

Radicalisation and Europe's counter-terrorism strategy

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Europe did not wake up to terrorism on 9/11. Throughout its history, it has been experiencing all sorts of terrorisms, leftwing, rightwing, nationalist, social, religious. European counter-terrorism mechanisms date back as far as the 70s and have been part of the Schengen Agreement in the 80s, the 1991 Maastricht Treaty and all of the ensuing Treaties since then. Nevertheless, as was the case for the United States, 9/11 was a watershed for Europe too.

In Europe, 9/11 and Madrid 3/11 resulted in a flurry of decisions, initiatives and mechanisms aimed at enhancing Europe's capabilities in fighting terrorism in all its aspects. After 9/11, old ideas were suddenly propelled centre-stage, such as the European Arrest Warrant. After March 11, EU member states pledged full solidarity if one of them would be the victim of a terrorist attack. Increased counter-terrorism decisions brought the EU in uncharted territory, especially in the realm of Home and Justice Affairs, boosting existing cooperation and furthering political integration to a degree nobody would have imagined some years earlier.

What was created as the result of urgent action, ultimately became a patchwork of decisions and mechanisms so complex that even EU-officials – and not to speak the public at large – lost oversight of what had been decided, who was doing what when and who implemented what decisions. The track record of all these decisions was difficult to assess. So, the UK presidency decided to bring some order in the chaos and elaborated – partly in line with its own counter-terrorism strategy – an overall **European Union Counter-Terrorism Strategy**, effectively streamlining the ad-hoc measures into a single framework.

The strategy is based upon four pillars: Prevent, Protect, Pursue and Respond.

'Prevent' stands for stemming the radicalisation process by tackling the root causes which can lead to radicalisation and recruitment.

'Protect' aims at sheltering citizens and infrastructure from new attacks.

'Pursue' relates to the efforts to chase and investigate terrorists and their networks across our borders.

'Respond' puts into practice the 2004 Solidarity clause by enhancing consequence management mechanisms and capabilities to be used in case of an attack in one of the member-states.

On 1 December 2005 the EU justice and interior ministers agreed on this new counter-terrorism strategy. Subsequently the Heads of State and Government, in their December 2005 Council meeting followed suit and adopted the Strategy.¹

Does this imply the Europeans finally have their proper and effective counter-terrorism strategy ?

Yes and no.

¹ Council of the European Union, 14469/4/05 REV 4 (30 November 2005)

Where Europe's fight against terrorism departs from the American Global War on Terror

The EU now has a strategic concept, multidimensional in character, corresponding to the multifaceted reality that terrorism is. Its strategy even contains a specific European dimension. The fact that the very first pillar of its Strategy (albeit not in its first draft) is titled 'Prevent' illustrates a strategic difference between the European fight against terrorism and the American War on Terror.

Looking at the United States from the outside, it appears as if the US still widely perceives international terrorism as a global external threat to be eradicated – perhaps quite understandably so in view of the magnitude of the 9/11 attacks. Europe never wholly shared the perception that the attacks of 9/11 'revealed the outlines of a new world' and 'provided a warning of future dangers of terror networks aided by outlaw regimes and ideologies that incite the murder of the innocent, and weapons of mass destruction that multiply destructive power'.²

Characteristic of the European approach to counter-terrorism is the constant reminder of the need to address socio-economic and political root causes of terrorism. Until recently this root cause emphasis was largely absent from US counter-terrorism.

As of late however a rapprochement between European and American thinking seemed to occur, as witnessed by President Bush's remarks at the United Nations High-Level Meeting, September 2005. He referred to the 'anger and despair' that feed terrorism. He emphasized that the war against terrorism 'will not be won by force alone' (and that) 'we must change the conditions that allow terrorists to flourish and recruit.' In the course of 2005 the US intelligence community had indeed started to emphasize this root cause's dimension too. To what degree this dimension is now firmly anchored in American counter-terrorism strategy is difficult to gauge for a European, since even Zbigniew Brzezinski did not fail to notice that President Bush's later speeches stand in sharp contrast to his UN address by dismissing altogether the notion that there could be any 'set of grievances that can be soothed and addressed' in order to eliminate the sources of terrorism.³

So Europe now has a concept for fighting terrorism. But in order to have an effective strategy, more is needed than simply a reference framework. You also need credible tools and clear decision making procedures. And here, as usual, we are confronted with Europe's complexity.

