysts that, all of sudden, from reliable, steady competence that –as we all should know– raised American prestige worldwide, we shall plunge into an abyss of policy mayhem stirred by dangerous ignorance mixed with laughable (or dangerous) braggadocio, with a stupendously unqualified Commander in Chief at the helm.

Condescension

This narrative is another expression of the Olympian condescension of the perennially entitled leaders of the Washington foreign affairs establishment. They simply cannot get used to the reality of a complete outsider, with no real hands-on experience in this field until now reserved to few insiders, now in charge.

Trump is inexperienced

True, Trump is inexperienced. He may indeed fail in foreign policy, and we should not take this prospect lightly, as there are bound to be consequences. On the other hand, he may not fail, after all. Trump will have a team working for him. Most of the people he picked thus far have considerable

international and national security experience.

Right mix?

That said, has he chosen the right mix of people? Even more important, when confronted with difficult decisions, in murky situations when there is no obvious right policy choice, will Trump have the right instincts? Will he manage to safeguard –better yet, advance– the American National Interest? Quite frankly, we do not know yet. Time will tell.

Obama's record

However, while we can only speculate about the future, we do know a great deal about the Obama Team foreign policy record. And, no, it is not stellar. Contrary to the official narrative, the supposedly expert hands that have been in charge until now are not shining stars. And Obama is no great leader when it comes to directing U.S. foreign affairs. Hesitation, mixed messages and retreat have defined American foreign policy under his stewardship.

Now, after George W. Bush's profoundly ill-advised pro-democracy enthusiasm which led America into two horrendously costly and mostly unsuccessful wars –Afghanistan and then Iraq– a new foreign policy guided by restraint was indeed a welcome change after the 2008 elections. But there is a huge distinction between careful, calculated withdrawal behind defensible lines, while spelling out U.S. continuing strategic priorities, and policy confusion leading to retreat.

Allowing chaos in Iraq

In Iraq, President Barack Obama used Baghdad's intransigence regarding the legal status of U.S. troops which would stay on after December 2011 as a good excuse for ending the negotiation with then Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki. With no deal with Baghdad in place, the U.S. pulled completely out of Iraq at the end of 2011.

At that time Iraq was a relatively stable but still fragile and politically split country (Sunni in the North, Shia in the South) in which America had invested an enormous amount of resources. Pulling out completely while the wounds had not healed was an ill-advised and in the end horribly wrong decision.

To this day, President Obama claims he had no choice, given the uncooperative stance of the Baghdad government. But this is nonsense. If the Obama administration really wanted a deal with Prime Minister al-Maliki that would have allowed a substantial U.S. military presence after 2011 it would have found a way to get one.

Get out

The fact is that Obama wanted out of Iraq, entirely for domestic political reasons. He wanted out of Iraq in order to show to the American people that he had made good on a major campaign promise: he had brought all the troops home. And, in fact, later on he repeatedly bragged about this “accomplishment” represented by the closing of the Iraq War chapter. Which is to say that concerns about Obama’s popularity at home caused America to essentially abandon a country in which it had invested years, hundreds of billions, and so many lives of killed U.S. soldiers.

Could sizable American troops stationed in Iraq have prevented the steady descent into chaos that followed their departure? We do not know for sure. But it is not far-fetched to believe that they could have helped keep things together.

Belated U-turn in 2014

That said, Obama was forced to make a complete U-Turn on Iraq when this deeply divided country was confronted with an invasion masterminded in 2014 by the Islamic State, or ISIL from its bases in Eastern Syria. A massive invasion, by the way, that the sophisticated Obama intelligence leaders never

saw coming.

With no U.S. troops on the ground, (thanks to Obama's complete troops withdrawal decided back in December 2011), ISIL breezed, mostly unopposed, into Northern Iraq. In a matter of days it took over Mosul –the second largest city in the country– and the entire North West of Iraq. An eyewitness quoted by *The Guardian* said that:

“The city [Mosul] fell like a plane without an engine. They [ISIL] were firing their weapons into the air, but no one was shooting at them.”

Beyond taking over Mosul, ISIL captured vast amounts of cash and a huge arsenal of U.S. supplied weapons and material, simply because the Iraqi troops had run away.

So, here is the upshot regarding Obama's record on Iraq: U.S. troops out; ISIL in. The Caliphate takes over 1/3 of the country within days. America forced to move back in. But slowly and with hesitation. Meanwhile, militias funded by Iran spread through the country. This is complete policy failure.

Surge in Afghanistan?

In Afghanistan, President Obama started with an almost comical public debate in the Fall of 2009 (first year of his mandate) about what U.S. policy should be regarding the continuing Taliban insurgency. Obama finally ended the deliberations in November 2009 with a commitment to a “Iraq-like” surge in Afghanistan. But it was a surge accompanied by a publicly announced withdrawal timetable.

Yes it was just like that. Washington would send additional troops aimed at stabilizing this perennially chaotic country; but only for a short while. How ill-advised. You go to war not to shoot around a little bit, and then go home. You go to war to win. Or you do not go at all. Result? 2016 is over and the war in Afghanistan is still going on. This is another failure

due to Washington's indecisiveness and half measures.

Get rid of Ghaddafi

Then there was Libya, and the ill-conceived idea of toppling dictator Ghaddafi, without even a thought of a game plan about what to do afterwards. Result? Ghaddafi was toppled and he is certainly dead. But so is Libya, now a failed state torn apart by various warring militias. This is failure number three.

Hesitation about Syria

And what about Syria? in 2011, at the beginning of the Arab Spring, President Obama declared that President Assad heavy-handed repression of initially peaceful pro-democracy demonstrations was intolerable. Assad, Obama declared, "*had to go*".

Strong words. However, this clear statement of a U.S. policy objective –nothing but regime change would do for Syria–lacked even the semblance of a policy aimed at obtaining the outcome: make Assad go.

This incoherence between grandiose objectives and no policy to implement them was only the beginning of a half-hearted U.S. policy in support of some factions within the Syrian opposition.

Military planners should know that a little bit of support is not enough. In war, either you are in or you are out. Even if your method is to support the opposition, as opposed to sending your own troops, you have to be with them all the way. Support to your side in the conflict has to be decisive. The objective must be victory.

Media criticism

Well, even the serious usually pro-Obama media, after years of U.S. half measures, recognized that Syria is a huge policy failure for Obama. this is a BBC analysis dated October 2015:

“[Regarding Syria] the philosophical discussion at the White House was heated and fierce, leading to stalemate, not resolution.

