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The worst start to a year?

Has there ever been a worse start to a year? January has always been my least favourite month; long, cold and grey. The only glimmer is the prospect of a new start; the offer of renewal as the calendar page turns.

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But even that irrational flicker of optimism has been removed by recent events in Paris. I was there last week, and shared with URBACT colleagues the shock and numbness of recent brutal events.

The city was eerily quiet. The hotel was half empty and the streets seemed much less busy than usual. The passport control guard confided that Eurostar had had a 33% drop in bookings since the attacks. Visitors are staying away and even most Parisians seemed to be staying indoors. What happens now?

As the dust settles, what will be the repercussions of these events? The debate rages over the scope for increased levels of surveillance, challenging the balance between the need for security and civil liberties. However, after recent NSA revelations, many Europeans feel skeptical about knowingly permitting Governments to snoop on our every activity. Increasingly, if you live in one of Europe's major cities, coping with the consequences of the War on terror, feels like an inevitable risk of daily life. We take our chances.

Following the Paris outrage, citizens demonstrated their commitment to free speech and the principles of the republic on the streets of the capital and throughout France. That didn't happen after London's 7/7 bombings, nor after the explosion at Atocha Station, Madrid. Perhaps, after the years of austerity and the almost universal mistrust of the establishment, there is a changing mood music.
 Who benefits?

But who will benefit from this? I'd like to think that these horrible events will have a unifying effect, but the terrorist agenda is to set us all against one another. The far right see it as a further opportunity to scapegoat migrants, as we have seen before with organisations like Golden Dawn in Greece and the attacks on immigrants in the Tor Sapienza housing estate in Rome. Classically, in uncertain times this is the irrational fear of 'the other' which can be powerful even in places where migrant numbers are minimal – as with the cases of the Pegida demonstrations in cities like Dresden.

The reality is that those preparing to make mischief are using the actions of extremists to threaten and intimidate minorities in our cities. And we know where that leads, unless it is challenged.

At emotional times like this, it is important to be clear about the facts. Unfortunately, this does not always trouble sections of the media. For example, residents of Birmingham UK were surprised to hear last week that, according to Steve Emerson, a Fox News expert, they were living in a 'totally Muslim place' where 'Non-Muslims just don't go." "What you are describing sounds like a caliphate" said the concerned Fox news anchor.

The reality is rather different. 21% of Birmingham's 1,000,000 population are Muslims. This may be one of the UK's most diverse conurbations, but it is far from being a caliphate! Birmingham has a long history of absorbing and integrating migrants from all over the world. Brummies routinely cite their city's diversity as one of its strengths, and Emerson's remarks provided great material for local comedians in a week when jokes were thin on the ground.
Poverty and Inequality

The truth is that Muslims are amongst the most disadvantaged and vulnerable communities in Europe. In the aftermath of the 2005 London bombings, the UK discovered that the perpetrators

were British citizens from urban areas in the north of England. Growing up in deprived conurbations, they felt little sense of connection with mainstream British society. France is coming to terms with a similar story, after home-grown terrorists from disadvantaged banlieus committed last week's atrocities. But as Arun Kundnani points out in his excellent book, The Muslims are Coming!, generalizing is always dangerous.

Poverty and inequality is not an excuse, but it is a driver for alienation and anger. It can provide the tinder for the spark of radicalism, particularly when disaffected young people feel that they have 'nothing to lose', one of the key findings from the London riots investigation in 2011, which involved a large cross-section of society . Access to education, opportunities and employment with decent pay and reasonable prospects are the most effective weapons against this kind of angry disconnection.

In countries like the UK and France, young Muslims are disproportionately represented in the prison system, an evident recruiting ground for radical organisations. Muslims represent 4.7% of the population of England and Wales but account for 14% of the prison population. As many as 60% of France's prisoners identify themselves as Muslims, according to a recent parliamentary report. Across Europe, there are many organisations tackling these issues, such as Maslaha which bring an innovative approach to supporting young Muslim prisoners But the alienation and potential scapegoating of an entire religious group is a wider societal problem, for which we all have some responsibility.

Those of us who believe that diversity, tolerance and mutual respect are at the heart of cohesive cities have as responsibility to set an example in whatever way we can. If we all hate each other, the terrorists have won, and our cities will die.