

Can Brexit Be Reversed?

WASHINGTON – Looking at the reactions of sadness and disbelief in Britain to the results of the Brexit vote, I am beginning to feel that the end of this England/EU tragedy (farce?) has not been written, yet. (On this, see also Gideon Rachman's reflections in The Financial Times). By that I mean that a new London-Brussels compromise may be negotiated and struck that will allow Britain to stay in the EU, albeit with a few new qualifications regarding its membership.

What have we done?

I say this because the British are clearly not that happy about the outcome of their vote. Based on the widespread consternation now pervading the UK, (*"My God! What have we done?"*), my hunch is that many among those who voted Leave had no idea about they were doing, and of the dire consequences of a vote that would take Britain out of the EU.

Even worse, many truly believed all the lies told by the Leave leaders regarding all the British money earmarked for Brussels that from now on would stay in Great Britain, and about how wonderful everything would be, once the UK regained its "independence" from Brussels. Most of that talk was just brazen, totally irresponsible propaganda.

No triumph

Well, what do you know, in the aftermath of this clear victory, the language of the Leave leaders all of a sudden has become very nuanced, almost timid. *"Well, there will be some financial gains, but not too many." "Yes, we shall regain control over immigration, but not total."*

In other words, no atmosphere of triumph. In fact it looks like: *"And now, what do we do? Getting out of the EU looks a lot more complicated than we thought" .*

Looking at all this, many voters are getting the feeling that by voting for Brexit they bought a dream of a “new independence” that would make everybody rich that has no basis in reality.

No more Great Britain?

Besides, the Leave front probably did not consider adequately the domestic political repercussions of the referendum outcome. With England in favor of leaving, while Scotland and Northern Ireland are strongly in favor of remaining, we have the elements of a major national dispute that may very well lead to the breakup of the United Kingdom. The possible end of Great Britain seems to be too much of a price to pay in the context of a vote that was supposed to assert British independence from Brussels.

Not a super majority

And, last but not least, while the 52% to 48% vote in favor is Brexit is clear, it is far from overwhelming. In other words, almost half the people in the UK voted to stay in the EU. And if you look at the actual number of votes cast, (only 72% of all voters participated in the referendum), in the end only 36% of the British citizens went for Brexit. A strong plurality, to be sure; but not a convincing majority.

Can this be undone?

Well, given all that, can something be done to reverse the outcome of this referendum? Something is indeed possible. It is not inconceivable that we can see in the coming weeks and months a fresh round of negotiations between London and Brussels aimed at reaching a new compromise that may satisfy a majority of British voters.

If we can assume a new arrangement whereby the UK gets a few more concessions from Brussels, especially on the number of EU immigrants it is willing to accept, it is entirely possible to

have another referendum justified by the fact that the situation has changed, because now there is a new, more “favorable” UK-EU deal on the table.

If the victory for the Leave camp had been much more decisive, with a larger voter turnout, any idea of starting new negotiations leading to a new compromise and a new vote would be totally implausible. But the fact is that only 36% of the voters affirmed their wish to leave the EU. And it seems that now many of them regret that vote.

Compromise, anybody?

Can there be a face-saving compromise? Imagine a new, more favorable (for the UK) deal followed by another referendum. Great Britain decides to stay in the EU on the basis of a new arrangement with Brussels. The Brexit camp can still claim victory because better terms were obtained on account of their successful agitation. This second act may not be easy. But it is entirely possible.

I still believe that the EU is mostly a turbocharged Chamber of Commerce with vain glorious and ill-defined political unification aspirations. And I still believe that this vote in the UK highlights the lack of genuine buy-in in the “Idea of Europe” on the part of large segments of European public opinion. But tearing the whole thing down without any plan whatsoever for a post-EU Great Britain is not the best way to move forward.

The EU is not the source of all problems

Here is the thing. The UK and other EU members have deep problems. But most of them do not stem from Brussels. They are rooted in large and frankly non affordable social programs, lack of labor mobility, low levels of investments and productivity, and declining fertility rates.

The notion sold to a majority of the British public before

this referendum that the country's difficulties originate from its EU membership is false and totally misleading. True enough, Brussels does not help much. But, no, it is not the source of the widespread economic suffering affecting the UK and the rest of Europe. Therefore, getting out of Europe is no cure.

The Manufactured "Terrorism Crisis"

WASHINGTON – America is getting into the heat of its presidential campaign in a climate of hysteria created by Donald Trump, (would-be Republican nominee for the White House), most media and various terrorism experts who shout on a daily basis that the Islamic terrorists are already among us, and about to unleash a wave of deadly attacks. The San Bernardino killing spree is just the beginning.

Thousand of killers

Yes, America, in case anybody missed it, there are untold numbers of blood thirsty murderers about to come out of the shadows with the intent to kill all of us. Have you seen what happened in Paris? have you seen the San Bernardino massacre? Well, this is just the beginning.