For years Obama and his deputies refused to say categorically: we're not doing this. Instead a decision was postponed.

Four years later, the result is a splintered Syrian opposition, the growth of the Islamic State group and a humanitarian disaster stretching across Europe.

Last year, in a move that was more symbolic than serious, Obama asked Congress for money to fund a programme allowing US personnel to teach rebels marksmanship, navigation and other skills.

The goal was to train about 15,000 rebels in Jordan and other countries so they could return to Syria and fight. However, US defence officials admitted last month [September 2015] that only four or five of the recruits in the programme had actually returned to the battle.”

It ended badly

And this was the BBC, a fairly sympathetic voice. A year later, things got only worse. The result of years of U.S. policy confusion and half measures is a semi-destroyed Syria, Russian massive intervention in support of Assad, the Iranians and Hezbollah firmly planted there, a defeated opposition just driven out of Aleppo, not to mention untold numbers of dead people and millions of refugees. And now, a new ceasefire was arranged by Russia in partnership with Turkey and Iran. The U.S. is not even at the table. Talk about American retreat. This is a colossal policy failure.

ISIL in Iraq

And then there is ISIL in Iraq, the worst consequence of the U.S. total military withdrawal from the country it had invaded

back in March of 2003. In a speech to the Nation, on September 10, 2014, President Obama sounded really tough about ISIL and the threat that it represented for the region and indeed the world.

He declared that: *“Our objective is clear: we will degrade, and ultimately destroy, ISIL through a comprehensive and sustained counter-terrorism strategy”*.

It sounded that America really meant business. To begin with, Obama told the world that Washington had assembled a powerful coalition of 66 countries. Impressive? Not so much. If you care to dig just a little bit, you discover that this unbeatable anti-ISIL Armada includes heavyweights like Luxembourg, Somalia, Iceland, Bosnia, Bahrain, Romania, Cyprus, Estonia, Panama, Montenegro, Latvia and Albania. Are you still impressed?

Painfully slow progress

And the American military effort has also been modest. Two years later, while there have been significant successes against ISIL, we are still not done. Coalition supported Iraqi forces, (by the way this would also include support from Iran) are getting closer to Mosul; but they are still far from retaking it and eventually driving ISIL out of Iraq, let alone “destroying” it, as Obama pledged.

This is almost inconceivable. ISIL is a bunch of nasty thugs who use barbaric methods. But ISIL is not the German Wehrmacht smashing France, or the Japanese Imperial Army conquering Manchuria or the Philippines. It is a rag-tag, third-rate military force. It is unbelievable that America, with the largest and most technologically advanced military force in the world, could not destroy the self-proclaimed Islamic Caliphate in a matter of weeks.

To the contrary, a recent *Washington Post* story indicated that this battle against ISIL is going to be long slug:

“.[...]But a full offensive to retake the city [of Raqqa, de facto capital of ISIL] could still be months or more away, despite hopes in Washington that an operation to take the Islamic State’s most symbolically significant stronghold would be well underway before President Obama left office.”

This slow and uneven progress is the military outcome of policy confusion and partial military engagement. Despite Obama’s clear commitment a couple of year ago, the mighty U.S. still has not managed to “*degrade and ultimately destroy ISIL*”.

Pivot to Asia?

And there are many more examples of grand plans that yielded little. Consider the pivot to Asia. Nice idea; but little to show in terms of results. Suffice to say that China, just as America publicly committed to shift its policy focus on Asia, has managed to increase its sphere of influence throughout most of the South China Sea –essentially unchallenged.

True, the Obama administration made all the right noises when confronted with the evidence that China is busy building up and militarizing small islands scattered across the South China Sea that it occupied with the bogus justification that these rocks (some of which do not even qualify as “land” according to international law) have always been under Chinese sovereignty.

The Obama administration has not been able to challenge this creeping Chinese expansion, nor has it been capable or willing to persuade the Chinese to retreat and get out.

Iran

I am purposely leaving out of this analysis the Iran nuclear deal, because it is a lot more complicated than these other issues, and because in Iran’s case the Obama administration acted with purpose towards a fairly clear policy objective:

freeze the Iranian nuclear program. And this objective has been reached. While there are many vocal critics of the deal, none of them seem to have a better plan. Just getting out of a "bad deal" without having anything to replace it will not yield better outcomes.

Obama's retreat

Anyway, you get the picture. Clearly, it is always easy to point out foreign policy failures with the benefit of hindsight. Of course, it would be completely unfair to blame Obama for an Arab World in chaos, and other major troubles.

Still, the net result of Obama's 8 years in office is not stellar.

All in all, U.S. policies regarding Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya, Syria and ISIL reveal a pattern of hesitation, in fact genuine confusion, and the inability to define, articulate and pursue what in Obama's mind is the U.S. national interest.

What U.S. retreat signals to the world

It would be disingenuous to conclude that all these failures, mixed messages and retreats from the world stage do not matter, because America after all is still the most powerful country on earth.

It is obvious that other political leaders around the world look at both American military capabilities and American political will. If they conclude that America lost its will, its powerful military forces will not deter as much as they used to.

Will Trump be better?

In the end, it is perfectly alright to express doubts about President-elect Trump ability to articulate a mature U.S. foreign policy. Still, the idea that come January 20 2017 the rowdy, clueless children are taking over, while the thoughtful

grown ups have been driven out of the room is nonsense.

Quite frankly, if the poor Obama foreign policy record is the best the mature and experienced adults are capable of, then we may as well give the untested Trump and his team a chance.

Who knows, they may surprise us.

Italy Overwhelmed by Poor African Immigrants

WASHINGTON – Italy has two major demographic problems. Both of them carry bad outcomes. Italy is the destination of too many immigrants from poor countries in Africa and the Middle East; while its native population is shrinking due to extremely low fertility rates. In plain language: not enough new babies.

Gloomy picture

Here is the gloomy end game. Italy's population is progressively becoming more African/Middle Eastern. And this trend brings no economic gains, because most of the new residents are either illiterate or low skilled, while at the same time they are entitled to receiving costly social services.

Crisis point

Add to this social and political tensions caused by the new immigrants. Indeed, according to public officials, Italy has reached a crisis point when it comes to its ability to welcome and integrate immigrants arriving mostly from Africa and the Middle East. Piero Fassino, former Mayor of Turin, a major

city in Italy's North West, recently stated that: *"In terms of numbers [of new immigrants] we are at the point of surpassing what can be managed by the public authorities. Unless we deal with it, this immigration problem may overwhelm us"*.

