Safeguarding the "grey zone"

For free, open and diverse societies

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In an article first published shortly after the 13 November Paris terrorist attacks, investigative journalist Nafeez Ahmed addresses the twisted logic of extremist ideologies; and how to break the continuum of violence that such ideologies seek to perpetuate.

At the end of last year, as politicians and pundits cheered on coalition airstrikes in Syria, I wrote this:

The war on ISIS has already been lost. As regional instability escalates predictably as a direct consequence of the US-UK led non-strategy, ISIS will become stronger, and reactionary terrorist violence against western targets will proliferate – in turn fuelling reactionary and militant responses from western foreign policy establishments.

Less than a year later, 130 people were confirmed dead, and 352 injured, from terrorist attacks in Paris.

“Islamic State” (ISIS) acolytes conducted a sophisticated operation involving three coordinated teams, striking multiple targets simultaneously, demonstrating a considerable degree of training and planning.

Yet the airstrikes that began last year had been justified by our leaders precisely on the pretext that they would be necessary to prevent ISIS from striking the West.

Although the attacks appear to have been triggered by the drone strike against “Jihadi John”, their sophistication reveals that preparations for the operation had been going on for months, at least.

ISIS, in other words, activated sleeper cells with a longstanding presence in France.
But the attacks in Paris must not be viewed in isolation.

So far, world governments have responded as if the ISIS attack came entirely out of the blue, “an act of war” in Hollande’s words, targeted “against France, against the values that we defend everywhere in the world, against what we are: a free country that means something to the whole planet”.

While there is truth to Hollande’s words, they are also misleading. The Paris attacks have occurred on the tail-end of an escalating series of massacres.

On 22 May, an ISIS militant blew himself up at a mosque in Qatif, Saudi Arabia, killing 21 people.

On 20 July, a female suicide bomber killed 31 students in Suruc, a Turkish city close to the Syrian border.

On 13 August, an ISIS bomb detonated at a farmers’ market in an impoverished district of Baghdad killed 80 people, and wounded over 200.

On 2 September, an ISIS bombing killed 28 people and wounded 75 at a mosque in northern Sanaa, the capital of Yemen.

Another suicide bomb attack at Sanaa’s al-Balili mosque three weeks later took the lives of at least 25 people, and injured over 36.

On 10 October, ISIS suicide bombers in the Turkish capital, Ankara, killed 102, and wounded 400.

The night before the attacks on Paris, ISIS suicide bombers slaughtered 43 people in Beirut, and injured 250.

The following morning, an ISIS suicide bomber killed at least 19 people and injured 41 at a funeral in Baghdad.

Then, that evening, ISIS militants coordinated the attacks on Paris.

ISIS’s choice of targets reveal a range of ideological motives – sectarian targeting of minorities like Shi’as, Kurds and Yazidis; striking in the heart of Muslim regimes that have joined the anti-ISIS coalition; as well as demonstrating the punitive consequences of attacking ISIS to western publics by hitting them at their most vulnerable, in bars, restaurants and music venues.

The goal, of course, is to inflict trauma, fear, paranoia, suspicion, panic and terror – but there is a particularly twisted logic as part of this continuum of violence, which is to draw the western world into an apocalyptic civilizational Armageddon with “Islam”.

ISIS recognizes that it has only marginal support amongst Muslims around the world. The only way it can accelerate recruitment and strengthen its territorial ambitions is twofold: firstly, demonstrating to Islamist jihadist networks that there is now only one credible
terror game in town capable of pulling off spectacular terrorist attacks in the heart of the West and, secondly, by deteriorating conditions of life for Muslims all over the world to draw them into joining or supporting ISIS.

Both these goals depend on two constructs: the “crusader” civilization of the “kuffar” (disbelievers) pitted against the authentic “Islamic” utopia of ISIS.

In their own literature shortly after the Charlie Hebdo attacks, ISIS shamelessly drew on the late Osama bin Laden’s endorsement of the words of President George W. Bush, to justify this apocalyptic vision: “The world today is divided into two camps. Bush spoke the truth when he said, ‘either you are with us or you are with the terrorists’. Meaning either you are with the crusade or you are with Islam.”

