

Is ISIS an 'existential threat'?

What is the greatest existential threat to world security? The Islamic State?

This month, yes. But back in July, the incoming chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff told a Congressional committee that it was Russia. "If you want to talk about a nation that could pose an existential threat to the United States, I'd have to point to Russia. And if you look at their behavior, it's nothing short of alarming," [said Marine General Joseph Dunford](#).

And what about China? And North Korea? Both of them have been described as existential threats to the West.

Western civilisation is always facing "existential threats" ranging from climate change to asteroids to a global pandemic to artificial intelligence to nuclear warfare. The University of Cambridge has a well-funded [Centre for the Study of Existential Risk](#) to alert people to the dangers of new technologies. We seem to be hard-wired to turn small disasters into existential risks. Perhaps that is why zombie films and other dystopian dramas are so popular.

So it's not cowardice or naiveté to heed the Obama Administration's call not to panic about the Islamic State after its Friday the 13th atrocities in Paris. "They're a bunch of killers with good social media," [President Obama said yesterday](#). They are "dangerous," but "Our way of life is stronger. We have more to offer." And Vice-President [Joe Biden has insisted](#): "ISIS is no existential threat to the United States of America."

However, there is an ominous precedent for these fears. Within a hundred years after the death of Mohammed, Muslim armies

overran the Middle East, North Africa and Spain, obliterating Christianity from countries where it had flourished for centuries. It took 700 years for a resurgent Christian kingdoms to expel Islam from Spain. That left a scar on the Western psyche which still aches.

Could this happen again?

Not everyone agrees with Obama's assessment. [John Lloyd](#), an eminent journalism academic at the University of Oxford, recently wrote: "This, I think, adds up to war: and an existential threat. A threat to our existence, our way of life." He quotes the former head of British armed forces from 2010 to 2013, General David Richards. Earlier this year he declared that the threat is existential and "that we need to approach this issue of Muslim extremism as we might approach World War II back in the 1930s."

France's best-known philosopher, Bernard-Henri Lévy, also seems to think so. In a recent newspaper column he backed up the French President's call for war on Islamic terrorists. A war, says Lévy in passionate rhetoric reminiscent of the early days of World War I, waged "without truce or mercy".

Dare to utter the terrible word "war," a word that the democracies try to push out of the range of hearing, beyond the bounds of their imagination, their symbolic system, and their reality. This aversion to war is their mission, their distinguishing trait, and their crowning glory, but it is also their weakness.

Lévy wants Western countries to support air strikes with boots on the ground and suggests that to think otherwise is evasive and cowardly:

What is it about this war that the America of Barack Obama, at least for the moment, seems not to really want to win? I do not know the answer. But I know where the key lies. And I

know the alternative to using the key: No boots on their ground means more blood on ours.

If we are not going to give into panic and name-calling, we need to distinguish the three wars implied in this these doom-laden words.

The war in the Middle East. There ISIS is a serious threat to the sovereignty of Iraq and Syria, where it already controls significant areas. [Lebanon is also at risk](#). ISIS has already begun a campaign against the only country in the Middle East with a substantial Christian minority. If its army were to sweep through, the Mediterranean would turn red with the blood of Christians and Shias.

What is needed to win this war is not so much military might as subtle diplomacy to secure the cooperation of Turkey, Russia, Iraq, the Kurds, Assad's Syria, Iran, Hezbollah, Israel, the Arab states, the United States, France and other Western nations. But the more atrocities ISIS commits in other countries, the more motivated the diplomats will become. The Islamic State can be crushed, although it will almost certainly survive as a terrorist network.

The greatest danger is that it might get its hands on weapons of mass destruction. This is possible, but if Saddam Hussein failed to obtain them with all the resources at his disposal, will ISIS?

The war of terror. Western Europe has experience in controlling terrorists. Through a combination of diplomacy and force by the United Kingdom, the IRA is no longer a threat. Spain has crushed ETA, Italy the Red Brigades, Germany the Baader-Meinhof Group, France the OAS. The United States, another target for ISIS, has to expect some terrorist acts, but it's impossible to imagine that American security agencies will fail to eventually uproot and destroy terror networks.

The long-term war of ideologies. Again, it's impossible to imagine that Western Europe will suddenly convert to Islam, let alone the repulsive sect represented by the Islamic state. Violence and extremism will attract some young Muslims – and even some young converts – but most people will be repelled.

On the contrary, the immediate danger to political freedom is that democratic governments will resort to oppressive schemes like the one proposed by US presidential candidate [Donald Trump](#), to register all Muslims. [Lévy suggested](#) internment camps, like those set up in World War II Britain for Fascists and German sympathisers.

But the barbaric attacks in Paris do expose a serious weakness in the Western response. Politicians everywhere denounced them – but as an assault on “our way of life”: shopping, sport, dining out, concerts, the whole package of Western freedom to enjoy a consumer society. “What would our country be without its cafes, concerts, sport events, museums?” President Hollande said, urging his countrymen to return to their bistros. “Our duty is to get on with our lives.”

But is entertainment all that the West has to offer?

Once upon a time, to be “Western” implied a commitment to transcendent values. For those who have remained loyal to Christianity and Judaism, it meant faith in their religious values and democracy and freedom. For the Enlightenment legatees of that tradition, it meant just democracy and freedom. But for both it meant a commitment to defend and die for a cause bigger than the self.

The contemporary West, however, is far more self-centred and sceptical. The most powerful social movements are campaigns to live out one's own sexuality and choose one's own death. It's hard to think of anything more self-absorbed. Intellectually, there is a loss of faith in the austere and commanding power of truth.

While the Islamic State is unlikely to topple governments and establish a caliphate in Paris any time soon, this intellectual vacuum will eventually be filled by some transcendent belief. It could possibly be Islam; it could be a resurgent Christianity; it could be an as-yet unknown toxic ideology.

But one thing is sure. People are not going to die for the right to eat in their favourite bistros.

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