Foreign & Commonwealth Office (UK)

How Global Britain is helping to win the struggle against Islamist terror

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When in the course of a prolonged and vicious struggle you eventually record a success, then it is essential – with due humility and caution – to celebrate that success. So I draw your attention once again to the defeat of Daesh in Raqqa, and the victory of the 74-member coalition – in which the UK played a proud part.

It was 3 years ago that Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi stood forth in the pulpit of Mosul's biggest mosque and vowed to "conquer Rome" and "own the world". At one stage his domain had 10 million inhabitants, suffering under what may be remembered as one of the most depraved regimes in history.

They picked on the innocent. They hurled gays from rooftops. They enslaved women and children. They used the town square to crucify and behead anyone who dared oppose moral codes that I would call mediaeval if that were not an insult to the comparative civility of the Middle Ages.

And when they made their last stand in the football stadium in Raqqa, it may not surprise you that they fully lived down to expectations. They did not fight like lions, or die wrapped in their sinister black flag. They put up their hands and allowed themselves to be driven away in white buses.

And it is a pleasing irony that in the end they were out-shot, out-fought and out-generalled by a force that contained significant numbers of female Kurdish soldiers, the very women whose freedom they regarded as a Western abomination, and most of the fighters who inflicted this defeat were Sunni Muslims – the very people who Daesh purported to represent.

We should hail the fall of Raqqa and Mosul; because 96% of the so-called 'caliphate' is now gone, along with their pompous pretensions to statehood. Al-Baghdadi is a fugitive.

We have helped to disable the machine that drew in recruits from across the world, from Luton to Mindanao. They no longer have the land for training camps or a tortured population to plunder and tax.

We should offer ourselves this limited congratulation: that we have prevented a terrorist group from controlling territory in the Middle East.

And yet we know that we have not destroyed Daesh: not in Iraq, not yet in Syria, and certainly not across the world. We may have temporarily smashed the machine but we know the components are invisibly reassembling themselves.

They are even now seeking each other out in countries where governance is weak. They are there in Afghanistan, Libya, Somalia, northern Nigeria; indeed for 5 months of this year the Islamic State (so-called) in the Philippines occupied Marawi City until they were driven out.

They are capable of operating even in places where government is comparatively stable, as they have tried to do in Tunisia and Egypt. A hundred of the foreign fighters in Syria came from Malaysia.

And of course we see their impact here in western Europe, in the concrete and steel chicanes that have been installed around our public buildings, in the endless boustrophedon queues at airports, in the recent attacks in Manchester and London.

We know that they are simultaneously moving up and down on the ladder of technological ambition. They are working on new bombs of all kinds, and new ways of eluding detection. They are enlisting everyday objects as terrorist weapons.

And I am sad to say that it has become all too commonplace to read that somewhere on our continent, someone chooses to announce that God is great while launching an attack on passers-by. In this country, MI5 and Counter-Terrorism Policing are now running well over 500 live operations – a third more than last year.

So now is the moment to draw confidence from our success against Daesh; and to consider how we are going to prosecute the struggle.

To answer that question – how do we win – we need to understand first who, or rather what, we are fighting. Because even if we were to capture every single Daesh fighter, even if all the jihadis in the world were either imprisoned or vaporized in drone strikes, we would still have failed to defeat the enemy.

This is neither a war against a conventional Westphalian state, nor do these terrorists have any remotely negotiable objectives. It is a struggle not against a religion but an idea, a perverse ideology.

So it may be more useful to switch metaphors. Perhaps we should think of a fight not against a military opponent but against a disease or psychosis – even though that metaphor is itself imperfect. The notion of a disease or contagion fails to do justice to the moral agency of the terrorists.

They have decided to take this path; they and they alone are responsible for their crimes. Perhaps we can say that as with every other form of criminal behaviour, we have to look at the social and emotional factors that combine to make people dedicate themselves to such comprehensive nihilism.

I appreciate the inadequacies of the phrase “Islamist terrorism”. If I could think of a better one I would use it. But we need to understand exactly why this type of terrorism has become associated with Islam in a way that 1.5 billion Muslims find both insulting and infuriating.

