

Terrorism Is Not An Existential Threat

WASHINGTON – Sadly, there has been another terror attack. This time it took place in Munich, one of Germany's most important cities. Here is my take on this tragedy. It is alright for the news media to report the facts. What is not alright, in fact down right insane, is for every news channel to provide endless coverage of the event that quickly turns into wild speculation in the absence of hard facts.

Obsessive coverage

Indeed, all the networks kept the topic on the air by creating an endless loop in which there was no real news. The same skimpy facts were repeated again and again, in an obsessive fashion. In an equally obsessive fashion, viewers were treated with endless reruns of the same footage that showed scared people in Munich running away.

Uninformed commentary now part of the news

And it got a lot worse. In order to keep viewers interested, the news editors laced these non-reports from Munich with interviews with "experts" who knew absolutely nothing about the evolving situation in Germany. But supposedly they are "terrorism experts" who can opine on what is going on, even though they are totally in the dark regarding the key facts. As this "coverage" unfolded, nobody knew anything about the Munich shooter. Was he a German? Was he Middle Eastern? Is this about ISIL and jihad? Is this the work of extreme right militants? Or is it about a mentally disturbed person with no political agenda?

Ignorance is OK

But none of this matters. And so you could see on various TV

channels a parade of retired U.S. Generals who were asked to offer their (supposedly insightful) opinion about an ongoing police action aimed at capturing a shooter in a German shopping mall about which they knew absolutely nothing. As if their military background would allow them to know what was happening and why.

And then add to the experts mix retired CIA and FBI agents, think tank people, and assorted others. One thing is clear. None of these people knew anything whatsoever about what happened in Munich. But this does not matter. Speculation, sometimes totally irresponsible, by experts is now considered an integral part of news coverage.

And it got really crazy. "Let's assume that these are ISIL inspired terrorists", said one. "Well, in this case, this means that...blah, blah, blah". This is how the news media transformed a sad event whose causes were unknown (and that is very limited in scope) into yet another chapter of an unfolding global war waged by Terror against us that does not exist.

A global war that does not exist

Yes, the media want you to believe that this Munich attack must be part of a general war waged by Islamic fanatics against the West. Another terror attack signals that we are dealing with a ferocious enemy, determined to totally destroy us. And then the really stupid questions follow: "In your opinion, what should governments do to keep us totally safe?" As if there were an intelligent, cogent answer to such a broad question.

Terrorism is real

Terrorism is unfortunately real. Yes, innocent people across the world are being killed, and many more are potentially vulnerable. This is true. But by amplifying the news coverage of all these attacks the news media creates the false

impression that there are thousands and thousands of terrorists ready to jump on us. They describe all this as an existential, truly overwhelming threat; when it is not.

A total of a few hundred people killed over a few months period across many countries is serious business. But these killings do not amount to an ongoing massive slaughter. By comparison, during WWI thousands of soldiers were killed in just a few hours in one of the many battles that were fought almost daily, over a number of years. Again, thousands of people get killed every year in America by criminals. But, somehow these deaths are not as important.

No perspective

I am not saying that terror-related killings should be ignored because they are not large enough to deserve attention. I am saying however that they should be looked at in perspective. Unless we see a real change in the momentum of these terror operations showing us that there is both willingness and operational ability to attack all Western (and other) countries from all angles on a regular basis, these terror attacks are not about to destroy our civilization. Of course we should deploy all our intelligence and police resources to deal with this threat. This is serious business. But we should leave its handling to law enforcement agencies and not panic.

World not coming to an end

However, this is not what the media tell us. Indeed, by providing truly over the top, excessive coverage and by allowing the wildest speculations about "*what other terrible things will happen next*" to be mixed with incessant news coverage the media give the public the impression that, on account of "Global Terrorism", the world may be coming to an end.

This is just not true. Allowing this perception to be created by exaggerated coverage the media are creating fear, if not

panic when we need perspective and calm. This is truly irresponsible. This distortion amounts to a huge disservice to Western societies which rely on the news media for balanced accounts in order to gain a reasonably accurate understanding about what is going on in the world.

[How To Handle Terrorism: Stop Media Coverage](#)

WASHINGTON – A 31 year old French citizen of Tunisian origin, using a truck as his weapon, run over and killed scores of people who had gathered on a sea side promenade to celebrate the French National Day in the southern city of Nice. Confronted with another episode of mass murder perpetrated by another psychopath inspired, it seems, by radical Islamist ideology, the French Government and the world react in the same way. We mourn, we cry, we express solidarity and sympathy to the French people, and we swear to continue our fight against terrorism.