This hysteria is what passes for balanced media coverage, analysis, and rational political debate these days.

Terrorism is the number one issue

And the daily media barrage has consequences. Millions of people apparently bought the story. Indeed, according to most

opinion polls taken in the US, less than a year before critical presidential and congressional elections the most critical issue confronting America is terrorism.

Not the national debt, not the need to reform out of control entitlement programs or our taxation system, not the loss of economic standing, not our declining education standards with consequent erosion of our nation's competitiveness. No, none of that.

Terrorism is the number one issue. And this is because after the Paris and San Bernardino attacks the media, cynical presidential contenders, and armies of terrorism experts have declared that we are all defenseless targets for super organized, highly disciplined murderers inspired by religious zeal.

Magnify the threat

But how can just a few episodes, however terrible, make terrorism into the number one national concern? Very simple. Because it is easy to magnify the extent of a real but undefined threat represented by an unknown number of people living in the shadows who are willing to kill and die for their cause. Indeed, all the terrorism experts interviewed on TV tell us that most likely the probability of more deadly attacks is bigger than we think. And why do they say this?

Because that's how they make a living, as authors and consultants. They want to tell everybody that we are facing an existential threat, a real crisis, so that demand for their services grows. And some TV talk show hosts fan the flames by telling their scared audiences that right now for most Americans the issue on the table is sheer *"Survival"*. *"Here is my advice to you –intoned one of them– go out and buy yourself a gun"*. So it comes to this: shoot first before they shoot you. No kidding.

As for Donald Trump and others, it is quite clear that they

want to portray themselves as saviors. *"This is a historic crisis. But President Obama and all the Democrats are too weak and too inept to protect you, America. I am tough. I'll take drastic measures. I'll take care of this. Vote for me"*.

Fear sells

Again, why all this fear mongering? Why do the politicians, the media and the experts behave so irresponsibly? Very simple.

Because this story sells.

Media managers get more people to watch their TV shows. And this means more commercials and higher profits. The experts paraded on TV get more attention and higher fees. And the tough-talking politicians get higher ratings in the polls.

Of course, if you want to scare people, terrorism is the perfect issue. We have a supposedly widespread threat represented by ISIL in the Middle East acting in concert with potentially "thousands" of seemingly normal people living among us who may turn violent at any moment and kill innocent Americans.

For some reasons, there is a peculiar fascination with lurking threats concocted by determined lunatics who are willing to kill and die claiming that they act in the name of God.

The plan to destroy America

And so, almost out of nothing, a spontaneous coalition of scaremongers, irresponsible media and cynical politicians created this narrative of a carefully orchestrated plan to destroy America and the West hatched by ISIL in Syria and Iraq, and supported here by a variety of rank and file believers and a coterie of "do-it-yourself", home-grown terrorists.

This coalition screams every day that unless we do something

drastic we are practically doomed.

And this constant drumbeat about imminent attacks got people really scared. *“Oh My God...The terrorists are everywhere. In fact, they are already here...And any day they will come out of the shadows and try to kill all of us”.*

Some truth

Never mind that this is a wild exaggeration. Of course, there is some truth to it. We have had a few terror attacks: in Paris, in Turkey, in Africa, (Mali), and here at home. And terrorism is nasty business. But are we having repeated bloody killings across America on a daily or at least regular basis?

No, we are not. Not even close.

But it does not matter. Right now the accepted narrative is that the terror onslaught is unfolding, or about to unfold. Real facts and figures about the number of terror attacks do not matter.

Donald Trump to the rescue

Hence the surprising polls indicating that right now terrorism is the number one issue America is facing. And crafty politicians like would-be President Donald Trump have quickly figured out that it is to their advantage to ride this wave and play on the fears created by the media hype.

Yes, we should worry, Trump argues forcefully and dramatically. And he adds that for sure there must be plenty more “self-radicalized” people lurking in the shadows, ready to pounce on us. How many? Well, who knows. Possibly scores, may be hundreds, may be thousands. Therefore, let’s all go to battle stations. Let’s close the borders, let’s close the mosques. Let’s keep an eye on all Muslims living in America.

We want to be safe

And these over the top “policies” now are embraced by millions of people who are told that this is the only way to be safe. Yes, if there is an even remote chance that one or two terrorists may hide among Syrian or other refugees seeking asylum, or perhaps among regular visitors trying to come to America, this is a good enough reason to shut the door and keep everybody out. Why take any chances when our lives are at stake?

All about fear

Again, bear in mind that all this is irrational. It is all about fear. And this fear has been carefully created by irresponsible media that see their ratings go up while they run with this story, and by cynical politicians who see this manufactured crisis as an opportunity to make themselves into really tough fighters, and climb up in the polls.

No real debate

It would be nice if in this pre-election season if we could have a rational debate on sensible policy options, including how to face the terror threat.

Sadly, right now we are not having any serious debate about anything. We have crazy and hysteric reactions to a real problem that has been deliberately blown out of proportion, and is now presented to the public as a historic crisis.