It is a very ancient idea, and common to virtually all religions – including Christianity – that any kind of worldly setback (military defeat, political humiliation, even economic decline) must be the mark of some divine disfavour. For thousands of years human beings have postulated that the correct response must be to propitiate the Gods or God by some act of piety.

(Think of Agamemnon: he wanted a more favourable wind for his ships at Aulis. He believed he was being punished for a transgression. So he did what he thought was the obvious thing. He killed his daughter.) It is this same sort of expiatory thought pattern that persuades people to engage in movements that could be broadly described as puritan or fundamentalist.

In the last 150 years we have seen how a small number of Islamic thinkers have responded to what they see as the humiliations of the Muslim world. And this same logic applies to the individual as he or she is radicalized. Because of course the world is full of people who feel that they are not successful, or not powerful, or not in control of their lives.

And then suddenly – in a mosque, or in a prison, or increasingly online – someone hands them what seems to be this emotional universal spanner. They are told that all their disappointments are caused by their own refusal to adopt a jihadist ideology.

And they are told that if only they will turn to this extreme and violent theology then all their troubles will be gone and their lives turned upside down. And suddenly the world around them that had previously seemed to be alienating and intimidating now seems itself to be contemptible and corrupt; and deserving of reform by the application of their holy rage.

The process is not only very fast – Islamist jihadism has been compared in its addictive power to crack cocaine. It is also very hard to reverse.

And so we need to stop the spread of this malady. We need to confront it and wipe it out in all the ungoverned spaces where it breeds: in the Middle East and north Africa, in the foul rag and bone shops of the internet, in our own country, where it exploits the very freedoms of our liberal democracy, and in the wildest and least governed space of all, the human heart.

There are interlocking ecosystems of terror, domestic and international, contaminating each other online. We can stop both cogs turning. We can greatly reduce the threat. Yes, we can

win.

But we need to understand not just whom we mean by the enemy. We need to understand who we are. Who are ‘we’ who are going to win?

There is an unedifying narcissism in the whole use of this first person plural, because I am afraid that all too often the term ‘we’ is taken to mean the West: it means the so-called advanced liberal democracies of Europe and America – and if that is all we mean by ‘we’ then the cause is hopeless.

Look at the death tolls from suicide bombs that now rate barely a paragraph in our papers, in Iraq or Somalia. Who are the principal victims of this global disease?

It is not Westerners, in spite of the recent increase in terrorist attacks. The number of global terrorist victims has risen from 3,361 in the year 2000 to 25,673 in 2016; and the overwhelming majority of those victims, 98%, were innocent Muslims living in Muslim countries.

Since October, we have witnessed 2 of the deadliest terrorist attacks in modern history – in Mogadishu and Sinai – and of the 823 who died virtually all were Muslims; in Sinai the target of the atrocity was a mosque filled with Friday worshippers. The tragedy of their families was identical to the tragedy of the bereaved families in Manchester or London – and the perpetrator was the same enemy that we face in Britain.

But if we are going to win, then we need to scrap the idea that Western foreign policy is somehow the principal cause of the problem. It is a fallacy that is at once glib, egotistical and which simply feeds the narrative of the jihadis.

Yes it is true that we have made horrendous mistakes – even when our intentions have been broadly good.

Sir John Chilcot concluded: “The Iraq of 2009, when British troops withdrew, certainly did not meet the UK’s objectives as described in January 2003. It fell far short of strategic success.” That must be a competitor for understatement of the century.

In removing Saddam Hussein, without any clear programme for succession, we not only helped to cause chaos. We sent a troubling signal around the Muslim world.

Saddam was a monster, a mass murderer, but he nonetheless stood at the apex of the Iraqi political system and in toppling him with a flip of our fingers, we seemed to suggest a contempt for national political institutions in the Middle East and North Africa. In the last 15 years we have learned the hard way that these institutions – no matter how flawed – are more easily destroyed than rebuilt.

And so I am with the consensus that the war in Iraq – certainly in the absence of a clear plan – was a mistake.

But that war did not create the Islamist terrorist threat: far from it. It is almost as if people have forgotten that the 9/11 massacre – in which 3,000 died at the hands of Osama bin Laden – came before the Iraq war, not after it.