A better counter terror strategy?

Is there a better strategy? When it comes to intelligence and police work, probably not. This ongoing international counter terrorism effort is enormously complicated because we are talking about finding the proverbial needles hidden in many haystacks.

Indeed, given limited resources and potentially hundreds of thousands of militants who may turn into terrorists, it is next to impossible to make sure that all credible suspects are known and tracked by various law enforcement agencies, so that they can be stopped before they act. Case in point, based on

early reports, the young man who slaughtered so many people in Nice was not on any terror list.

One person can create a slaughter

Furthermore, we know very well that just one determined terrorist can inflict enormous damage when targeting large numbers of unarmed civilians who are gathered in one place. Indeed, in order to perpetrate this horrendous slaughter in Nice, the young man who planned it needed a driver license and a truck. We are not talking about expensive, sophisticated weapons that require intensive training before they can be properly used. Sadly, committing mass murder is easy.

That said, intelligence agencies and law enforcement simply must persevere in this thankless investigative effort. They must try their best, hoping to catch more bad guys before they can act.

Stop endless media coverage

But there is something else that we should do. World media should stop behaving as the unwitting propaganda arm of international terrorism. By this I mean that the biggest victory for terrorists is that we treat their acts as something that precipitates a national crisis, while scaring all of us to death.

After these events, there is non-stop coverage, laced with testimonials from eye witnesses, sad stories of orphaned children, and more. All this creates an atmosphere of helplessness, fear and confusion. *"We are all targets". "This will never end". "I can be dead tomorrow"*.

Report the facts, and then stop

Of course it is the job of all media to report facts. But, after having done so, they should stop, simply because endless 24/7 coverage proves to other would-be terrorist watching all

this that terrorism scares everybody. Therefore "it works".

If we could think of a different scenario in which terror attacks are treated just like accidents, that is unfortunate events (think two trains colliding) with no political or ideological angle, societies would register the sad news about loss of life, and then move on; without the endless and frankly counterproductive debates on how can governments provide perfect protection to all of us from this calamity.

Attackers are narcissists

The fact is that most of these attackers, and would-be attackers deep down are publicity seeking narcissists. Sure enough, in some fashion they see themselves as noble warriors engaged in jihad. But they also want to be famous, even in death. Imagine being an obscure young man of Arab origin living in France. You see yourself as a nobody. Most likely, you feel that you are treated unfairly. You believe that the French people around you harbor racist feelings against you.

Become famous

But from the vantage point of the paradise you earned after your noble deed of martyrdom (the slaughter of all those civilians) you rejoice seeing that the whole world talks about you. You are famous, and for all the right reasons. You are a hero, a martyr in the just war against the infidels.

Given all of the above, by toning down media coverage and the endless commentary and speculations, we would take much of the oxygen out of the terrorism breeding grounds.

No rational goals

From a rational perspective, it is obvious that these acts of terrorism achieve nothing. Killing 80 people here and 50 there is not a strategy that leads to anything. But these perpetrators are not thinking rationally.

That said they certainly want the world to know that they are heroes in this global battle for the establishment of the true faith. Becoming famous after having accomplished a great deed is seen as part of the just reward for martyrdom. And this by itself becomes a strong motivation for others to engage in similar acts.

Stop the coverage

However, if in the future these tragedies were not incessantly covered by the media, then there is no free publicity, and therefore no aura of fame for the actors. If nobody talks about them after their glorious martyrdom, then part of the incentive to follow on the footsteps of other famous jihadists vanishes.

So, please, report the facts, by all means. But stop “promoting” terrorism by giving so much free publicity to the perpetrators. Endless media coverage simply encourages others.

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.

Orlando Shooting Strengthens Trump's Position On Muslims

WASHINGTON – In a U.S. presidential campaign that is and will be dominated by emotional slogans and over simplified narratives, the horrible Orlando shooting (50 people killed, 53 injured) by the son of Afghan immigrants will be used by Donald Trump as clear evidence that his tough anti-Muslim and anti-immigrants positions are the only way to protect American lives from the supreme existential threat of Islamic terrorism.

Muslim killer?

This killing rampage (the worst in U.S. history) planned and executed by Omar Mateen, 29, will be used as a powerful argument to severely restrict immigration, ban refugees from the Middle East, place a hold on all would be visitors/immigrants of Muslim faith, and redouble U.S. military efforts against ISIL in Iraq and Syria.

