



AFTER PARIS: BACK TO BASICS

By Adam Garfinkle



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At times like these, in the immediate aftermath of a convulsive and repulsive terrorist attack like that of this past Friday evening in Paris, it is a good idea to repair to basics. Doing so helps one to calm down, which is essential because, as Elena Bonner once observed, "fear gives bad advice." It also forces us to balance the urge to "do something" with the need to think first about what is both wise and possible to do. I am content to let others "sound the tocsin," blame and admonish far and wide, and adopt Churchillian-toned aspirational language. Let me now then merely think a bit on paper about a few basics, and do so in view of an audience in hopes that it might help others to get a grip as well.

Avoid the Terrorist Trap

Perhaps the best essay ever written on the kind of challenge before us today dates back more than forty years, to July 1975. That is when David Fromkin's "The Strategy of Terrorism" appeared in *Foreign Affairs*, before perhaps most of the readers of these blogospheric words were born. Fromkin identified terrorism as a weapon of the weak, a trap of sorts designed to provoke stronger forces into acting on the basis of fear in counterproductive ways. Those counterproductive ways could take several forms: foolishly exaggerating a terrorist enemy's power and legitimacy; doing things that betray one's core values or alienate natural or objective allies; spending huge sums of public money to prevent tactics that terrorists have no intention of reusing; and more besides.

One example Fromkin gave came from FLN tactics in Algeria in the mid-1950s. The French government at the time claimed that Algeria was not a colony but a department of France, and that all citizens enjoyed equal rights and respect. But when the FLN bombed a cinema, the police rounded up only Arabs, no French colonists, giving lie to the pretense. Alas, the French have a vaguely similar problem today, except now it is playing out in France proper, not Algeria.

One does not have to go back so far into history to find other examples. Unfortunately, one of those examples involves the United States, its passage through history is far from over, and its very existence remains unrecognized by most. One of the legacies of the 9/11 attacks has been a bureaucratized paranoia that undermines the confidence and verve that have been integral to the vitality of American society throughout its history. The distorted formation of the Department of Homeland Security and the massive TSA bureaucracy are very expensive, and most of the money we spend year after year is spent by rote and mostly in vain. Somewhere Ayman al-Zawahiri is sucking oxygen, and he probably smiles regularly at the thought of how little al-Qaeda's operations cost compared to how many billions of dollars we have spent ever since.

Indeed, we have even let one nutcase of a man, Richard Reid, trick us into making harmless middle-aged men and women remove their shoes and belts before boarding an airplane for more than a decade. How many shoe bombs has TSA discovered and defused in all this time? None.

We have also flooded our trains, subways and busses with omnipresent announcements to notice “something suspicious.” Every time we do such things to obvious excess, we betray our freedom and optimism and, by showing how easy it is to scare us, actually make us more alluring targets for future attack.

Instead of questioning the growing shadow of the lumbering security state, amazingly, our salon intellectuals, media, and much of our political class prefer to wax indignant over intelligence and surveillance programs that have a track record of quiet success, and strain to shut them down.....at least until we yo-yo ourselves back to prudence after the next attack. Thus the strategy of terrorism slowly succeeds.

What has this to do with what happened on Friday evening and since? François Hollande’s statement that the Friday attack was “an act of war,” and France’s rapid retaliation by air against targets in Raqqa, did much to raise the status of the Islamic State from the desultory, hybrid proto-state it is to something grander that it is not—at least not yet. No doubt domestic politics affected Hollande’s choice of language, for he does not wish to cede political ground to Marine Le Pen, lest by a sin of omission he help to make her the next President of France—but still. If France is at war, every day that the Islamic State remains ensconced in its territory is a day that France has failed to win that war. But France *cannot* win a war in the Levant with airpower alone, and as it, along with the British, demonstrated in Libya in 2011, its airpower is less than massively impressive in any case.

Similarly, suggestions that NATO invoke Article V, as it did at European behest after 9/11, shower ISIS with symbolic power it does not deserve and that it anyway should be denied. There is nothing wrong with solidarity and a good deal that is right with it, but it should be a quiet and stoic solidarity forged by effective deeds—of which there are a great many left to do among democratic allies—not a glitzy kind purchased by a spurt of elevated vocabulary words.

As for French aerial attacks, no one can yet say (in public) with confidence what they destroyed. It is worth remembering, however, that the people of Raqqa, as well as of Mosul, are in a very tough spot. The vast majority are not premillenarian fanatics wishing to goad on the great global holy war of the end of days—quite possibly the aim of the small core of delusionists surrounding Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. But neither are they eager to be repressed and killed in large numbers by a criminal Alawi regime in Damascus or by murderous Shi’a militias directed via Baghdad from Tehran—or left to the abject chaos of having no governing order at all. Wayward French, American, and Russian bombs tend to force such people into putting up with the order of the status quo, no matter how heinous, as the lesser evil compared to no order at all. That translates into an objective advantage for the Islamic state.

