**Terrorism in an age of asymmetries**

All victims of terrorism anywhere in the world are entitled to our sympathy, compassion, solidarity and support. All acts of indiscriminate killing of civilians are abhorrent. Nothing will ever justify terrorist acts against innocent human beings. Perpetrators must be identified, prosecuted and punished.

These are obvious *ex post* conclusions, but what we urgently need is a strategy of *ex ante* prevention. Let us therefore reflect on the nature of terrorist acts in an attempt to understand not only the how but also the why of such insane violence, in order to inquire what factors lead young men and women to join the ranks of *Daesh* and other terrorist associations. Only thus can we formulate concrete measures to get at the source of terrorism, to understand the mechanism of recruitment, stop its appeal, and attempt to heal the festering wounds that criminal ideologues and fundamentalists instrumentalize for their deadly objectives.

Autocratic regimes that have oppressed their populations and denied them basic human rights including their freedom of association, expression, peaceful assembly, public participation in decision-making, etc. bear considerable responsibility for the rise of frustration, anger and extremism in their respective countries and creating an environment in which terrorism could emerge. The situation has been aggravated by the increasing number of arms in the Middle East region combined with old religious tensions and conflicts between Israeli settlers and Palestinian populations. The intervention of foreign powers and the admixture of competing economic interests on all sides have negatively impacted on the right to life as a result of military operations in Syria, Iraq, Yemen, Gaza and elsewhere. The disproportionate use of force has led to immense suffering and “collateral damage” among civilians and has made it all the easier to recruit distressed and frustrated individuals and indoctrinate them into killing agents. Meanwhile, the grim economic picture in some African countries where the rights to food, health and work have been violated for too long have led to widespread despair and anger, which power-hungry leaders and corrupt governments have exploited for their own purposes.

Where lie the root causes of terrorism? This question calls for an analysis not only of recent events but also of old grievances, historical inequities and memories of impunity. Some observers have postulated the view that terrorism, albeit neither justified nor justifiable, is partly a response to grave injustices and on-going abuses perpetrated by the dominant, primarily developed countries, against populations of less developed countries. Admittedly, modern terrorism has evolved over the past decades, but it remains a truism that in the light of power asymmetries both guerilla warfare and terrorism are seen preferred tactics of the underdog.

The abuses of the powerful, often with the active support of governments from the regions concerned, have included the denial of self-determination, totalitarianism, slave trade, slavery, colonialism, occupation, imposition of puppet governments, undemocratic regime change, violation of the rights of minorities, comprehensive sanctions, bombardment of population centres, drone strikes with all their human collateral damage, use of indiscriminate weapons including depleted uranium, agent orange, white phosphorus, landmines, cluster bombs, widespread torture, extraordinary rendition, indefinite detention, degradation of eco-systems, unfair trade relations, land-grab, inequitable exploitation of natural resources, destruction of food security, toxic waste pollution, forced evictions and population transfers etc.

While the developed world may not remember the Opium Wars of the 19th century, the application of international law *à la carte*, especially the adverse impact of the non compliance with UN resolutions by certain States in total impunity, the colonial massacres in Africa and Asia, the destruction of infra-structures and societal fabrics, the humiliation of whole populations – the victims and the survivors of this violence have neither forgotten nor forgiven, because they are living in the ruins, in the midst of the destruction wrought by “smart weapons”, often fabricated in one of the so called P5 States and perpetuated by unilateral or multilateral sanctions.

Nothing will ever justify the killing of innocent people. Alas, sometime the point of desperation was reached and surpassed making it easier for individuals – and for those exploiting their frustration -- to cross a red line, abandon the most natural instinct – the instinct of self-preservation – accepting the kamikaze option as perhaps the only way to hit back at the perceived victimizer. The undemocratic and inequitable world order prevailing today has caused gravest injustice to many peoples worldwide, making it possible for extremists to play on the argument “We” against “Them” and use other arguments, including eschatological arguments, susceptible to convince a young man or a young woman to blow himself/herself up, just to hurt the “enemy”.

