

Islamist extremism is the ideology that must be defeated

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Unsurprisingly, young Muslim men who are raised in Syria's Raqqa, Iraq's Mosul or Saudi Arabia's Medina are typically not alienated or ostracised for their Islamic faith or Arabic ethnicity. Yet thousands have become Islamist extremists, intent on killing Shiite Muslims, non-Muslims or random crowds in an effort to promote their absolutist, almost nihilist, creed of death and destruction. No one analysing the spread of this extremist Wahhabism — this rising tide of Islamist terrorism — across North Africa, the Middle East, the sub-Continent or South East Asia could seriously suggest social rejection or anti-Muslim sentiment in the suburbs of Western nations could possibly be a causative factor. This is why the words of Australia's Grand Mufti, Ibrahim Abu Mohamed, citing Islamophobia and counter-terrorism measures as causes of terrorism are not only dangerous and insensitive but clearly ridiculous. Greens leader Richard Di Natale talks of "building social cohesion" as one way to prevent terrorism. Yet it is that very cohesion that already exists here and, for the most part, in other western nations which the terrorists seek to destroy.

An exercise of deliberate delusion

While it stands to reason we should always work to prevent any level of alienation in our communities (all the more so if it is based on race or religion) we would be engaging in an exercise of deliberate delusion if we attempted to argue such social ills are the root cause of Islamist extremism. Disillusionment, especially among youth, is hardly new and is certainly not restricted to young Muslims in our society. Young men, whether or not they were born here and whether or not they belong to a range of other immigrant or religious cohorts, have not turned to murderous and suicidal terrorism as a way to express their angst. This is an ideological carcinoma endemic only to people in Muslim communities or converts to their religion. We can skirt around this unpalatable fact all we like — seek to ignore or deny it — but it will not change the reality.

It seems absurd that we need to be saying all this, yet again, 14 years after 9/11, 13 years after the first Bali bombings and almost a year since an Islamist extremist took hostages at gunpoint in Martin Place. But there seems to be a persistent sheepishness among world leaders, from Barack Obama down, to address the Islamist motivation at the core of the current global threat. Just because Mr Obama goes out of his way to avoid mentioning Islam or Muslims, and just because our own political leaders do the same (even Tony Abbott used "death cult" to avoid saying Islamic State), it doesn't stop the terrorists shouting "Allahu Akbar" as they kill innocents anywhere from Beirut to Boston, Mosul to Melbourne or Paris to Parramatta.

Muslim communities are crucial partners in combating the threat

To recognise the nature of our current terrorist challenge is not to demonise a religion or its followers. Muslim communities are terrorised and murdered by these same extremists and, obviously, are crucial partners in combating the threat. It is their religion's name that is used by the barbarians and they have a stake in eradicating the cancer. The extremist interpretation of Wahhabist Sunni Islam is the central ideological thread that must be countered. It dates back 300 years but has been on the rise in the Middle East since the formation of the Muslim Brotherhood more than 80 years ago. To this extent Islamic State — while powerful through the land and cities it holds and the inspiration its self-declared caliphate provides — is just one

of many Islamist organisations that must be countered. Whether it is Jemaah Islamiyah persisting in South East Asia, Boko Haram fostering chaos in Nigeria or the Taliban reasserting their terror in Afghanistan, the challenges are diverse and global. The terrorists are adherents to medieval practices whose paradoxical grasp of digital media allows them to spread their propaganda like never before. We cannot combat their bloodlust nor counter their message if we do not even recognise the ideology they spread.

Grievances used for propaganda

Revelations that a tiny fraction of the money spent on “countering violent extremism” actually deals with those who have been radicalised and that 199 passengers have been banned from Australian planes for security reasons in the past five months only emphasise the need for increased vigilance at home. More than 100 Australians are currently fighting for Islamic State in Iraq or Syria and 40 have already been killed, some as suicide bombers. We’ve had three domestic terror attacks that have killed three innocent people and three terrorists. And with 140 passports cancelled and ASIO running 400 high priority cases, we know the domestic threat persists. The motivating factor is not terrorism nor violent extremism, nor is it alienation, Islamophobia nor Western foreign policy. These are grievances used for propaganda and recruitment purposes. The core of the motivation is an Islamist extremist distortion of one of the world’s great faiths. This brutally intolerant ideology needs to be called out and defeated.