

Fearsome threats

At least 129 people have died after coordinated attacks on several venues in Paris. President Hollande has declared a state of emergency, imposed border controls and called out hundreds of troops.

ISIS has proudly taken responsibility for the atrocity. In its communiqué it uttered [fearsome threats](#):

Let France and those who walk in its path know that they will remain on the top of the list of targets of the Islamic State, and that the smell of death will never leave their noses as long as they lead the convoy of the Crusader campaign, and dare to curse our Prophet, Allah's peace and blessings be upon him, and are proud of fighting Islam in France and striking the Muslims in the land of the Caliphate with their planes, which did not help them at all in the streets of Paris and its rotten alleys. This attack is the first of the storm and a warning to those who wish to learn.

Not to be outdone, President François Hollande uttered his own fearsome threats: France would be “merciless” in responding to “the barbarians of ISIS”. Yesterday ten French fighters bombed targets in the ISIS capital of Raqqa, in Syria.

Interior Minister Bernard Cazeneuve hit [an even more ferocious note](#):

The riposte will be on a huge scale, it will be total. anyone who attacks the Republic, then the Republic will be merciless towards them and their accomplices. Terrorists will never destroy the Republic, because the Republic will destroy them.

The aftermath of November 13 will test the mettle of France – as it would any nation. Hostility towards the large Muslim population will grow, more French Muslims may become

radicalised, refugees will be unwelcome, and the government could be provoked into putting boots on the ground in the heartland of ISIS.

Terrorism depersonalises people, turning innocent men and women into faceless, inhuman enemies.

The Islamic creed is not necessarily violent – hundreds of millions of Muslims live peaceful lives and are horrified by events like this. Most of the people killed by ISIS have been Muslims. But it seems undeniable that within Islam there is a recessive gene for savagery which uses Allah as an ideological pretext for bloodlust. All too often there have been Muslim movements which condone the murderous rage which characterises ISIS.

To steel young men to the horror of slaughter, ISIS teaches them to see all of their victims as non-persons – in this case “crusaders” living in a city which was “the capital of prostitution and obscenity”.

The temptation for France – and other Western nations – will be to depersonalise the jihadis. The West already finds it difficult to empathise with the agonies of distant and darker people. In Lebanon, for instance, two suicide bombers blew themselves up last Thursday in a southern suburb of Beirut, killing 43 and wounding hundreds. It was just a flicker in the newspapers.

“When my people died, no country bothered to light up its landmarks in the colors of their flag,” [Elie Fares, a Lebanese doctor, complained on his blog](#). “When my people died, they did not send the world into mourning. Their death was but an irrelevant fleck along the international news cycle, something that happens in those parts of the world.”

To say nothing of Nigeria’s bloody fight with Boko Haram, where far more people have been butchered.

Western nations may be more orderly, efficient and prosperous, but they, too, can succumb to the temptation to depersonalise and demonise their foes.

The post-Christian West has its own recessive gene for savagery. From its roots in the Judaeo-Christian tradition it inherited the idea of universe which was intelligible because it participated in the divine reason. Christian reason became a powerful tool for understanding the universe, thus underpinning the development of science. As long as the West believed in God, morality limited possible applications of increasingly powerful technology.

Reason without God was dangerous. Men saw other men not as reflections of their Maker, but as cannon fodder. After the Enlightenment, then, came the Battle of the Somme, Auschwitz, the Gulag, Hiroshima and napalmed villages in Vietnam. When governments lost sight of the divine spark they hurled their enemies – and even their own citizens – into gigantic mincing machines. These may have been more detached and antiseptic than the knives of the jihadis, but they were far more lethal.

Obviously France must respond forcefully to this atrocity, but without losing its *liberté, égalité, et fraternité* by lapsing into the very barbarism it wants to obliterate.

It will be difficult to resist the temptation.

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