Continuing in its English-language magazine, Dabiq, ISIS forecasted the “extinction” of the “grey zone” between these two camps:

One of the first matters renounced by the hypocrites abandoning the grayzone and fleeing to the camp of apostasy and kufr after the operations in Paris is the clear-cut obligation to kill those who mock the Messenger [Muhammad]. The evidences [religious justification based on Islamic sources] for this issue are so abundant and clear, and yet some apostates, who abandoned the grayzone, claimed that the operations in Paris contradicted the teachings of Islam! […] There is no doubt that such deeds are apostasy, that those who publicly call to such deeds in the name of Islam and scholarship are from the du’at (callers) to apostasy, and that there is great reward awaiting the Muslim in the Hereafter if he kills these apostate imams...

The strategy behind this call to “kill” apostate Muslims who reject ISIS is also laid out candidly: to terrorize western countries into genocidal violence against their own Muslim populations:

The Muslims in the West will quickly find themselves between one of two choices, they either apostatize and adopt the kufri [infidel] religion propagated by Bush, Obama, Blair, Cameron, Sarkozy, and Hollande in the name of Islam so as to live amongst the kuffar [infidels] without hardship, or they perform hijrah [emigrate] to the Islamic State and thereby escape persecution from the crusader governments and citizens. [...] Muslims in the crusader countries will find themselves driven to abandon their homes for a place to live in the Khilafah, as the crusaders increase persecution against Muslims living in Western lands so as to force them into a tolerable sect of apostasy in the name of “Islam” before forcing them into blatant Christianity and democracy.

While Hollande’s reactionary declaration of war is understandable, it falls into the ideological trap laid by ISIS. France’s new state of emergency grants the government extraordinary powers that effectively put an end to democratic accountability, and give law-enforcement and security agencies unaccountable authority to run amok.
This includes being able to enforce curfews, close public spaces, and even exert control of media. Authorities can now “prohibit passage of vehicles or people”, establish “protection or security zones, where people’s presence is regulated”, exclude from a public space “any person seeking to obstruct, in any way, the actions of the public authorities”, and detain anyone in their homes “whose activity appears dangerous for public security and order”.

The problem is in the open-ended way such vague precepts can be interpreted and executed. Obstructing “in any way” the actions of the state, or activity that “appears dangerous” for “security and order” could, crucially, be used to shut down public criticisms of the French government’s response to the Paris attacks.

Dissent against past or present French foreign and counter-terror policies can easily be construed as “dangerous” or obstructive to those policies. The language also perpetuates the Bush-era “with us or against us” mantra, which ISIS sees as central to its agenda of fracturing what it calls the “grey zone”.

Such a sweeping approach to countering “extremism” – interpreted essentially as any ideological threat to the state – has already fuelled social polarization in Britain, where the “Prevent” duty, for instance, is being used to police the thoughts of children as young as three years old.

Leaked government training documents reveal that the British government’s Prevent programme views political activism in general as a potential “extremist” threat to the state’s hegemonic construct of “British values”, including environmental, animal rights and anti-nuclear campaigning. These measures are already going some way to fulfil ISIS’s objective of eroding the “grey zone” in the West.

According to Yahya Birt, an academic at the University of Leeds who is part of #EducationNotSurveillance – a national network of parents, teachers, educationalists, activists and academics – cases of unwarranted targeting of Muslim students under the Prevent duty are becoming legion.

“Muslim students are being profiled disproportionately under the government’s mandatory programme simply for displaying an interest in their own faith, or for holding political opinions critical of government foreign policy”, Birt told me. “Far from upholding democratic values, the programme is eroding them, and making perfectly normal, decent British Muslim citizens feel that they are under siege”.