Political tensions

Among other issues, Fassino pointed out that immigrants come up on top of the waiting list for low-cost housing, because they usually have large families (unlike the Italians), and large families have a priority among those waiting for these units.

This way immigrants end up getting the housing originally planned for low income Italians. And this unforeseen development clearly breeds strong anti-immigrant resentment.

Lowest fertility rates

And it gets worse. If we look at the never-ending immigration tidal wave in conjunction with low fertility rates among Italian women, then we have the elements of a demographic/political crisis. Italy now has the lowest number of new births per unit of population in the entire European Union. Simple math: fewer native Italians and more Africans permanently settled in Italy will transform the country's ethnic composition—rather rapidly.

Indeed, Italy is now at the point in which deaths have surpassed new births. This means a progressively shrinking native population. If we consider that in Italy, (like in most other developed countries), social services and pensions going to current recipients are paid for through contributions by active workers, it is obvious that the entire fabric of the Italian welfare state will soon become unsustainable. There will not be enough revenue to finance benefits. Simply stated: too many retirees, and not enough active workers paying into the system.

Immigrants do not add to the quality labor pool

From this perspective, the arrival of large numbers of new immigrants should be viewed as good news, no? More young people with jobs paying into the welfare system, should help re-balance it. Right?

Well, not really. Because these new immigrants are unskilled and mostly illiterate. These new arrivals have hard time get real jobs. They often become part of an informal, underground economy. To put it mildly, they do not add to the quality of Italian human capital. They are a net cost to the country.

No way out

Is there a way of this? Probably not. Italians do not have more children because of a changed culture in which family is no longer thought of as important, and in part because children are deemed to be too expensive for millions of struggling lower income Italians who can barely make ends meet.

Immigrants driven by poverty

At the same time, abject poverty will continue to drive hundreds of thousands of poor Africans out of their Continent. Same thing for Middle Eastern people trying to escape from civil wars, and political chaos in their native lands. Many of them end up in Italy because Italy is close to Africa, Syria, and Iraq. Once the new immigrants get there, hard to move them elsewhere.

So, here are the facts. Soon enough, Italy and others parts of Europe, especially Southern Europe, will look more like Africa and the Middle East.

Can U.S. Fight Insurgencies?

WASHINGTON – Under pressure, the Obama administration released the estimated number of civilians killed (unintentionally) in the course of U.S. drone strikes that have taken place in various theaters. Along with the figures came new guidance aimed at further reducing “collateral damage”, i.e. the killing of civilians in the course of U.S. air attacks via drones. (These attacks are always aimed at military targets).

Indeed, sometimes, civilians get killed accidentally due to their proximity to military targets. (There have also been a few cases in which civilians have been mistakenly targeted, because it was wrongly assumed, based on the information available at the time, that they were in fact enemy fighters).

Civilians killed by drone attacks

US Intelligence sources stated that 116 civilians were killed in the course of drone strikes aimed at hitting legitimate military targets in different theaters. This usually happens because enemy positions are located in the midst of populated areas.

President Obama stated that America, from now on, will do its very best to further reduce these numbers. Of course, several critics immediately argued that the real number of civilians killed is a lot higher. Besides, this total just announced excludes the death toll from operations in Iraq, Syria and Afghanistan.

This U.S. announcement could be just public relations; or it could be an oblique way to tell the world that from now on the U.S., while fighting elusive enemies on different fronts, will

be more restrained. It will bomb less, with drones or conventional aircraft. Indeed, if this new guidance will take effect as stated, hard to bomb more enemy positions most often located in populated urban areas, when your goal is to further reduce the chance of killing civilians.

Restrictive Rules of Engagement

Still, whatever the real numbers of civilians accidentally killed, the truth is that America's current "Rules of Engagement" are already extremely restrictive on when and where U.S. bombs can be legitimately used.

Drones strikes are usually planned on the basis of carefully sifted intelligence. "Dynamic" strikes that occur in the context of ongoing military operations however are also subject to complex procedures. Tactical Operations Centers need to authorize them, often only after having received the input of military lawyers who are standing by 24/7 and who are called upon to assess the legality of strikes, on the basis of the available intelligence regarding the situation on the ground.

Is the way to fight a war?

This way of fighting a war looks crazy. But these are the standard rules. Given all these restrictions on what targets can be bombed aimed at avoiding or at least reducing possible civilian casualties, quite often requested strikes are simply not authorized by the U.S. military authorities.

Well, then why do we have non combatants killed by U.S. bombs? Very simple. Al Qaeda, the Taliban and now ISIL do not follow the established laws of warfare. They routinely place their own assets (troops, ammunition, logistics) in the middle of densely populated areas. They deliberately use civilians as human shields. And the purpose of all this is obvious: to deter American attacks.

Civilian deaths become propaganda tools

And when some ISIL positions are indeed attacked and civilians are killed, then there is a huge publicity gain for the insurgents. *“The blood thirsty Americans bomb indiscriminately, deliberately targeting women and children”.*

Needless to say, ISIL and others have a vested interest in inflating the numbers of civilians killed through drone or other U.S. air strikes. This is their own way of fighting the propaganda war, using the argument of American barbarity in order to recruit more people willing to fight and die for the cause.

Impossible to avoid civilian casualties

The fact is that, even with heroic efforts, it is impossible to avoid civilian casualties while fighting irregular forces that hide within populated areas. It is just impossible. Even with highly sophisticated satellites and other sensors that gather detailed images and provide real time data to those who operate drones, or to pilots of manned aircraft, it is just impossible for the U.S. military to neatly separate combatants who usually wear no uniforms from innocent civilians in populated areas.

No way to win

So, here is the bottom line. If Obama is serious about cutting the number of casualties going forward, then this means that America cannot realistically fight aggressively and win against insurgents who routinely hide in urban areas. Even today, without new restrictions in place on the use of air power, the effort to minimize collateral damage means relatively few air strikes, because many targets are deemed to be unlawful by the military lawyers, and therefore excluded.

More targets will be declared off-limits

If America wants to further diminish the likelihood of future civilian casualties while fighting insurgents, this means that an even larger number of possible military targets will be declared off-limits by the military lawyers, due to their close proximity to civilian areas.

And here is the absurdity. This is no way to fight any war. As troubling as this is to our civilized conscience, it is just impossible to fight an insurgency that operates in cities and towns without causing some unwanted suffering.

If America wants to win against ISIL and other insurgents, it has to accept this fact: if you want to destroy enemy forces that hide in populated areas, you have to accept that civilians will also be killed.

