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Confronting Apocalyptic Terrorism: Lessons from France and Japan

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Abstract

Terrorists who believe they have a role to play in bringing about the apocalypse pose a serious threat to countries around the world. In their quest to eradicate this especially pernicious form of terrorism, states, including liberal democratic ones, confront the understandable temptation to eliminate such groups through brute force: repression of apocalyptic groups and their constituencies at home and overwhelming military force abroad. Using a comparative case study of France and Japan, this paper argues that such policies actually serve to perpetuate the very conditions that generate further terrorism rooted in apocalyptic beliefs. France's policies of repression of Islam at home and militarism abroad have had the unintended consequence of encouraging attacks by those affiliated with the apocalyptic group ISIS. Conversely, the case of Japan shows that successfully combatting apocalyptic terrorism requires far more understated measures, including respecting religious rights at home and caution in using force abroad.

Key Words

Terrorism, Apocalypse, France, Japan, ISIS, Aum Shinryko, Counterterrorism, Democracies

Introduction

In 1984, a Jewish millenarian group called Gush Emunim devised a plot to destroy one of the holiest sites in all of Islam, the Dome of the Rock and al Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem. The group hoped that the attack would spark a cosmic confrontation between Israel and its Muslim neighbors, which would hasten the coming of the Jewish messiah. In 1995, a millennial Japanese cult released sarin nerve gas in the Tokyo subway system, killing twelve passengers and wounding another 5500. The attack was perpetrated by Aum Shinrikyo, an ecumenical apocalyptic movement amalgamating elements of Buddhism, Hinduism, Christianity, New Age philosophy and occultism. By violently confronting a corrupt and materialistic Japanese society before the impending apocalypse, the group believed it could rid Japan of its “negative karma.” In 2013, the world’s most brutal contemporary terrorist organization, ISIS, burst its way into public consciousness, commencing a campaign of unfathomable cruelty in its self-styled quest to create an Islamic caliphate according to its extremist interpretation of Islam. ISIS grounds its actions in the belief that it is prophesied to bring about the end times and the coming of the Muslim messiah. What ties these three seemingly disparate movements together is their belief that they either have a divinely-ordained mission to bring about the apocalypse or that they play a key role in the “script of cosmic war” unique to their end-times theology.¹ The common belief held by these groups that they have a divine mandate to engage in an apocalyptic showdown as they seek the destruction and transformation of the entire world coupled with their desire to acquire weapons of mass destruction renders apocalyptic terrorism a uniquely dangerous form of violence in the modern world.

How should liberal democracies respond to groups such as these? In their quest to eradicate this especially savage form of terrorism, states, including liberal democratic ones, confront the understandable temptation to eliminate such groups through brute force: repression of apocalyptic

groups and their constituencies at home and overwhelming military force abroad. For example, in response to the 2016 attack in Nice, French president François Hollande promised a “merciless” war against jihadi terrorists. During his campaign to become the United States’ 45th president, Donald Trump pledged on several occasions to “bomb the shit out of [ISIS],” and then fulfilled that promise after taking office.² Both leaders also pursued controversial exclusionary policies toward Muslims in the name of effectively combatting Islamist terrorism.

This article argues that while such policies have proven effective against certain terrorist groups in the past, they are not likely to succeed against apocalyptic terrorism—a form of violence wholly different from that of its conventional counterparts, marked by the presence of a metaphysical political theology, unwillingness to compromise and use of catastrophic violence.³ Through a comparative case study of French and Japanese counterterrorism policies, I show that successfully fighting apocalyptic terrorism requires a different approach, one rooted in caution, patience and a firm commitment to upholding basic democratic principles, including freedom of religion, instead of yielding to tempting but counterproductive policies like repression and militarism.

How is Apocalyptic Terrorism Different?

Brian Jenkins once famously remarked that “terrorists want a lot of people watching and a lot of people listening and not a lot of people dead.”⁴ This maxim certainly applies to terrorists who hold a non-transcendent ideology and seek achievable goals such as independence, territorial autonomy or socio-economic justice.⁵ However, Jenkin’s truism fails to describe terrorists motivated not by class conflict, anti-colonial liberation and secular nationalism but rather by metaphysical, abstract,

universalist or apocalyptic goals. Indeed, groups motivated by such concerns “want a lot of people watching and a lot of people dead.”⁶

Apocalyptic terrorism—the gravest form of terrorism today—is a subset of religious terrorism whose perpetrators, motivated by transcendent aims, carry out attacks uninhibited by the political, moral or pragmatic constraints which guide most other terrorists. Many of the world’s faith traditions depict a distinct vision for the future broadly known as the “end times” or eschatology. While specific apocalyptic beliefs vary from religion to religion, at its core, apocalypticism involves complex theologies of the end of days, emphasizing ubiquitous corruption and depravity at a global level, the belief that the universe needs to be cleansed through a cataclysmic series of events and the return to earth of a messiah who ushers in a reign of peace in a new age of holy utopia after a prolonged struggle or tribulation period.⁷ Many faith believers around the world hold eschatological beliefs and interpret current events in light of these beliefs, but they also presume that they have no control over events which can only be brought about by divine will, and therefore eschew the use of violence. Apocalyptic terrorists, by contrast, believe they have a divine mission to help bring about the end of the present evil age by sparking a global catastrophe that will lead to a cosmic showdown between the forces of good and evil. Essentially, such groups seek to force God’s hand by speeding up the divine timetable for the ultimate final battle through a practice known as “catastrophic messianism.”⁸ In short, the divinely-ordained narrative inherent in apocalyptic theology presents believers with an opportunity not only to observe the “signs of the time” but also to actively participate in the end-of-days drama by helping to bring about the literal fulfillment of prophecy.