Trump Is Still Ahead, But His Core Constituency Is Narrow

WASHINGTON – Yes, despite the crazy things he says about immigrants, China, Mexico, and Muslims, and despite the grandiose yet content-free promise of “Making America Great”, Donald Trump is still ahead in all the polls in which likely Republican primaries voters express their preferences.

Trump is at 25%, or more

He is up there, at around 25%, or more, depending on which polls you are looking at. Alright, all this is truly remarkable. However, Trump’s popularity, while real and perhaps consequential, should not be exaggerated.

It is true that Trump’s aggressive populism, with all his promises of breaking all the crockery as soon as he gets into the White House, truly resonates with a large segment of the frustrated American conservative electorate.

Small numbers, after all

However, when we say that Trump is favored by 25% or even 30% of the probable Republican primaries voters, we are not saying much. Let’s understand that, compared to the size of the entire national electorate, these are small numbers.

As the WSJ pointed out, Republican primary voters comprise only about 16% of overall US voters. Trump is favored by 25% of them. Well, this translates into about 4% of the national electorate. Not insignificant; but these are hardly overwhelming numbers. Unless these numbers grow significantly, “Trump for President” is still mostly a dream.

Loyal base

Yes, Trump is consistently leading, and his supporters are

steadfast. No matter what he says, Trump is still ahead. In fact, many analysts believe that he is ahead *precisely because he is outrageous, and openly offensive towards the political establishment*. This is his trade mark, his appeal. Fine, we understand that his (let's say unusual) style keeps his base energized.

The open question is whether Trump will be able to build on this loyal support, now strong mainly among frustrated White, middle class, and lower middle class conservatives. For the moment, this segment of likely Republican voters is willing to bet everything on a feisty outsider, with zero political experience, who makes outlandish promises.

Can Trump build a coalition?

However, party nominations usually go to candidates who can build coalitions. Can Trump transform his skills as a deal maker into a (so far non existent) ability to reach out and appeal to diverse supporters?

Keep in mind that while a 25% or even 30% base is remarkable, this is not a majority of the Republican voters, let alone a majority of the American electorate.

Of course, the number of Republican contenders will get smaller as we move into the actual primaries season next year. As some candidates will drop out, will Trump be able to get the support of the more moderate, centrist Republican voters who favored them? If he cannot sway many of them, hard to see how he gets much beyond 25% or even 30%.

Convince the independents

That said, even assuming that Trump somehow will get the Republican nomination, will his "unconventional" style really appeal to the millions of uncommitted independents who in the end determine national elections?

Securing the strong support of a large segment of middle class, (mostly male) White voters is important. But they are not the majority of the national electorate, not even close. Without the backing of at least some women, Latinos, some Blacks, and millions of independents nobody gets elected President in America.

In the end, we know that Trump is getting a lot of attention because he is an outsider, and because he is ahead in the polls. But this level of support, and all the media buzz that it creates, while significant, is just not enough to get him into the White House.

The Republicans Should Coalesce Around A Modern Pragmatist

WASHINGTON – I guess I am also part of faulty conventional wisdom when it comes to US presidential politics. I believed that former Florida Governor Jeb Bush had a great chance to become the Republican nominee. I was wrong.

Jeb Bush?

I thought that Jeb Bush brought to the table an impressive record as a two term Governor. He also has good credentials when it comes to relaunching the GOP as an inclusive political force focused on expanded opportunity for the poor, minorities and Hispanics. He is a serious proponent of public education reform.

Well, all this is true. Still, I was wrong because I

underestimated the strength of the anti-establishment sentiment this year. Bush may be great. But probable Republican primary voters are just not interested. They are not buying.

Personality issues

On top of that, Bush proved to be a mediocre, in fact bad stump politician. You would think that someone with that kind of experience would be at ease campaigning and debating. But he is not. He looks awkward, out of place. His demeanor is bland. Well, this may be fixable. But fixing it is predicated on Bush's ability to quickly reinvent himself and present to the voters a different persona. Doable in theory, but very difficult, this late in the game.

A bad name

Well, if demeanor on the campaign trail is a big issue, Bush's family name may be a truly insurmountable obstacle. Simply stated, it is now clear that the Republicans are fed up with the old political establishment. And Jeb Bush, even though he never held any position in Washington, is part of a political dynasty that is not remembered fondly.

His brother George W. Bush (President until January 2009) is linked to the disastrous Iraq War and to the onset of the devastating 2008 "Great Recession" with the ensuing financial crisis. Not a great legacy.

Out of the game

As things stand now, even though Jeb Bush was a good Governor and not part of his brother's administration, the family name and the blood connection may be enough to kill his candidacy. Hence Jeb's extremely low numbers in all the polls.

As I said before, beyond his name, Bush revealed other personality problems that may sink him anyway. Given all this,

he is probably finished as a candidate.