And to assert, as people often do, that the terrorism we see on the streets of Britain and America is some kind of punishment for adventurism and folly in the Middle East is to ignore that these so-called punishments are visited on peoples – Swedes, Belgians, Finns, or the Japanese hostages murdered by Daesh – with no such history in the region.

There is no consistency or no logic in this bashing of the West. We must not play their game. The truth is that, if anything, the Western powers have been bit players in a kaleidoscopic struggle between dynasties and sects and tribes and interests in which, over the last 30 years, Islamist extremism – and in many cases terrorism – has been manipulated in order to serve some political end. Actually, the end is always broadly the same. It is the survival or strengthening of the regime.

But there are several distinct types of manipulation. There is simple appeasement, by which some governments – at least in the past – have condoned the financial support of highly dubious mosques or madrasas and turned a blind eye to preaching of hate or violence to buy the domestic support, for instance, of a conservative and reactionary clerisy.

Next there is the ingenious device of the false alternative, by which regimes will artfully contrive a choice, which they present to their own people and to the rest of the world. You either accept me, they say, with all my blemishes – cruel secret police, terrible human rights record – or else the Islamists will take over and we are back to the Middle Ages.

The most egregious recent exponent of this false alternative has been Bashar al-Asad. From the very beginning of the Syrian uprising in 2011 Asad worked assiduously to sharpen the dilemma. He contributed to the very creation of Daesh. He let their leaders out of jail and bought their oil. Until this year, he usually avoided fighting Daesh, reserving his most ruthless aggression for the civilian population of Syria.

And after 6 years of this Morton’s fork, and 6 years of slaughter, we have to accept that the gambit appears to have paid off.

We have never been able to answer the question, ‘who should follow Asad’, because the prior challenge has been to get rid of Daesh, to defeat the Islamist terrorists. And yes, we celebrate the defeat of Daesh in Raqqa, but Asad has meanwhile recovered most of operational Syria.

That is how Islamist extremism has been for decades used as a tool for self-preservation. It's either me or the maniacs, a regime will say: which do you prefer? And the world says, well, in that case I suppose we had better hold our noses and have you.

In some cases, let us be frank, this arrangement works better than in others. Some governments, without being necessarily democratic, are able to hold things together without too much repression. But sometimes the lid is jammed down so hard on the pressure cooker that the resentment builds, and a campaign for political freedom becomes indistinguishable from a campaign for Islamist control.

So we end up with a lose-lose situation. If you have a chaotic state, then you have a breeding-ground for terror. If you have a strong but repressive state, then you also have a potential breeding-ground for terror.

And last there is a method of manipulation that even more pernicious than the false alternative. I mean the concept of 'forward defence', whereby a government or its agents will covertly support terrorist groups abroad: either to weaken that government's neighbours; or to diffuse any threat from those neighbours – real or imagined, or to export its own jihadi problem outside its borders.

Or, most destructively of all, the objective may be to engage in a regional campaign for influence by exploiting the weaknesses of states, and by promoting fanatical or semi-fanatical militias to force other states to respond.

Whatever the rights and wrongs of these conflicts, you cannot credibly argue that they are the fault of the West, let alone that they are now being driven by Western powers. On the contrary, you could argue much more persuasively that the problems we are seeing today have been exacerbated not so much by Western meddling as by our aloofness.

We called on Asad to go. We set the red lines of what we would accept in his treatment of the Syrian population. And then we did nothing about it. We willed the end, and failed to will the means – leaving the pitch wide open for Russia and Iran.

I am afraid that we must now adjust to reality, but we do not walk away. We must collectively re-insert ourselves in the process because it is Western cash that will eventually rebuild Syria, and that can only happen in the context of a political transition away from the Asad regime in which the Syrian people – including the 11 or 12 million who have fled – are allowed to vote on their future in UN-monitored elections.

We can and should do more to resolve the conflict in Yemen where a humanitarian catastrophe is looming, and where Saudi cities are now facing the terror of Houthi missile attacks.

We have the opportunity to bring together the factions in Libya, who should seize this moment to put aside their differences for the good of that country.

The UK has played an important part in uniting the world around the plan of the UN envoy, Ghassan Salame.

We need more engagement, not less, because if you look at events since 2013, when the British and the US decided not to intervene in Syria even after Asad had used chemical weapons, you could not say that we managed to insulate ourselves from the region.

