

Hard Lessons from Paris Attack

In Official Washington, the talk is all about expanded wars and how tough to be on Syrian refugees. But elsewhere there is some serious reflection on how the West went wrong in its approach toward the Middle East, as reflected in Dennis J Bernstein's interview with Indian historian Vijay Prashad.

By Dennis J Bernstein

After the Paris terror attacks and a bloody hostage standoff in Mali, the focus has been on the West's plans to "intensify" the war against Islamic terrorists, especially the Islamic State (or ISIS), but some more thoughtful thinkers are calling for a critical examination of the past mistakes made and the lessons that can be learned.

For instance, Vijay Prashad, an Indian historian, journalist and commentator, warned against "clichéd policies" that could make the violence worse. Prashad spoke in an interview with Pacifica Radio host Dennis J Bernstein.

DB: Vijay Prashad writes, "A week of horrible carnage, bomb blasts in Beirut and Baghdad, then the cold-blooded shootings in Paris. Each of these acts of terror left dead bodies and wounded lives. There is nothing good that comes of them, only the pain of the victim, and then more pain, as powerful people take refuge in clichéd policies that once again turn the wheel of violence."

Meanwhile the BBC announced, "France is committed to destroying the so-called Islamic State group after last Friday's deadly attacks. President Francois Hollande has said France's military campaign against ISIS and Iraq will intensify." Imagine, intensify. Vijay, what is your overview?

VP: These attacks have been horrible. There's been an intensification of ISIS attacks – the one in Paris was part of a sequence. The reaction from the French president is to be expected. There's a kind of political grammar that he's forced to fall in line with. Two words apply here – you have to "do something," and you have to appear strong.

Something and *strong* are the key words in order to understand the French reaction just as we are to understand the US reaction after 9/11. There's no worked out strategy after 15 months of U.S. and Gulf air bombing Iraq and then Syria. The rollback, particularly in Syria, has been minimal. The French now want to intensify that. They had been part of the coalition previously, so there's nothing new here. It's the same strategy, which is not bringing dividends. On the other hand, it's producing acts of terror. I'm afraid the prognosis is very poor for what Francois Hollande is recommending.

DB: You have some suggestions for the French president. What are they?

VP: First, grieve for those who have been killed. Grief is important for a family, neighborhood, city, country, and the planet. There are terrible stories, and each one should be told. A 41-year-old woman at a cafe was shot in Paris. In Beirut, a four-month-old baby was sitting in his mother's lap. She cushioned the blow. Mother and father died, and the baby lived.

These stories are educational. They tell us who the victims of these terror attacks are. There was the killing by drones of an entire family in Yemen. We need to know their names – their lives – so that people don't just see them as statistics. First we need an accounting of who they are, and then grieve for them.

Secondly, states need to not believe that a response to a terrorist action is military force. They need to believe that it's got to be forensic. One needs to understand how this happened. How is it possible that the Turkish government handed over the names of one of these terrorists to the French – not once, but twice? Apparently, it was not acted upon.

These are the kinds of questions that were not asked after 9/11. The 9/11 Commission ducked many serious questions about how people on a watch list were not discovered. It's the same thing with any terrorist action, whether it's 9/11 or the Oklahoma City bombing. These were known characters on a certain list. We're supposed to have this enormous surveillance, but instead of forensic surveillance, we have blanket surveillance. Everybody's emails are checked. There needs to be a proper police accounting of what occurred.

DB: I like the next suggestion: Try to get to the root of the issue to what provoked the inhumanity. This is one the U.S. and the West aren't particularly interested in.

VP: We used to joke that somebody needs to tell the CIA that highlighter pens are yellow and not black. The 9/11 Commission did some accounting of the reason it occurred, but most of the 9/11 report was entirely blacked out, particularly the section that involved Saudi Arabia and its involvement – not the country, but individual sheiks. There needs to be a very serious and honest appraisal, not only of the culpability of people in the Arabian Peninsula, but also in the French and American government.

Just this year, the French government sent \$10 billion of arms to Saudi Arabia. The U.S. and Western Europe rely on Saudi oil money – not the oil itself, but the profits – to liquefy their banks. There's extreme complicity of the West with the Gulf Arab states. So any accounting of where this vicious ideology

spawns from, who finances the network of mullahs, some of these extremist groups – none of that is taken in hand.

Friends in Paris tell me that when a mosque is searching for a new cleric, often the government insists the cleric not be from the community, but they must be brought in from abroad. Often some Saudi-trained cleric arrives, so people feel these clerics are foisted upon them. This is the nature of the accounting that's necessary. You can't just say they are bad guys, ISIS. It's much deeper than that, because our complicity is quite considerable in these cases.