Long, inconclusive conflicts

Otherwise, if avoiding civilian casualties is more important than destroying at least some enemy targets, let's prepare for an endless and inconclusive conflict with adversaries who do not play by the accepted rules of war.

With all the restrictions outlined above, and possibly more to come, the U.S. cannot fight properly; because Washington feels the pressure of a world public opinion that requires America to behave according to an impossible standard.

Dealing With The Terror Threat in America

WASHINGTON – As we are entering the heated phase of the US presidential campaign, the Orlando massacre perpetrated by

Omar Mateen, a self-radicalized second generation US born Muslim, has immediately become a major political issue.

Terror and politics

Both Democrat Hillary Clinton and Republican Donald Trump felt the pressure to articulate a (supposedly) credible anti-terror strategy aimed at preventing more terror attacks in the US. But the expectation that either of them can come up with a winning strategy that will destroy terrorism while providing total protection to all Americans is patently absurd.

The terror threat

The "Terror Threat" is not a monolith led by an organized command. It is composed of multiple, mostly independent factions spread around at least a dozen countries, with support from a myriad of diverse foot soldiers. They can be citizens of Arab countries. But they can also be European or US national citizens of Arab or other Muslim descent. They can be from Bosnia, Chechnya or Kosovo. Some of them may have received training in Syria. Others may have been convinced to join the global jihad through Islamic propaganda delivered via the internet.

ISIL in Syria and Iraq

Sure enough, America and the West have a tangible target in the self-declared Caliphate, chunks of Syria and Iraq now occupied by ISIL. It can be plausibly argued that the existence of a somewhat functioning "Islamic State" provides encouragement to assorted young dreamers around the world who now are convinced that this new religious-political entity, supposedly founded on total adherence to the True Faith, is the clear sign of an unfolding global revolution of which they are the vanguard.

People believe in crazy things

Yes, this is absolutely crazy. But, as history amply demonstrates, some people at times believe in crazy things. Therefore, redoubling our efforts to destroy the Islamic State is probably a good thing.

But let's not harbor any illusions. The genie of Islamic Fundamentalism is out of the bottle. Even assuming ISIL's quick defeat, (not a sure thing), this millenarian ideology now embraced by ISIL will find another vehicle. It will probably find a new home and new followers in other parts of the world.

Is there are a plan?

Given all of the above, what should a new US President do to protect all Americans? Nothing new, really. America is not confronted with a frontal assault orchestrated by Islamic radicals. ISIL and its associates did not land here as an organized army attacking us. We have a few (certainly not tens of thousands) ISIL followers, spread around, here and there, within America.

Some of them harbor jihadist beliefs and intentions. A small number of them are willing to plot and execute terror attacks –just like Omar Mateen did in Orlando. And the sad reality is that small numbers can do great damage.

Asymmetric warfare

Omar Mateen, the young man of Afghan descent who plotted and executed the Orlando massacre was all by himself. He was not acting (as far as we know) under direct orders of some kind of ISIL supreme leader in the U.S. or the Middle East.

In other words, this horrible Orlando massacre did not require any master plan, structure or chain of command. Again, Mateen did it by all by himself. And look at what he did. Just one man –acting alone– killed 50 people and injured more than 50 others. A real carnage. This is what is known as “asymmetric

warfare". You do not need an army, or even a platoon to kill a large number of unarmed civilians gathered in one place.

Better police work

Is this is so, what is to be done? Realistically, the only thing that a responsible new US President can promise to America is to do his/her best to have and possibly beef up a robust intelligence and police apparatus that hopefully will catch the bad guys before they can act.

But nobody in his right mind can promise 100% success. The home-grown terrorists are likely to be just like the young man responsible for the Orlando massacre. Most likely they are psychopaths acting on their own who have adopted this ideological veneer –Islamic fundamentalism– in order to justify their violent intentions. Indeed, no sane individual would seriously believe that firing into a crowd of unarmed people will bring about a major, constructive political transformation.

Unrealistic expectations

In a more sober political environment in which voters would avoid harboring unrealistic expectations, both Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump would say precisely this. *"We shall do our best. But it is impossible to monitor millions of people 24/7. Some of the bad guys will slip through. More attacks are unfortunately possible."*

But saying this sounds like hopelessness. The candidates for the highest office in the land "must" offer a "perfect plan". And so they do, even though they know (and we should know) that this is mostly hot air.

Again, better intelligence and coordinated police work can do something, probably a lot, to mitigate the risk of more attacks. But we cannot expect perfection.

Living with the threat

So, are we going to live with this latent terror threat indefinitely? The answer is yes. Until at least some individuals scattered here and there in the United States (and elsewhere) will be inspired by crazy ideologies that order violence as the best tool to bring about a new order finally based on the True Faith, we should expect more terror plots.

Even if we managed to destroy the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria very quickly, this would not kill –for good– the crazy ideology that breeds terrorists and new terror threats.

A different version of this article was published in www.globalpi.org, the website of the Global Policy Institute, a Washington DC think tank.

NATO Is Indeed Obsolete

WASHINGTON – The Atlantic Alliance, or NATO, is an old security arrangement (founded in 1949) that no longer has a clear purpose. In his habitual blunt style Donald Trump, the leading candidate for the Republican nomination in the upcoming presidential elections, recently said that NATO “is obsolete”. In fact, while Trump is certainly not a leading foreign and defense policy expert, he is mostly right.

No mission

Indeed, what is NATO’s mission today? And, related to that, what means does NATO have at its disposal to execute this mission? On the first question, now that the Soviet Union is gone, the mission of a military alliance created to face it is murky. On the second question, NATO has very few military

means, as defense budgets in most members states have been shrinking, year after year. (In the US, despite cuts, the Pentagon's budget is equal to 3.6% of GDP. Germany's defense spending is 1.2% of GDP. In Belgium it is 0.9%, in Spain 0.9%, in Italy 1.0%)

The old rationale

The initial rationale for the creation of Atlantic Alliance, the very first peace time integrated military structure, was the Soviet threat against Western Europe at the beginning of the Cold War. Europe's proximity to the expanded Soviet Bloc, (it included all of Eastern Europe and East Germany), combined with Europe's economic and military weakness, (due to the lingering effects of the destruction caused by WWII), prompted America to commit itself to the defense of Europe. Hence the creation of NATO in 1949, with tens of thousands of US troops permanently stationed in West Germany and elsewhere in Europe, with tanks, guns, aircraft, and nuclear weapons.

No more Soviet Union

But then the Berlin Wall came down in 1989, and the Cold War ended because the Soviet Union imploded shortly thereafter. The Warsaw Pact disappeared. The New Russian Federation lost control over all of Eastern Europe. Germany was reunified. Moscow also lost large pieces of the old Soviet Union, including Ukraine, Belarus and the three Baltic States.

