Tributes and messages to the victims of the Manchester Arena suicide attack on May 22, 2017. AAP/Terry Waller

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The recent terrorist acts in Manchester, Brussels and London prompted British Prime Minister Theresa May to argue for a more punitive counter-terrorism approach. She mooted longer prison sentences, stronger deportation regulations, and stopping the freedom of movement of suspects.

The notion that recent events necessitate changes to legislation is in part based on the idea that they are somehow different from previous incidents. Yet many past incidents have either had unclear motivations (the “lone wolf”), or apocalyptic tendencies (Japanese doomsday cult Aum Shinrikyo in the mid-1990s), or have used everyday items to perpetrate their crime (al-Qaeda and 9/11).

Changing tactics

Terrorism is a chameleon by its very nature. Developing new and inventive ways to shock and challenge political authorities is fundamental to the phenomenon. Air hijackings were used until Entebbe in Uganda in 1976, where counter-terrorism forces freed hostages aboard an Air France flight. Hostage taking was de rigueur for a while.

Fears about the potential of weapons of mass destruction attacks rose considerably after the sarin gas attacks in the Tokyo subway in 1995. As a “weapon of the weak” that seeks to spread fear, terrorism is necessarily adaptive.

What is consistent across the dynamism is an emphasis on challenging the politics of the day. Given this, ensuring a balance of security and liberty is central to any effective response. Thus the recent suggestions by May are unfortunate.

Human rights and protection both possible

For example, detaining more suspects for longer is illogical. Recent analyses show that Islamic State (IS) was created by a group of men who had been detained together in Camp Bucca after the 2003 war against Iraq. Seasoned military officers, ideologues and political minds were brought together, detained, mistreated and denied any future role in their country. The result? IS.

Altering aspects of the law that currently enshrine various human rights is also nonsensical. Keir Starmer, current Labour MP and previously director of public prosecutions (DPP) in the UK from 2008 to 2013, brings this to life.

In an article in The Guardian, he states that during his five years as DPP he saw many cases involving serious terrorist plots, but that human rights laws never prevented the Crown Prosecution Service from pursuing a prosecution, or the dedicated counter-terrorist teams from monitoring and apprehending suspects.

He says that from his experience both as DPP and previously as a human rights lawyer, human rights and effective protection from terrorism are not incompatible.

Countering terrorism

Given this, then, how do we tackle terrorism? We do not want innocent people being killed, injured or threatened. The ability to respond quickly and with a variety of options is important: it demonstrates that the state has the capacity and resolve to try to protect its citizens.

Police were at the scene of the June 3 attacks on a busy Saturday night in London within a commendable eight minutes. The SAS Blue Thunder unit was deployed for the first time.

Notably, though, this is a double-edged sword. It can make people feel safe in the short term but having the military involved in internal security is a temporary measure. It threatens to give kudos to the attackers ("we provoked them enough to launch their best unit") and increase militarisation – a phenomenon where military options are given status and seen as the first choice response for a variety of problems

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A more sustainable security option is to actively engage the community. A serving firearms officer in the UK claimed that the problem is less about having a tactical response team, or high levels of surveillance, or highly stringent legal constraints upon persons of interest, but rather that it is the lack of community police officers.

Maintaining a proactive policing capability that has a finger on the pulse and a good working relationship with the community is key. Another part of the puzzle is that citizens be engaged. That is, people can either run, hide and tell (if appropriate), or, if there is no other option, seek to act in times of attack.

Turning a crowd at a pub into a group that can help foil attacks or diminish damage is not a silly idea – as long as this is not just mob violence run amok.

Rejecting violence

The answer is also broader than the question of terrorism per se. Devaluing violence as a general rule makes it more apparent when individuals are likely to see violence as a means to an end.

It is statistically significant that male terrorists are likely to be perpetrators of domestic violence. Female suicide bombers have been motivated by calls for redemption after being victims of honour crimes or domestic violence.

Empathy, education and a rejection of violence as an option for action in liberal democratic societies is what provides the most solid platform for addressing terrorism. Revisiting and revising human rights laws is ineffective and counter-productive, playing into the hands of those who would undertake extreme acts by forcing the state to manifest extremism itself.

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