Coalesce around a credible moderate

Well, if this is indeed so, then it would make sense for him and his supporters to coalesce around another pragmatic reformer who can appeal beyond the traditional GOP base in the general election. My preference would be for John Kasich.

But I realize that Kasich is also viewed as another establishment candidate. He has been around too much. Never mind that he has been an extremely capable Congressman, (former Chairman of the Budget Committee), and an excellent Governor of Ohio. None of this matters this year. For pretty much the same reasons, you can take New Jersey Governor Chris Christie out.

Is Rubio the man?

Well, who's left? Florida Senator Marco Rubio. He is young, and different. The son of humble Cuban immigrants who had to struggle to get ahead, Rubio is a credible proponent of a new Republican Party that will create opportunities for a changed America. He is young, good-looking, reasonably articulate and, unlike Bush, he looks enthusiastic.

Well, is Rubio the man? I do not know, but the moderates better make up their minds –and fast.

Trump leading by default

If the reasonable, future oriented, inclusive Republican moderates fail to unite around one of them, then we are left with the absurd candidates. Donald Trump is still doing reasonably well. But he is struggling to get above 25%.

Still, with all the moderates below 10%, assuming that Trump somehow manages to get the Republican nomination, there is no way that he will be able to win against Clinton. Not from such a narrow, if loyal, base of angry “anti-everything” voters.

Carson not credible

The same applies to Dr. Ben Carson. He is an interesting man with a compelling personal story. A classic “rags-to-riches” story that proves how at least in some cases sheer determination and creativity can lift people out of poverty.

But Carson is an even more improbable nominee. He has almost no public policy experience. He is a neuro surgeon. What does he know about entitlements, national security, and energy? What does he understand about the Federal Budget, or Social Security? Practically nothing. He never held any public office.

Pick a candidate who is different but electable

I do understand, up to a point, that Republican voters are looking for someone “different”. I get that. But there should be a distinction between different and being laughable –and therefore unelectable. Trump and Carson, for very different reasons, are both laughable and unelectable.

Can the smart moderates coalesce around a candidate who can appeal to the conservative base but also to the uncommitted in the middle who always decide all presidential elections, with a political program founded on expanded opportunity and inclusiveness?

I believe they can. But they should hurry. Battling each other (witness the Bush Rubio fight) while Trump continues to claim, with cause, that he is the GOP front-runner is bad for them, bad for the party, and certainly bad for America.

In The Age Of The Internet Biased News Still Prevails

WASHINGTON – Here is one big paradox for you. When the internet proved to be a truly revolutionary innovation, everybody concluded that this technology is a game changer affecting the global communications sector in a fundamental way. More specifically, many argued that the ability to see and quickly report (thanks to the internet) on facts as they are, in real time, all over the world, in many cases at essentially zero cost, would make it a lot more difficult for the bad guys to lie about anything.

Expose lies

Indeed, if a government, a corporation, a political party, or an interest group would tell a lie, especially if it is a big lie, hundreds, may be thousands of fact checkers would spring into action. Thanks to the internet, in almost no time they would be able to provide a true account of what actually happened, and this would expose and shame the liars and manipulators who produced falsehood for their own benefit.

It did not turn out this way

Well, this is what the hope and the prediction was. But it did not turn out this way. True enough, thanks to the ubiquitous internet, many new actors produce, post and send very valuable information that is now accessible from anywhere in the world.

But, contrary to early predictions, it is not true that serious research and scrupulous accounts prevail simply because the public seeks and prefers substance, quality and honesty.

Reinforcing prejudices

So, here is the paradox. There are plenty of good sources of information, mostly free, that are now easily accessible through the internet. But most people simply ignore them.

They go instead to the sources that reinforce their ideological prejudices. These sources are clearly biased. Some are just propaganda. But this concerns no one. If anything, bias is a plus, as long as it is the kind of bias I happen to like.

Ignore whatever contradicts my bias

And so the internet, far from being the preferred instrument for delivering "The Truth", is now the equivalent of a gigantic super market where people go to buy what they know they want, ignoring however all the other products on the shelves.

Here is the picture. Facts are almost irrelevant. What counts is the opinion that frames the facts in a way that reinforces what I already believe in. And I choose the interpretation of what is happening that suits my strongly built worldview. I easily dismiss any evidence that contradicts what I want to believe that actually happened, by claiming that it is not true. The other side made it up. And this proves how dishonest and evil they are.

My bias is the truth

Think about it. In this age of instant access to all sorts of reporting about any development across the globe, there is no interest in any objective description of the facts. Facts mean whatever I want to believe they mean. And I shall listen only to the news broadcasts and commentary (the two are now generally mixed) that support my prejudices.

And I shall not even take into consideration that most likely my preferred interpretation is the result of distortions, lies, made-up figures and other manipulations. I

want to listen to or watch my own truth.