**Documented cases** include a fifteen-year-old Muslim boy being questioned by police officers on his views about ISIS simply for wearing a “Free Palestine” badge to school and handing out leaflets calling for sanctions on Israel. The officers told him that he had “terrorist-like beliefs”, and warned him against speaking about his views in school. Another Muslim child was questioned after a classroom lesson about ISIS in which he aired his support for environmental activism.

In the US and France, **similar programmes** are also underway.
Neoconservatives on both sides of the Atlantic, however, want more. David Frum, a former Bush speechwriter turned senior editor at the *Atlantic*, took to Twitter to demand the forcible mass deportation of Arabs who had migrated to Europe over the past two years. In Britain, Douglas Murray, a director at the Henry Jackson Society in London, told his fellow guests on BBC Sunday Morning Live that “any percentage of Muslims you like” in Britain are ISIS sympathisers.

In a blog in the *Spectator* the day before, he had claimed: “Islam is not a peaceful religion. No religion is, but Islam is especially not.” Though acknowledging that there are “many peaceful verses in the Quran which – luckily for us – the majority of Muslims live by”. Islam, he went on, is “by no means, only a religion of peace” and “this is the verifiable truth based on the texts”.

Murray’s conception of “Us”, it seems, does not include “Them”, “Muslims” whom, he believes, are not ISIS suicide bombers purely because they follow their faith selectively. Islamic theologians who specialize in those very texts unanimously disagree with Murray. But that matters not, for Murray has previously endorsed the very same policies of forced mass expulsion of European Muslims advocated by Frum – not entirely surprising given that Murray praises Frum profusely in his book, *Neoconservativism: Why We Need It* (2006).

Pundits like Frum and Murray provide a critically powerful PR service for ISIS. Parading themselves as liberals seeking to defend western civilisation, they call for precisely what ISIS wants: the equation of “Islam” with the “Islamic State”; the impossibility of “Islam” co-existing peacefully with “the West”; the inherent threat posed by Muslims residing in the west due to their faith; and the need to therefore discriminate against and persecute Muslims in particular.

This sort of far-right sympathizing subsists in direct symbiosis with ISIS’s divisive ideology. It also serves to obscure the deeper more uncomfortable reality that ISIS has emerged and thrived precisely in the context of the “war on terror”.

When Hollande declared that the Paris massacre constituted an “act of war”, he appeared to have forgotten that we have been engaged in perpetual war for the last decade and a half, with no end in sight.

The kneejerk relapse to the familiar is understandable – more surveillance, more airstrikes, more thought-policing. Yet it is merely a reversion to what we think we know, rather than a recognition that what we think we know has clearly failed.

It is psychologically easier to frame the Paris attacks as even further evidence of the unfathomable evil of “Them”, which must be even more ruthlessly flushed out by “Us”. But the truth staring us in the face is that the Paris attacks offer incontrovertible proof that all our efforts at ruthlessly flushing out terror through mass surveillance, drone strikes, air strikes, ground troops, torture, rendition, the Prevent agenda, and so on and so forth, have produced the opposite result.

What we really need is a fundamental re-assessment of everything we have done since 9/11, a full-on, formal international public inquiry into the abject failure of the “war on terror”. The facts, which most pundits and politicians continue to avoid mentioning,
speak for themselves. We have spent well over **five trillion dollars** on waging the “war on terror”, not just in Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan, but across the Middle East and central Asia. Over that period, US State Department data shows that terror attacks have skyrocketed by 6500 percent, while the number of casualties from terror attacks has increased by 4500 percent.

Journalist Paul Gottinger, who **analysed the data**, noted that spikes in these figures coincided with military intervention: “... from 2007 to 2011 almost half of all the world’s terror took place in Iraq or Afghanistan – two countries being occupied by the US at the time.” And in 2014, he found, “74 percent of all terror-related casualties occurred in Iraq, Nigeria, Afghanistan, Pakistan, or Syria. Of these five, only Nigeria did not experience either US air strikes or a military occupation in that year.”

Simultaneously, even as the US-led anti-ISIS coalition has accelerated attacks on the group in Iraq and Syria, the group has only grown in power. Latest figures **suggest** the group now has some 80,000 fighters at least, up from last year’s **estimates** of around 20,000 to 31,500.