This sounds absurd. However horrible, this is only one episode, orchestrated it seems by just one person. No, America is not facing armies of domestic Islamic terrorists. But in this political climate, for almost half of America, this is not over reaction. This sounds logical and rational. And you can bet that this is the argument that will be made. And you can also bet that Donald Trump will lead this charge, with the clear expectation that his anti-Muslim policies will help him get to the White House.

We are at war

Here is the “truth” according to the Trump/anti-immigrant

camp. As we all know, a large part of the Muslim world is at war with us. We are the innocent targets and victims. The violent acts perpetrated on U.S. soil against Americans by Muslims, including Muslims born in the U.S. who became radicals as young adults, is evidence that we are facing a mortal danger and that the U.S. Government (led as we know by weak and incompetent Democrats who simply do not want to acknowledge that Islamic Terrorism declared war on us) is not doing enough to protect the American people against a mounting terror threat.

To those who argue that these scattered violent episodes –however gruesome– do not constitute evidence of a massive, ongoing campaign to kill Americans, the anti-immigrants reply forcefully that this is just the beginning. They “know” that there are hundreds, possibly thousands of would-be terrorists warming up and getting ready to unleash their vicious attacks against innocent Americans.

We need to protect ourselves

As I said, this is a presidential campaign that is and will be dominated by over simplifications and raw emotions. Forget about balanced and nuanced positions. If most Americans buy the idea that “the terrorists are already among us and are ready to kill us all” and that for this very reason we need drastic measures to protect our lives, then Donald Trump gains a powerful edge in this unfolding race for the White House.

He is the Tough Guy who will have the courage to take the drastic steps that will finally get us protection from this looming terror threat. He will do his very best to paint Hillary Clinton and the entire Democratic establishment as weak on terrorism and national defense and therefore unfit to govern America.

We need a determined leader

And the Tough Guy will propose tough responses. If this

includes undertaking measures that may infringe on the civil rights of law-abiding, innocent Muslims who have nothing to do with terror plots, so be it. Better safe than sorry. They are Muslims, and therefore by definition suspects. The priority here is to protect Americans.

Voice of reason?

Hillary Clinton will try to be the balanced voice of reason. But this presidential campaign has nothing to do with reason. And fear of terrorism is the quintessential emotional issue. It is mostly about fear of unknown dangers that are easily magnified by those who want you to believe that this is the number one existential threat confronting all of us.

Those who support Donald Trump believe that in this hour of supreme danger only a New Leader, not tainted by the corrupt ways of Washington, DC, will create a new era of security, self-confidence, prosperity and eventually regained national prestige.

Are these the feelings of the majority of Americans? In a few months we shall find out.

America Is Not Suffering Daily Terror Attacks

WASHINGTON – One of the most damaging –and completely unchallenged– myths propagated by some candidates in this surreal presidential campaign, and reinforced by almost all national media, is that America is targeted, on a daily basis, by terrorists. Indeed we Americans are all potential (and defenseless) victims of a well orchestrated campaign of

Islamic terror expertly managed by ISIL, its agents, and thousands of radicalized sympathizers.

Terrorism in America

Yes, of course, in recent years there have been a few well publicized terror attacks perpetrated by individuals who declared to be followers of the Islamic Caliphate still ruling over parts of Syria and Iraq, and other Islamic radical groups.

But a recent WSJ editorial lists a total of only 5 violent actions on US soil by Islamic terrorists since October 2014. By far the worst among them is the San Bernardino mass killing that occurred in December 2015. More broadly, a total of 45 Americans have been victims of terror attacks since 9/11.

Terrorism is serious business

Of course, terrorism is bad stuff. No doubt about it. But we are talking about only a few incidents that involved very few terrorists, and a relatively small number of victims. However bad, none of this suggests the existence of a relentless "terror campaign", with mass killings of innocent Americans occurring on a regular basis.

Of course, law enforcement and all our intelligence and counter terror agencies should stay on top of this Islamic terror issue. As we have had these incidents, there is no doubt that others are plotting some more.

And the very fact that there have been high-profile terror attacks in other countries (Paris, Ankara, Istanbul, and most recently Brussels) suggest that we may have more and may be better planned terror plots targeting the US in the near future.

We are not under attack

Still, with all due respect for the victims and their

families, the extremely limited proportions of this phenomenon in the USA hardly suggest that we are in the midst of a national security crisis.