Easy to double-check

The internet was supposed to give anybody the opportunity to easily double-check. If I read or watch anything, it is easy enough to go to a different source and see or read what they say about the same topic. Is there a consensus? Or are they saying something else? Well, this checking is possible, simple, and in most cases cost-free. But it is not done. And this is because prejudice beats help via user-friendly technology any time.

Technology was supposed to help

To put things in context, bias, prejudice, willful manipulation, and ideological blinders always existed. This is not new. Nobody can claim that the internet created them.

But the internet was supposed to enable truth-tellers to easily counter misinformation and manipulation, along with plain errors, by telling you what really happened. Well, they do. But their impact is modest, or non-existent.

The information is there. The means to check and double-check are also there. But most people prefer not to use them.

In the end, for many a solid belief, grounded on prejudice, that provides reassurance is much better than any unsettling truth.

Is Police Brutality The Main Issue Affecting African Americans?

WASHINGTON – Thanks to highly publicized official investigations, some of them led by the US Department of Justice, America is now convinced that we have a national White police brutality issue. Yes, we are told that African Americans are routinely singled out by (racist) White police officers.

Blacks are targeted by racist police

Blacks minding their own business are stopped for no reason by police. They are arrested on bogus charges. They are treated roughly while in police custody, and so forth. While this happens all the time, in more extreme cases several unarmed African Americans have been shot and killed by trigger happy police officers who later on say that they thought the Black person they killed might have had a gun. In truth, killing Black people is now akin to a sport.

This is what we are told. And, much worse, this is what most African Americans strongly believe: *"We are targeted"*.

Not that easy

Well, it is not that easy. The truth is a lot more complicated. It is undeniable that there are instances of White police brutality, including unnecessary use of force, sometimes leading to the killing of people wrongly suspected of holding weapons with criminal intent.

Policing high crime areas

However, the larger issue is that there is a connection between high levels of violent crime in Black areas and

excessive use of force by police forces sent in to investigate crimes. To begin with, there is a much higher level of police activities in Black neighborhoods for the simple reason that these are high crime, or extremely high crime areas, with shootings and killings occurring every day.

So, let's establish that Black neighborhoods are not targeted. The police go where crimes have been committed. It is therefore not surprising that police officers going into a very high crime area in which fire arms are routinely used may be on edge. Being on edge may in some cases trigger unjustified actions, or over reactions. And this unfortunately leads to mistakes and unwarranted use of force.

With this I am not trying to justify the killing of innocent Black victims by police officers, (who at least in some instances are motivated by racists feelings). Police brutality does exist, and it should be prosecuted.

More police interventions

However, it is truly disingenuous to ignore the fact that extremely high levels of crime in Black neighborhoods make policing of these areas much more difficult. Police officers patrolling streets in Black neighborhood where people are routinely shot are likely to be on edge. And high levels of tension may lead to bad judgment calls, including killing innocent victims.

And yet this high crime context is routinely ignored.

Is it just about the police?

Right now the official narrative is that the only issue at hand is totally unwarranted and unjustified police brutality against innocent, law abiding Blacks unfairly targeted simply because they are Black.

Because of this finding, police departments across America

need to be reformed. The instances in which the use of force may be permissible need to be reassessed.

Again, I see nothing wrong with any of this. By all means, let's make sure that all police officers behave properly.

But it is wrong to believe that police brutality is the only issue, and that there is no connection between policing dangerous, high crime areas and excessive use of force by some police officers.

The roots of Black crime are ignored

Unfortunately, the larger context of how stressful it is for police officers to operate daily in high crime areas is ignored. Moreover, I see national indignation only when a White police officer kills a Black person. But there is zero indignation when homicide statistics are made public.

And these statistics make it clear that the overwhelming majority of African Americans are killed by other African Americans in predominantly poor Black neighborhoods. They are not killed by mean spirited White police officers. Black on Black violent crime is the real, overwhelming problem that needs to be addressed.

Police brutality is an issue. No doubt about it. But it is certainly not the main problem affecting African Americans. The main problems are ignorance, illiteracy, poverty, drugs, and marginalization. These are the toxic factors that often lead to a life of crime and violence.

We should all welcome any reforms leading to well behaved police officers. But even the best trained police officers will be unable to improve –let alone solve– any of the deep social and economic problems affecting millions of African Americans.

Get Good People Out Of Bad Neighborhoods

WASHINGTON – Here is a simple, if radical, new idea for those who want to deal with large pockets of urban poverty. (*What We Know About Bad Neighborhoods*, by Holman W. Jenkins, Jr. in the WLS, May 9-10, 2015). Do not try to re-engineer truly bad neighborhoods. Not because this is in principle a bad idea. But simply because it is too difficult. The failure of scores of well funded public programs attests to this.

Impossible to fix truly bad neighborhoods

Indeed we have to come to the realization that it is almost impossible to deal with poverty, bad housing, bad schools, dilapidated buildings, lack of decent food stores and other shopping, and then crime and despair –all at the same time. In these sometimes large neighborhoods there are just too many interconnected negative factors, all of them sadly feeding on each other.