NATO is still here

However, NATO was not disbanded in response to the withering away of the old existential threat to Europe's security. Perhaps it was prudent to keep the old institution in place, just in case. And may be it was a good idea to allow the former members of the Soviet Bloc to join NATO, even though the new Russian leaders saw this as an eastward expansion of NATO, and therefore a potential threat to them.

Still, be that as it may, an Alliance's strength is based not on how many members it has, (28 countries), but on its shared purpose and on its ability to deploy the military tools to secure them. And here NATO shows its inherent weakness. No clear purpose, and drastically reduced military forces.

A new threat from Russia?

If we fast forward to today, many will argue that NATO is still quite relevant because Putin's Russia has demonstrated to have aggressive tendencies. In 2008 it went to war with Georgia. More recently it grabbed Crimea, a piece of Ukraine. Many say that, if unchecked by NATO, Russia would keep moving westward into Poland, the Baltic States, and may be beyond.

I believe that Russia is mostly interested in neighboring regions that historically were part of Russia. The idea that Ukraine is just the appetizer for a famished Russia, while Portugal or at the very least Germany will be the pudding seems quite preposterous.

Inadequate military means

But even if we assume that this unlikely theory of Russian resurgent expansionism were in fact correct, then where is NATO's demonstrable military deterrent to counter it?

Indeed, if NATO is still standing and operational because Russia is a threat to its members, then we should also see robust defense spending aimed at creating a war fighting force that can credibly deter aggression by showing Russia that any threat to NATO members' security would be met by a formidable force.

Unfulfilled commitments

Well, it is not so. Because of economic weaknesses and competing social spending priorities, most European countries have allowed defense spending to go into free fall. In

theory, all NATO members are unequivocally committed to spend at least 2% of GDP on defense. In practice, only 5 countries, out of 28 NATO members, have honored this pledge. Most of the others spend around 1% of GDP on their military, or less. This is half of what they promised. If you take the U.S. out, The European members of NATO have only limited air power. Practically no sizable expeditionary forces. No meaningful airlift capabilities.

During the Libya mission, confronted with a third-rate enemy, the French and British air forces run out of smart bombs only a few weeks into the conflict. Even that limited operation could not have been executed without US support in key areas such as air defense jamming and suppression, and overall logistics.

Not serious

Quite frankly, this reluctance to field credible military forces makes NATO into a joke. You cannot say that we have to keep NATO together and strong in order to face an aggressive Russia and then have a virtually disarmed military alliance on account of the fact that nobody wants to spend diminished revenue on defense in economically weak countries.

Limited support to US-led operations

As far as what used to be called "out of area" (that is possible threats outside of Europe) NATO does not have clear objectives and a credible strategy to achieve them. Yes, NATO countries participated in the difficult Afghanistan and Iraq conflicts. NATO countries intervened in Libya. All true. But in all these efforts (Libya is a partial exception) the US was leading, and selected NATO countries followed.

At present, while the US (with little enthusiasm) is leading a military effort against ISIL in Iraq and Syria, some NATO countries are contributing some aircraft to the air war. But there is no clear NATO policy. And certainly no commitment by

all NATO members to participate.

No clear purpose

So, here is the thing. With the end of the Cold War, NATO lost its original purpose. What we have now is murky strategic objectives and lack of military means to accomplish even slightly ambitious missions.

The NATO Alliance is now mostly a talking shop with too many members who contribute almost nothing of value. While something may change after the US elections, it is unlikely that anybody will ask the hard questions about purpose, strategy and means.

No debate on difficult issues

Nobody wants to have an open debate within NATO that would inevitably expose deep political divisions and embarrassing military vulnerabilities. For this reason, I suspect that the old institutional framework will be left as is, even though most analysts recognize that it is obsolete and virtually meaningless when it comes to core military capabilities.

In the future, if we are lucky, the US may be able to create *ad hoc* “coalitions of the willing” and work selectively with the 4 or 5 NATO countries that still have modern armed forces.

No Deal To Cut Oil Production – Still, Russia And Saudi

Arabia Are Talking

WASHINGTON – Saudi Arabia and Russia are the leading world oil producers and exporters. Energy Ministers from both countries met in Qatar to discuss a possible agreement leading to production cuts. They were joined by Qatar and Venezuela.

No deal

But nothing really happened. The only “agreement” reached by the two oil exporting giants, (the other two participants are not very consequential), is to freeze their production at January levels, an all time high. So this does not mean much.

Besides, the agreement is contingent on Iran and Iraq not raising their production beyond this level. And this is almost impossible. Iran wants to ramp up its production to pre-sanctions levels. This translates into *adding* another one million barrels a day beyond the 400,00 it has already added. Iraq desperately needs cash to finance its counter-insurgency efforts against ISIL in the North West of the country. So, expect no production freezes from these two key OPEC members.

Too much oil

The current oil production glut, intentionally allowed by Saudi Arabia when it refused to cut production when confronted with lower prices in 2014, is hurting both Russia and Saudi Arabia. And, as noted above, the situation is about to get worse. With the lifting of international sanctions, Iran is now free to export more to Europe and elsewhere. We can expect more than 1.4 million barrels of additional Iranian oil to hit already saturated markets in the near future. For sure, this over supply will keep crude prices down. They are around \$ 30 right now, down to just 1/3 of what they used to be before this glut began.

Financial pain

Saudi Arabia can tolerate the financial pain caused by the huge oil revenue loss, for now, but not indefinitely. Likewise, the Russian government has been forced to cut spending, repeatedly, while dipping into a reserve fund to cover the substantial revenue shortfall. Depressed crude prices are really bad for both countries.

While no breakthrough took place in Qatar, may be it is time for the Saudis to get a deal with Russia. The problem is that Saudi Arabia is also concerned with retaining market share. If it cuts production, it will lose some customers. And others who are not cutting may end up benefiting. (Think Iraq and Iran, among others).

Can they agree?

Hence the importance of a deal with Russia, the other giant exporter. The two of them combined control 20 millions barrels of production. Still, is such a deal really possible?

In theory, yes. In practice, we would be entering uncharted territory. This has not been done before. Russia is not an OPEC member. Besides, Russia is not viewed as a friend by the Saudis. Moscow is on good terms with Iran, while it heavily supports Assad in Syria.

May be

Can the two countries go beyond these major political differences, and strike a deal that would benefit both of them financially, in a major way?