If we look at the number of violent deaths in America, the total number of victims of terrorism are very low on any list. In 2014 in California there were 1,699 homicides; in Houston, 239 murders, in Indianapolis, 138. But none of this makes headlines. Drug related crimes, conflicts among criminal gangs leading to homicides, and armed robberies gone bad are so common in America that they only deserve a quick mention in the evening news.

Given this context, it is frankly baffling that isolated terror attacks are portrayed by the media, several politicians, and many experts as part of a wave of planned attacks aimed at destroying America. Indeed some have described our current predicament caused by terror plots as a "fight for survival". Talk about exaggeration.

Very frequent non political killings get much less media attention

For some reason, when a deranged former employee completely loses his mind and goes to his old work place and starts shooting everybody in sight, we say almost nothing. No banner headline the next morning. Somehow these mass killings are "normal". As bad as these episodes that result in many deaths may be, we are used to them. Being shot and possibly killed by a disgruntled former co-worker is a possibility that we all accept.

Tens of thousands die in car accidents

From a different perspective, as a society, we are perfectly willing to accept that any time we get into our cars we expose ourselves to the possibility, remote but real, that we may get killed in an accident. Indeed, tens of thousands Americans die because of car accidents, every year. (32,000 in 2014). We

know this. And yet we keep using our cars; even though we are fully aware that this routine activity involves a significant level of risk.

We demand total protection

However, the extremely remote possibility of being shot by an ISIL supporter while he screams "God is Great", somehow is a totally unacceptable level of risk. Therefore, we feel perfectly entitled to be scared to death.

The fact that a few such terror incidents have indeed occurred has been turned into a collective belief –in fact certainty– that, here we are, totally defenseless and exposed, in the midst of a major national security crisis. We are unprotected and afraid. And so we scream, and demand guarantees of 100% protection from such evil doers.

And yet, this fear is totally irrational, and therefore unjustified. Based on current data, the odds of getting killed by a terrorist in America are extremely small.

Why the hyperbole?

So, why all the hyperbole about terrorism? Who knows really? There is absolutely no rational explanation for this. However, the fact that many politicians and most media keep repeating that we under daily assault, with plenty more to come, does not help recreate any sense of proportion.

The media love this

All media are at fault. They know that stories on terror attacks, and stories on potential terror plots get large audiences. Fear sells. And so the media provide maximum coverage, using every possible hyperbole to magnify any terror related news story.

As an example, just look at the 24 hours non stop coverage of the recent terror attacks in Brussels. For sure, this is a

newsworthy tragedy. More than 30 people killed, hundreds wounded. But, once the news has been given, do we really need this level of total saturation, almost obsessive coverage? No new facts are revealed during these fake "news reports". Most of the "coverage" consists on asking hypothetical questions to terrorism experts who make a living telling us that this horrible and of course bound to get much worse.

Sure, this way cable news outlets get bigger audiences; and so the media companies get higher prices for TV commercials they put on the air that advertise detergent and pain killers.

Phony story

But the American public is fed a phony "Islamic terrorists are determined to kill all of us" story that fuels a climate of fear and uncertainty. Even if we take into account major acts of terror that have occurred outside of the United States, the emerging picture does not even remotely justify the term "war" to describe the phenomenon.

Yes, the media make more money. Some politicians magnify the terror danger, while promising that when they get elected they will finally take care of the problem, and all will be well again. But in all this America loses perspective and good judgement.

I am not suggesting that terrorism is not a serious problem. It is a major issue to be handled by competent US intelligence and counter terrorism professionals, hopefully working together with their counterparts across borders.

Terrorism is indeed a serious matter. But it is not a national crisis.

Immigrants No Longer Welcome in Europe

WASHINGTON – Predictably, the European refugee problem has turned into a major Europe-wide political crisis. Anti-immigrant, far right political forces are gaining strength, prompted by widespread illegal behavior displayed by many immigrants.

It used to be about logistics

Here is the thing. Until not too long ago, when it came to massive immigration from Africa and the Middle East the major focus and concern for most European policy-makers was on logistics and budgets. How many new immigrants can Europe accommodate every month? How many shelters are there? What about paying for food, clothing, medical care, education? And what kind of jobs can communities across Europe create for these often illiterate new comers?

Xenophobia

But now, while all these “practical issues” still matter, we have to add open xenophobia. Yes, most Europeans do not want these immigrants.