Consequently, the goals of apocalyptic terrorism differ markedly from religious terrorism not rooted in apocalyptic considerations. Political scientist Heather S. Gregg classifies religious terrorists into three categories: (1) religiously-based social movements seeking policy change or revolution; (2)

fundamentalist groups fighting against secular influences in society; and (3) apocalyptic groups aspiring to destroy the world in its current form, purge society of sin and initiate the apocalypse. Unlike the terrorism of religious social movements and fundamentalism, apocalyptic terrorism seeks not to change specific governmental policies, instigate popular revolutions, preserve correct interpretations of their faith or impose standards of behavior upon all of society.⁹ Instead, apocalyptic terrorists want nothing less than to secure their own salvation through their participation in an ultimate battle between the forces of good and evil, culminating in the end of times.¹⁰

The literature on religious violence suggests three reasons why apocalyptic terrorism may prove to be an especially intractable problem. The first concerns the metaphysical political theology animating apocalyptic organizations. As sociologist Mark Juergensmeyer explains, “[w]hat makes [apocalyptic] violence particularly savage and relentless is that its perpetrators have placed such religious images of divine struggle—cosmic war—in the service of worldly political battles.”¹¹ Such groups do not have concrete material goals but rather transcendent, spiritual ones in accordance with their interpretation of their religion’s texts, beliefs and practices. Because apocalyptic terrorists do not conform to an earthly logic but instead believe that they have heavenly authorization to hasten the apocalypse in order to achieve the salvation of the world through an overarching trans-historical battle between good and evil, they do not seek to gain popular approval for their actions, nor do they recognize norms of morality associated with conflicts over matters of secular or temporal concern. Accordingly, apocalyptic groups employ extended time horizons when fighting for sacred causes, implying that they are ready to discount present-day costs in exchange for the hope of eternal glory.¹²

The second way in which apocalyptic terrorism represents a unique category of terrorism involves issue indivisibility.¹³ Terrorist groups motivated by a belief in the apocalypse perceive themselves to be engaged in a cosmic war and conflate the spiritual and temporal worlds in such a way

so as to prevent bargaining, compromise and common ground between the group and the state.¹⁴ By contrast, groups seeking terrestrial and well-defined goals like national liberation, regime change, territorial change, policy change, social control, economic concessions or status quo maintenance, even when those goals are rooted in religion, target specific enemies and are not only open to but *desirous of* a seat at the negotiating table.¹⁵ That apocalyptic groups seek absolutist objectives and make unreasonable demands means that negotiations are out of the question.

Third, the violence carried out by apocalyptic groups is of a markedly different nature than the violence of secular and non-apocalyptic religious terrorist organizations. As explained by terrorism expert Bruce Hoffman, terrorism rooted in cosmic worldviews, “assumes a transcendent purpose and therefore becomes a sacramental or divine duty [that] arguably results in a significant loosening of the constraints on the commission of mass murder.”¹⁶ Apocalyptic terrorists declare war on entire populations, cultures and values, and engage in wide-spread, virtually limitless, bloodshed against symbolic targets. They seek the eradication of broadly-construed categories of enemies and a nebulous disorder present in the universe.¹⁷ All members of these “infidel societies,” including the most vulnerable, are considered legitimate targets. Unlike most non-apocalyptic violence, apocalyptic terrorism sees bloodshed not only as a means to an end but as an end in itself—a holy calling to cleanse the world of sin.¹⁸ Because it embraces a wholly different means of legitimization and justification, apocalyptic terrorism thus results in far greater levels of bloodshed and devastation than other forms of terrorism.¹⁹ This logic helps explain why tactics such as suicide bombings, soft target attacks and assaults against members of the same religious or national community are more prevalent with apocalyptic terrorist groups. Furthermore, the theological belief structure of apocalyptic groups makes them far more likely to attempt to acquire and deploy weapons of mass destruction (WMDs) in order to kill as many people as possible, incite a cosmic war and initiate the countdown to the apocalypse.²⁰ For example, the Islamic State has a stated intention to acquire chemical and nuclear weapons, explicitly

declaring this objective in its propaganda magazine, *Dabiq*.²¹ Thus, the possibility that terrorists might acquire and use weapons of mass destruction poses a serious danger to international security.

To be sure, apocalyptic terrorist groups can pursue a wide array of goals in their quest to hasten the apocalypse or otherwise participate in their eschatological timelines. The Islamic State, for example, seeks the establishment of an Islamic caliphate, the overthrow of governments not operating in accordance with ISIS' interpretation of Islam and the implementation of sharia-based regimes in their place. The point, nevertheless, is that in the mindset of apocalyptic warriors, these ancillary goals all work together toward the end objective of fulfilling prophecies about the end of the world.

The Limits of Conventional Counterterrorism

Conventional counterterrorism practice has focused on several different approaches designed to neutralize or eradicate terrorism. Yet government decisions about how best to confront terrorism are complicated by the nature, motivation and strategies of different terrorist organizations. Terrorists operate according to their own incentive structures, which may or may not reflect the calculus of political elites regarding the utility of terrorism.²² That apocalyptic terrorism represents such a fundamentally different threat than traditional forms of terrorism suggests that the way apocalyptic groups end might be different as well, necessitating unique counterterrorism approaches on the part of states.

Governments have developed an array of (sometimes overlapping) counterterrorism approaches, including, but not limited to, law enforcement, political negotiations, repression and war. The first option—law enforcement—treats terrorism like a crime and addresses it primarily through the vehicle of the criminal justice system. The rationale behind employing law enforcement in the fight against terrorism concerns the fact that terrorists, by their very definition, are criminals engaging in

illegal activities such as murder, arson, bombing, money laundering, hostage taking and hijacking. Law enforcement counterterrorism measures might include cutting off means of funding and communication, gathering and sharing intelligence, passing antiterrorism legislation, hardening targets, employing linguists, infiltrating terrorist organizations, manipulating information, providing law enforcement officials with extraordinary investigative powers, enforcing sanctions against state sponsors, cooperating with other countries and international institutions and creating new organizational machinery to coordinate counter-terrorism efforts. Law enforcement tactics certainly have a role to play in combatting apocalyptic terrorism, especially in liberal democratic states which have well-developed structures to deal with crime. The problem, however, is that while law enforcement strategies comprise an effective and necessary response to terrorism, they cannot, on their own, address the root causes of terrorism or understand the underlying ideology or motivation behind different terrorist movements, which is of crucial importance for states attempting to combat apocalyptic terrorism.

