Counter-terrorism responses: Can psychology contribute?

By Associate Professor Winnifred Louis MAPS, School of Psychology, University of Queensland

W e respond on many levels to the 2015 attack on Charlie Hebdo staff in France. The human tragedy makes us sad and angry. The moral atrocity screams for outraged condemnation. The sense of threat calls out community determination, courage and sacrifice. The counter-mobilisation of millions, and of world leaders, evokes pride and grim satisfaction.

At the same time, psychologists who study group conflict are professionally interested in this terrorist attack and its aftermath. If we adopt the likely point of view of the terrorists who are trying to bring about a world jihad, it looks like it might have worked well. The tremendous international attention to the terrorists and their stated cause; the presumably gratifying spectacle of European grief, fear and anger; the reactive flowering of anti-Muslim prejudice; the empowerment of European right wing militants; the internal marginalisation of moderate Muslim leaders – all of this should promote further conflict and extremism, all other things being equal. However, the effectiveness of any terror attack depends upon the reactions of the authorities and the targets. From the target group’s perspective, it seems we should work towards reducing the effectiveness of the attacks. Are there lessons from psychology to be drawn about what will work well versus poorly in counter-terrorism responses?

There are many lessons, and scholars do not always agree; the reading list referred to at the end of this article outlines a range of views. This article provides a psychological perspective on one thing done well in the aftermath of the Charlie Hebdo massacre and two recommended changes for future national and international responses to terrorism.

Keep the definitions narrow: The conflict is against terrorism, not Islam

Most world leaders have been at pains not to identify the terrorists as Islamic, and to highlight the peacefulness of Muslims. In contrast, some commentators’ angry Tweets or opinion pieces have put the onus onto all Muslims to prove by explicit comment that they reject the terrorist approach. Which approach will reduce terror more?

There is an evidence basis in psychology that would applaud political leaders’ and authorities’ narrower definition of the enemy here. Logically, it is the case that even though very many modern terrorists are Muslims, hardly any Muslims are terrorists. Calling on Muslims to take responsibility for stating that they are not terrorists is like calling on Catholics in the days of the Irish Republican Army to take responsibility for stating they are not terrorists. It is offensive and ignores the base-rates: there are thousands if not millions of the former for every one of the latter.

Tactically, there are millions of Muslims who are opposed to American, European or Australian foreign policy, or who are deeply implicated in conflicts in Iraq, Syria and elsewhere in which the US, Europe or Australia have taken sides. There are others still who are pursuing a more peaceful ‘jihad’ (in the sense of whole-hearted struggle) to change the world towards an idealised Islamic state. Acknowledging the reality that there are millions of Muslim political opponents of the current foreign policy of the West, or millions of spiritual warriors for religious change, is important, and so is acknowledging that they are determined yet peaceful in their views. Positioning terrorists as the representatives and leaders of this large group of political opponents or spiritual activists wrongly gives the terrorists political and religious status and power. It denies the legitimate leadership of moderate Muslims and radical non-violent Muslims, disempowering them. Presenting terrorism as if it is common and supported by most Muslims could even create a counter-productive descriptive norm, which means terror is more likely to spread. Thus authorities should continue to keep the definitions of the enemy narrow and the ‘outgroup’ small.

Lengthen the timeframe of counter-terrorism planning to include the longer term

One lesson from conflict resolution that it is worth re-affirming on this topic is that our timeframe for the solution constrains the tactics we can choose. If we ask ourselves, “How can Australians reduce terror in the next 6 weeks?”, our answer is most likely to be focused on policing and security. To reduce terror now, we have to take terrorists’ motivation as a given, and focus our energies exclusively on reducing their opportunities to act by increasing surveillance and coercion.

But what if we ask ourselves, “How can Australians reduce terror in the next six years?” or even “… in the next six decades?”, what then? These longer timeframes invite attention to social psychological factors. Sectarian violence between Catholics and Protestants decreased from millions of deaths in the 1600s to thousands in the 20th century. This welcome shift occurred without human nature changing, and without the theological differences between Protestants and Catholics being resolved. It is likely that the tactics of conflict between Muslim Shia and Sunni denominations, and between Islamic and the West, will also change dramatically in the 21st century and beyond. How can we ensure that the change will be towards more peaceful resolutions of disputes, rather than towards a new era of atrocities?