In the field of counter-terrorism, we should never lose sight of the fact that member states are primarily responsible for the fight against terrorism. The EU mostly provides only for a framework that adds value to the action of the member states, by strengthening national capabilities, facilitating European cooperation, developing collective capability and promoting international partnership. But in the end, member states remain the ultimate guarantors for intra-European counter-terrorism strategy to bear results.

Europe only works if the perceptions and objectives of its member states converge. Is this the case with counter-terrorism? As always, official statements seem to indicate perfect consensus. In reality, there is a range of issues which continue to generate discussion (or worse: are glossed over), both between and within EU member states. At least three closely related issues stand out:

- the nature of the threat,
- the nature of the terrorist's target,
- and, finally, the nature of the communities most directly affected by today's terrorism.

² President Bush's March 2005 remarks at the National Defense University

³ *Washington Post*, 4 December 2005

The nature of the threat

Routinely, the European Union and its member states refer to terrorism as a ‘global threat’ and stress that ‘most of the terrorist threat to Europe originate outside the EU’.⁴ Behind these phrases however, there are real differences of opinion as to the very nature of the terrorist threat.

In the US, so it appears to a European observer, most observers consider local terrorist groups to be part of a global Islamist insurgency. In Europe at least three distinct views seem to coexist.

A first (minority) school of thought tends to see today’s nebula of groups, cells and individuals as very much being the original design of Osama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri, who according to this view saw themselves only as a spark intended to stimulate autonomous groups to take over the banner of jihad once they themselves would have been eliminated.

A second school depicts international terrorism in Europe as concentric circles around a still lethal al-Qaeda core at the centre, surrounded by a ring of more or less structured ‘ethno-jihadi’ organisations with established contacts with al-Qaeda (Zarqawi’s Tadheem al-Qaeda fi Bilad al-Rafidain, the Chechen jihadi’s *et al.*) and finally a loose and informal conglomerate of freelance jihadi’s.⁵

A third analysis describes the terrorist threat in Europe as a patchwork of self-radicalising cells with international contacts, without any central engine and without any central organisational design.

One can very much doubt that the original al-Qaeda consciously intended to phase itself out as a potent organisation, whereas the concentric circles image suggests a degree of hierarchical relationship that is probably inexistent nowadays.

I thus tend to subscribe to this third analysis. Jihadi terrorism in Europe can therefore best be viewed as largely independent ‘spheres’: an much degraded al-Qaeda core composed of individuals from the original al-Qaeda members that are still at large having thus far escaped arrest; loose networks, such as the GICM, Ansar al-Islam and the Chechen jihadi’s; and finally the freelancers and ‘self-starters’, largely self-radicalising and self-recruiting cells and individuals. These spheres are mainly functioning beside one another, but are being stitched together by occasional and mostly opportunistic links – just like in a **patchwork**, without any leader, without any hierarchy. Such a patchwork is not unlike the leftwing terrorist groups in Europe in the 70s – or the 19th century anarchists for that matter.

The international counter-terrorism cooperation has been successful in degrading al-Qaeda as an organisation and in decreasing its ability to conduct massive attacks.⁶ The era of vertical and hierarchical organised terrorist organisations is largely over. The ‘resident threat’ is the face of terrorism we face today: a patchwork of home-grown networks and ‘lone wolfs’, where almost everyone can be linked, at least indirectly, to almost everyone else – the overwhelming majority of these linkages, however, only consisting of casual contacts and not involving preparations of terrorist operations.⁷

International terrorism has thus largely returned to what existed before the rise of al-Qaeda in the 1990s, with local root causes being the main engine behind terrorist activities. In one important dimension however today’s environment is different from the pre 9/11 era: the global momentum is more enabling and conducive for these local groups, partly due to al-Qaeda’s initial dramatic success on 9/11, partly due to the West’s own discourse unduly exaggerating the importance of al-Qaeda.