Most unfortunately, taken all together these factors create a deeply pathological value system. Indeed, even if you are a person with some abilities and good will, when you are surrounded by blight, rampant crime, and hopelessness it is nearly impossible to stay positive and believe that there is a practical way to improve your own life in a neighborhood dominated by poverty, violence, gangs and crime.

Move people out, give them a chance

So, what is the alternative? The alternative, as Jenkins points out in his WSJ piece, is in offering a chance to those who are reasonably motivated by helping them move somewhere

else.

Yes, the environment in which you live does make a huge difference. A reasonably motivated person is bound to do much better in a new place where there is safety, decent housing, good schools, and jobs. However, the very same person will drown in a bad neighborhood with non-existent public services, and almost zero economic opportunities outside of crime.

A partial solution

So, is this a complete “solution” to the challenges created by poor neighborhoods? No, it is not. It is only a partial solution; but very significant nonetheless. This is about giving people with motivation and will a viable alternative that may literally save their lives.

Of course, there is still the problem of those who have neither the will nor the abilities who are left behind. What about them? I do not have a good answer for this.

Save some people

However, it still makes sense to offer a better life to those who can and will take advantage of good opportunities, instead of condemning them to drown in the swamp that scores of (well-meaning but useless) tax-payers-funded welfare programs never managed to drain.

Sadly, 50 years after the “War on Poverty” was declared, we have to admit defeat. The well-meaning frontal assault using all the best tools of public policy did not work. It is time to think of something else.

Media Hype About ISIL Not Helpful

WASHINGTON – The international media are not helping our understanding of the actual extent of the Islamic State threat. They are now serving the function of echo chamber, amplifying ISIL's scary propaganda messages, (beheadings, a Jordanian pilot burnt alive), spread via the internet. And this is very unhelpful, as it contributes to create the rather silly notion of this unstoppable, mighty Army of truculent "True Believers" on the march to world conquest.

Intelligence failure

It is indeed sad that Western intelligence obviously underestimated ISIL and its potential, first in Syria and then in Iraq. This was a major blunder. But now Western media want to imply that barbarians who cut the throats of a few prisoners, and then expertly package the whole thing for internet distribution, almost by definition must be capable of "anything".

Not the Wehrmacht

This is patently absurd. ISIL is fairly strong and resilient. Its military forces are indeed capable of holding on to large pieces of weak and divided countries, such as Syria and Iraq. They are now making inroads into Libya, taking advantage of the fact that this is yet another sorry-looking and essentially failed state. ISIL's ability to exploit the opportunities created by weak countries torn by conflicts is indeed a problem.

But this is not the German Wehrmacht smashing Poland, and then turning West to defeat a large French army in a matter of weeks. This is not the Japanese Imperial Army conquering Manchuria.

A relatively small military force

The Islamic State has financial resources and manpower. We know that. But it does not have an invincible force at its command. Most estimates talk about 30,000 to 40,000 troops. Well, Turkey, a country that could become engaged in the fight because of its proximity to Syria, has an army with 700,000 soldiers, (active and reserve forces combined). The fact that ISIL, this most improbable creature, is still operational tells us a lot about Western and Arab timidity and indecisiveness. It is not a function of the Islamic State's inherent strength.

Yes, we could and should do a lot more to "degrade" and eventually "defeat" ISIL. Doing just a little bit here and there with a few bombing raids is harmful to our credibility.

Not an existential threat

Nevertheless, let's keep things in perspective. ISIL is indeed fueled by a dangerous, toxic millenarian ideology. But it is not an irresistible military tsunami.

I would love to see more cohesion and more determination in Western military responses, whatever the best tools may be, so that this menace will end soon. But this is not an existential threat.

Stop rebroadcasting propaganda

World media should stop rebroadcasting ISIL propaganda videos whose objective is to scare the general public, while creating interest among would-be jihadists.

They should instead help the public gain a realistic perspective on a threat that is serious, but not as deadly as ISIL's leaders would like us to believe.

Radical Islamic Groups Cannot Be Fought With Conventional Means

WASHINGTON – The current wave of violence motivated and justified by crazy interpretations of Muslim scriptures created demands for ways to deal with this threat once and for all. The trouble is that there is no clever, precise “solution” to this problem.

Scattered groups

With the notable exception of the (self-described) Islamic State, Islamic radicals are scattered all over: from Minnesota to Western Pakistan. We are not dealing with an easily identifiable, conventional threat that resides in one place and uses conventional means.

There are almost endless varieties of radical Islamic groups. They have inspired an equally large universe of diverse people, scattered in many different countries, who decided to follow, in different ways, their calls to engage in violent *jihad*.

Islamic fundamentalism is not an enemy state. It is not a political party in the traditional sense of the word. While there are several organized groups, this is not the equivalent of the old Soviet Communist Party with a clear hierarchy and command structure.

