I n a way, it’s like listening to Stephen Hawking talking about the size of the known universe – you know the meaning of the words but the concepts are so overwhelming they seem impossible to grasp.

We know what Islamist extremist terrorists do and what motivates their unspeakable acts but these are so foreign to us they seem impossible to comprehend.

Many people, including in politics and the media, find it so difficult that they simply put their hands over their eyes.

Or they try to rationalise each attack to downplay the sum total – this one was just a nutter, that one was revenge against the US and another was triggered by offensive cartoons.

Tragically, we begin 2015 the way we ended last year, branded by the horror and persistent threat of jihadist terror.

After two innocent people were killed in Sydney’s Martin Place and a dozen were slaughtered in Paris, it’s time we understood what we’re up against.

With more than 20 people in Australian jails serving serious sentences for terror offences after plots to bomb the AFL grand final and attack an army base were thwarted, about 800 of our fellow citizens in Iraq and Syria killing, raping, beheading and butchering any-one who doesn’t side with Islamic State; another 20 jihadist newsmen returned to Australia; and with young men who had every opportunity to be educated, live and work in our country deciding instead to blow themselves up in suicide missions overseas, we need to come to grips with some difficult realities.

What Saudi Arabia calls the “deadly mutation in the heart of Islam” is an extremist cult that sees all non-believers (including other Muslims) as worthless and seeks to use innocent people as an obscure target, these monsters to re-establish a caliphate (or Islamic kingdom, if you like) across the globe.

This is the evil extremist ideology that links al-Qaeda Jamaat, Boko Haram, Islamic State and a range of other groups.

Each time jihadist terrorists kill innocent people, they offer up their grievances (the pretext has been the US military presence in Saudi Arabia, Australia’s role in the Iraq and in Afghanistan, the existence of Israel, or as we saw during the week, the publication of cartoons).

Each, of course, is an issue but the core motivation is a hatred of western values – secularism, democracy, pluralism, free expression and gender equality.

So if we focus too much on individual grievances, we miss the point.

Despite opposing the Iraq war, France has suffered many attacks; 9/11 came out of clear blue skies; Bali was before Iraq; and if a bravely satirical French magazine wasn’t an obvious target, these monsters would have killed at a café, a school or a television station – anywhere to undermine the established order.

In Australia, some political fringe-dwellers and many in the commentariat downplay the Islamist extremist threat.

When Tony Abbott introduced new anti-terror measures, people such as WA Labor MP Melissa Parke, former Labor adviser Stephen Kouloulas, activist lawyer Greg Barns and Ten Network political reporter Paul Bongiorno accused the Prime Minister of trying to distract from budget problems.

Similar taunts greeted the deployment of our military against Islamic State and the government’s elevation of the domestic terror alert.

Even as we saw videos of journalists being beheaded in Syria and photos of Australians displaying severed heads in Iraq, these jihad deniers attacked the media for showing the images more robustly than they did the perpetrators.

On ABC TV’s Insiders, David Marr dismissed the Sydney terrorist showing off severed heads with his young sons as a “depraved clown” and declared that we were “not at risk.”

“They cry wolf, they cry terror; they fan the flames of distrust,” vented ABC opinion leader Jonathon Green. “Who threatens us? Where are they?” he asked.

When 18-year-old radicalised Melburnian Numan Haider stabbed police officers and was shot dead, the deniers talked about a confused teenager just days earlier, Islamic State spokesman Abu Mohammad al-Adnani had issued a global call to arms.

“If you can kill a disbelieving American or European – especially the hateful and filthy French – or an Australian, or a Canadian, or any other disbeliever from the disbelievers waging war … then rely upon Allah, and kill him in any manner or way,” he said.

Just four months later, a score of people have been killed in the US, Canada, France and Australia in attacks with guns, knives and cars.

Not much point denying the problem.

If we understand the threat, we will know that there can be no compromise or negotiation. Pretending it isn’t there won’t make it go away. Remember, we tried that.

Despite warnings, Barack Obama exited Iraq in 2011 and declared the “War on Terror” was virtually over, while Julia Gillard said the 9/11 decade was “virtually over, while Julia Gillard said the 9/11 decade was behind us.

Now, by ruthlessly establishing a caliphate in Iraq and Syria, Islamic State has inspired global jihadists.

Our response needs to be firm across intelligence, security, military, legal, social and diplomatic spheres for decades to come.

We will need to tackle extremism without alienating the overwhelming majority of politically moderate Muslims and we will need to be wary of the threat without allowing it to change the way we live.

It won’t be easy.

Chris Kenny is Associate Editor of The Australian and hosts Viewpoint, 7.30pm Sundays and Fridays on SkyNews (back January 23).

Denying the existence of a murderous movement will not defend us