The second approach involves political negotiations. The logic underpinning negotiations is that by recognizing legitimate grievances and making certain reasonable concessions to armed groups, governments can help undermine support for violence among terrorist constituencies and encourage terrorist groups to renounce the use of force by isolating their more radical elements. These compromises on the part of the state can help to win the “hearts and minds” of the larger population from which terrorists draw support. The opening of negotiations has paved the way for some terrorist groups to transition away from violence and to a legitimate political process. The classic example involves the Provisional Irish Republican Army, whose participation in negotiations with the British ultimately resulted in the Good Friday accord for how Northern Ireland should be governed. Negotiation assumes that groups engaged in terrorism have negotiable grievances that can be addressed through a political process. However, apocalyptic groups cannot be negotiated with inasmuch as their overarching

objectives are tied to the transcendent and spiritual concerns of the non-material world and compromise amounts to betraying the faith.²³ Moreover, apocalyptic terrorist groups consider violence to be the *only* way to achieve their goals, and therefore consider negotiations to be anathema to their guiding ideology.²⁴

Governments undertake the third and fourth counterterrorism approaches—repression and war—with the intention of making violence too costly for actual or potential terrorists. The logic behind these approaches is that when states develop a reputation for being “tough on terrorism” they can deter future attacks. Conversely, states that attempt to negotiate with or otherwise appease terrorists send the message that terrorism can yield desirable outcomes.

In certain contexts, repression in the form of brute force, assassinations or collective punishment has proved to be a successful strategy. Serious terrorist movements like Russia’s Narodnaya Volya, Argentina’s Montoneros and People’s Revolutionary Party, Peru’s Shining Path, Uruguay’s Tupamaros, Brazil’s Popular Revolutionary Vanguard and National Liberation Action, and Sri Lanka’s Tamil Tigers were all eventually neutralized through the use of force.²⁵ Such groups, however, did not hold apocalyptic (or even religious) worldviews and instead worked toward earthly, concrete and limited goals. Scholarship has shown that regimes that attempt to quash or prevent religious (including apocalyptic) terrorism through such brutality tend not to be as successful over the long term.²⁶ Indeed, repression can have the exact opposite effect of generating terrorism by feeding into the “cosmic war” narrative of martyrdom offered by the apocalyptic script. Furthermore, repressive policies risk undermining the liberal quality of democratic states in situations where members of a terrorist organization cannot be effectively parsed out from the population at large.²⁷ Such policies risk alienating the large masses of people in the middle who support neither the state nor the agenda of terrorists, further undercutting the ability of the state to deter or respond to future attacks.²⁸ In short,

indiscriminate repression serves to turn apocalyptic terrorists into martyrs, rallies the general populace to the terrorists' cause and leads the uncommitted to lose faith in the state.²⁹

While repression may, in certain cases, represent a viable option for effectively combatting domestic terrorism, depending on the nature of the group involved, it is not a practical way to deal with threats from abroad. A fourth alternative is to declare war on terrorist groups emanating from other countries through military invasions, missile strikes, occupations and special operations. After the terrorist strikes of September 11, 2001, the United States embarked on a campaign known as the "Global War on Terrorism" to eliminate al Qaeda and related groups. This war witnessed the toppling of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan one month after the 9/11 attacks, the invasion of Iraq in 2003 and subsequent ten-year occupation of that country, drone wars in Pakistan and Yemen and special operations in dozens of other countries. These efforts, however well intentioned, have, in reality, served to generate terrorism and aid in terrorist recruitment. As concluded by political scientist Robert Pape in his study of suicide terrorism, "[t]he use of heavy offensive force to defeat today's terrorists is the most likely stimulus to the rise of more."³⁰ Such actions are also deeply counterproductive in that they play into the narrative proffered by purveyors of apocalypticism of an end-of-times cosmic showdown between the forces of good and evil. Before the American invasion in 2003, Iraq witnessed virtually no terrorism. After the ousting of Saddam and subsequent military occupation, the number of terrorist attacks increased exponentially. From 2014-2016, Iraq experienced an average of 3,400 attacks per year, a large number of which were carried out by the apocalyptic group ISIS. Similarly, in the years preceding 2001, Afghanistan suffered an average of about eight terrorist attacks per year. Once the United States began its "longest war," the number of terrorist groups and attacks greatly increased. From 2014-2016, the country witnessed, on average, 1,600 attacks per year. The American intervention in Libya reveals the same pattern. Before the intervention against Muamar Qaddafi, terrorism in Libya was virtually non-existent. From 2014-2016, the average number of terrorist attacks in the country rose to approximately

500 per year.³¹ All three countries have also given rise to apocalyptic terrorism in various forms. In short, the history of apocalyptic terrorism and limited amount of scholarly work on how terrorist groups end suggests that brute force, either in the form of repression or war, may not be the best strategy for eliminating apocalyptic terrorism, even if these strategies have proven successful against other groups.

Confronting Apocalyptic Terrorism

The uniqueness of apocalyptic terrorism confronts policymakers with serious counterterrorism challenges. On the surface, it might seem that the abstract and supernatural goals of apocalyptic terrorism coupled with its use of unrestrained, indiscriminate violence leaves no real policy options for states other than eradication. After all, such groups cannot be reasoned with, negotiated with or coerced into changing their worldview; and while law enforcement can be a useful strategy in the fight against terrorism, it does little to address the underlying sources of apocalyptic violence.