In a way, it is not surprising that among millions of new arrivals there are some criminals and some would be –or real– radicals and terrorists. Of course, the trouble makers are not the majority. But there have been and there are enough nasty daily occurrences of immigrant law breakers to give a bad name to all immigrants/refugees/asylum seekers.

Every time an Arab or African immigrant is arrested because of theft or violent acts, this fosters an atmosphere of fear and alarm. In many localities, and sometimes entire countries, now the prevailing sentiment is that *all* the new arrivals are bad

people, or at least dangerous.

The highly publicized New Year's Eve attacks by immigrants, some of them recent refugees, against a very large number of German women in Cologne, and in other German cities, are now considered hard evidence that all immigrants are criminals and rapists.

In Italy a small group of young kids was taken hostage for a short while by Muslim immigrants who put the boys in a line and asked them in a menacing way: *"Do you believe in God or Allah?"* While a weapon was fired in the air, no violence followed. Still, this sounds like material lifted from some ISIL internet propaganda video.

Throughout Europe, every day there are reports of attacks against immigrants. Shelters for immigrants are often set on fire.

Unprepared Europe

The problem is that Europe is not equipped materially and psychologically to welcome millions of poor people with vastly different cultural backgrounds. They are mostly Muslim. Many of them come from a region in which there is a great deal of political violence and terrorism inspired by radical Islam.

Of course, the recent Paris large-scale terror attacks seems to confirm what most people fear: *"All Muslim immigrants are dangerous. We do not want them. They should be sent back"*.

Send them back?

But this is impossible. Europe does not have and will not have both the will power and the practical ability to kick everybody out. We are talking about millions of people. And it will also be extremely difficult to close the door to all new immigrants. Desperate (and opportunistic) people are coming in, they will keep coming in. Some of them have traveled long

distances on foot. The “civilized” Europeans simply do not know how to stand firm and prevent them from getting in.

It is probably true that most refugees are genuine. They are poor and desperate people seeking a better life. But the criminals and would be terrorists among them created the now prevailing negative perception.

I’m afraid this cannot be fixed. And European leaders are in a bind. They cannot be at the same time humanitarians, and really strict on law and order. The current refugee problem, now mixed with the unsolved issues created by vast and not assimilated older immigrant communities, has become too big.

Europe will be changed by this wave, in a bad way

Expect the mess caused by these chaotic waves to continue and to get worse. And here is a simple, if sad, prediction.

Europe will be changed by the enormous numbers of Muslim refugees. Not the other way around. The refugees will not be assimilated. They will transform Europe. And quite frankly this is not going to be an improvement, simply because what they bring is not a refined culture. “Multiculturalism” sounds really nice. Yes, provided that you can have a productive encounter among developed cultures. And this is absolutely not the case right now.

Traditional cultures with outmoded values

What these mostly illiterate or semi-literate refugees bring along with them is at best a traditional rural culture of old, outmoded values (including medieval ideas about the role of women in society, and full justification for “honor killing”).

Sadly, the days of refined Arab scholarship ended many, many centuries ago.

There Will Be No Real Palestinian State

WASHINGTON – A couple of recent interviews with two Israeli citizens, the first one a seasoned policy-maker with an impressive background in intelligence and national security, the other an inhabitant of a settlement in what is technically Palestinian territory, conveyed to me in a powerful way that Israel will never allow the creation of a real, sovereign Palestinian State. *And I really mean never.*

Official position

We know the official Israeli position on a Palestinian state. In principle, Israel would like to see a Palestinian state. The Israelis do not want to carry the burden of indefinite occupation. It is difficult, and it is costly.

Guarantees

However, for this to happen, there would have to be solid guarantees. The Palestinians would have to openly and unequivocally recognize Israel as a Jewish state. They would have to unequivocally give up any claims to the territories that belong to Israel. No claims, no violence against Israel and no terrorism.

Palestinians will not deliver

Well, we do know that this blanket, unequivocal, non revocable recognition of Israel is not coming. At least not in a form that would satisfy Israel. We do know that at least some Palestinians openly state that their goal is the elimination of Israel. We also know that many Palestinians assert their

right to regain possession of land and homes they were forced to abandon after Israel was created.

From this vantage point, the Israeli government can easily proclaim that since the Palestinians are reluctant to fully acknowledge Israel's right to exist, unfortunately Israel cannot take the chance to allow the establishment of a full-fledged Palestinian state next door. This position implicitly indicates that, should the Palestinians finally change their mind, then the road to an agreement leading to the "Two States Solution" will be open.