It would be naive in the extreme, then, to pretend that the rise of ISIS has nothing to do with the string of failed or failing states that have been wrought in the region in the aftermath of such interventions, in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya and Syria.

But more than that, there is the far more uncomfortable question of the regional geopolitics that continues to feed ISIS under the nose of coalition airstrikes.

The leading players in the anti-ISIS coalition, many of whom are Muslim regimes considered to be staunch allies of the west, have provided billions of dollars of funding and military support to the most extreme Islamist militants in Syria.

Saudi Arabia, Qatar, the UAE, Kuwait and Turkey played lead roles in funnelling support to groups affiliated with al-Qaeda, including the ISIS precursors al-Qaeda in Iraq and al-Qaeda in Syria (Jabhat al-Nusra), in their western-backed bid to oust Bashir al-Assad.

Due to porous links between some Free Syrian Army (FSA) rebels, other Islamist groups like al-Nusra and Ahrar al-Sham, and ISIS, there have been prolific weapons transfers from “moderate” to Islamist militant groups, to the extent that the German journalist Jurgen Todenofer, who spent 10 days inside the Islamic State, **reported** last year that ISIS is being “indirectly” armed by the west: “They buy the weapons that we give to the Free Syrian Army, so they get western weapons – they get French weapons... I saw German weapons, I saw American weapons.”

Meanwhile, it is not even clear whether our own allies in the anti-ISIS coalition have stopped funding the terror entity. In his **testimony** before the Senate Armed Services Committee in September 2014, General Martin Dempsey, then chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, was asked by Senator Lindsay Graham whether he knew of “any major Arab ally that embraces ISIL”. General Dempsey replied: “I know major Arab allies who fund them.”

Senator Graham, clearly taken aback by the blunt response, quickly attempted to play
down the damning implications: “they were tried [sic] to beat Assad. I think they realise the folly of their ways. Let’s don’t [sic] taint the Mideast unfairly.”

Never mind that the most senior US military official confirms the Pentagon’s full awareness that its own allies in the anti-ISIS coalition are simultaneously “funding” ISIS while purportedly bombing the group.

Such linkages between our geopolitical allies and the terrorists we are purportedly fighting in Iraq-Syria came to the fore when it emerged that Syrian passports discovered near the bodies of two of the suspected Paris attackers were fake. Police sources in France had told Channel 4 News that the passports were likely forged in Turkey.

French officials now concede that one of the suicide bombers, Omar Ismail Mostefai had been on a “watch list” as a “potential security threat” in 2010, and was known to have links with “radical Islam”. But according to a Turkish official, Turkish intelligence had tipped off French authorities “twice” about Mostefai before the Paris attacks.

Earlier this year, the Turkish daily *Today's Zaman* reported that “more than 100,000 fake Turkish passports” had been given to ISIS. Erdogan’s government, the newspaper added, “has been accused of supporting the terrorist organization by turning a blind eye to its militants crossing the border and even buying its oil... Based on a 2014 report, Sezgin Tanrikulu, deputy chairman of the main opposition Republican People’s Party (CHP) said that ISIL terrorists fighting in Syria have also been claimed to have been treated in hospitals in Turkey.”

But it is far worse than that. A senior western official familiar with a large cache of intelligence obtained this summer told *The Guardian* that “direct dealings between Turkish officials and ranking ISIS members was now “undeniable”.

The same official confirmed that Turkey is not just supporting ISIS, but also other jihadist groups, including Ahrar al-Sham and Jabhat al-Nusra, al-Qaeda’s affiliate in Syria. “The distinctions they draw [with other opposition groups] are thin indeed”, said the official. “There is no doubt at all that they militarily cooperate with both”.

Turkey has played a key role in facilitating the life-blood of ISIS’s expansion: black market oil sales. Senior political and intelligence sources in Turkey, Iraq, and the Kurdistan Regional Government confirm that Turkish authorities have actively facilitated ISIS oil sales through the country.