Nevertheless, the scholarly literature and empirical record suggest that governments trying to deter or respond to apocalyptic terrorist groups can actively work toward their implosion by pushing them to undermine themselves—a goal unlikely to result from conventional counterterrorism measures alone. To this end, governments should pursue three alternative counterterrorism approaches. First, they should avoid overreacting and applying the indiscriminate use of force against the broader communities apocalyptic terrorists claim to represent; instead, to the extent that force is used, it should be narrowly focused on perpetrators of violence and the organization's leadership responsible for spawning the apocalyptic worldview. Avoiding the excessive use of force and broadly discriminatory policies can avert creating a self-fulfilling prophecy that directly plays into the apocalyptic narrative and pushes terrorists and their constituencies closer together instead of driving a wedge between them. Knowing that widespread and disproportionate counterterrorism measures will likely exacerbate

grievances among the wider population and legitimize their agenda, terrorists carry out attacks in the hope that they can provoke overreactions by states against the very communities these groups claim to be defending.³² In such contexts, extremists are much more likely to find a receptive audience to their message that their faith is under siege, that the apocalypse is at hand and that violence is justified.³³ Conversely, studies reveal that when states use force discriminately in their counterterrorism policies and do not engage in discriminatory counterterrorism strategies they reduce grievances among their moderate citizens, impede radicalization and discourage attacks.³⁴ In this way, by making it harder for apocalyptic groups to secure support from their constituencies, states can keep terrorists from overcoming their collective action problem.

Second, because leaders of apocalyptic movements (both violent and nonviolent) present their followers with a convincing, theologically-grounded explanation for global disorder, offer a way to combat it, and portray themselves as indispensable to the grand vision of the group, decapitation can have the effect of irreparably fracturing the organization, causing it to implode or, at the least, to be weakened. For example, the al Qaeda “brand” became less reputable among extremists throughout the Muslim world after the assassination of its charismatic spiritual leader, Osama bin Laden, and the accession of bin Laden’s lieutenant, Ayman al-Zawahiri, who lacked bin Laden’s moral authority, allure and motivational skills. In the case of Japan below, the capture of Shoko Asahara, the charismatic leader of Aum Shinkyko who enjoyed centralized power within a hierarchical organization, ultimately led to Aum’s implosion. Examples of non-apocalyptic groups seriously damaged by decapitation include the Shining Path, Kurdistan Worker’s Party (PKK), and the Real Irish Republican Army (RIRA).

Yet the killing or capturing of terrorist leaders alone may not be enough to cause the demise of an apocalyptic organization if that group commands a good deal of popular support. For this reason, states should simultaneously pursue a third strategy of opening up space for the development of a

marketplace of ideas which can empower rival liberal and moderate voices to challenge the theological claims made by apocalyptic warriors who claim to represent the will of God. Through the protection of religious liberty, states can indirectly contest apocalyptic groups and naturally weaken the appeal of apocalypticism at its root by amplifying its internal inconsistencies and challenging its mythology on theological grounds. The logic behind this approach is that open theological debate might lead members of apocalyptic groups to question the views propounded by their spiritual leaders, ultimately resulting in theological alterations away from cosmic warfare.³⁵ By protecting and promoting freedom of religion, states can facilitate the disintegration of terrorist groups from the inside without rewarding terrorists through concessions or attempting to repress them through the use of force. Indeed a burgeoning scholarly literature has found that repression of religion is casually related to the onset of violent religious extremism in various forms.³⁶ On the other hand, religiously repressive governments encourage theological indoctrination—including apocalypticism—by both facilitating social exclusion and self-imposed isolation and stifling open debate and the channels of discourse about the proper interpretation of religion.

The Cases of France and Japan

Having established that apocalyptic terrorism constitutes a unique form of terrorism, poses a distinctively dangerous threat and requires a special governmental response, the present section examines the counterterrorism policies of two advanced industrial democracies: France and Japan. These countries were chosen for three reasons. First, they are arguably the two liberal countries that have faced the greatest threat from apocalyptic terrorism in the past 25 years. Second, they are also two of the world's most mature democratic countries. According to the democracy watchdog organization Freedom House, Japan and France rank among the world's freest countries over the past 50 years, with

neither country witnessing any democratic backsliding. Third, France and Japan share important socio-economic traits. Both countries have nearly identical levels of socio-economic development as measured by per/capita GDPs (\$38,578 in France; \$38,983 in Japan in 2017). They spend similar amounts on national defense, score similarly on corruption, have comparable birth/fertility rates and life expectancies, and boast stable social structures. At the same time, despite these similarities, France and Japan have adopted radically different counterterrorism approaches, making for a natural comparison between them. France faces a threat of apocalyptic terrorism stemming from alienated Muslim communities receptive to ISIS' message of cosmic war. This danger has been exacerbated by Paris' counterterrorism policies at home and abroad, namely repression and war. On the other hand, Japan's response to the apocalyptic terrorist cult Aum Shinryko was characterized by a low-profile and effective approach, marked by moderation and restraint.³⁷ The Japanese case shows the effectiveness of its approach to combatting cosmic warriors—one from which other countries can learn.

