

Facing the terrorist challenge

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September 11th, 2001 marked a new age in international terrorism. As the hijacked commercial planes hit the World Trade Centers and the Pentagon, terrorism had literally become a global phenomenon. Although radical jihadists had claimed and continues to claim several hundreds of lives in many - especially poor - countries, such a spectacular and cold-blooded operation, hitting the heart of the only remaining superpower, revealed a by-product of globalisation: that not just products, services and companies became global, but so did criminals and terrorists. The perception of security has changed from one day to another. The terror acts of 9/11 were historical in another aspect: never before had so many people died in a single terrorist operation (around 3000). Subsequently, the London and Madrid attacks proved that the U.S. was not the only target for al-Qaeda, but the jihadists viewed the whole Western world - especially the countries participating in the Iraqi War - as their enemy. The high death toll revealed that they were capable of carrying out lethal attacks in European soil.

As an immediate reaction to 9/11, the U. S. government set up a new government body, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) to strengthen public security and prepare for - and rather, prevent - emergencies such as terrorism. Since 2001, there had been 37 terrorist acts in the US, but some of them have dubious motives and could also be classified as hate crimes. Clear links to al-Qaeda or Islamic radicalism could be detected in the case of the Boston Marathon Bombing (April, 2013), the San Bernardino Attack (December, 2015) and the Orlando Nightclub Shooting (June, 2016). Basically for almost ten years (between 2003 and 2013) there had been relative peace and the notion of security had returned to the life of ordinary citizens. With the execution of Osama bin Laden, al-Qaeda lost its leader and its mysterious aura of invincibility. The military victories in the War on Terror (basically in Afghanistan and in Iraq) and the compromise at home - sacrificing certain personal liberties in exchange for more security - jointly paved the way for his ephemeral peace, which lasted until 2014.

Europe as a target

However, the year 2015 opened a new chapter in international terrorism. As al-Qaeda weakened, its more successful, and - in FBI Director James Comey' words - more dangerous rival, the Islamic State (ISIS) stepped into its footsteps. ISIS claimed responsibility for most of the terrorist attacks of the last two years, spreading an unprecedented wave of terror and insecurity - this time - first and foremost, in Europe. Terror attacks shook France, starting with the shootings at the satiric magazine Charlie Hebdo, followed by the massacre in Bataclan, and the Nice truck attack. Brussels, the headquarters of the European Union had not been spared either and a major terrorist attack hit Berlin just a few days before Christmas.

2017 started with a bloody massacre in a popular Istanbul nightclub, leaving 39 dead and it is pretty much unpredictable where ISIS would hit next. No European capital is safe anymore. The U.S. was not left unscathed either: the shooting in San Bernardino and the amok running in an Orlando nightclub claimed more than sixty lives, the latter being the deadliest terror attack in U.S soil since 9/11. What

makes this second wave of terror attacks - since 2014 - special is that the perpetrators - with the exception of two Tunisians, the Nice and the Berlin truck drivers - were not foreigners but French/Belgian or U.S. citizens, second or third generation descendants of immigrant families. Paradoxically, European civilians have been massacred by fellow Europeans, who received terrorist training in Syria or in Iraq, and returned to the EU without any difficulty.

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The dilemma of home-grown terrorism

There is a lot of talk and speculation about the root causes. Has Europe failed in integrating the second and third generation immigrants, who feel frustrated and take revenge, using Islam as a cover? Is Jihad calling the attention to the problems in the Middle East, or rather to the frustration of the non-integrated immigrants? Souad Mekhennet, correspondent of The Washington Post claims in an essay written for the World Economic Forum that the reason for the radicalization of young Muslims was the invasion of Iraq and the war in Syria, thus the responsibility of the West for waging war in their ancient (cultural) home. These second or third generation immigrants are rejecting their parents' vision of economic improvement, but religion is not really their main motivator. Anthropologist Scott Atran in an interview with nature.com explains that frustration and discrimination are the main reasons behind: 7,5% of France's population is Muslim, yet 60-75% of the prison population are Muslim. This is approximately the same ratio as black youth in the US.

But - and this is the key difference - in Europe these youngsters have found a radical ideology which appeals to them. As if somebody said: "Nobody cares about you, but see what you can do to capture the attention of the world". In this interpretation, the main motivation is creating a shock in the society, spreading fear, but interestingly - and contrary to most al-Qaeda terrorists - the new-age radical jihadists do not want to be martyrs: they tend to escape after the attacks. But the picture is more complex if we look at the latest terror attacks in the U.S: jihadism has found its followers even overseas, despite having a much more successful integration record than in Europe.

The criminal background

According to the GLOBSEC Intelligence Reform Initiative, there is a fundamental difference between the 9/11 terrorists and today's jihadists. While the former generation did formally attend training camps and tended to belong to a hierarchical organization, the biggest counterterrorist challenge today is not confronting a set of known terrorist groups, but identifying who is a potential terrorist. Terrorist attacks can happen any time, at any place and can be carried out by lone wolves, not even belonging to any hierarchy. What connects them is usually a thirst for revenge for wars not fought in Europe and a deep desire for media attention. The biggest bonding experience is prison, since most of the perpetrators have served short or longer times behind bars. Most of them have some criminal background, thus they know perfectly well how to acquire guns, share information or falsify documents, get money thru blackmail or robbery, etc. They no longer communicate with easily traceable emails, but through channels which are much more difficult to control (dark net, Snapchat, social media). They are perceived as being always one step ahead in communication technology.

It would be unfounded to believe that jihadism and the challenge of terror will disappear in the next years, thus Europe and the U.S. must work out an effective strategy to fight and in most possible cases, prevent terrorist attacks. In this situation law enforcement and counterterrorism should work hand in hand on both sides of the Atlantic. Cooperation has many sensitive aspects, especially in the sphere of exchanging a sharing information - which is still a major challenge even inside the EU - but it could prove to be vital for the future of our societies.

In our upcoming Euro-Atlantic Cafe, we will address these challenges and try to find answers to questions like:

1. What are the instruments of counterterrorism in 2017? Are Western countries ready and capable of protecting their citizens?
2. Whose task and responsibility is counterterrorism? What role may the police, the special squads or the military play?
3. How to fight the root causes of terrorism? Are their best practices which we can learn from each other?
4. What is the price to be paid for enhanced security? Should we say goodbye to our open societies or “suspend” certain values, as we are fighting terrorist? What can Europe learn from the U.S. and the experiences of the Department of Homeland and Security?
5. How important is technology? Is law enforcement and counterterrorism losing a battle here?

The pre-study on Homeland Security was prepared in the framework of the Euro-Atlantic Café series and it was supported by the US Embassy in Budapest

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