As we are getting closer to what begins to look like an emergency situation caused by oil revenue collapse, a production cut agreement between Moscow and Riyadh is just possible.

The meeting in Qatar was inconclusive. Still it counts as an exploratory talk between two critical players that until today

had no established venue for bilateral energy talks.

Will there be more meetings? Can the two sides get a real deal, a deal that will cut production, and therefore lift oil prices? I would not rule this out. Both Russia and Saudi Arabia badly need more cash.

Forget About Assad – America Should Focus on Fighting ISIL

WASHINGTON – What are Obama's options regarding an American "Syria Policy" aimed at supporting the emergence of a democratic state over there? None. Simply stated, we cannot fight and win against ISIL, (entrenched both in Syria and Iraq), while also trying to get rid of President Assad, as he is protected by Russia, Iran, and Iran-funded Hezbollah.

Focus on ISIL

As we should really focus on ISIL, the broader threat, we should let go of any plans aimed at replacing Assad.

As we remember, when the Arab Spring reformist winds reached Syria, President Bashar al-Assad responded with characteristic brutality. Street demonstrators were met with force. Many were killed.

At the very beginning of what (years later) turned out to be a human tragedy of monumental proportions, the Obama administration postured. It issued strong statements, proclamations. "*Assad has got to go*", Obama stated.

Yes, except that there was no appetite to do anything that would actually *make him* go. At that time, may be there was

still a chance to support the moderate, reasonably pro-western Syrian opposition. But that opportunity, assuming that it was viable, came and went.

ISIL firmly entrenched

What happened instead is that the group that became known later on as ISIL managed to exploit the unfolding civil strife within the country to gain control of a huge part of Eastern Syria. From there, the jihadists subsequently managed to quickly invade North Western Iraq, encountering no opposition, because they were viewed as “liberators” by the Sunni majority who live there.

After this territorial conquest, they proclaimed the establishment of an Islamic Caliphate in the territories they control. And it is clear that they believe to be engaged in a global battle whose final objective is Islam’s victory against the rest of the world.

As the situation on the ground rapidly deteriorated, the US administration looked surprised. The impression is that they did not see any of this coming. Since then, not much has happened, except for the mounting destruction within Syria caused by Assad’s forces, various insurgents, ISIL, and now Russian bombs.

America’s air war

True, after much hesitation, President Obama finally declared that America would fight ISIL in order to finally defeat it. Yes, except that the military effort (a limited air war) is so minimal that many people wonder if America means this or not.

But let’s look at where we are now. With America largely absent, Iran and its proxies, plus Russia entered the fray in Syria. (Iran is also supporting the Shia Government in Iraq in its own fight against ISIL).

Russia and Iran protecting Assad

It is clear that Russia and Iran want to save Assad, even though the Syrian President's position has deteriorated. Meanwhile, both America and Iran seem to share an interest in dislodging ISIL from its strongholds in Iraq and Syria.

Given all this, it is clear that America cannot even remotely aspire to obtain its old objective of supporting the emergence of a free, democratic Syria. Syria is now a semi-destroyed, hopeless country. Assad is protected by two major powers. And we have no influence there.

Destroy ISIL

What we can and should do is to destroy ISIL, because its very existence fans the flames of a global, if disorganized, jihadist ideology and groups that support it through violent means, (witness the acts of terrorism in France and elsewhere).

I believe that ISIL's ability to convince thousands of young Muslims to engage in "home-made" jihad is vastly overstated. Still, ISIL is a dangerous cancer now firmly planted in the heart of the Middle East. It has to be eradicated.

Forget about Syria

As for Syria, let's look at it realistically. Did Assad ever launch any messianic, anti-western movement? No, he did not. Was he behind terror attacks against the US Homeland? No, he was not. He was yet another Middle Eastern nasty autocrat. Unpleasant, yes. But no direct threat to the security of the United States. Bottom line: we can live with him.

No deal with ISIL

But we cannot "do a deal" with ISIL. ISIL needs to be eradicated. Is it possible for Washington to work with Russia and may be even Iran on this? Who knows.

Still, whatever the chances of a serious anti-ISIL coalition, Russia and Iran will continue to support Assad.

As we have no way to convince them otherwise, we better admit this reality, forget about Assad, and focus on ISIL.

Major Economic Reforms In Saudi Arabia?

WASHINGTON – What is going in Saudi Arabia? Probably too much. We have now an odd stew of engineered low oil prices that created huge economic and fiscal constraints, in Saudi Arabia and in other oil-producing countries, mixed with a new “Master Plan” for the country that includes extremely ambitious reforms unlikely to succeed.

Low oil prices

Let’s look at oil prices. We know that the Saudis have willfully caused the global oil prices collapse that began in 2014, and continues today, by refusing to cut their massive output (in excess of 10 million barrels a day) when crude prices became soft on account of the extra supply created (in a very short time) by US shale oil producers.

With Saudi Arabia opposed to production cuts, the OPEC cartel had no choice. They had to endure the consequences of dramatically lower prices until Riyadh will change its mind.

So far, it has not.

What is the end game?

Why is Saudi Arabia doing this? Who knows really. I believe that this is an anti-Iranian move, and by extension, a move also directed against Shia dominated Iraq.

We know that for a while at least Saudi Arabia can afford to lose billions of dollars, the result of the lower prices it has imposed, because it can count on a significant financial cushion, in the neighborhood of \$ 628 billion.

A huge price

Still, it is clear that the Kingdom is already paying a huge price. The Saudi state depends almost entirely on its vast oil revenue to finance all public expenditures. Dramatically lower revenue means huge public deficits. Last year the shortfall was almost \$ 100 billion. Again, the Saudis can afford to do this, at least for a few more years. But, at some point, their reserves will be gone. And then what?

Major reforms announced

But this is not the only major development underway in Saudi Arabia. No, there is plenty more going on. Just as the Royal Family running the state is adjusting its policies to the lean years it has created, it came out with a new plan aimed at transforming the country. And this is no exaggeration.

The plan has been developed under the guidance of Prince Mohammed bin-Salman, the 30-year-old son of King Salman and now deputy Crown Prince. The young Prince (who is also Minister of Defense) is in charge of the Council of Economic and Development Affairs. The Council is a new institution established in January 2015, and placed in charge of planning future economic policies.

Privatizations, and a lot more

Here are the highlights. There will be large-scale privatizations, including health care services. There will be a deliberate effort to move Saudi citizens away from cushy state jobs *and into a soon to be created private sector* (I am not making this up) that will not rely on the established oil economy. (Currently, two-thirds of all Saudi workers are employed by the state). There will be an end to fuel subsidies and other freebies.