Quiet determination to carry on

This is the official position. However, beyond the public pronouncements, I detected in the two interviews I watched on TV both an oblique conclusion that a deal with the Palestinians is impossible and an Israeli quiet determination to hold on to the status quo –essentially for ever. I assume that this determination is in part based on a healthy mistrust of the Palestinians and in part on a widespread implicit and at times open assumption whereby all of Biblical Palestine, including the West Bank, is and should be recognized as a part of Israel.

Limited sovereignty

In political terms this position is conceptualized as an Israeli version of the old Soviet "limited sovereignty" doctrine that shaped relations between Moscow and the vassal countries of the Eastern Bloc. "You are semi-free, but only to the extent that you do not do anything that in our judgment undermines our interests".

In a nutshell, the senior Israeli policy maker stated that it is acceptable to have a Palestinian Authority with some of the elements of a sovereign state, as long as Israel is still in overall control. It is alright for the Palestinians to have jurisdiction on most of their internal affairs, as long as

they recognize that they will never be allowed to have a real army, and other attributes of a truly independent state.

Furthermore, the Palestinians should accept the consequences of their almost total economic dependence on Israel. Israel is a key supplier of basic goods to Palestine, and the employer of many Palestinians. Israel is in the lead and therefore it dictates the terms. The Palestinians should be wise enough to recognize all this, and what it means to them.

Bottom line: since the Palestinians cannot be fully trusted, the status quo will continue –for ever, if necessary. The Palestinians better get used to their status of permanent vassal territory.

But while all this makes some sense, these positions are reinforced by a belief widely held by many Israelis: the West Bank is in fact part of Israel.

Settlements are here to stay

Indeed, switching to the long interview with the Israeli settler, it is patently obvious that he and tens of thousands of other feel perfectly comfortable where they are. He does not believe that his home is “illegal” since it has been built on occupied Palestinian territory. On the contrary, he believes that it is alright for himself and thousands of Israelis to build settlements in what used to be Palestinian land.

Clearly these settlements are not temporary. They are permanent. Through them and all the Israeli citizens who live there, little by little Israel is expanding its *de facto* borders.

Anyway, the combined meaning of the two interviews is that they convey a quiet determination to carry on with the status quo, without any final settlement, and without giving away an inch.

Palestinians cannot be trusted

May be with cause, the Israelis concluded that a “real deal” with the Palestinians is in fact impossible. They have concluded that no Palestinian state, no matter who is in charge, can be trusted to act as a peaceful good neighbor.

No Palestinian government can be trusted when it comes to pursuing terrorists or others who will continue to plot violent actions against Israel. Therefore, while endless occupation is not an ideal situation, letting go entirely would most likely have adverse consequences. Just think of what happened in Gaza after the unilateral Israeli withdrawal. It became a Hamas-dominated enclave, and a launching pad for terror attacks against Israel.

Change the borders

At the same time, by creating settlements in the occupied territories, Israel is slowly modifying to its advantage a rather unfavorable territorial reality. Israel is a very small country surrounded by potentially hostile neighbors. Getting little pieces of Palestine by creating Jewish settlements in strategic locations will eventually diminish the disadvantage of such a small territory.

And if many settlers believe as they do that they are building homes in what is in fact Biblical Israel, the land of their forefathers, this is even better. Strengthened by this religious belief, they will have the determination to hold on to their homes and defend them with force, whenever necessary.

Given all of the above, my perception is that this –the endless continuation of the occupation– is what we are going to have. Whatever the official pronouncements, whatever the objectives of the next round of Israeli-Palestinian negotiations, Israel will not budge.

In fact Israel will continue to slowly modify in its favor the reality on the ground through its ongoing settlements policy which amounts to *de facto* annexation of slices of Palestinian territory.

The Palestinians have responsibilities

This may look terribly unfair to the poor Palestinians. But the Palestinians have their share of responsibilities. Many of them are wedded to unrealistic ideological positions. Many of them openly want Israel to disappear. At least some of them are terrorists, and many more support terrorism against Israel.

Therefore it is truly disingenuous on the part of the Palestinian leadership to assume that Israel will give up and allow the creation of a fully sovereign, but potentially hostile state a few kilometers away from its major cities.

Israel's worst nightmare is to see the entire West Bank become another Gaza Strip controlled by fanatics. For all these reasons expect occupation to continue.