⁴ Council of the European Union, 14469/4/05 REV 4 (30 November 2005)

⁵ Philippe Errera, ‘Three circles of threat’, in: *Survival*, Vol. 47:1, Spring 2005

⁶ *Country Reports on Terrorism 2004*. Washington, State Department, April 2005

⁷ Paul R. Pillar, ‘Counterterrorism after Al Qaeda’, in: *The Washington Quarterly*, Summer 2004, 27:3, pp. 101-113

Jihadi terrorism today is a **‘glocal’** phenomenon: its core is essentially local, but its appearances are global. Jihadi terrorism now basically is a cloak patched from different sources of local discontent, real and perceived, stitched together by a puritanical and radical interpretation of Islam and a common experience of perceived and real injustices, thriving on an enabling global momentum. As Mohammed Ayoob from Michigan State University described, “It is the Muslims’ collective memory of subjugation and the current perception of weakness in relation to the West that provides the common denominator among the many divergent manifestations of political Islam. (...) The common denominator among Islamists, therefore, is the quest for dignity, a variable often ignored by contemporary political analysts in the West.”⁸

Osama bin Laden’s main contribution has consisted in plugging into existing insurgencies, rebellions and local brands of terrorism and offering an overarching jihadi perspective to these groups and individuals, who until then merely had their own local agenda.⁹ Al-Qaeda stitched together local opposition groups, disenchanted youngsters in migrant communities in Europe and willing converts, in a shared world view of a worldwide oppressed *Ummah*, offering a salafist reading of the Koran as the religion of the oppressed and offering political symbols such as al-Andalus and a fascinating religion-based utopia – not altogether that different from what Marxism once offered to the oppressed.

So ultimately I do not believe that we are confronted with a formidable global foe. We must stop behaving as if we were in a permanent state of war with a monolithic authoritarian threat, a successor enemy to nazism or communism. I cannot agree more with Zbigniew Brzezinski’s aforementioned warning not to exaggerate jihadi terrorism: ‘The "Islamic" jihad is, at best, a fragmented and limited movement that hardly resonates in most of the world.’

Indeed, by fixating on a global picture, we tend to overlook the fact that most of the local jihadi groups are relatively isolated groupings, rejected by both religious authorities and Muslim communities at large. Opinion polls – both worldwide and in Europe – time and again show large majorities rejecting violence in the name of Islam.¹⁰ By presenting these local groups as a global threat we’re elevating – quoting Zbigniew Brzezinski again – Osama bin Laden’s stature and historic significance to the level of figures such as Lenin, Stalin or Mao – instead of what he really is: a leader of a sect. Unduly stressing the global nature of the threat we boost his appeal to would-be suicide bombers who feel boosted by the worldwide success of a potent al-Qaeda the West contributes to magnify.

The nature of the target

Local groups or global foe: whatever the nature of the threat might be, who are they after ? What is their target? We in the West routinely declare that they are after us, that Western civilisation is the main target of ‘islamic/islamist/Muslim terrorism’, our freedoms, our democracy. How does this claim sound when heard in Amman, Casablanca or Riyadh ?

Our rhetoric often fails to mention that neither Americans nor Europeans are the prime victims of these attacks. The public in the West does not fully realize that the earliest victims of jihadi terror groups did not fall in New York. A very rough estimate puts the number of Muslim victims since the start of the wave of jihadi terrorism in the early 90s at some 175.000 compared to some 4000 Western victims. This pattern has not altered since. The November 2005 attacks in Amman and the increasing death toll in Iraq sadly confirm that Muslims are the ones to suffer the most under these attacks: intellectuals, civil servants, ordinary citizens, security agents in Algeria, Egypt, Yemen, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Iraq.

⁸ Mohammed Ayoob, ‘Political Islam: Image and Reality’, in: *World Policy Journal*, Fall 2004, pp. 1-14

⁹ Olivier Roy, *Globalised Islam: The Search for a New Ummah*, London, Hearst, 2004

¹⁰ ‘Islamic Terrorism: Common Concern for Muslim and Western Publics’. Pew, 14 July 2005; ICM Muslims Poll, July 2005

Taking this reality into consideration, Peter Clarke from the London Metropolitan Police has pleaded extreme prudence in labelling today's main terrorist threat as 'islamic', since this is both offensive and misleading.¹¹ *Al-Salafiyya al-Jihadiyya* being commonly used by the radicals themselves, it might be appropriate to return them the denomination and to call them simply 'jihadi's' and their brand of terrorism 'jihadi terrorism' – thus avoiding giving the impression that we label as perpetrators those who bear the heaviest toll of terrorism: Muslims, especially in the Middle East.¹²

The nature of the communities – and the radicalisation process

After the London attacks in July 2005, Charles Krauthammer in the *Washington Post* wrote: 'Europe has incubated an enemy within, a threat that for decades Europe simply refused to face.'¹³

If you were a Dutchman, a Belgian or a German from North-African descent, born and raised in our countries, how could you not be offended by such a statement ? In fact, who are you ? A Muslim, a European, a North-African ?

