

Terrorism Will Always Fail



New York, 11

September 2001; Madrid, 11 March 2004; London, 7 July 2007; Mumbai, 26-29 November 2008; Nairobi, 21 September 2013; Paris, 13 November 2015 – and now Brussels, 22 March 2016. These are among the “days of infamy” when terrorists have indiscriminately slaughtered innocent civilians who were going about their daily lives. All such events take their particular horror from the way in which normal civilised human life is plunged into the midst of carnage and slaughter. Whether in office block, airline terminal, city street, shopping mall, London bus, metro or suburban railway carriage, death is a heart-beat away from everyone, and nowhere is ever completely safe.

A terrorist bomb brings death but it also brings disorder, a sense that the fabric of civilised life itself has been torn asunder and ordinary people have been rendered helpless. It is at such time that civilisation is seen at its most fragile. And the human beings who executed such devastation are its bitterest foes. The sudden death and pain they bring is merely their chosen instrument. Their aim is to destroy the established cohesion of society, so that neighbours – in desperation, no longer knowing whom to trust, no longer feeling protected – turn on each other.

And the most conspicuous lesson from such attacks is that they always fail. Human societies are extraordinarily resilient; solidarity always asserts itself. If the wholesale destruction by aerial bombing of European and Japanese cities during the Second World War proves anything, it is that cities are more than their buildings, and more even than the people in them; they are patterns and habits of living together that are remembered, and hence that survive and can be recreated. They symbolise and exemplify the Easter message: after every Good Friday comes a resurrection. It is God’s will.

Coventry in England, now once again a prosperous Midlands city, was one of the first to suffer; later in the sequence came Hamburg, Dresden, Berlin, Tokyo, Nagasaki, and many others. Each of those thriving cities bears no resemblance today to the heap of smoking rubble the bombers left behind. The story in each case was first of panic and a desperately improvised response, followed by methodical clear-up, followed gradually by the rebuilding of shattered lives and property – stories of the human spirit ultimately triumphing over chaos. Above all it was made possible through the rediscovery and reassertion of social cohesion – neighbours helping neighbours, strangers comforting the wounded, rescuers taking risks to save lives. In Coventry's case and many others, the experience of the best that human nature is capable of led ultimately to a desire for reconciliation even with past enemies.

Relations between Muslim communities and the majority did undoubtedly deteriorate in the immediate aftermath of attacks conducted falsely in the name of Islam, but they largely recovered. Good leadership, showing a visible willingness to stand shoulder to shoulder, is crucial. But it is also instinctive in religious leaders, for their very profession is peace. Imams and Christian leaders in Belgium must and will come publicly together, as they have done in other places, to demonstrate conclusively that the terrorists have failed.

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