Semi-serious bombing by otherwise serious air forces also, of course, reinforces the Islamic State propaganda narrative that the infidels have declared war against Islam, and greatly aids its recruitment efforts. Very likely, the feckless American use of airpower since September 2014 has had exactly that result. What this means, it seems pretty obvious, is that if Western countries determine that deploying violence has a role in solving the ISIS problem, that violence must have a prominent Sunni Muslim component if it is to undermine the ISIS claim, and it must be a deployment meant not for signaling purposes or to tender wagers about escalation dominance, but to intimidate, suffocate, and, yes, actually defeat the enemy.

Defeating the Enemy is Hard; Planning for What Comes After is Harder

If basic number one is don’t foolishly help the bad guys with their strategy of terrorism, what is basic number two? It is that destroying a relatively weak enemy is easy compared to building a stable peace in its wake. Or, as P.J. O’Rourke once memorably put it, it’s one thing to burn down the shithouse, another to install plumbing.

Alas, not even the prior destruction phase is all that easy, and how that might get done will shape the environment for any subsequent effort to put the region back together. (History tells us so: Messrs. Sykes and Picot could draw all the lines they liked on a map nearly a century ago, yet the arrival of General Allenby’s army the very next year and the exigencies of occupation and administration rendered those lines rapidly obsolete.) So even assuming that, somehow, a coalition can be assembled to defeat the Islamic State on the battlefield in the Levant, here exactly is where things would get very, very complicated. Let us count the ways.

First, ISIS is a problem only because the Assad regime in Syria is the prior problem, and standing behind that murderous regime is Iran and Russia. ISIS arose from the U.S. shattering and subsequent premature abandonment of Iraq, two errors in sequence that produced one compound mess. But the fuel that fed ISIS most and allowed it to deepen and spread has been the Syrian civil war, in which the regime has killed upwards of 300,000 Sunni civilians, forced four million more to leave the

country, and created unknown numbers of internally displaced persons. ISIS initially struggled, mostly in vain, to fill a vacuum and stop mass murder, because no one else would try—not other Sunni Arab states and not the United States. This must be acknowledged. We can call ISIS all the nasty names we like, and of course we're not obligated to nominate it for the Nobel Peace Prize. But we cannot readily fix a problem whose origins we refuse to understand.

This means that Iranian and Russian efforts to protect Assad in recent and ongoing multilateral diplomacy must not be allowed to succeed, because if they do ISIS cannot be undone. It will regenerate like sliced up planaria in a high school biology lab. Rumors that the Obama Administration is slipping toward some kind of concession along those lines *need* to be not true, because that would only ensure that the civil war would become even bloodier than it already is and produce still more refugees to strain Jordan, Turkey and, of course, the European Union to and beyond their limits. A deal made largely on Russian terms will not stop the war, only reshape it.

In the longer run, ISIS represents a nightmare for both Tehran and Moscow, to the extent that it survives to become the core node of radical Sunni sectarian power. But in the short, tactical run, ISIS works like a battering ram against dysfunctional Sunni Arab states in the throes of perduring institutional decay, and that works in favor of Iranian interests, if less clearly also Russian ones. Russia and Iran are trying to save the Assad regime, not attack ISIS, even if saving Assad strengthens ISIS politically. The U.S. government has no business abetting such a scheme.

Second, unfortunately, while the Russian and Iranian regimes are not potential effective partners in solving this problem, they are the ones right now with the most skin in the game. They have gone seriously if still ineffectually kinetic, while the U.S. administration has done the minimum necessarily to salve domestic pressures. This means that to gain the upper hand diplomatically and really stop the war, the U.S. government needs to torque the battlefield more decisively than Iran and Russia can do so.

But how? Even if we acknowledge the analogy of the Islamic State today to Taliban Afghanistan in the late summer and autumn of 2001, we have no Northern Alliance to leverage U.S. airpower. Of course, maybe a mere 7,000-8,000 crack U.S. troops could do the job, as [some have suggested](#); but that seems an optimistic assessment and, in any event, this Administration is clearly not going to send them.

Third, the most likely coalition partner for that purpose the United States will not undertake itself—indeed, the only country on Syria's border with the requisite capacity and perhaps the will to use it—is Turkey. The good news is that the Turkish leadership understands far better than the U.S. leadership does that the Syrian regime is the core of the ISIS problem. The bad news is that in recent months getting rid of Assad has taken a back seat to what is perceived in Ankara as an even greater and more urgent problem: stemming the twinned burgeoning of Kurdish nationalism and battlefield prowess.

This puts Turkish and U.S. interests at loggerheads for all practical purposes. The fact that the two governments worked out a deal a few months ago that allows the U.S. military to use Incirlik air base is passing strange, for it is based on no stable coincidence of key interests whatsoever. It is likely therefore to eventually deteriorate in acrimony, leaving U.S.-Turkish relations even worse for the wear. The Turks see ISIS as a highly dangerous but still useful last-ditch asset against Assad, and they see the Kurds as both a mortal political challenge within the Turkish Republic and as an agent weakening that last-ditch asset. Meanwhile, the Americans see the Kurds as the most effective and reliable ally available so far against ISIS.

