

Brussels horror reminds us about threat at home

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In the wake of the Brussels slaughter, Malcolm Turnbull is right to say that Australians stand with the people of Belgium, share their condemnation of terrorism and are united in efforts to defeat a common enemy.

But he is wrong to foster any sense of comfort for us by insisting that the Europeans have “allowed things to slip” or that our social or security situation is markedly different. Europe’s problem is graver and larger than ours but, in essence, it is reflected here. Rather than laud our own success, we must look to the European experience to ensure we learn lessons vital for our security.

More than 100 Australian jihadists have joined Islamic State and just as many have been blocked from leaving. We have suffered three fatal terrorist incidents in 18 months and, over a longer period, security agencies have thwarted six plots, including planned mass casualty attacks. Some Middle Eastern and African Muslim cohorts haven’t integrated as successfully as earlier waves of immigrants, and hot spots of Islamist extremism have developed in Sydney and Melbourne.

Yet the Prime Minister, like many political leaders, tends to talk about this issue without referring to the enemy: Islamist extremism. This reluctance to name an obvious threat tends to be patronising towards Muslims, who are familiar with the problem, and can frustrate the wider public, who want to know their leaders value strong security over political correctness.

The evil perversion of the Islamic faith that has motivated slaughters from New York to London, Baghdad to Jakarta and Brussels to Martin Place must be confronted in language and education, as well as in security terms. It will not go away just because some refuse to speak its name.

Mr Turnbull avoided the word all day yesterday but was forthright in a foreign policy speech last night at the Lowy Institute. “The attacks are an unfortunate reminder of the current challenges facing Europe, where violent Islamist extremism appears to have reached a crisis point,” he said.

There should be no surprise that the latest atrocities have prompted British Brexit campaigners to suggest there is little point staying in the EU when its capital has become the headquarters of barbaric jihadist extremism in Europe. Critical questions surround Europe’s open and, until recently, largely unsupervised borders in the face of mass migration, the growth of large and disaffected Muslim communities within European nations, and the recklessly lax vetting of refugees. More than a quarter of Brussels’ 1.8 million people are Sunni Muslims, many living in the teeming district of Molenbeek which, thanks to radicalisation by Salafist extremist imams, has become a cauldron of jihadist fomentation backing Islamic State. This is where fugitive terrorist Salah Abdeslam found refuge and evaded capture for four months after last November’s shocking terrorist attack in Paris.

Molenbeek has featured in just about every recent European terrorist attack, as a jumping-off point for jihadists or a place for them to find refuge. It has aspects of being an extremist ghetto. It has been the source for more than 500 jihadists going to fight with Islamic State in Syria and Iraq. Yet neither Belgium’s government nor the EU, headquartered in Brussels, has

been able to do anything much about this jihadist cancer at the heart of Europe. Feebly, Prime Minister Charles Michel has conceded that “there is almost always a link with Molenbeek (and) that’s a gigantic problem”.

Now Belgium — and Europe — is witnessing the consequences of allowing such hotbeds of terrorist activity to develop and if the tragic events at Brussels’ airport and a metro station do nothing else they should spur Europe into taking far more decisive action to end the unchecked inflow of migrants from Turkey. However worthy the humanitarian arguments may be, there can be little doubt that the flood of migrants is seriously exacerbating the tensions and sense of disaffection in places such as Molenbeek. This is being exploited by the Islamists. Belgian authorities believe many of the jihadists who have been fighting in Syria have returned, using the unchecked migrant wave to avoid detection.

Among others, French authorities have confirmed that two of the Paris attackers re-entered Europe by pretending to be refugees and followed the so-called Balkan route to Austria from Greece before reaching Belgium and the safety of community support in Molenbeek.

The EU’s protracted failure to effectively halt the flood of migrants, though it is now showing some signs of improvement, has played into the hands of Islamic State and, in no small measure, assisted the Brexit movement in Britain which is capitalising on deep-seated fears that the UK also could be sucked into the vortex of the uncontrolled migrant mess that Europe has brought on itself.

Chillingly, the European security agency says there are at least 5000 trained jihadist operatives in Europe, many battle-hardened returnees from Syria. Before new border controls began in Turkey this month more than 250,000 Syrians had arrived in Greece just this year; in addition to more than a million who arrived last year. Multiple raids by Belgian police in Molenbeek before the latest atrocities uncovered large stockpiles of weapons and authorities were surprised by the level of support shown for jihadists. Brussels is not alone in being faced with such seething unrest.

In recent years, almost no major European city has been immune to terrorism, with Brussels and Paris only the latest after a string, including London, Madrid, Stockholm and Copenhagen.

Mr Turnbull is wise to warn Australians that terrorists sow hate and aim to divide us. We must be resolute but tolerant. But French Prime Minister Manuel Valls, who inspired his country after the Paris attacks, is right to declare boldly that Europe is “at war” with jihadist terrorism. We are too.