The Case of France

France has witnessed a recent and dramatic rise in apocalyptic terrorist incidents. Prior to 2012, most of the terrorism that occurred in France was of the secular variety, carried out by organizations like the Corsican National Liberation Front (FLNC), Basque Fatherland and Freedom group (ETA) and the Breton Liberation Front (FLB). France also has a history of religious terrorism. From 1994-1996, the country experienced a rash of attacks carried out by the Armed Islamic Group (GIA). However, these attacks were not rooted in apocalyptic considerations, but rather were orchestrated with the intent of forcing Paris to end its support for the repressive incumbent Algerian government. Things began to change in 2012. From 2012-2014, France experienced sporadic attacks carried out by lone wolf terrorists

who drew their inspiration from apocalyptic theologies of violence. Apocalyptic violence hit France *en masse* beginning in 2015. In that year, apocalyptic terrorists targeted France 13 times, including ten attacks in Paris alone. These attacks resulted in 153 fatalities and left another 421 individuals wounded. The trend continued into 2016, with eight more attacks carried out throughout the year. Among these attacks was the particularly gruesome strike in Nice in which Tunisian terrorist Mohamed Lahouaiej-Bouhlel drove a cargo truck into crowds of people celebrating Bastille Day on the Promenade des Anglais. This attack alone resulted in 520 casualties, including 87 deaths.³⁸

The majority of apocalyptic terrorist attacks in France have either been directed by the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) or carried out by individuals acting on behalf of its ideology. Historically, apocalyptic belief has played a marginal role in inspiring Islamist terrorism. However, in its various propaganda statements, ISIS has clearly articulated a political theology of apocalypticism, claiming that it embodies the fulfillment of various Islamic prophecies and that through the establishment of the caliphate led by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi it can play a key role in instigating the final battle between the forces of Allah and those of Rome (the Western Christian world).³⁹ The sequence of political events triggered by ISIS will hasten the arrival of the Muslim messiah known as the Mahdi, Judgment Day and the ultimate triumph of Islam.⁴⁰ ISIS grounds these apocalyptic beliefs in its interpretation of a corpus of eschatological hadith (rather than the *Qu'ran* itself) on which it draws to attract Muslims around the world to its cause, command ultimate loyalty and justify radical acts of violence.⁴¹

Why has France, more than any other Western democracy, been the target of ISIS-inspired or -directed attacks? While the precipitants are myriad, a large part of the explanation concerns Paris' approach to counterterrorism. In conjunction with law enforcement, France has elected to deal with the threat posed by Islamist terrorism through domestic repression of Islam and military force abroad. As

argued above, the latter two strategies are counterproductive ways of combatting apocalyptic terrorism. ISIS itself alluded to both strategies in a statement released after the Nice attack:

Let France and those who walk in its path know that they will remain on *the top of the list of targets* of the Islamic State, and that the smell of death will never leave their noses as long as they *lead the convoy of the Crusader campaign*, and dare to curse our Prophet, Allah's peace and blessings be upon him, and are proud of *fighting Islam in France and striking the Muslims in the land of the Caliphate with their planes*, which did not help them at all in the streets of Paris and its rotten alleys (emphasis added).⁴²

Domestically, Paris has long sought to isolate religion from public life through an aggressive form of secularism called *laïcité*. Originally, anti-clerical proponents of *laïcité* aspired to free public institutions, particularly primary schools, from the residual influence of Catholicism in public life. Unlike the separation of religion and state found in the United States, however, French *laïcité* maintains a strong division between public and private life, the former being where it is believed religion rightly belongs.⁴³ The concept has since broadened to cover other religious traditions, most prominently Islam in recent times. Supporters of *laïcité* contend that the robust division between religious issues and organizations and political matters both protects the sanctity of religion by insulating it from political squabbles and guards political institutions from interference by religious institutions, while, at the same time, promoting social cohesion and cultural assimilation. Opponents maintain, however, that *laïcité* contravenes the fundamental right of religious freedom and expression by inhibiting religious individuals from observing and practicing their faith publically.

According to the most recent of the Pew Research Center's "government restrictions on religion index," France engages in "high" levels of government religious restrictions, joining the ranks of countries like Pakistan, Sudan, Yemen and Somalia. This is seen most starkly in a 2004 law banning

conspicuous religious symbols in public places, a 2011 law banning full face veils—both passed nearly unanimously by the French parliament—and several local laws passed in 2016 by over 30 French coastal towns outlawing the “burkini” at French beaches after the attack in Nice.⁴⁴ In addition to regulating religious dress, Paris has also passed legislation limiting the establishment of places of worship.⁴⁵ The Pew Research Center documents that France was one of only two countries in 2015 that had more than 200 cases of government force against religious groups – mostly instances of individuals being punished for violating the ban on face coverings in public spaces and government buildings.⁴⁶ At the same time, several politicians called for tougher immigration policies or the restricting of Muslim immigration altogether. Human rights NGOs like Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International have detailed that the government enacted these counterterrorism measures restrictive of Islam in response to Islamist terrorist attacks and fear of growing radicalization among French Muslim communities and how these laws and policies target the French Muslim community disproportionately.⁴⁷

Rather than promoting a sense of secular inclusion, many of the country’s 5 million Muslims see France’s form of aggressive secularism as deliberate attack on Islam—one that conflates the actions of militants with the Islamic religion in general and sees European Muslims as foreign enemies who threaten national harmony and security.⁴⁸ State policies grounded in *laïcité* have served to alienate Muslim communities from the fabric of French life, give rise to a French radical right political movement growing in influence, promote discrimination against Muslims within society, provide a fertile breeding ground for terrorist recruiters eager to exploit the sense of shame and humiliation experienced by marginalized Muslim communities and increase the risk of terrorist attacks. Muslim immigrants to France commonly live or grow up in physically and culturally isolated and rundown “banlieues” apart from more well-integrated communities. In the face of this marginalization, the Islamic State, which seeks to eliminate moderate Islam in the West, offers a compelling alternative narrative of “belonging, purpose, adventure and respect” for disaffected and vulnerable Muslim communities.⁴⁹ As terrorism

scholar Jessica Stern notes, ISIS is much more likely to find foot soldiers “when they can recruit from an existing pool of disenfranchised Muslims.”⁵⁰