Under such circumstances, the idea of creating a no-fly zone on the Syrian side of the Turkish border is fraught with problems. It is certainly an on-ramp for a ground force that will quickly become necessary to protect it, and the Obama Administration has made it clear that it will not provide that ground force. If the Turks provide it, it will predictably end up being pointed against the Kurds. If the Obama Administration relents and supports a no-fly zone under such circumstances, that will amount *de facto* to the third or fourth U.S. betrayal of the Kurds in the past half-century, depending on how one counts the tragedies of the past.

Fourth, if not the Turks, then the only other ground force that can fill the bill, in theory at least, would be some kind of Sunni mega-militia that bestrides the old border that divided Syria and Iraq—a sort of second coming of the Anbar Awakening, only larger. To train and support such a mega-militia would require a significant U.S.-led force in theater—at a minimum something like 5,000-8,000 troops. Here the good news is that many of the Sunni Arabs on both sides of the border are (literally) cousins; one can at least imagine enough affinity (*asabiyya*) among them to sustain effective cooperation. But turning a theoretical militia and an imagined affinity into a real military force that can fight and win is no cakewalk, to recall an embarrassing phrase from the past. And it would take time to make it happen, during which outrages like Paris could be expected to multiply.

Fifth—and this is really the kicker—there is no way to compose a stable peace in the area within the old borders of the Levant. Let us assume for a moment that, somehow, Turks, Kurds, and a Sunni Arab mega-militia, with U.S.-led Western help in training, arming, logistics and intelligence, join together within the next year to overshadow the current Russian and Iranian effort and roll back, if not finally crush, the Islamic State. Assume further that other Western-supported anti-Assad forces prevent the Syrian regime from taking significant advantage of ISIS's weakening. It is easy to pretend to be Sir Percy Cox and Gertrude Bell, armed with a thick graphite harquebus and an otherwise blank map as they were in 1921, sketching out the borders of an independent Kurdistan composed of selected former Iraqi and Syrian territories, an Alawi-dominated rump Syria along the Mediterranean coast, a Sunni regional government spreading over the old Syrian-Iraqi border, and a rump Shi'a Iraq centered on Baghdad and Basra. But who would agree to those new lines (and who would not)? Who would, enable, finance, support and enforce the new reality represented by that map?

Maybe Russia and Iran would be satisfied to have preserved a rump Alawi Syria. Maybe, somehow, the Turks could be mollified and compensated in some way as to accept a Kurdish state, if it were skillfully shrouded in symbolic conditionalities and solemnly sworn limits. Maybe the Saudis and the Gulf Arabs would come up with the massive amounts of cash needed to finance stabilization and reconstruction in a newly drawn Levant. Maybe the Egyptians on behalf of the Arab League would lead an Arab force to police the peace until it stuck on its own, and maybe NATO would support that force.

But for all these maybes to turn into a real postwar settlement, there would need to be a genuine leader—a great power with the resources, resolve, patience, reputation, and discernment to make it happen. That can only be the United States. But no one in his or her right mind thinks that can happen in the final year of the Obama Administration, and it is by no means clear that its successor would be any more willing to try—unless, of course, an American city (or two) suffers in future as Paris did this past Friday evening.

So what does this very complicated if still basic analysis tell us? It tells us that even a massive and battlefield-successful use of force against ISIS in the absence of a viable route to a regional settlement is not in itself a strategy. It is only an instrument. A truly viable strategy is, most regrettably, hard to envision right now, even as the new status quo—defined by the sudden realization that the Islamic State has a “far enemy” option—is manifestly unacceptable.

It Could Be Worse

There is, at the least, a third basic: It is that things could get even worse. They always can.

To see how, note that Israel has been dealing over the past month or so with a new kind of terrorism—terrorism not directed by any organization but a plague of anomic, one-off, lone-wolf stabbings and other forms of low-level but lethal violence. Compared to the terror of the first and second intifadas, the objective level of death and blood has been modest, but the level of anxiety it has produced is anything but modest. And that is because Israelis realize that the growth potential of this sort of terrorism is enormous, and that stopping it cannot depend on either deterring or cutting off the head of a leadership that is directing it.

In the wake of 9/11, anti-terrorism experts in the United States and Europe feared exactly this sort of widely distributed, copycat, leaderless terrorism. With rare exceptions here and there, the problem never materialized, and to the limited extent it has, it has plagued Europe more than the United States. It could materialize in the near future, again far more likely in Europe than here.

That concern should not lead Europeans to demonize asylum seekers, of course, for most of them are trying to escape the same purveyors of madness who attacked Paris on Friday. But it would be wildly imprudent to ignore the potential danger. From the forensics so far, every possible avenue of danger has been confirmed. French citizens as attackers? Check. Other European citizens as attackers—in this case Belgian nationals—using the Schengen zone to advantage? Check. Returnees from jihad in Syria? Check. And a terrorist who disappeared into the flow of Europe-bound asylum seekers? Check.

Clearly, then, it is not just the Levant that we in the United States need to be concerned about: the future of Europe is at stake as well, and that future needs to be understood as having, as always, a national security aspect for us. We need our democratic partners to be strong, stable, and cooperative in pursuit of common goals. So it is not only putting the Levant back together that confronts us, it is the simultaneous challenge of preventing Europe from falling apart. It doesn't get any more basic than that.