

## Terrorism Expert Knoope: “Much of the World Hates Us”

**Dutch counter-terrorism expert Peter Knoope zeroes in on what motivates terrorists and has words of caution for the west: “Much of the world hates us. What we see as progress, they see as neo-colonial”.**

Dutch foreign policy expert Peter Knoope has a warning for the West: We force our concept of history upon the rest of the world. And that is a serious blunder. “We are oblivious to what is developing in the non-western world. The anger, the discontent, the anti-western sentiment”.

“We still think we need to democratise. We think our secular, future-focused thinking still has some kind of currency in a world where the majority of people are anti-western. That worries me,” says Peter Knoope. Until last year he was director of the ICCT, the International Centre for Counter-terrorism, where he is now an associate fellow. He is also senior visiting fellow at Clingendael, the Dutch Institute for International Relations, a post that sends him on missions around the world. “What I’m seeing is cynicism in the extreme. I’ve flown to Myanmar, to Mauritania, to South Africa – I am hypermobility itself. And when people in these places see that Syrian refugees, that are confronted with serious suffering, are not being welcomed in Europe, it evokes anger”.

### Barbaric Violence

During a recent diplomatic trip, he heard a remark that stuck him like a needle: “Most of the people here are anti-western”. It came from a Frenchman he had met in Niger. And its implications, says Knoope, are enormous. Those words, *most of the people here are anti-western*, spoken in a random African country hang above European heads like a sword of Damocles. “And this is not only the case in Niger, but also in Nigeria and Chad, in Cameroon, in all of Sub-Saharan Africa, and in large parts of Asia”.

Take another incident. In the Chinese embassy in Pretoria, Mr Knoope came across a promotional brochure meant for citizens of the South African republic: “China is happy that the one-hundred-year humiliation of barbaric European domination has finally come to an end”.

“We are oblivious to what is developing in these areas. The anger, the discontent, the anti-western sentiment. Behind the small group of people that have been mobilised by Islamic State (IS) and are prepared to perpetrate barbaric violence is a sea of people who understand full well why”. Knoope wants to uproot terrorism at its base, a goal, he urges, that is even more important than combating the phenomenon itself.

### Terrorists’ Motivations

“It took a long time before the question *what motivates terrorists?* could be asked at all. It was politically incorrect to pose it in the years following 9/11”, says Knoope. “Between 2001 and 2007, those who did were even viewed with suspicion. People saw it as a show of sympathy for the perpetrators”.

He has since seen a change in the Americans' war rhetoric. The turning point came in 2011. "This had to do with the combination of the Arab Spring and the death of Osama bin Laden. The Arab Spring gave a sense of hope. As did the idea that al-Qaeda had no part in it – that it wasn't a religiously motivated uprising but a civilian one. It signalled the demise of Al Qaeda. Space emerged in which to study terrorists' motivations. The American president Barack Obama, inspired by Hillary Clinton, has moved this agenda forward in recent years, making money available and launching new programmes".

Meanwhile bombs continue to fall on Syria. Knoope: "The Pentagon has its own agenda and its own inertia, which are difficult to redirect. We know that removing leaders isn't always strategically wise. A terrorist organisation is like a pyramid. When you remove its top man, he is replaced by someone more aggressive. Look at Abubakar Shekau, who followed Mohammed Yusuf as the leader of Boko Haram in Nigeria. Strategically, it is smarter to erode the base. But it is hard for our military to hear that their machinery is not 100% equipped to achieve the result they hoped to achieve".

### **What Binds 5 Billion People?**

The worldwide character of al-Qaeda and IS is new. "Globalisation, which began with Christopher Columbus, has rapidly intensified in the last two decades. The global character of terrorism is unprecedented and is impossible to compare with previous waves", says Knoope. "It's like a water bed. You push it down here and it rises up there. That's one thing we've learned in the last years".

But how does one erode the base? Knoope: "The first step is to try to understand what people are resisting against. Otherwise you cannot offer an alternative. IS has an appeal in China, Indonesia, Pakistan, Afghanistan and in the Central Asian republics, all the way through to Russia, the Middle East and North and West Africa. You name it. What underlies all this? What is it that binds these people in the common conviction that they have something to resist? So long as we don't understand this, so long as we continue to drop bombs on the situation and answer with violence, we won't solve the problem".

### **Pretentious View of History**

Coming to a better insight into what history means to another is a start, he says. This, because the seeds of violence are already present in our pretentious view of history. "Our western society, with its modern outlook on life, is afflicted with a belief in the future. The entire modernisation mind-set relies on the 'makeability' of the future: the world will get better, the world will change and our economy will grow. But for many people in this world, time is something very different. For large parts of the world population, the world is not about tomorrow but about yesterday – about what have we gone through, what went on in the past, in my culture, in the lives of my ancestors. Those hundreds of years of history are the baggage on everyone's back. The future is a fantasy". Therein lies a part of the problem, says Knoope. "Western modernism tends to refute this vision of the past. And that causes an enormous disconnect".