On the contrary, Europe had a tumultuous and tragic flood of migration from Syria. We are still seeing huge flows via Libya and the tempo of domestic terrorism would appear if anything to have increased.

We cannot create some Maginot Line in the Mediterranean. We cannot just seal off the whole of the Middle East and North Africa and give them 50 years to sort themselves out.

The problems will only get worse, not just for the Muslim countries who are in the frontline of the struggle but for us in Western Europe.

Above all, we must not be afraid. The easiest way to lose a war on terror is to be terrified. We cannot afford to let them change the way we live our lives – no more than is strictly necessary. We should not minimize the threat we face. Neither should we exaggerate.

For whatever else it may be, Islamist terrorism is simply not an existential threat to Britain.

[political content removed]

It is a scourge, a disease, a malaise; but we can get on top of it, because for all its allegedly instant addictive power – there are in reality only a tiny, tiny minority of people who are going to be remotely vulnerable to its bombastic lunacies.

Anyone who actually went to Raqqa discovered that it was a hopeless and unsanitary dystopia. There proved to be a very limited market for that way of life.

We can defeat this scourge at home and abroad; we can stop both cogs turning at once.

We are working to get their videos down from the internet, and thanks to the efforts of both the Prime Minister and of Amber Rudd, we are beginning to see more co-operation from the internet companies, with hundreds of thousands of items removed.

We are going to continue the work of the Prevent programme, which is designed to spot vulnerable people and protect them from radicalization, and – despite its detractors – Prevent has had its share of success.

At the same time we in the UK, Global Britain, are helping to reverse the spread of the disease overseas, and in its most hideous and dangerous manifestations that will mean surgery. It will sometimes mean military action of the kind we have taken in the skies above Raqqa and Mosul, where the UK has been among the biggest contributors to a highly successful campaign of tactical air bombardment, second only to the US.

Contrary to some of the assertions you will have heard recently, I can tell you that every day around the world I can tell you that British serving men and women are putting their lives at risk to roll up terrorist networks, to expose what they are doing, to thwart them and bring them to justice.

And they are doing it not just on behalf of the British people, but for the sake of everyone. They are making good on what the Prime Minister has rightly called the

unconditional commitment of the British people

to the security of our European friends – not just in this continent but beyond. We have the best in the world – and they will be with our allies for the long term.

People should be immensely proud of the work of this country in the danger zones and the breeding grounds of terror. I have myself seen British forces training Nigerians to tackle the maniacs of Boko Haram. I have seen how we are helping the Libyans to tackle the people traffickers and gun-runners, and to stop the terrorists regaining a foothold in Sirte.

But we cannot win until whole populations are immunized from the virus, until the Muslim world is no longer vulnerable to the cancer. That struggle will only be over when across that huge arc of territory, from south Asia to the Middle East, we have managed to end the political manipulation of extremism and terror, and end the baleful logic of the false alternative.

We – and by ‘we’ I mean not just we the West but the whole Muslim world who will be the winners when there is a powerful and visible third option: neither the tyranny and repression of undemocratic governments nor the chaos and backwardness of Islamist regimes, but the real and viable possibility of pluralist, generous and tolerant societies that allow space for free speech and independent non-governmental organisations.

We all understand the reasons why this third alternative has been so rare and so hard to achieve. There is no tradition of secular political parties in many Muslim countries, and often the biggest, most efficient and most politically savvy competitor for political space are the Islamists.

The most effective of all is the Muslim Brotherhood. We must be clear-eyed about this organization. It manifests itself in different ways in different places.

It cannot be denied that Muslim Brotherhood parties represent a body of public opinion, if not the overwhelming current: in some countries they hold seats in parliament; in Tunisia they were part of an elected government.

We in the UK have received representations from friendly governments in the Middle East that would like us to ban that organization. In 2015, after long consideration, the government decided that the Muslim Brotherhood did not meet the threshold for a proscribed group.

But it is plainly wrong that Islamists should exploit freedoms here in the UK – freedoms of speech and association – that their associates would repress overseas, and it is all too clear that some affiliates of the Muslim Brotherhood are willing to turn a blind eye to terrorism.