In other words, the plan is to make Saudi Arabia into a modern, vibrant, innovation-driven, private sector-led economy, no longer dependent on its enormous hydrocarbon resources.

Slim chances of success

In principle, this is not at all a bad idea. In practice, it all depends on the time line and the quality of both the plans and the execution. Let's say this plainly. Usually these Grand Reform Plans do not work. And they do not work because the objectives are unrealistic, because people resist change, because sleek blueprints drawn by highly paid consultants fail to take fully into account the drag created by entrenched cultural habits and traditional mind sets. And in most cases all participants under estimate how long it takes for anything of substance to be implemented, and become eventually self-sustaining.

Abenomics failed

Look, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe has essentially failed in his noble attempt to revitalize Japan. He called it "Abenomics". And there was a lot of suggestive imagery built to support it. Abe talked about arrows in his quiver and how they would reach their targets. But it simply did not work.

And yet Japan is a highly advanced industrial democracy, with many world class companies, a modern state, and lots of highly educated people. Nonetheless, Abe's Grand Plan, did not work.

There is too much inertia, there are too many political, institutional and cultural obstacles. The Japanese people are unable to get out of their complacent, (and in the end self-destructive), mind set.

Now, if modern Japan cannot quickly embrace and own a vision of vibrant change, what makes Prince Mohammed think that sleepy Saudi Arabia, a country in which most people do nothing, (large numbers of foreign workers have been hired to perform most tasks), while oil money subsidizes the entire economy and society, will do much better?

In Europe, welfare reforms almost impossible

Welfare and subsidies create dependence. Of course, in theory it is possible to wean people away from dependence on public largesse. But it is extremely difficult. Look everywhere.

In Europe all entitlement programs are essentially untouchable. Greece had to get all the way to the edge of the abyss before any political leader would accept the notion that the government had to reduce unaffordable social programs.

In other words, it took complete financial ruin before real reforms (this means cuts) could be contemplated. And even under those extreme circumstances reforms were fiercely resisted by most citizens.

Better results in Saudi Arabia?

Given these examples, one needs a truly heroic level of optimism to believe that Saudi Arabia will eagerly embrace change and quickly transform itself into some kind of Big Singapore in the Middle East.

This is a country that lives under a heavy blanket of religious conservatism. It is an absolute monarchy in which basic human rights are unknown. Women are second class citizens. It is a nation where, beyond oil and refining oil

products, there is essentially no other industry. And this is the soil where the leaders want to plant the seeds of innovation and modernity? Good luck to them.

May be in 20 years

Look, assuming a perfectly modulated plan and a 20 to 30 years time horizon, some real changes may be possible. But the impression here is that Prince Mohammed is in a hurry. The perception is that we wants everybody to get busy, right now. *“Give me a private sector-led, non-oil economy, today”*.

So, here is the thing. It is good to have bold dreams of modernization. But in the case of Saudi Arabia, this new reform plan looks a lot like lunacy.

The Terror Threat Will Not End

WASHINGTON – Terror attacks hatched by crazy militants underscore the deep vulnerabilities of modern, open societies. They trigger an avalanche of emotional and sometimes useless reactions. After Paris was hit hard (yet again) by another cell of Islamic radicals, French President Francois Hollande declared passionately that France is clearly under military assault, and that this is “war”.

Hit them hard?

Well, this being war, as a response to this ISIL-led “military operation” aimed at Paris, Hollande dispatched French jet fighters to hit targets in Raqqa, Syria, the de facto capital of the ISIL-led, “Caliphate”.

Does this response make any sense? Symbolically, may be. But as a military reaction, not a lot; unless Hollande intends to engage up to the end, namely until the complete annihilation of the Caliphate. Well, first of all, France does not have the military tools to do this. Besides, even complete success would only be a partial victory.

Destroy the Caliphate

I have argued here, several times, that the destruction of the self-described Caliphate would help the “anti-Islamic radicalism” effort. Indeed, the very existence of this bizarre but quite real state, right in the heart of the Middle East, is a source of pride and inspiration for all Islamic militants, and a powerful tool to get more recruits willing to go there, and fight “for the cause”.

That said, I am under no illusion that even the complete and final destruction of the Caliphate will take care of the anti-Western terror problem. At least some of the more committed militants will melt away from the ISIL-controlled territories in Eastern Syria and Northern Iraq and will regroup somewhere else.

A difficult agenda

Well, so what is to be done? There is no simple answer. There is no clear recipe that will quickly lead the West to “victory”. Let’s be clear, even in this strange conflict, “victory” will take place only when all the known and unknown terrorists have been caught, and I mean all of them; and –most crucial– nobody else will be willing to follow their example and engage in any fresh terror plots.

In other words, as in all conflicts, large or small, all the enemy combatants and would-be combatants have to say clearly and unequivocally: “We lost. We are done. No more fighting”.

This is the strategic objective of any conflict, and the only possible definition of "victory". This must be the goal.

But in this conflict against a variety of terror groups it is an extremely difficult goal. And here is why.

Many foot soldiers

Whether we like it or not, there are thousands and thousands of people across the Muslim world, and within Muslim communities in Western countries, who now see the West as their mortal enemy. They are not going to change their mind on this any time soon. And there is not much we can do to about any of this.

It is easy

Besides, planning and executing acts of terrorism targeting civilians in Paris, New York, or Berlin is very easy. Right now, it only takes a few motivated people willing to die in a suicide mission to hatch a terror plot. And, sadly, there seem to be plenty of them.

The idea that the Paris terror attacks are the result of a highly sophisticated command and control structure is nonsense. Sure enough, it takes some planning and coordination to plot and execute, simultaneously, multiple attacks. But it is not that complicated. The terrorists identified a number of unprotected, soft targets, (a soccer stadium, a concert hall, and restaurants). Going there and opening fire, indiscriminately, against unarmed civilians is not that difficult.

It is cheap

And it gets even worse. These type of attacks against soft targets are cheap. Very cheap. A recent Reuters story quoted some experts who calculated the up front cost of the Paris terror attacks: about 7,000 Euro, approximately US \$ 7,500.

Well, this is next to nothing. Even if the real amount spent is higher, say 20,000 Euro, it is still a very low bar. So, here is the thing. The barrier to entry to be a terror group is extremely low. You need a few, motivated people who know how to handle fire arms, and some cash.

How to protect ourselves

Having said all this, how do we protect ourselves? Sadly, a perfect shield does not exist. The main line of defense has to be more and better intelligence. Admittedly, this is a never-ending, thankless job.

