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SEARCH

The art of understanding reality and the science of mitigating the context

by Saviour Formosa

Ojalá, "insha Allah (إن شاء الله)", oxalá, "ghada min rah"... so many terms, so many languages but still one direction: the future is unknown but will definitely make an appearance. One that may yet see us taken aback should preparedness find us wanting. However, the future is only defined by the state of the present decision-making processes and the foundations laid in the past. Thus, the Maltese phrase "ghada jmiss mal-lum" is so highly dangerous when taken in a safety and security context. Complacency brings lethargy and eventually shock.

A few examples which caught the world unawares: 9/11, Exxon Valdes, Hiroshima, Chernobyl, the Berlin Wall, the Titanic and the famous collapse of the banking system.

Lets us take a step closer to home and one finds that we were not immune to short sharp shocks that made us reconsider our safety and security profile from the individual to the national levels: the 1960 Twanny Aquilina murder, the 1985 Egyptair Flight 648 hijacking, the 1988 taxi driver murders, the 1995 Um El Faroud explosion, the 2008 Naxxar fireworks explosion and the list goes on...

Some definitely were totally unpredictable and unplanned-for, others required a minimal degree of enforcement, yet others were the result of utter inobservance of the law. Both the world and the microcosm called Malta have a habit of pushing the boundaries until the straw breaks. Then it is fever time and panic breeds more security-checks and in turn more social reactions and upheavals. The last few "Arab Spring" months have shown what sheer reaction can achieve: from a speedy capitulation (Ben Ali) to insistent thuggish blowbacks of Egypt's hordes to army clampdown in Syria and outright civil war in Libya. Well, that said, ruling individuals and groups who stay in power for long tend to become accustomed to their seat and lose contact with the reality around them!

The fomenting aura of such resultant social structures brings about ignorance of the field as the grass roots would have long been parched of sustenance. Having somewhat mitigated internal strife (IRA, ETA, Brigade Rosse...) nations underwent a reversal of security and focused elsewhere. Nations looked outwards in terms of security issues assuming that terrorism strikes in the traditional manner consonant with state-state conflict, until the unimaginable happened: 9/11 in New York, 11/3 in Spain and 7/7 in London gave a lesson to all that the state fed its own attackers through training and education apart from through neglect and distancing as happened in the Paris 2005 and London 2011 riots. In addition, new modes of unrest are manifesting themselves through social network organisation and through informational attacks: online attacks are common and have shut down whole entities in case of cyberattacks and physical cities in terms of riot organisation, a modern day Pandora's box.

Security takes on a new twist as states move into panic mode and commit the dreaded knee-jerk reaction: clamping down on communities or social groups, religious extremists, integrative- projects rejection, state abuse on its subjects and the increasingly 1984-ish scenario of citizen monitoring. The UK's CCTV system is a phenomenon unlike no other: sneeze and you get recorded...

Malta has been lucky enough to bypass any grave incident but has not been left unscathed, especially on the informational front, as in the case of documented hacking in March 2009. The informational agencies, policing and security entities in both public and private domains have geared towards preparedness. But much remains to be done: what protocols will be activated in times of the triggering of a restive technology-savvy youth, as well as a re-evaluation of the effects on crime enacted through the 40-year social engineering exercises initiated through the movement of people in various new town areas that has caused a detachment from the socially-cohesive community structures. Add to this, a reduction in job-security and an approaching potential for rapid environmental change and extreme weather conditions. Malta has no Risk Maps which would serve to create an understanding of the potential risk, but these cannot be entertained solely by the governing body.

Definitely advocating a police state is not on the cards; do that and society will collapse; the adoption of a laissez-faire attitude is neither the solution.

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Malta has a solid legislative foundation in all domains and needs to bring up to scratch its enforcement activity in conjunction with an educational activity across the social, physical and economic structures. Enforcement on its own says zilch, understanding the context is: give the proverbial rod to the fisherman...

However, effective monitoring followed by action will reduce the need for overreaction by the state in time of crises. And this is where the state has to make a move to integrate its efforts with those in the private and non-governmental domains in order to elicit a realistic approach to maintaining the nation as one of the safest on record!

Crimes have been there since man became self-aware and will still continue to adapt to new environments. None can change that as crime morphs faster than the proverbial genie. However foresight and preparedness will ease the integration of security within a cohesive society.

Ojalá can be mitigated.

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