It was disgraceful that when the Pope visited Egypt, the Muslim Brotherhood should call him “the Pope of terrorism” and accuse the Egyptian security forces that were tasked with guarding him of being “Christian militias.” They have repeatedly sought to obscure the crimes of Daesh. Even when Daesh had claimed an attack on St Mark’s Cathedral in Alexandria, on Palm Sunday, a Muslim Brotherhood spokesman blamed the Sisi government.

Of course we should challenge Egypt’s government when its standards on human rights and the rule of law fall short of their own country’s constitution – and suppress the open society that Egypt needs in order to succeed – but that is no excuse for the kind of poisonous rhetoric we are seeing from the Muslim Brotherhood. They are exculpating the true culprits and encouraging terrorism by making wild claims about the Egyptian government.

That is among the reasons why this government is applying greater scrutiny to the Muslim Brotherhood: of their visa applications, of their charity work, and of their international links.

And if there is to be that third alternative, neither anti-democratic tyranny, nor Islamism, but pluralist and tolerant then we need to intensify our current work – the development aid programmes in which Britain, and DFID, leads the world.

We are helping by backing human rights groups and NGOs, and helping above all to change one of the most destructive imbalances, one of the greatest barriers to social and economic progress: the cultural and intellectual repression of women.

It is great news that women are finally going to be able to drive in Saudi Arabia – where they already comprise a majority of university students - and the world is willing on that brave programme of reform. But almost a third of Egyptian women cannot read. In Pakistan the adult female illiteracy rate is 60%.

And it is not just women who are being starved of intellectual sustenance. There is currently only one university in the Muslim world that makes the top 200.

Imagine the difference if those universities began to take off, in a spirit of real academic freedom. Imagine the growth in pride and confidence as those universities in Cairo, in Damascus, in Baghdad, in Tunis began to move up the world rankings, to take once again the positions of huge intellectual eminence that those cities occupied in the Middle Ages. Because in the end this is all about self-confidence and belief, not just in universities but in all national institutions.

One of my heroes is the 14th century Tunisian scholar Ibn Khaldoun. He was a great historiographer and economist – he showed that low taxes mean high yields long before Arthur Laffer – he's one of the founders of sociology.

He identified what is called 'asabiyyah', the cohesive loyalty to a group or tribe or sect or movement that propels a dynasty to power. And he showed how time and again that loyalty eventually breaks down, and the dynasty is swept away – usually by violence – in favour of another group.

That is why my friend the Secretary General of the Arab League, Ahmed Aboul Gheit, says that the problem of the Muslim world is that there is not enough nationalism.

Now nationalism is not a fashionable concept in some circles. But it can be immensely valuable. If people have a sense of loyalty and duty to their country, and to its institutions, then those institutions will endure and they will help to promote equity and fairness and respect in society because they command a devotion that goes beyond the narrow selfish imperatives of 'asabiyyah'.

That is why Britain seeks everywhere to help countries to develop their own respected national institutions: an independent judiciary and army, proud national educational institutions, a national broadcaster and independent national journalists, and a legislature that protects the sovereignty of the people.

And more than anything else it needs people who can tell that national story, build a narrative of success that embraces everyone, brings people together Shia and Sunni in a project that transcends sect and tribe and class.

We are in need of a new school of leaders, women as well as men, and of course the UK can and is helping with our hundreds of Chevening and Commonwealth scholars every year. Never forget that of the current crop of kings queens, presidents and prime ministers, 1 in 7 was educated in this country. Our soft power brings together the development funds and expertise that can help produce the social, educational and political change that will immunize populations from Islamist terror.

And look at the reality of UK hard power: the second biggest defence budget in NATO, one of the few countries capable of deploying air power more than 7,000 miles overseas.

Look at the reality and we are not retreating from our role overseas. On the contrary we are learning what that retreat has cost us in the past. British foreign policy is not part of the problem; it is part of the solution.

And above all we will win when we understand that ‘we’ means not just us in the West but the hundreds of millions of Muslims around the world who share the same hopes and dreams, who have the same anxieties and goals for their families as we do, all of us, who are equally engaged with the world and all its excitements and possibilities, who are equally determined to beat this plague.

We can beat it together. And we will.

Source: https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/how-global-britain-is-helping-to-win-the-struggle-against-islamist-terror