Promote and reward political alternatives to terror

A point about political terror which is frequently neglected is that people pick up the gun, the ballot paper or the pen in the context of others’ actions. In a given historical period, there is a dynamic link between state repression and the popularity of terror. This contextualisation of terror in relation to other political tactics highlights two findings of psychological research that could inform counter-terrorism approaches in the longer term.
First, ‘illegitimate’ attacks reinforce the behaviour they target: psychological research shows there is a strong human motive to resist coercion, particularly at the group level. The terror attack on cartoonists will increase the uptake of cartooning in France. The use of murder to challenge the cartoon depiction of Mohammed has already, predictably, increased the prevalence of such depictions. So too militarist violence and repression against terrorists may increase terror. Of relevance to the campaign against ISIS/ISIL in particular, it seems clear that as long as innocent parties continue to be killed and non-violent Muslims continue to be repressed in the name of anti-terror campaigns, then anti-terror campaigns are not only not likely to reduce terror, they are likely to spread it.

Second, the national and world leaders who are building an arsenal of anti-terror choices must collectively address the desired alternative behaviour for their political opponents, and reinforce that alternative. Psychology tells us that one of the reasons why a particular collective action is chosen is if other behaviours are perceived not to work. This understanding can be used to assess recent political events that have involved Muslim groups or individuals. For example, if non-violent Muslim leaders win power democratically (as happened in Egypt), and their overthrow in a coup is tolerated or even funded, it sends a negative signal about the utility of pursuing social change in the Middle East through the democratic process. In addition, funding repressive regimes which kill and imprison innocents, while decrying such practices, also leads to being seen as hypocritical. The longstanding toleration of torture, prisoner abuse, and detention without trial in Guantanamo Bay and elsewhere undermines the credibility of advice to work within the rule of law. In short, even though the motive for supporting political repression, militarist violence, or abuse of the legal process may be a genuine desire to protect against terror, the psychology of group conflict tells us that these approaches sow the seeds of future violence, creating a dysfunctional longer-term dynamic.

We are at pains to say that there is no quid pro quo. All terror attacks are wrong and all victims’ murders abhorrent. The victims of Charlie Hebdo, the people of France, and the world deserve the opportunity for collective grieving, and they deserve the acknowledgement and condemnation of their attackers’ barbarism. There is no moral calculus in which a lack of attention to the deaths of some justifies the murderous attack on others, or one country’s support of murder here justifies attacking civilians there.

There are also Yemeni, Pakistani, or Nigerian victims of terror; there are Indonesians, and Australians in the Bali bombing; there are Syrian and Iraqi victims. Their deaths deserve grieving and their lives deserve celebrating too. There is a moral issue, as well as a clear psychological feedback loop which is arguably reinforcing future terror: on either account, the moral and human rights abuses in the Middle East and elsewhere must be resisted. Militarist violence that props up one abusive power to hold down another must give way to other mechanisms of dispute resolution. Funding for state agents of terror must be withdrawn. Consistent accountability to international law and to war crimes tribunals must be established. These of course are political statements, but they are also recommendations for counter-terrorism policy – recommendations which have an evidence basis in psychological research.

Conclusion

National and world leaders are strenuously engaged in developing counter-terrorism responses to protect their citizens in the aftermath of the Charlie Hebdo massacre and as the momentum of the ISIS/ISIL threat increases. Cool heads and considered responses are essential, and here psychology can contribute some important research-based perspectives on group conflict and dispute resolution. Other areas of psychology also have relevant understandings to offer on how to prevent young people joining the terrorist cause. We must find ways to ensure psychology’s thoughtful and research-based contribution is considered in the development of effective and just counter-terrorism policies and actions.

The author can be contacted at w.louis@psy.uq.edu.au

The reading list referred to in the text can be found in the online version of the article (www.psychology.org.au/inpsych/2015/february/louis).

Acknowledgement

An earlier abridged version of this article appeared online at the In Mind blog, www.in-mind.org/blog/post/empowering-cartoonists-detering-killers-protecting-bystanders-can-psychology-contribute.