"A group of more than five billion people reject the modernisation mind-set. They say, 'What you are telling us about the future isn't our future, it's *your* future'". This short-circuiting sends young people

searching for alternatives. Knoope: “This is when you start to see tradition and history and the ‘true’ interpretation of Islam appear, and you get a group that says, ‘We have an alternative to offer. We’ll provide you with a place to live that is based on the past, on our own rich history, and one that offers a community that stretches from Indonesia to Morocco. Feel at home.’ Meanwhile our conviction that modern society will lead to a worldwide secularity, a growing market and scientific advancement is considered in large parts of the world as a western, neo-colonial agenda. The modernists never meant it that way, of course, but when you ask people in Africa, they say, ‘That is just your new way of looking at us and telling us that we are inadequate.’ And because leaving religion behind is part of the modernisation project, it leads to resistance and the religious component comes all the more to a forefront”.

So is there such a thing as fundamentalist secularism? Definitely, says Knoope. “It is fanatic. People who are a part of ISAF, the NATO-led security mission in Afghanistan, tell me without batting an eye that the people in Afghanistan are two thousand years behind. Then I ask: behind what exactly? They were of course referring to our modern, secular, scientific vision of the future to which, as the modern mind-set has it, the entire world population will have to submit”.

### Postcolonial Disappointment

The problem of modernisation, says Knoope, has entangled itself with the emancipation ideology of the postcolonial period, which began around 1960. Many people in the former colonies are disappointed. Independence has failed to live up to expectations. “The postcolonial promise of progress – we’re going to build up our own countries and make something of them – has turned into postcolonial anger. If you ask the average young person in North Nigeria what democracy has brought for him, he answers: ‘Nothing. A corrupt police force and a dangerous army. That is our democracy. Thank you, Europe.’ The democracy that was installed in large parts of Europe’s former colonies has done nothing for the people it was meant to serve. And yet we continue to say that democracy is the miracle cure”.

What irks Knoope most is that many of these countries had well-functioning systems of traditional governance in place. “If one man stole another man’s cow, they’d sit under the tree and sort it out together. Conflicts were settled between the people themselves. But traditional conflict resolution was replaced with a western system of judges and lawyers. That system doesn’t function well at all in these places – unless you have money to bribe the judge. Prisons are overflowing with people still waiting to see a judge or a lawyer. The old system of justice was completely dismantled and replaced by what the west imposed under the label of democratisation, human rights and ‘international law’. But in everyday practice, people see that it only brought misery. And then al-Qaeda comes along, or IS, or a group like it, and they say: ‘Democracy? What good is it? What has it ever done for you?’ These groups push their way into politics. Of course, many people strongly condemn the horrible, brute violence these terror groups perpetrate, but they do understand it”.

Is there a peaceful solution? “As a first step, we must understand that we can no longer force our modernity on our former colonies”, says Knoope. “We must find the humility to realise that modernity is not appealing enough for everyone to embrace. Then all you can do is look within non-western communities to find indigenous solutions for justice and good governance. Look to what tradition has

produced and find ways to enrich this with new elements. It is extremely important to look to the past. These people must organise their contemporary societies according to their own history and tradition. Their identity is vested in their past, not ours. We think, following the liberation movements and fight for independence, that colonialism ended decades ago. We have left it behind us — but the people who lived it have not. In their collective consciousness and history, it constitutes an important part of their identity”.

### History of Humiliation

It is important that we realise that many people who support Boko Haram and IS really do consider us enemies, emphasised Knoope. “We are bad, that is their solemn conviction. They are convinced that westerners are trying to marginalise, humiliate and denigrate Muslims and that we are unwilling to afford them an equitable, legitimate position in the world. We are killing them in the Middle East, Chechnya and Bosnia, we torture them in Guantanamo Bay. When a Muslim tries to cross a national border, he is singled out and humiliated. And now streams of Muslims are heading to Europe from Syria and Iraq. We all know how that’s going”. All of this feeds into a history of humiliation, and that is something to remember as the flow of refugees swells.

Knoope draws an important lesson from history. “Generational solidarity plays a far bigger role than we realise. People’s anger for what their parents endured is many times greater than the anger felt by the parents themselves, who lived through the events. That anger is passed on across generations. What you are is in large part rooted in your solidarity with your parents. One probes this at his own risk, because doing so cuts straight to people’s core values. That can be explosive”.

*Anne Luyten is a freelance journalist based in Brussels. A version of this interview, written originally in Dutch, [appeared in Knack](#) on 10 November and has since been shared nearly 100K times. It was translated from the Dutch by Jack McMartin.*