Surely there are other root causes of terrorism and violence, including the world’s financial crisis causing unemployment and social exclusion, the increasing number of individualistic, competition-obsessed, predator societies that ignore any kind of solidarity, social conscience or aspirations for greater spiritualism…. Without these factors recruitment of terrorists would not be viable. Why is it then that there are more and more terrorists since 9/11? Perhaps because the dominant powers have drawn on faulty diagnoses and applied the wrong medicine.

Many politicians and pundits in the developed world live in solipsism and operate in a purely positivistic context, incapable of coming to grips with current phenomena, failing again and again to explain the increasing terrorist violence except in the light of the black-and-white mentality of cowboys and Indians, of star wars, of the good guys and the bad guys. According to this mindset, even resistance against the international order imposed by the hegemony is criminal, whereas coercive measures in the interests of the powerful are declared to be within international law, norms created by the powerful in their own interest, but which the underdog rejects as neither applicable nor legitimate.

Many politicians and pundits live in a world of hubris and empty words, invoking “democracy”, “values”, “the rule of law”, contending that “they” hate “us” because of “our” values of freedom and democracy, with corporate media echoing the same self-serving narrative, thus frustrating the public’s right to receive true, reliable and pluralistic information. Governments seem to be out of touch with reality, caught in their own webs.

The problem is further exacerbated by the fact that the exact opposite narrative is served in the political discourse of numerous governments from the Global South, where the West is portrayed as the incorrigible imperialist imposing “its” values at all costs when its population is in fact trying to exercise its fundamental rights and freedoms, including its right to development and to the “pursuit of happiness” in their own way and within their own culture.

Politicians calling for more bombings or justifying torture of suspected terrorists manifest a guilty unwillingness to look for the root causes of terrorism. More bombings with the accompanying “collateral damage” will not defeat terrorism – it may, however, facilitate the recruitment of more determined terrorists. Punishment – in particular collective punishment -- will have no deterrent effect on fanatics or other persons who have been radicalized and are desperate, immensely angry, consumed by the fire of revenge.

How can the situation be addressed today? Surely not through band-aid politics or greater surveillance (which evidently has not prevented the increasing number of terrorist attacks) or even higher security measures at airports and public places. As indicated above, among the root causes of terrorism we must acknowledge the accumulation of hatred, not only because of religion or ideology but because of very real abuses from various origins affecting millions of human beings. As some observers have noted “they came to us because we went to them.” The civilians who were victims and survivors of the Baghdad or Falluja bombings, of the Benghazi repression, of Homs, Gaza, or Grozny, or those who were subjected to torture and ill treatment in Abu Ghraib or Guantanamo, have not forgotten. International cooperation for mutual benefit and due respect to human rights here and everywhere are essential to promote and consolidate more inclusive and accountable societies driven by human rights aspirations, and in fact to combat effectively the root causes of terrorism. This is the best strategy for the elaboration of a long-term plan to enable the establishment of a peaceful and just world order.

Under no conditions should civil liberties be sacrificed because of the terrorist threat. A democracy worth its name has a responsibility to protect all persons under its jurisdiction – and while doing so, it must respect the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and other core human rights conventions, which guarantee the right to privacy and to one’s own opinions. The terrorist threat must not be allowed to undermine the rule of law and transform democratic societies into totalitarian societies consumed by fear.

Only a patient and persevering approach to terrorism – one that respects the human rights and human dignity of all -- will allow making ever so slow progress in tackling the monsters that have been generated. Only when we realize that the current international order engenders frustration and despair because of its fundamental injustices will we understand that we must work for equity and human dignity worldwide and not for just for the expansion of markets, laissez faire, free trade, foreign direct investment, competition, consumerism or the many other idolatries we have invented.

Alfred de Zayas, 20 November 2015