Several studies have found that when individuals’ personal experiences mirror terrorist propaganda, they are more likely to support or join terrorist organizations.⁵¹ Predictably, ISIS and other extremist groups have seized on Paris’ treatment of Islam as a recruitment tool in their literature. For example, in various articles in its online French magazine, *Dar al-Islam*, ISIS argues that the ban on religious garb is part of France’s larger campaign against Islam.⁵² This theme would be taken up in several of the Islamic State’s online recruitment videos. Beyond ISIS, the extremist organization al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) devoted an article in the first issue of its magazine *Inspire* to the topic of France’s ban on the face veil.⁵³ Other articles in *Inspire* have been sharply critical of French foreign policy. A 2017 issue, for example, highlighted French foreign policy in the world of Islam, dating back to its colonial history in North Africa.⁵⁴ An earlier edition equated Operation Serval, the 2013 French military intervention in Mali, with a “crusade war on Muslim land and its people.”⁵⁵

This propaganda has resonated with some disenfranchised French Muslims. French nationals have carried out the overwhelming majority of ISIS-inspired or -directed attacks in Europe, often employing brutal suicide tactics. Furthermore, France has supplied a disproportionate number of foreign fighters to fight under the banner of ISIS in the Middle East, while at least 2,000 others remain radicalized within France itself.⁵⁶ A study by William McCants and Christopher Meserole found that the top predictor of foreign jihadi radicalization was whether the home country of the jihadist was Francophone; four of the five countries with the highest rates of radicalization in the world are French-speaking. The researchers attribute this striking finding to French political culture, particularly the aggressive form of secularism part and parcel of *laïcité*.⁵⁷ ISIS has repeatedly threatened those responsible for enforcing these secular values, namely French law enforcement.

This is not to suggest, of course, that all French Muslims who sympathize with or join the Islamic State necessarily hold with the same degree of intensity the apocalyptic worldviews of ISIS' leadership, but rather that terrorist recruiters associated with ISIS have a much easier time persuading French Muslims to join their apocalyptic movement when they can effectively exploit political and social conditions of marginalization and widespread feelings of animosity among Muslim communities. This strategic thinking, which preys upon marginalized and persecuted French Muslims, is used in service to ISIS' grander apocalyptic vision.

Paris has used ISIS-inspired attacks as a pretext for further crackdowns on Muslim communities. After the 2015 terrorist attack in France, the government of President Francois Hollande implemented and then extended a state of emergency throughout the country. The new emergency laws were used to justify widespread religious profiling of non-violent Muslims who frequently found themselves the targets of warrantless house raids, random public searches and personal data seizures — all without judicial authorization.⁵⁸ A 2016 Amnesty International report found that the emergency measures were “implemented in a discriminatory manner, specifically targeting Muslims, often on the basis of their beliefs and religious practices rather than any concrete evidence of criminal behavior,” further embittering millions of Muslim immigrants.⁵⁹ In October 2017, the lower house of the French parliament approved legislation making permanent some of the emergency measures put in place after the 2015 attack in Paris. Critics of the law maintained that the legislation could exacerbate racial profiling by law enforcement against Muslims, thus making it more difficult to fight terrorism.⁶⁰ Indeed, ISIS has proven well able of exploiting this growing anti-Muslim sentiment in order to inspire further attacks.

Paris has not just focused its counterterrorism efforts domestically but has complemented them with military action abroad. This strategy too has had the effect of making France *more* vulnerable to terrorism. The roots of French military intervention in the Islamic world stem from its colonial legacy in

parts of North and West Africa. France has undertaken a series of military interventions in recent years in places like Libya and Mali, and it retains a presence in several African states--actions that have been interpreted by many jihadi groups as part of a larger crusade against Islam. Al Qaida's flagship publication, *Inspire*, for example, singled out French foreign policy as a critical factor responsible for jihadi attacks: "It is France that has committed crimes in Mali and the Islamic Maghreb. It is France that supports the annihilation of Muslims in Central Africa in the name of race cleansing. They are the party of Satan, the enemies of Allah the Almighty and the enemies of His Prophets."⁶¹

More recently, Paris has also become involved in military operations against terrorist groups in the Middle East. In 2014, France became the first country to join a bombing campaign led by the United States against ISIS in northern Iraq. Shortly thereafter, Mohammad al-Adani, the chief spokesman for ISIS, called for attacks against the "spiteful and filthy French" for their role in anti-ISIS airstrikes.⁶² A year later ISIS chose Paris to be the location of its first mass-casualty attack in Europe, resulting in the deaths of 130 people and injuries to another 300. Following the attack, ISIS released a video threatening "all the enemies of Islam and *in particular, France*": "As long as you keep bombing you will not find peace" (emphasis added).⁶³ Clearly, ISIS considered the attack to be an act of revenge for Paris' military actions. After the attack, Hollande vowed a "merciless" war against jihadi terrorists, and Paris commenced flying missions in Syria. After the Nice attack, an ISIS bulletin praised the truck driver, Lahouaiej Bouhlel, for responding to "calls to target citizens of coalition nations, which fight the Islamic state" and "states participating in the crusader coalition that fights the caliphate."⁶⁴

An important objection to this argument is that military action against ISIS eventually led to its demise as a territorial entity and has seriously hampered its ability to orchestrate attacks against Western targets. Nevertheless, proclamations of victory are likely premature. In the first five months of 2018 alone—a period of time immediately following the collapse of its caliphate—ISIS claimed responsibility for seven major attacks in five countries, including two separate incidents in France, revealing its strategic flexibility and staying power. These attacks demonstrate that ISIS is transforming from a geographic location to an idea that is still capable of mobilizing sympathizers throughout the world thanks to its propaganda savvy.

In sum, the case of France reveals a paradox of counterterrorism against apocalypticism: the very militant strategies believed necessary to respond to such a barbarous form of terrorism often end up producing more radicalization and attacks. These attacks, in turn, spawn calls for even greater demonstrations of force abroad and repressive policies at home, which directly feed into the apocalyptic worldview proffered by ISIS. French counterterrorism policy has proved counterproductive in that it has largely accepted instead of attempting to discredit the Manichean dualism of the ISIS narrative, one that sees the worlds of Islam and the West engaged in a cosmic struggle over modernity and Western values.⁶⁵ While there is obviously no single policy prescription for successfully countering terrorism, a strong case can be made that had Paris chosen a different approach—one rooted in freedom at home and caution abroad—that it might have been more successful in combatting ISIS-related militants.