There will be no fully sovereign Palestinian state.

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.

We Have To Learn How To Live With The Terror Threat

WASHINGTON – Here we go, more home-grown terrorism in America, most likely Islam-inspired terrorism. This time it happened in San Bernardino, in Southern California. A young couple of South Asian origin decided that they needed to kill people at a holiday party for local public services employees.

Mass killing

And so they did. They went there, heavily armed. And they started firing into the defenseless crowd, killing 14, and injuring 17. A while later they were found, and they were killed in a massive shoot out with police.

After all this, we have the usual phenomenon of over the top, 24 hour media coverage, with the usual tail of dozens of experts interviewed, so that they can opine on motives, international connections, methods, necessary counter

measures, and more. Officiating over this media bazaar, stern looking news anchors ask really silly questions such as: *“How are we going to prevent this from happening again?”*

This obsessive coverage at least indirectly conveys the impression that in America and throughout the world we have massive terrorist attacks everywhere, every day. But it is not so. Yes, we had the bomb on the Russian plane in Egypt, then, Paris, and Mali, and now San Bernardino. Disturbing developments. But this is hardly a wave.

ISIL and its supporters are a menace. But deaths or serious injuries due to traffic accidents are a much worse menace. It is a fact that millions of Americans will die prematurely because of the consequences of type 2 diabetes, a preventable chronic disease that most people affected by it do not take seriously.

Very, very few will be victims of terror violence. And yet the media hysteria creates the unhealthy perception that we are now a nation under siege.

No way to completely stop religion inspired violence

Unless they are totally dense, these savvy media people must know that a few terror attacks, however tragic, are not the equivalent of a global conflict.

Besides, they should also know that there is no clean “solution” for occasional acts of violence perpetrated by psychopaths inspired by a weird interpretation of Islam.

The media people should know that it is impossible to stop all small groups of radicalized individuals, scattered around a vast country, from scheming, plotting and occasionally executing acts of terror. And yet the relentless coverage of the events leads the general public to believe that terrorism is an everyday occurrence and that, if we only had the right leaders, we would find a way to stop it.

As we have just seen in San Bernardino, it does not take an organized expeditionary force to cause a slaughter. You need just a couple of motivated people armed with semi-automatic weapons. Sadly, plotting and executing similar acts of terror is really easy. As long as there are people willing to embrace this ideology that advocates a crazy version of jihad, there will be more acts of terror.

Mitigate the threat

Yes, we can mitigate the threat. Law enforcement can do a better job. Intelligence services can track more bad guys. More alert citizens can raise alarms when they see something suspicious.

And, as I have argued elsewhere, destroying the self-proclaimed Islamic State in Syria and Iraq would affect the morale of militants located in many countries.

But there is no “final remedy” for a threat that stems from the power of an alluring ideology of death and redemption that resonates with some (not millions, not thousands) confused people looking for meaning in their lives.

The “cause” of terror

Indeed, we know that the “source” of this terror threat rests in the twisted minds of some deranged individuals who have been convinced by internet-delivered slick propaganda that it is their duty to kill innocent people in order to further a plan of destruction and redemption founded on religious beliefs.

Talking over and over on TV about what may have motivated so and so to embrace radical Islam provides no remedy whatsoever. It does not create new tools that may be used to convince others to abandon similar plans. It only creates and fuels unjustified fears.

The only antidote to “radicalization” is for people to choose humane ideas instead of crazy ones. But nobody knows how to create a method that will teach misguided people how to abandon dreams of jihad and rejoin civilized discourse.

This is serious

Let me be clear, I am not trying to say that these mass killings inspired by crazy political-religious beliefs are not important. They are.

But broadcasting, in an obsessive way, all the details of a violent deed plotted and executed by psychopaths who justified it with some pseudo-religious motive does not help anybody.

If anything, it conjures up scenarios of hundreds, possibly thousands of sinister plots unfolding, every day. And this is clearly an exaggeration.

So, what should we do about terrorism? First of all, stop this hysterical coverage! Let’s leave this matter to the professionals. If anybody can help, even a bit, it is going to be intelligence people, the FBI counter terrorism specialists, Homeland Security, and various police forces around America.

