

Which is worse: Islamist terror or the Cold War?

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Australian Minister for Foreign Affairs, Julie Bishop's suggestion that Islamist terror poses a greater threat than Cold War communism is thought provoking. It's possible to wonder whether history will prove the Foreign Minister correct without losing sight of her essential argument that the struggle against Islamist terror is likely to be a long and costly one prosecuted across the globe and demanding insight and expertise beyond sheer military might. Former army head and strategic analyst Peter Leahy issued a similar warning in this newspaper last August when he predicted that the multifaceted war against radical Islam would last the rest of the century.

The most significant threat in the past 70 years

Speaking at the Sydney Institute on Monday night, the Foreign Minister cast jihadist terror as “the most significant threat to the global rules-based order to emerge in the past 70 years — and (she included in this comparison) the rise of communism and the Cold War. This threat is a form of terrorism — more dangerous, more complex, more global than we have witnessed before — a pernicious force that could, if left unchecked, wield great global power that would threaten the very existence of nation-states.”

Communism had a backstory of global pretensions but nation-states trumped international socialism. The Cold War badge for those states was “democratic republic”, a term just as misleading as the “caliphates” declared by today's terrorists as they destabilise borders. Ms Bishop quotes former US secretary of state Henry Kissinger as saying that “zones of non-governance or jihad now stretch across the Muslim world ... a significant portion of the world's territory and population is on the verge of effectively falling out of the international state system altogether”.

Secular communism then, global jihadism now

Both ideologies — secular communism then, global jihadism now — involve a violent rejection of an open society and the urge to impose a totalitarian order. Both have been ruthless in repressing heresy or dissent. Just as the most effective anti-communists were often ex-communists or social democrats, so too the struggle against murderous Islamists cannot be won without the support and knowledge of Islam's peace-loving majority. Whereas communism saw itself as the inevitable future, Islamism harks back to a distorted image of original religious purity while co-opting Western technology as it prepares for an apocalyptic confrontation.

The defence of free and open societies has required some uneasy alliances; during the Cold War, the West exploited tensions between the Soviet Union on the one hand and Yugoslavia and China on the other. Ms Bishop has just returned from visiting Shia Iran, a defacto ally against the Sunni Islamic State, and Tony Abbott has appealed to Turkey, which was home to the last recognised caliphate of modern times, for help in stopping the flow of jihadis across its borders.

Challenge and repudiate its ideology

Both the Cold War and the anti-Islamist cause have required a struggle that is not just military and strategic but cultural and intellectual. “To truly defeat (Islamic State),” Ms Bishop said, “is

to challenge and repudiate its ideology.” First it is necessary to have the confidence to defend the values and achievements represented by an open, democratic society. And, as Ms Bishop rightly pointed out, it is vital to collaborate with Muslim communities and others in civil society “to counter radical extremism from taking hold of our towns and cities”.

A key question is how extremism finds its recruits on the home front. Some see a sharp contrast between two recent Islamic State foot soldiers — Melbourne’s Neil Prakash being a high school dropout and misfit as opposed to Perth’s Tareq Kamleh with his privileged education as a medical doctor. Young men seen as “alienated” do count among jihadi recruits but alienation is a vague term and can be misused to suggest that open societies are to blame for those who betray them. Kamleh (allegedly a womaniser) and Prakash (a self-styled booty rapper) seem to share a contemptuous attitude to women. In any case, many Western jihadis come not from society’s margins but from the comfortable ranks of the educated middle class. Communism suffered a similar contradiction in that its ideology proved more attractive to the West’s intellectuals than to its supposedly oppressed workers.

The abrupt collapse of the Soviet system — and the unforgettable breaching of the Berlin Wall — took many observers by surprise. The CIA, for example, had over-estimated the health of the Soviet economy.

The common error in the West today

By contrast, the common error in the West today is to downplay the jihadist threat — to wish it away as some postcolonial malaise — but we should be vigilant to exploit whatever weakness it displays. For example, as Ms Bishop pointed out, Islamic State’s conquest of territory and its declaration of a caliphate is a two-edged sword; it makes it more vulnerable than the amorphous franchise that was al-Qai’da. Even so, we should not forget Professor Leahy’s advice: “Get ready for a long war.”