

Manila (Philippines) and the Resorts World complex: The Isis in our minds

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Even as we grieve and condole with the families of the victims of the attack by a lone gunman at the Resorts World Manila casino and hotel, the question that will linger in our minds is what we ourselves would have done if we had been there on that fateful evening. Would we have rushed to the nearest exits at the first burst of automatic gunfire? Or would we have retreated into our hotel rooms, or sought refuge in the nearest restroom, upon hearing the word “Isis” shouted in panic by terrified guests?

At the Resorts World the other night, the best course of action for the guests would have been to get out of the building as soon as the gunman started shooting and setting fire to the place. But, that’s all in hindsight — only because we now know the gunman did not aim his gun at anyone, and that he was alone. In other words, he couldn’t have been a terrorist. It would have made perfect sense to get out of the place at the first sign of trouble.

And that’s exactly what Department of Health spokesperson Eric Tayag, in the aftermath of this tragedy, advises the public to do in case of fire. “Just go out because the fire consumes oxygen and emits carbon monoxide or toxic gases. Do not have second thoughts, just go out. Don’t waste time.”

This, indeed, is what commonsense dictates — in a preterrorist world. The same advice could get one killed in a real terrorist attack. In past terror incidents abroad — at airports, concert venues, and other public places where many people are gathered — people have been observed to instantly flee if they could, or to drop to the ground and not move, aware that any movement could be a magnet for gunfire.

At the Resorts World complex, the guests behaved precisely according to their perception that this was a terrorist attack. They panicked at the sound of the word “Isis.” Those who were near the exits quickly made their way to the street outside, unmindful of the possibility that gunmen could be waiting for them at the ground floor exits. Those who were caught inside froze where they were and sought safety in the company of others, behind the illusory security of locked restroom doors. Little did they suspect that the whole place would soon be plunged in darkness and enveloped in thick toxic smoke. Most, if not all, of the 37 dead victims died from suffocation.

The terrorist network Isis has taken responsibility for the attack, claiming the solitary gunman as one of its own. But Philippine security officials are one in saying this was not an act of terrorism. The gunman didn’t fire at the guests, or at anyone for that matter. He burned a few gaming tables as though in fury, and raided the room where the casino kept the gambling chips. According to the police narrative, he then entered one of the hotel rooms on the fifth floor, and — in what seemed like an act of madness — wrapped himself in a petrol-soaked blanket, and set himself on fire. All this, according to the police, doesn’t fit the portrait of a typical terrorist.

But, what is a typical terrorist? Everywhere in the world nowadays, we hear of the most bizarre and

outrageous attacks being committed by individuals who employ the oddest means imaginable to inflict the greatest harm on innocent people. They may or may not have been ordered, prompted, or inspired by the Isis. Their connections to the Isis or any other terror network may be real or imagined. It makes no difference anymore.

Whether we like it or not, the Isis has succeeded in lodging itself in our minds like a worm. The enormous fear we associate with it now inescapably frames our experience of the everyday world. Governments invoke its dark menacing presence to justify further restrictions on fundamental freedoms, or to use repressive measures to go after the state's perceived enemies.

It is encouraging to hear the Philippine National Police immediately discount terrorism as a motive in the Resorts World attack. Perhaps this is its way of calming down a public that has just been introduced to the threat of a looming Isis caliphate in Marawi City. Or, maybe this is an attempt to stem the negative publicity that turns tourists away from the gigantic gambling and entertainment havens that have become the vanguard of the modern tourism industry. Whatever the reason might be, it hasn't erased the Isis from our minds.

Over in Mindanao, President Duterte is making the case that terrorism and drugs are now conjoined as a twin evil, thus implying the necessity of conflating the war on drugs with the war on terror. If true, this makes everyday police operations an integral part of a permanent war without boundaries. It also makes the assertion of human rights and civil liberties in the face of a grave national security threat seem selfish and misplaced.

Writing one year after the 9/11 attacks, the American philosopher Richard Rorty warned against the dangers posed by an undeclared national security state that has grown in response to the terrorist threat. "We may have the strength to keep our democratic institutions intact even after realizing that our cities may never again be invulnerable.... But we shall only do so if the voters of the democracies stop their governments from putting their countries on a permanent war footing—from creating a situation in which neither the judges nor the newspapers can restrain organizations like the FBI from doing whatever they please, and in which the military absorbs most of the nation's resources."

Rorty didn't live long enough to see the worst of his fears confirmed—the election of Donald Trump as US president, and the rise of strongmen who ride on the wave of populist paranoia.

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P.S.

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