There are millions of young, unhappy Muslims who may fit the profile of a would-be terrorist. How do you vet all of them? Impossible. Sure, we can get better at this. But we cannot become perfect.

In the meantime, we can extend police and intelligence services powers. But this creates a conflict with the need to protect our civil liberties. Therefore, here we have an issue. How far can we go? Do we want to become a police state, so that the police can better protect us? It is obvious that this can lead us down a dangerous road.

There is no strategy

Anyway, here is the thing. Bombing Raqqa a couple of times is not a serious strategy. A serious strategy would have to include the complete destruction of IS and the Caliphate. But even this would not be enough.

A serious strategy would have to include the creation of an alternative message that could be embraced by those who now choose militancy and terror plots. This would be the real "silver bullet" that would defeat terrorism. But I doubt that anybody can come up with a new, more appealing "peaceful package" that would actually "sell". The end game here is to convince young militants that there are better ways to get

more opportunities in the societies they live in. Unfortunately, nobody is that smart. As yet, nobody developed a new message that can gain real traction.

Silly grandstanding, empty talk

In the meantime, though, we waste time grandstanding with unproductive talk of “war”. Here in Washington, we waste time with stupid debates about how we should vet Syrian refugees who want to come to America. The idea that several US Governors and a majority of the members of the House have really nothing better to do other than demanding more stringent vetting of poor souls from Syria, in case some of them may be terrorists in disguise, is disheartening. Yes, potentially this may be an issue. But we already have a very stringent vetting process. Refugees do not just walk in. It takes several months of checks and re-checks.

In any event, is this all we can do? How about giving more resources to the FBI, the federal agency with the people who know something about the threat? And how about getting serious about destroying the Caliphate?

The West Is Caught In Middle East Chaos

WASHINGTON – The Paris terror attacks lead to Syria, to the Arab Spring, to the Sunni-Shia conflicts, to al Qaeda, and to the rise of ISIL and of the Caliphate. This is a huge mess; and there are no quick solutions. The real issue is not about catching a few bad guys. The issue is in endless religious strife in which opposing militants in the Middle East have long lists of mortal enemies. The West is on many of them.

Chaos

Here is the sad truth. The Middle East and parts of North Africa are in total chaos. Within many societies there is a structural inability to chart a rational course towards modernity focused on education, enterprise, more gender equality, inclusiveness, genuine political freedoms, and religious tolerance.

No viable path to modernity

This inability to choose and pursue modern, secular development models fuels economic stagnation, poverty and despair. Prolonged stagnation fuels resentment. A great deal of this resentment is now channeled into religiously inspired movements.

These movements preach violent actions against various enemies: rapacious and corrupt governments, other religious sects, Christians, you name it. According to the militants, only the physical destruction of their enemies will bring about true religious piety, peace, justice, and prosperity.

Of course, none of this is true. What is true is that, inspired by this folly, religious believers have created a disheartening cycle of violence that generates violent reactions, followed by more violence.

Enter the Caliphate

Without exaggeration, this is chaos. At least in some parts of the region, (Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, and Yemen in the Middle East; Libya in North Africa), unmanageable chaos. The creation of the self-described Caliphate in parts of Syria and subsequently Iraq made this turmoil even worse, in as much as it created a tangible symbol of what is viewed by some Sunni militants as a successful religious revolution.

The West is caught in this mess

Deep down, the West has really nothing to do with any of this. However both Europe and the US are caught into this trap because of old historic ties to the Middle East and more recent connections related to their dependence on oil and gas produced in the Region.

In the case of the US, there were also high-profile, complex relations with the discredited regime of the Shah in Iran. And then there were military interventions: the first Iraq war in 1991, and then the occupation of Iraq in 2003.

Europe is exposed

In the case of Europe, there is a mix of old colonial ties and more recently a huge migration into Europe from the Middle East and North Africa. In France alone, (population almost 65 million), there are about 5 million Muslims, most of them of Arab descent. In Belgium, Muslim are 6% of the population, in Austria 5.7%, in the Netherlands 5.5%.

Anyway, you get the picture. Many of these immigrants, for whatever reasons feel discriminated against, marginalized, humiliated, or worse. Therefore, many of them look at the radical movements in the Middle East as an answer to their quest for meaning and belonging.

Disaffected young Muslims

And so here you can see how the Middle East/North Africa religion-inspired chaos has been exported into Europe. There is a back and forth of French-born, Belgium-born, UK-born would-be militants who have traveled to Syria or elsewhere. They have been recruited. They now believe that exporting Jihad into Europe is a good way to advance their cause, because Europe is somehow responsible for the plight of the Arab World and beyond.

The road to Paris

And this leads us to the tragic Paris massacres perpetrated by some young French and Belgians terrorists of Middle Eastern origin.

Sadly, because of all the above, it should be reasonably clear that there are no quick fixes to any of this. The Middle East will be in turmoil for who knows how long. The ISIL Caliphate can be attacked and destroyed. But, even assuming a successful operation, the attackers should have a workable game plan on how to reintegrate the Sunnis who lived under ISIL into the main stream. Good luck with that.

Mission Impossible

As for “Combating Terror”, this is almost “Mission Impossible”. As I indicated above, in Europe there are tens of millions of Muslims. Even assuming that only a tiny fraction of them are potentially dangerous individuals willing to engage in acts of terror, police authorities and intelligence agencies simply do not have the resources to sift through millions of people and identify all the bad guys before they act.

In the US the picture is a little better because there are far fewer Muslims, and therefore not so many individuals who may represent a potential threat.

Be prepared to absorb the consequences

Still, be that as it may, the West has to be prepared to absorb the violent consequences of an enormous crisis affecting many countries. Terrorism is the most unfortunate manifestation of the intellectual and moral chaos now rampant in the Middle East. And it is very hard to protect ourselves against it, in large part because there are too many potential suspects, and in part because we live in free societies in which individual liberties are protected and police powers are limited by the law.

Allow enhanced police powers?

Of course, we could collectively and indefinitely do what France just did in the aftermath of the Paris attacks. Declare an open-ended state of emergency. This would allow law enforcement agencies to do pretty much all they want, including arrests without warrants, search and seizure operations, and what not. Forget about "probable cause". But this is not doable. We love our freedoms.

Free but vulnerable

Therefore, as we want to stay free, we also have to accept our inherent vulnerability. Nobody from the outside can fix the Middle East. And its turmoil will go on and on. And terrorism aimed at Western targets is unfortunately a manifestation of this turmoil.