DB: Do you think U.S. and Western terrorism in the Middle East is the driving force behind growing acts of terrorism against the West? They tried to put a cork in Allah's mouth, and the whole world blew up?

VP: There's a lot of truth to what you are saying. There are different timelines by which you can sketch that story backwards, such as to the Iraq war of 2003. Now it's widely understood that the regime change in Iraq had a catastrophic impact on the region. It essentially produced the space for ISIS to grow, and brought us to where we are.

But we can go earlier, to the way the West and the Gulf Arab states first collaborated to send the mujahedeen to Afghanistan. This was also a regime change in process, where we financed anybody, mostly the most conservative and heinous forces on the ground. We legitimized them, gave them training, and then were surprised when out of the kernel of Afghanistan, Al Qaeda erupted.

Before that, in the 1950s, the U.S. collaborated with the Saudis, largely, to attack Arab nationalism, undermining and destroying the Left by promoting very virulent forms of Islam, pushed by the Saudis in particular. There's a lot to be said about the role of the West in producing the social conditions which lead to ISIS. Many serious questions must be asked about the role Saudi Arabia has played in West Asia and across the Muslim world, with its collaborators in Morocco and elsewhere, pushing a very heartless politics against the social democratic politics that had emerged from the people of the Arab lands.

DB: The more I see how the Saudis operate, the more it reminds me of Israel.

VP: The last UN report that came out from the Economic and Social Commission of West Asia addressed the sense of the Arab Spring, and stressed the importance of what happened in Tunisia. Then the report made a startling comparison. It had a section where it went after states that promote a kind of moral, ethnic, religious culture where there's no cultural diversity allowed or sanctified by the state.

The countries it used as an example were Israel and Saudi Arabia. The report

suggested that these two countries are creating an anachronistic form of nation vote for the world, and are not a good example for the region. Of course, Israel is furious with the comparison, because it prefers to be compared to European states, and would hate to be compared to Saudi Arabia. But there's something to be said for the way in which Israel is increasingly showing a very narrow understanding of ethnic or religious nationalism. If you were very uncharitable, you might call it racist nationalism.

DB: Where does this go now? Do you see a light at the end of the tunnel?

VP: There is the phrase, "May we always live in interesting times." In an essay I wrote after the Paris shootings, I call these pitiless times times without pity. We are going to prosecute a ruthless, pitiless war. Our political leadership, across the planet, has the imagination of yesterday. They don't want to see new ways of doing things, or acknowledge we are dealing with people, not aliens who can be smashed out of existence.

We need creative thinking. In Syria, as an example, all understand the West is trapped in a web of its relationships. Turkey is on one side, which understands terrorism to include the Kurds. The Kurdish fighters have been some of the most successful fighters against ISIS. Here's a major U.S. ally, and NATO member, which wants to attack the Assad government in Damascus, and the Kurds.

The Americans have been giving close air support to the Kurds against ISIS. Meanwhile, the U.S. is so compromised with the Saudis that it's unable to pressure the Saudis to back down from their proxies. We live in an age where the politics is yesterday – they are not able to look forward. [On Nov. 15], Obama and Putin had a private discussion for 35 minutes. My only hope is that they don't do more damage than they've already done. Our current political leadership is not capable of rolling back the damage, but we should have faith that they will not make it worse than it is already.

DB: After the Charlie Hebdo killing in Paris, we had the insanity of Netanyahu marching in the streets of Paris in solidarity with the people of France after he had slaughtered some 2,200 people, including many children. They say no peace in Palestine, no peace anyplace else in the world.

VP: In 2003, it was very gratifying to see India, Brazil and South Africa take a very strong position against the American war in Iraq. Then in 2011, the five BRICS countries happened to comprise the UN Security Council [BRICS is the acronym for an association of five major emerging national economies: Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa. The grouping was originally known as "BRIC" before the inclusion of South Africa in 2010].

Sadly, Russia, China, India and Brazil abstained when the West and the Gulf Arab states wanted to bomb Libya. Only South Africa voted in favor, and President Jacob Zuma said that Obama personally called him to convince him to vote yes. So the five BRICS countries essentially allowed the West and Gulf Arabs to destroy Libya.

Now we have an extraordinarily introspective BRICS bloc, particularly India, Brazil, South Africa and China. The four of them seriously regret their vote about Libya. Unfortunately they've gone silent, but my hope is that these four countries will assert themselves on the global stage, and argue that the approach the West has taken has been catastrophic, and another way must be put forward. Thus far they haven't had the confidence to articulate an alternative, but I very much hope that these countries, which are very chastised by the vote in 2011, might now come out and say the West doesn't have all the answers.

Dennis J Bernstein is a host of "Flashpoints" on the Pacifica radio network and the author of *Special Ed: Voices from a Hidden Classroom*. You can access the audio archives at www.flashpoints.net.
