

The West needs to beat Islamism on the battlefield of ideas

By Frank Furedi, Spiked Online, 30 December 2015

This was the year when a growing section of the public began to regard the threat of homegrown terrorism as far more real than at any time since 9/11. In Europe, the *Charlie Hebdo* massacre in January stoked initial fears about the rising terror threat. These were heightened when two people were shot dead by an Islamist in Copenhagen, Denmark in mid-February. And the slaughter of 30 British tourists on holiday in Tunisia showed that jihadis viewed any kaffir as a target. But it was the scale of the murderous attack in Paris on 13 November that really frightened Europeans. For Americans, the murder of 14 people in San Bernardino, California, a few weeks after the Paris attacks, proved equally terrifying.

In the global scheme of things, a relatively small number of terrorist incidents in Europe and the US do not add up to a significant threat to society's way of life. But what makes them appear more menacing is that they seem to be linked to a wider global jihadist struggle making headway on the battlefields of Afghanistan, north Africa, Libya, Iraq and Syria. Western intervention on these battlefields has proved singularly ineffective. The only forces that have succeeded in containing and, on occasion, overwhelming ISIS have been the highly committed Kurdish militias and Iranian-led fighters in Iraq.

The situation on the battlefield of ideas is, if anything, of even greater concern. The willingness of thousands of young Western Muslims to travel to Syria and risk their lives for the radical jihadist cause shows how influential ISIS has become. Think of that photo of the three British Muslim teenage girls, clutching their bags as they prepared to board their flight on their way to Syria. This image captures something Western governments and societies are reluctant to acknowledge: namely, that many normal and idealistic Muslim teenagers are drawn towards a cultural outlook that loathes Western society and its values.

Losing the battle of ideas

What is truly significant about the high-profile terrorist incidents in Paris is the reaction of sections of the Muslim community. No doubt many Muslims were horrified by the massacres committed in the name of Islam. But some Muslim youths were more ambivalent.

This was clear in the aftermath of the *Charlie Hebdo* killings. In many of Paris's banlieues, there was little mourning for the victims. Numerous teachers in France reported that some immigrant children expressed deeply hostile sentiments towards the terrorists' victims. Others said some children refused to believe the official version of events. And many French teachers were at a loss to know how to react when many Muslim children refused to respect the minute's silence for the dead.

The reaction of many young Muslim schoolchildren to the *Charlie Hebdo* incident is quite consistent with the research into public attitudes towards ISIS. A poll of over 2,000 British adults, conducted by ICM in July, showed that nine per cent of respondents viewed ISIS in a positive light; three per cent held a 'very favourable view' of ISIS; and six per cent held a 'somewhat positive view'. Despite the numerous atrocities reported in the media, the proportion of those with a positive view of ISIS has increased by two percentage points since last year.

Public-opinion polls are always difficult to interpret. But what the ICM poll suggests is that a significant minority of British Muslims may be sympathetic to some of ISIS's ideals. The majority of those are likely to be passive sympathisers with no desire to journey to Syria. However, what their sympathies signify is that radical jihadist ideas have gained a foothold in British society. At the very least, the poll suggests a sizeable group of British Muslims expresses its everyday frustrations with the world, and particularly the West, through a favourable attitude towards ISIS.

Elsewhere, researchers investigating support in France and Spain for ISIS **reported:**

'Among young people in the hovels and grim housing projects of the Paris banlieues, we found fairly wide tolerance or support for ISIS's values, and even for the brutal actions carried out in their name. In Spain, among a large population sample, we found little willingness to fight in order to defend democratic values against onslaught.'

At present, the willingness actively to fight for ISIS is confined to a tiny minority. But the fact that there is a significant body of *passive* support is ominous.

Nowhere is this more evident than in the way 9/11 is now perceived and understood by many sections of European society. Many members of Muslim communities readily believe 9/11 conspiracy theories, especially the idea that it was all a Jewish plot. Claims about the world made by the Islamic State and other similar groups exercise a far greater influence today than they did three or four years ago. There are now far more people living in Europe who silently applaud or approve of an event like the Paris attacks.

The growing influence of radical Islamic sentiments is paralleled by a growing moral and political disorientation within European public life. European society is finding it very difficult to respond to what has now become a war against its way of life. This is especially clear in education, where numerous teachers have said how tough it is to discuss such 'controversial' subjects as 9/11 or the Holocaust in the classroom. Some teachers avoid these topics altogether.

Both France and Britain are failing to socialise a significant section of young people. Many of these youngsters embrace an Islamist counter-narrative that calls into question Western

Enlightenment values and celebrates jihadist identity politics. One of the aims of the Paris attacks is to turn these anti-Western sentiments into a more active force in European society.

