

Our security is important but our freedom is precious

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Barack Obama took care to avoid conflating Islam and terrorism in his State of the Union address. Photo: Bloomberg

In the aftermath of the Sydney siege and the Paris shootings, and in light of the growing might and reach of Islamic State, Boko Haram, and other terror movements, US President Barack Obama is talking tough.

In his State of the Union speech last week, President Obama said the US stands united with all those people around the world who have been terrorised by extremists. "We will continue to hunt down terrorists and dismantle their networks, and we reserve the right to act unilaterally, as we've done relentlessly since I took office, to take out terrorists who pose a direct threat to us and our allies," he said.

Young Muslims often endure a casual bigotry that can be hard to live with.

Mr Obama took care to avoid conflating Islam and terrorism, instead saying the US continued "to reject offensive stereotypes of Muslims - the vast majority of whom share our commitment to peace".

Moderate politicians everywhere have largely been careful to avoid painting all Muslims with the colours of extremism. Most understand that Islam is in fact a largely peaceful religion, as is Christianity and Judaism, and all three religions have had their share of violent extremists in the past. It goes without saying that many of the world's extremists these days are indeed militant Muslims, but their outrage seems less a product of their religion than of their poverty, their marginalisation and the difficult lives they lead in many parts of the world.

Young Muslims in France and in many other Western nations, including Canada and Australia, often endure a casual bigotry that can be hard to live with, especially alongside the high levels of unemployment, frustration and poverty commonly seen in the Paris banlieues, or in some of the rural towns of northern England, or, for that matter, in parts of Sydney, Melbourne or Brisbane. White angst and immigrant demoralisation can combine to create a toxic environment where extremism thrives.

Further afield, many Muslims in northern Nigeria, the stronghold of Boko Haram, have been living in poverty for decades; first marginalised by the nation's colonists and Christian missionaries, now by the nation's Christian elites. Disaffected Muslims in Iraq and Syria can be drawn to what seems to be the valour and religious fervour of their co-religionists in the Islamic State movement, and young Pakistanis and Afghans may find some form of personal validation by joining the unwavering Taliban.

Although most Muslim clerics are men of peace, extremist fanatics exist and these days their preachings can be widely disseminated on the internet. Particularly attractive to youngsters on the fringes of society, to the rootless, and to those who feel a burning sense of injustice, the propaganda from these jihadist preachers can be hard to override. The lure of righteous adventure remains potent, especially when it's aligned with a way to avenge supposed slights and insults.

As part of Australia's \$630 million anti-terrorism package, \$13.4 million has been set aside to try and prevent young and disaffected Australian Muslims from succumbing to the emotional

rhetoric of jihadist preachers and turning to the supposed heroism of fighting for their faith. Australia's diversionary strategies will include a broad array of individually targeted mentoring, counselling, and mental health services.

A further \$6.2 million will go funding an Australian Federal Police "diversion and monitoring team" to keep an eye on returning foreign fighters and their supporters; \$32.7 million for a multiagency "national disruption group" to investigate and prosecute these foreign fighters and their supporters; and another \$11.8 million to the AFP to boost its ability to respond to foreign fighters.

With the threat of often-suicidal militants, and extremist "lone wolves" who may be inspired by violent, pseudo-religious propaganda, many would argue that we live in a world more dangerous than it was when the September 11 militants attacked the US.

Security is, of course, important - so important that Australia is spending by far the bulk of its anti-terrorism package on boosting security agencies. Other anti-terrorism measures in the package include increased powers to arrest suspected terrorists without a warrant and to extend questioning, as well as designating as an offence travel to certain areas without a legitimate reason.

Yet it should perhaps be remembered that erratic, lone wolf militants can be hard to second-guess, and any society so secure that it could have definitely prevented the violence in Paris or even Martin Place, is not a place where many of us would like to live.