ISIS, in other words, is state-sponsored – indeed, sponsored by purportedly western-friendly regimes in the Muslim world who are integral to the anti-ISIS coalition. Turkey, for instance, plays a central role in both the CIA and Pentagon-run rebel training and assistance programmes.

To what extent, then, did our unquestionable geopolitical alliance with Turkey, our unwavering commitment to empowering allies like Turkey to fund Islamist militants of their choice in Syria, contribute to the freedom of movement those militants used to execute the Paris operation?
All this calls for a complete re-think of our approach to terrorism. We require, urgently, an international public inquiry into the colossal failure of the strategies deployed in the "war on terror".

How has over five trillion dollars succeeded only in permitting an extremist terror-state, to conquer a third of Iraq and Syria, while carrying out a series of assaults on cities across the region and in the heart of Europe?

The re-assessment must accompany concrete measures, now.

First and foremost, our alliances with terror-sponsoring dictatorships across the Muslim world must end. All the talk of making difficult decisions is meaningless if we would rather sacrifice civil liberties instead of sacrificing profit-oriented investments in brutal autocracies like Saudi Arabia, which have exploited western dependence on its oil resources to export Islamist extremism around the world.

Addressing those alliances means taking decisive action to enforce punitive measures in terms of the financing of Islamist militants, the facilitation of black-market ISIS oil sales, and the export of narrow extremist ideologies. Without this, military experts can give as much lip-service to “draining the swamp” as they like – it means nothing if we think draining it means using a few buckets to fling out the mud while our allies pour gallons back in.

Secondly, in Syria, efforts to find a political resolution to the conflict must ramp up. So far, neither the US nor Russia, driven by their own narrow geopolitical concerns, have done very much to destroy ISIS strongholds. The gung-ho entry of Russia into the conflict has only served to unify the most extreme jihadists and vindicate ISIS’s victim-bating claim to be a “David” fighting the “Goliath” of a homogenous “kafir” (infidel) crusader-axis.

Every military escalation has been followed by a further escalation, because ISIS itself was incubated in the militarized nightmare of occupied Iraq and Assad-bombed Syria.

Thirdly, and relatedly, all military support to all actors in the Syria conflict must end. Western powers can pressurize their Gulf and Turkish state allies to end support to rebel groups, which is now so out of control that there is no longer any prospect of preventing such support from being diverted to ISIS; while Russia and Iran can withdraw their aid to Assad’s bankrupt regime. If Russia and France genuinely wish to avoid further blowback against their own citizens, they would throw their weight behind such measures with a view to force regional actors to come to the negotiating table.

Fourthly, it must be recognized that contrary to the exhortations of fanatics like Douglas Murray, talk of “solidarity” is not merely empty sloganeering. The imperative now is for citizens around the world to work together to safeguard what ISIS calls the “grey zone” – the arena of co-existence where people of all faith and none remain unified on the simple principles of our common humanity. Despite the protestations of extremists, the reality is that the vast majority of secular humanists and religious believers accept and embrace this heritage of mutual acceptance.

But safeguarding the “grey zone” means more than bandying about the word “solidarity”
- it means enacting citizen-solidarity by firmly rejecting efforts by both ISIS and the far-right to exploit terrorism as a way to transform our societies into militarized police-states where dissent is demonized, the Other is feared, and mutual paranoia is the name of the game. That, in turn, means working together to advance and innovate the institutions, checks and balances, and accountability necessary to maintain and improve the framework of free, open and diverse societies.

It is not just ISIS that would benefit from a dangerous shift to the contrary.

Incumbent political elites keen to avoid accountability for a decade and a half of failure will use heightened public anxiety to push through more of the same. They will seek to avoid hard questions about past failures, while casting suspicion everywhere except the state itself, with a view to continue business-as-usual. And in similar vein, the military-industrial complex, whose profits have come to depend symbiotically on perpetual war, wants to avoid awkward questions about lack of transparency and corrupt relationships with governments. They would much rather keep the trillion-dollar gravy train flowing out of the public purse.

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