The Case of Japan

Even before the attacks of September 11, 2001, academic and policy discourses regarding the nature of and threat posed by religious terrorism have centered on the religion of Islam. Nevertheless,

every religious tradition has its own history of breeding faith-based violence, including eastern faiths generally considered pacifist and known for their tolerance, empathy and nonviolent protest. In 1995, an apocalyptic terrorist cult rooted in Hindu and Buddhist doctrines named Aum Shinrikyo (Supreme Truth) staged a dramatic chemical attack in Tokyo, unleashing sarin gas in the subway system at rush hour. The attack resulted in the deaths of 12 individuals and injuries to thousands of others.

Guided by a half-blind mystic named Shoko Asahara, Aum embraced a strongly Buddhist interpretation of cosmic history. Asahara taught that there had been three millennial eras since the death of the Buddha: an initial period of “perfect law” (*shoho*) in which humankind accepted and practiced the teachings of the Buddha, resulting in a state of tolerance and peace; a second age of “imitative law” (*zoho*) during which people began to drift from the Buddha’s teachings; and a final epoch marked by “degeneration” (*mappo*) when the world had either forgotten about or renounced the Buddha’s teachings. The concept of *mappo* was used to explain the chaotic and miserable state of the present world.⁶⁶ Aum also taught the importance of past deeds (*karma*) and “state of mind” (*jukkai*) in explaining the world’s lack of peace and harmony.⁶⁷

These theological beliefs might seem innocuous enough, but Aum simultaneously held much darker ideas that viewed those outside of its movement who impeded its messianic vision to be enemies of the truth and threats to humanity itself who deserved to die for their unbelief. Through death, those killed by Aum would be forgiven for their sins and have their souls saved. Asahara also prophesied an impending global war of catastrophe involving the use of weapons of mass destruction led by the United States and Japan in which the forces of evil would destroy themselves. Aum also held that ubiquitous destructive materialism had thrown the world, and particularly Japan, into disarray and that the world could be cleansed of its impurity only through a radical transformation involving the annihilation of the evil global culture of the modern world. Only those who had accepted Aum’s teachings would be spared.

Aum believed it was a sacred conduit to bring about the apocalypse and the spiritual transformation of the world by instigating a third world war, after which the group would be granted eternal salvation for eradicating the forces of evil.⁶⁸ Asahara predicted that the countdown to the apocalypse would begin in 1995, made possible by an act of mass violence that would trigger Armageddon.⁶⁹ Thereafter, a new age of peace and harmony would dawn.

It is important to stress the potential threat posed by Aum Shinrikyo. In order to fulfill its prophetic scenario, Aum made numerous attempts to procure weapons of mass destruction from different sources. Beginning in the 1990s, it unsuccessfully attempted to purchase a nuclear weapon from high-level Russian officials. Thereafter, the terrorist cult focused on building its own bomb, using uranium mined from a farm it had purchased in Australia. Not able to buy or build nuclear weapons, the cult then turned to seeking chemical and biological agents, the former being its weapon of choice in the subway attack. Had the sarin used in the attack been pure and more effectively weaponized, likely hundreds, if not thousands, of people would have been killed.⁷⁰ Documents found after the Tokyo attack revealed that the group was also interested in cultivating a biological agent called *botulism bacillus*—a poison 5,000 times stronger than sarin—along with gas laser weapons, space-launch rockets and tanks.⁷¹ Aum had also stockpiled large amounts of chemical weapons, planning to use them in future attacks. Clearly, Aum intended to use weapons of mass destruction in order to kill as many people as possible while causing maximum chaos. After the Tokyo attack, some terrorism scholars feared that Aum's use of chemical weapons would forever change the face of terrorism.⁷²

In many ways, Aum benefitted from extensive legal protections afforded to religious organizations and an open and permissive religious economy largely free from state interference. Before World War II, the Japanese government sharply repressed minority religious groups not aligned with the state in order to maintain its social and national cohesion through the Peace Preservation Law. Tokyo

dramatically reversed course following the war, ensconcing religious liberty in its constitution and almost completely deregulating the religious marketplace. In 1951, a Religious Corporation Law was enacted that provided certain religions business privileges and a great degree of autonomy from government oversight and police inquiries—a law that Aum effectively used to its advantage. Tokyo’s reluctance to involve itself in religious affairs thus had the unintended consequence of allowing Aum to carry out its activities free from interference, even after it transformed into a threat to Japanese society. For example, Aum had murdered several individuals, both inside and outside the group, and attempted several unsuccessful attacks prior to 1995. The Tokyo subway attack occurred nine months after Aum first attacked using nerve agents in the town of Matsumoto. Only after the subway attack, however, did Japanese law enforcement officials consider the organization to be a serious threat, despite its history of engaging in illegal activities over the previous six years.⁷³ For this reason, Aum’s activities should be considered more of a failure of intelligence and law enforcement, which “studiously avoided investigating Aum,” rather than the result of Tokyo’s commitment to freedom and human rights.⁷⁴

Indeed, Japan’s carefully-guarded principle of religious liberty brought on by its own record of religious persecution before and during World War II proved to be its greatest counterterrorism weapon in the wake of the subway attack. In a climate highly conducive to overreaction, the Japanese response to the attack was characterized by discipline and caution. The government primarily pursued a law enforcement strategy against Aum. It acted swiftly and vigorously to bring the perpetrators of the attack to justice, arresting and jailing Aum’s high-ranking members, closing many of its facilities, subjecting the group’s activities to special monitoring, accessing its centers and records and stripping it of its status as a registered religious corporation. The government arrested Asahara three months after the attack, and sentenced him to death in 2004. A reform to the Religious Corporation Law provided police with enhanced monitoring capabilities and placed serious limits on the group’s activities, requiring Aum to provide the state with membership lists and financial reports every three months.⁷⁵

