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How Politicians Duck the Blame for Terrorism

By *Patrick Cockburn*
March 21, 2016

The capture of Salah Abdeslam, thought to be the sole surviving planner of the Paris massacre, means that the media is focusing once again on the threat of terrorist attack by Islamic State. Questions are asked about why the most wanted man in Europe was able to elude the police for so long, even though he was living in his home district of Molenbeek in Brussels. Television and newspapers ask nervously about the chances of Isis carrying out another atrocity aimed at dominating the news agenda and showing that it is still in business.

The reporting of the events in Brussels is in keeping with that after the January (*Charlie Hebdo*) and November Paris attacks and the Tunisian beach killings by Isis last year. For several days there is blanket coverage by the media as it allocates time and space far beyond what is needed to relate developments. But then the focus shifts abruptly elsewhere and Isis becomes yesterday's story, treated as if the movement has ceased to exist or at least lost its capacity to affect our lives.

It is not as if Isis has stopped killing people in large numbers since the slaughter in Paris on 13 November; it is, rather, that it is not doing so in Europe. I was in Baghdad on 28 February when two Isissuicide bombers on motorcycles blew themselves up in an outdoor mobile phone market in Sadr City, killing 73 people and injuring more than 100. On the same day, dozens of Isis fighters riding in pick-ups with heavy machine guns mounted in the back attacked army and police outposts in Abu Ghraib, site of the notorious prison on the western outskirts of

Baghdad. There was an initial assault by at least four suicide bombers, one driving a vehicle packed with explosives into a barracks, and fighting went on for hours around a burning grain silo.

The outside world scarcely noticed these bloody events because they seem to be part of the natural order in Iraq and Syria. But the total number of Iraqis killed by these two attacks – and another double suicide bombing of a Shia mosque in the Shuala district of Baghdad four days earlier – was about the same as the 130 people who died in Paris at the hands of Isis last November.

There has always been a disconnect in the minds of people in Europe between the wars in Iraq and Syria and terrorist attacks against Europeans. This is in part because Baghdad and Damascus are exotic and frightening places, and pictures of the aftermath of bombings have been the norm since the US invasion of 2003. But there is a more insidious reason why Europeans do not sufficiently take on board the connection between the wars in the Middle East and the threat to their own security. Separating the two is much in the interests of Western political leaders, because it means that the public does not see that their disastrous policies in Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya and beyond created the conditions for the rise of Isis and for terrorist gangs such as that to which Salah Abdeslam belonged.

The outpouring of official grief that commonly follows atrocities, such as the march of 40 world leaders through the streets of Paris after the *Charlie Hebdo* killings last year, helps neuter any idea that the political failures of these same leaders might be to a degree responsible for the slaughter. After all, such marches are usually held by the powerless to protest and show defiance, but in this case the march simply served as a publicity stunt to divert attention from these leaders' inability to act effectively and stop the wars in the Middle East which they had done much to provoke.

A strange aspect of these conflicts is that Western leaders have never had to pay any political price for their role in initiating them or pursuing policies that effectively stoke the violence. Isis is a growing power in Libya, something that would not have happened had David Cameron and Nicolas Sarkozy not helped destroy the Libyan state by overthrowing Gaddafi in 2011. Al-Qaeda is expanding in Yemen, where Western leaders have given a free pass to Saudi Arabia to launch a bombing campaign that has wrecked the country.

After the Paris massacre last year there was a gush of emotional support for France and little criticism of French policies in Syria and Libya, although they have been to the advantage of Isis and other salafi-jihadi movements since 2011.

It is worth quoting at length Fabrice Balanche, the French cartographer and expert on Syria who now works for the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, about these misperceptions in France, although they also apply to other countries. He told Aron Lund of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace:

“The media refused to see the Syrian revolt as anything other than the continuation of revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt, at a time of enthusiasm over the Arab Spring. Journalists didn't

understand the sectarian subtleties in Syria, or perhaps they didn't want to understand; I was censored many times.

“Syrian intellectuals in the opposition, many of whom had been in exile for decades, had a discourse similar to that of the Iraqi opposition during the US invasion of 2003. Some of them honestly confused their own hopes for a non-sectarian society with reality, but others – such as the Muslim Brotherhood – tried to obfuscate reality in order to gain the support of Western countries.

“In 2011–2012, we suffered a type of intellectual McCarthyism on the Syrian question: if you said that Assad was not about to fall within three months, you would be suspected of being paid by the Syrian regime. And with the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs having taken up the cause of the Syrian opposition, it would have been in bad taste to contradict its communiqués.”

By taking up the cause of the Syrian and Libyan opposition and destroying the Syrian and Libyan states, France and Britain opened the door to Isis and should share in the blame for the rise of Isis and terrorism in Europe. By refusing to admit to or learn from past mistakes, the West Europeans did little to lay the basis for the current, surprisingly successful “cessation of hostilities” in Syria which is almost entirely an US and Russian achievement.

Britain and France have stuck close to Saudi Arabia and the Gulf monarchies in their policies towards Syria. I asked a former negotiator why this was so and he crisply replied: “Money. They wanted Saudi contracts.” After the capture of Salah Abdeslam there is talk of security lapses that had allowed him to evade arrest for so long, but this is largely irrelevant as terrorist attacks will go on as long as Isis remains a power. Once again, the wall-to-wall media coverage is allowing Western governments to escape responsibility for a far worse security failure, which is their own disastrous policies.