For a minority of young people, radical jihadism provides an outlet for their idealism. It also offers a coherent and edgy identity, a variant of the 'cool' narrative used by other online subcultures. The behaviour of young people who are attracted to jihadist websites is not all that different to the numerous non-Muslim Westerners who visit nihilistic websites and become fascinated by destructive themes and images. It just so happens that the destructive images and themes on jihadist websites are also linked to a destructive political cause.

Perils of multi-moralism

Why are so many young Muslims hostile to the society into which they were born? Many blame anti-Muslim prejudice, economic deprivation or the conflict in the Middle East. It may well be the case that such issues have caused bitterness in Muslim communities. But Muslims are not the only group to have experienced prejudice or economic deprivation. One distinctive feature of European Muslim subcultures is that they are relatively self-sufficient and have a strong impulse to maintain a clear boundary between themselves and others.

Sociological research shows that the way that members of a subculture talk to one another and the views they hold are often different to the outlook of the rest of society. That is true for radical Muslims, as it is for other groups. Muslim subcultures possess their own pool of knowledge – that is, ideas and sentiments that are distinct to such cultures. Unfortunately, distinctive, culturally defined pools of knowledge create a fertile terrain for the construction and circulation of disturbing views and rumours. In such circumstances, rumours about a Jewish or American conspiracy can swiftly mutate into a taken-for-granted fact. Worse still, such 'facts' and beliefs are rarely tested in the wider public sphere and can therefore turn into deeply ingrained prejudices.

The absence of debate about the sensitive issues that divide Muslim subcultures from other sections of society is, in part, an inadvertent consequence of the policies of multiculturalism. Multiculturalism has failed to develop a moral and cultural outlook to which all sections of society can sign up. Instead it has encouraged cultural segmentation where, in effect, we now have a system of multi-values: numerous values existing side by side, none of them being properly discussed or challenged. That is why the image of a beheading can appear to some as an inspiration and to others as unspeakably horrendous. Such morally polarised reactions to the same event are the outcome of a society in which cultural segmentation prevails.

Years of lost opportunities

At first sight, it is difficult to account for the growing influence of radical jihadist sentiments among young Muslims living in Western societies. In the aftermath of the 2001 riots in

Oldham, in the north west of England, I talked to Muslim students about their impression of life in Britain. Most of them spoke in a language that conveyed a strong sense of bitterness and, in some cases, hatred. In the early 2000s, however, their response was couched in a language of disappointment and disillusionment. Their criticism was not directed at ‘manmade law’ or democracy, but at the failure of society to live up to its promises.

Since 2001, the attitudes of some young Muslims towards their society have hardened and altered in character. Some no longer want society to accommodate their grievances; they want to inhabit a different moral universe. There are many reasons for this radical shift in attitude. For many Muslims, the military and terrorist success of jihadist forces has been emboldening. Stories about how an individual or a couple of ‘fighters’ – such as the Boston bombers – terrified the US appeal to some young men and women in search of a hero.

However, the most powerful driver of jihadist influence in the West is the culture of victimhood. In recent decades, the victim has acquired a quasi-sacred status. Competitive claims-making about victimisation has become widespread. Little wonder, then, that one of the most powerful themes promoted in radical jihadist propaganda is the representation of Islam as the universal victim of Western aggression. Jihadists frame virtually every dimension of local and global misfortune afflicting Muslims as the outcome of a permanent war waged by Western crusaders.

The jihadist media present Muslims as eternal victims. From this standpoint, any behaviour that does not accord with the worldview of jihadist political theology can be represented as an act of victimisation – an insult to Islam. In such circumstances, the reaction to a provocation is legitimised both by jihadist ideology and the Western cult of the victim. Even ISIS’s claim to recover Islam’s golden age is shot through, as Edward Said put it, with the ‘sanctimonious piety of historical or cultural victimhood’. Arguably, the jihadists travelling to Syria are as much a product of contemporary Western global culture, within which victimhood is sanctified, as they are of traditional Islam.

However, jihadists are not simply reacting against the Western way of life. In recent years, the likes of ISIS have appealed to the idealism of many young people. What Westerners perceive as a barbaric, medieval institution, some young people perceive as a movement that offers them a sense of purpose and meaning. That the Caliphate is now perceived in such positive light by some young Muslims is an indictment of the inability of Western society to inspire people with its own vision of the world.

Until now, Western governments, the media and intellectuals have more or less opted out of the battle of ideas. Efforts at preventing radicalisation have proved singularly ineffective because they are by definition reactive. What is required is not a reaction to the latest threat, but a moral and intellectual assertion of values that are worth fighting for.

That is the real challenge facing secular democracies: to gain popular support for the values of the Enlightenment and an open society. Western society needs to provide a positive account of itself, and to take its own ideals far more seriously than it does at present. And Western intellectuals, who, at the moment, are conspicuously silent on this matter, need to take their vocation and public role far more seriously. As the experience of the past 15 years shows, it is the failure to advance any vision worth supporting that has helped radical jihadists gain a measure of moral authority over sections of Muslim youth.

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