More important, however, was how the government did not respond. The subway attack severely tested Japan's commitment to free religious exercise. Some elements within society and political elites called for greater restriction of religions that deviated from Japanese norms. Importantly, however, Tokyo did not compromise its commitment to religious liberty in the wake of the attack. In fact, in many ways, the attack actually served to strengthen freedom of religion in Japan. While the state took decisive action against those involved in criminal behavior and restricted Aum's activities, the Ministry of Justice did not ban Aum by applying the Anti-Subversive Activities Act of 1952 for fear that such a move would unduly compromise Tokyo's commitment to freedom of religion, nor did it criminalize religious behavior in general.⁷⁶ Recognizing that the vast majority of Aum's members did not have violent tendencies or even know about their leaders' criminal activities, Japan focused entirely on those responsible for crimes against the state. No attempt was made to bring Buddhism or any other religion under the control of the state, and the courts continued to protect minority religious groups—including Aum—from majoritarian tyranny.⁷⁷

Nor did Tokyo pursue its counterterrorism policy by means of militancy abroad. Outside of Japan, Aum commanded a following numbering in the tens of thousands, operated 30 branches in six countries and possessed international assets estimated at one billion dollars.⁷⁸ The state refrained from carrying out any militaristic activities against Aum members in other East Asian countries, and did not interfere in the counter-terrorism operations of other states.⁷⁹

The state's approach of pursuing Aum's leadership aggressively but not resorting to repression or war yielded tangible results. After the Tokyo attack, the terrorist cult experienced precipitous declines in membership, from a peak of 45,000 to fewer than 1,000 today. It carried out no further successful terrorist attacks. In 1997, the group changed its name to "Aleph," renounced Asahara's theology of catastrophic messianism, issued a formal apology for the subway attack and paid reparations to the

victims. Its members continue to practice their faith, albeit under the supervision of the state. A strong case can be made that a more repressive or militaristic policy after the subway attack would have played directly into the narrative being proffered by Shoko Asahara, making further attacks much more likely. Instead, Tokyo's counterterrorism policy of restraint served to undermine Asahara's apocalyptic theology at its root. At a time when the threat of indiscriminate violence perpetrated by terrorist organizations has led many states, including some liberal democratic ones, to embrace repressive and militant measures, Japan's deliberate and restrained approach grounded in liberty and human rights offers a different model for states to fashion their approaches to counterterrorism .

Conclusion

Apocalyptic terrorist groups hold extreme millennial visions of a cosmic showdown in which unbelievers will be destroyed. These groups interpret current events in light of these beliefs, imagine that they have a role to play in bringing their eschatological scenarios to fruition, perceive the present world as intrinsically evil and believe that they are involved in a war against their governments and societies at large that seek to thwart their divinely-ordained mission and destroy their movements. Apocalyptic groups may be relatively small, but their members possess messianic zeal and are highly committed to their group's cause, as extreme as it may be, seeing violence as a sacred duty intended to purge the world of immorality and sin and central to their the end-of-days script.

What kinds of policies states can pursue to facilitate the implosion of apocalyptic groups sooner rather than later? This article has made the case that groups motivated by different objectives and ideologies call for different counterterrorism strategies to defeat them. Put differently, counterterrorism methods that have proven successful against non-religious and non-apocalyptic religious terrorist groups may not have the same effect—or even prove counterproductive—when applied to apocalyptic terrorists. States confronting apocalyptic terrorism have the opportunity to learn from the successes

and failures of others, especially in the face of rising stakes as these groups seek to acquire weapons of mass destruction.

The cases of France and Japan demonstrate that government policy has an important role in undermining and containing the apocalyptic narrative. First, as the case of France shows, if states fail to make an explicit distinction between the individuals who genuinely threaten others with terrorism and the broader constituencies those terrorists claim to represent, they end up playing directly into the prophetic scenarios espoused by the group's theology. The widespread use of force against such groups and their sympathizers may well seem logical and necessary, but, in reality, such tactics serve only to fulfill the group's expectations of a cosmic war between themselves and their enemies, thus making the spread of apocalyptic ideology more likely and harder to contain. Second, while it might be tempting to respond to the barbaric atrocities of apocalyptic terrorist groups with grand displays of military force, such actions risk engendering a self-fulfilling prophecy of an ultimate cosmic showdown. As a psychological weapon of the weak, terrorists hope to overcome the collective action problem by provoking an overreaction on the part of the target state that would lead more moderates to support violence. For example, as made clear in a series of provocative videos, ISIS hopes to goad France and other Western states into military conflicts in the Middle East in order to pave the way for the final cosmic battle in Dabiq, Syria. Third, government counterterrorism policy can play a critical role in helping to create conditions in which better theological alternatives can arise, in this way undermining the root of apocalyptic violence.

In sharp contrast to France, Japan adopted a very different—and successful—approach to combatting apocalyptic terrorism. In response to the 1995 attack in Tokyo, the Japanese government acted decisively, aggressively pursuing those responsible for the attack and their supporters. Japan did so, however, in a manner respectful of religious freedom in accordance with its commitment to human

rights central to its Peace Constitution. The state did not ban Aum Shinrikyo, nor did it take anti-religious measures by targeting all religious groups. On the contrary, the state continued to respect the rights of all religious communities (including Aum) to a degree that is difficult to imagine in most countries today. In the end Aum ended up imploding, eventually splitting in 2007. It carried out no further terrorist attacks, and thousands renounced membership in the organization. Such a happy outcome would have been less likely had Japan chosen an overly militaristic counterterrorism strategy repressive of religion rather than its more low-profile, restrained, patient and deliberate approach.

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