It is an ideology (that claims to have its legitimacy in Islamic doctrine) that finds adherents here and there. Some of them, on the basis of what they believe to be true doctrine,

are inspired to plot and execute violent attacks against Western targets, because the West is depicted by the spiritual and political leaders of these movements as the mortal enemy of the true faith.

No silver bullet

So, how do we eliminate this threat? Sorry to sound pessimistic, but we really cannot eliminate it. The problem with modern, decentralized terrorism is that you only need a couple of motivated people to carry out a mass killing against unprotected civilians, as the recent attacks in Paris amply demonstrated.

Sure enough, more sophisticated and more capillary intelligence gathering techniques will help law enforcement in identifying some of the “bad guys” before they can strike. But some will manage to slip through.

Our free societies are simply incapable of controlling everybody and everything, all the time. There are just too many potential suspects out there. Of course, we should give law enforcement all the tools they need. But we cannot expect perfect results. As long as this bizarre ideology (dressed up as religion) will have some enthusiastic followers, there will be more attacks.

No objective causes

Given all this, when is this nightmare going to end? Impossible to say, really. Fanaticism is a non rational phenomenon. it is not really related to “objective” circumstances. Of course, experts and sociologists will tell you that it is all about poverty and corrupt political regimes in the Middle East. There may be some truth there. But only a little bit.

There are millions of poor people in Muslim Bangladesh, and yet no terrorism. Indonesia is a very large Muslim country,

millions of Indonesians are poor. And yet Indonesia is not the breeding ground of jihad. Likewise, if extreme poverty were indeed the root cause of radicalism, how does one explain Muslim radicals in Canada, the USA, Great Britain and France?

It is really impossible to find a clear common denominator that will allow anybody to clearly identify what motivates young Muslims to join radical groups or to create their own. There are close to two billion Muslims in the world. There are only a few radicals; but they are scattered in many, diverse countries. How can one find an "antidote" that will "cure" those who now believe in radical ideologies?

The Muslim World should produce alternative models

Ideally, the Muslim World should be able to create and promote alternative paths to the creation of modern and more equitable societies. But this is hard and truly complicated. The West should help and support any such effort. But the West cannot lead it. The West has no prepackaged, ready-made solutions for this problem.

In the long run this "radical Islam" phenomenon, along with its terror offshoots, will go away. Ideologies based on fantasies do not have an indefinite staying power. The problem is that we do not know how long it will take for this "malady" to run its course.

We have to cope with this threat

In the meantime, let's stop talking about a "War on Terror" as if it were a conventional military campaign with clear objectives and conventional targets. Let's give law enforcement the best tools available and let's try to stay calm, even though we know that perfect security is unattainable.

Why Is the Islamic State Popular?

WASHINGTON – The NYT published a front page story on how American policy-makers are trying to understand ISIL, (Or ISIS, IS for Islamic State), in order to devise a strategy that will lead to its defeat. (*In Battle to Defang ISIS, US Targets Its Psychology*, December 29, 2014), The article is about the content of conversations obtained by the NYT. The main topic of these exchanges among senior military leaders is: “*Why is ISIS so popular?*” It would appear that military leaders really want to understand the root of ISIL’s appeal, so that they can combat the organization more effectively. This is not necessarily an idle or stupid question. But it is not as important as General Michael Nagata, the top US commander of American Special Operations forces in the Middle East, and the man asking the question, may think.

A winning dream

At the cost of appearing superficial, here are the two reasons why ISIL is popular. The main one is that this movement (now trying to become a state) has resurrected –with some success– the concept of a militant, strong, pious Islam. This fantasy, as strange as this may sound, is selling well in parts of the Arab world that are confused and disconcerted after decades of corrupt and incompetent rule by distant despots.

The second reason is that, for the moment at least, ISIL is

winning. And it is winning in large part because a distracted and incompetent American leadership did absolutely nothing as ISIL, from its bases in Syria, proceeded to invade and occupy 1/3 of Iraq, while the US-trained Iraqi Army melted away –without firing a shot.

Therefore, in large part thanks to these stunning military successes, we have now the convergence between the magic vision of an ancient and glorious Islam coming once again to life and the reassurance that its leaders must be right –because they are winning.

Totally irrational

In all this let's be clear about one basic fact. This ideology justified through religious distortions is totally and completely irrational. This is a fairy tale, a dream. There is not one shred of fact based argument. ISIL does not have a political program. It is based on the political equivalent of a religious revelation that has to be carried out and implemented by true believers. None of this makes sense to rational people. But it does not matter. ISIL does not appeal to reason. It appeals to emotions. And, by the way, this is certainly not the only example of irrational ideas that appeal to large masses who then act to realize "the dream" causing all sorts of troubles.