“Fix this, now”

But no. This is portrayed as a national emergency. TV news anchors blabbering about this “Islamic Terror Threat” 24/7 seem intent on creating a state of perpetual national alert. *“Oh, My God...More terrorism. Again? And what are we going to do about this? What is President Obama doing? What are the presidential candidates saying?”*

This *“Give us a solution, now, otherwise soon enough we shall all be dead”* approach creates the stupid perception that there is an imminent threat affecting the entire country, and that we need a smart person who can figure out a good way to “fix” this menace –once and for all.

No magic remedy

As if a leader with superior skills could dig into his tool kit and come up with the appropriate gadget that would just do it. The fact is that there is no such ready-made solution.

Consider the obvious. We do not live in a police state. We cannot have a permanent state of emergency in which the police can go anywhere, without probable cause and without any warrants, and round up everybody who may be a suspect, subjecting them to “harsh interrogations” (read torture) in order to extract information about plots and accomplices. This is America, not North Korea.

On top of that, we know that there are just too many, totally unprotected soft targets. This terrorist couple hit defenseless people assembled for a holiday party in San Bernardino.

Soft targets

Now, there are probably tens of thousands of such events every year before the Holidays in America. Are we going to dispatch squads of policemen to guard all of them, just in case?

And then there are sports events, concerts, crowded movie theaters, shopping malls, schools, universities, and museums. Same situation. Massive police protection everywhere? We just do not have the resources to police everything, everywhere.

This being the case, what do we do? Do we close “everything” down, as a security precaution? No, we shall not do that because this would be the end of commerce and of the national economy.

Well, if this is so, then we have to learn how to live with the possibility of more terror attacks, keeping in mind that, based on the existing record, there have been very few.

The plague of our time

Sadly, religiously motivated terrorism is a disease that will be with us for a while. Of course, we have to fight it. But we should also recognize that it is difficult to do so. There are more than 300 million citizens in America, not to mention throngs of visitors arriving every day, tens of thousands of foreign students and foreign workers, and millions of illegal immigrants who reside here. Checking on everybody in order to make sure that we catch all the bad guys before they act is an impossibility.

Low cost operations

Remember, just a couple of motivated terrorists can cause death and major disruptions, at least in the locality where the event occurs. As the San Bernardino slaughter proves, only two people with a couple of assault rifles caused a disaster. Besides, this type of "do-it-yourself", small scale terrorism is very cheap.

This whole operation probably cost just a few thousand dollars to buy rifles, ammunition, bomb making material, and for renting an SUV. In other words, putting together another plot, just like this one, is really easy!

Difficult to detect

On any given day, law enforcement agencies probably do a decent job at tracking many suspects, and occasionally apprehending a few. But some will slip through.

It is just inevitable. And sometimes bad guys go on plotting undetected because ordinary citizens do not want to get involved. Indeed, most tragically, it would appear that some neighbors of the terrorist couple in San Bernardino noticed strange activities around their house. But they did not report anything to the authorities, for fear of being portrayed as anti-foreigners bigots.

What do we do?

So, what do we do? Except for reporting suspicious activities when they see any, there is really nothing that ordinary people can do. This is a job for the professionals.

Intelligence services and law enforcement agencies may be able to get better at what they already do. But they cannot perform miracles. The tragedy of acts of terror inspired by crazy interpretations of Islam is that the bizarre ideas that inspire them can be embraced potentially by thousands and thousands of people, who may be located almost anywhere.

Easy to become a terrorist

And, as I said before, it is easy to become an improvised would-be terrorist. You do not need advanced degrees, or heavy training.

Sure, some skills are necessary.

But it is not that difficult to learn how to pull the trigger into an unarmed crowd, this way causing mass casualties. And it does not take that much money either. In this gun saturated society, if you have no prior criminal record, buying a gun or an assault rifle is just as complicated as ordering a coffee maker through Amazon.

That said, please keep in mind that we have no evidence of waves upon waves of terror attacks about to hit America. Yes, there have been some. And probably some more will take place. But this is a problem, and not an existential threat. I wish our media would be able to explain the difference.

Discussing all the details serves no purpose

Is this analysis an invitation to fatalism? Not really. This is an invitation to realism. We have a problem; but it is not a crisis.

By obsessively digging into the details of the lives of psychopaths dressed up as religious fighters we accomplish

nothing constructive. Doing so just creates an unhealthy climate of fear.

So, here is my simple advice. Let's report the news, but let's not talk about this too much. And let's leave terrorism to the professionals.

Looking into the future, let's hope that the ideological malady that inspires political violence will soon go away. If history is any guide, crazy ideas may linger for a while; but they do not last for ever.