The 9/11 hijackers

On a different but related level we have the 9/11 hijackers who plunged the airplanes into the Twin Towers. Were they motivated by something that we can call a real world political objective? Did they really think that by destroying a couple of buildings and killing a few thousand Americans they would have also killed America? 9/11 was a shock and a tragedy. No doubt about it. But it did not accomplish anything of lasting value for the Islamic cause. And yet the 9/11 hijackers did it anyway. They killed themselves believing that

their death would help the cause. An irrational belief that did not lead to anything except for some destruction and the killing of innocent people.

Hitler's dreams

And farther afield, did Hitler's megalomaniac fantasy of the "*1000 Years Reich*" in which the Arians would rule over inferior races make any rational sense? No, it did not. But it appealed to the emotions of a large segment of a defeated, disoriented and depressed Germany. The blend of nationalism, anti-Semitism and anti-Communism all presented in a splendidly arranged choreography of mass events was enough to motivate millions, especially young people yearning to believe in something truly big.

Communism as salvation

And before Nazim there was Communism. Although sold as "scientific", the vision of a harmonious socialist society that would follow a glorious proletarian revolution was a complete fantasy that could never work as advertised. And yet this dream captured millions across the world, even though its appeal was totally irrational. Communism was a dream of salvation disguised as a political project.

Winning is important

True enough, the fact that because of persistence, luck (and the stupidity of the White Russian generals) the Bolsheviki won the civil war and seized power in Russia mattered a great deal. This first victory of Socialism was the modern equivalent of a divine sign.

Among the believers it was obvious that the Communists won because they were on the right side of history. They were in fact fast forwarding a preordained historic revolution.

Again, all this is utter nonsense. And yet this very (and most

destructive) nonsense for decades motivated communist militants, from Spain to China, and from Vietnam to Bolivia. Communism was the modern religion of human redemption through struggle. Again, its appeal was emotional. This was not a political plan. This was a catharsis, a millenarian vision. It was about the re-humanization of the oppressed and lost individual.

The dream of a modern Caliphate

Now, let's fast forward to ISIL. Its leaders want to create a modern Caliphate. And, as far as this fantasy goes, they have accomplished something. They do control territory. This is like the Bolsheviks controlling a large chunk of Russia. Again, these military and political victories do matter, because they are reinforcing the credibility of this fantasy.

Therefore, I am not at all surprised that confused young people in the Arab world or in Canada, the UK or America may find this novelty that blends pious principles and just war extremely appealing. Going to Syria or Iraq in order to join the cause sounds really exhilarating. Much better than going to a bad school in Manchester and getting a low paying job. Joining ISIL is about glory, triumph and contributing to the manifestation of the true faith.

Nothing to understand

So, what is there to "understand" about any of this? ISIL, just as the Bolsheviks or the Nazis, do not belong to the rational world of politics and programs. This is a millenarian ideology, an ideology of salvation whose main feature is the glorification of gruesome, medieval violence as a perfectly legitimate means through which the believers can and will advance their righteous cause.

As it was impossible to have a "conversation" with a Marxist true believer, it is impossible to engage anybody who believes in this dream of true Islam in any meaningful "dialogue", let

alone convince them that they are “wrong”.

So, how can General Nagata fight this dream? Very simple. Hit ISIL hard, with anything he has. Destroy them. As I noted at the beginning, through its stupid inaction America allowed this aberration to gain ground. By gaining ground it gained legitimacy, You want to diminish ISIL's appeal? Defeat its troops. Show them retreating. Show them surrendering. Show them powerless.

Right now this fantasy of the Caliphate has huge appeal mostly because would-be militants can see that there is success. ISIL is winning. And therefore it is assumed that its foundations must be good. But I am sure that, as soon as they will start losing, the magic appeal will wither, very fast.

At a different level, the only way to inoculate young people around the world and in Arab countries in particular against this ideological poison is not in trying to prove through rational arguments that creating a new Caliphate is a bad idea. The only way is to create better and really viable alternatives.

America did not buy Marxism

It is not an accident that, with few exceptions, America was not penetrated by Marxism. It was immune because the American values founded on individual freedom and freedom of enterprise did not allow the Marxist myth of victimization of the working people to attach itself. Simply stated, very few Americans believed in the whole Marxist cosmology of blood sucking capitalists and oppressed working masses who will have to revolt in order to establish a just society.

Most Americans were reasonably convinced that their society allowed basic freedoms, including the opportunity to move up in the world through personal effort and perseverance.

Create an alternative

Which is to say that crazy ideologies like the beliefs espoused by ISIL will be defeated only by the genuine appeal of real world viable alternatives. This is the challenge.

In the short-term ISIL must be destroyed militarily. And this is not going to be easy if the US insists on using only a modicum of military strength in this fight. Most certainly, every day the ISIL flag flies it is a day of victory for its leaders. A rapid succession of stunning military defeats would do a lot to diminish the appeal of this crazy idea.

But in the long-term it is up to mainstream Muslim culture to come up with something real, modern and appealing. Until now, unfortunately, Arab societies have only produced kleptocratic despots. If this is the only viable alternative to fundamentalism, do not be so surprised when young people sign up with ISIL.