This question bedevils migrant communities with a Muslim background and the general public at large in Europe alike. Between and within European countries opinions vary as to the characterisation of the communities involved. Some describe them as 'Muslims' – with the ensuing question: how can a Muslim adapt to Europe ? Others would depict these communities as migrant communities, originated from largely Muslim societies, but socialised through living here – thus as a European from Moroccan, Turkish, etc origin.

Contrary to widespread outside perceptions, migrant communities do not form monolithic blocs. Discussion rages on a large number of issues, exactly as is the case within the surrounding society. The identity of these communities is defined as well by the society they now live in, as by the fact that they originate from recent migration, by their social and economic situation, their ethnic and national origins and – lastly – by Islam.

Lumping all these differences and specificities together into one overarching characteristic and thus transforming distinct communities into a single 'ethnic' community – 'Muslims' – privileges what is only one aspect of their identity to the detriment of all others, which are as crucial and important. Doing so, one fails to notice the very real *national* differences between individuals and migrant communities living in Holland, Belgium or Germany – even if their families originate from exactly the same background. It leads to a religion-based strategy that tries to tackle difficulties and issues that have nothing to do with religion.¹⁴

In fact, they are experiencing exactly the same challenge as their predecessors in earlier migration waves in history¹⁵: who am I and where do I belong to as an individual? As was customary in all previous migration waves, this identity quest is much more demanding for second generation youngsters than it was for their parents.

No longer able to identify with the country of origin of their parents or grand-parents, the countries they now live in constitute their sole natural environment for identification. Within this environment however, and to the difference of their non-migrant friends, they are confronted with a number of real obstacles, in particular discriminations on the job and the real estate market and educational

¹¹ Quoted in *The Guardian*, 29 July 2005

¹² A soon to be released research paper by the Department of Political Science at Ghent University (Belgium) will go with greater detail into the dichotomy between the customary perception of western civilization being the primary victim of jihadi terrorism and the reality that by and large Muslims are the main victims of violence in the name of Islam.

¹³ *Washington Post*, 15 July 2005

¹⁴ Olivier Roy, *La laïcité face à l'islam*. Paris, Stock, 2005

¹⁵ David Masci, 'An uncertain road: Muslims and the future of Europe', in: *The Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life*, December 2004

deficiencies. As a second generation, usually better educated than their parents, they are more sensitive than their parents to the feeling of being excluded or rejected by their natural environment as second-class citizens. When the job market – still the main socialisation channel for individuals – is tight, this increases the risk that in a vicious circle of frustration and dissatisfaction, youngsters from migrant communities choose the easiest way out and pose themselves as victims, projecting onto society whatever ill-fortune they encounter.

And so some of them discover religion – thus assuming for their part the way their society denominates them. But the rise of Islam – amongst youngsters and parents alike – undoubtedly predates 9/11. It is part of a worldwide social phenomenon of increased identity politics and deepening religious commitment as a result of the rapid transformation of societies.¹⁶ Migrant communities with a Muslim background in Europe show signs of both increased religiosity and cultural conservatism – a development not unlike the born-again Christian phenomenon in the United States. Accompanying this development in Muslim societies and migrant communities with a Muslim background is the **increased solidarity** among Muslims worldwide, as revealed by surveys by the Pew Global Attitudes Project and Zogby International.¹⁷

Within these communities – but also amongst converts – rigid interpretations of the Islam, both *tabligh* and *salafist*, provide for a strict set of rules in times of rapid change and uncertainty. The ready availability and the built-in simplicity of salafist books and texts privilege this specific hard-line strain within Islamic thought and practices.

This religious radicalisation however is not to be confused with political radicalisation. The former is more broadly grounded (and usually non-violent and even a-political), whereas the latter is much more limited to the fringes of Muslim and migrant communities – and youngsters.

Mohammed Ayoob's aforementioned 'Muslims' collective memory of subjugation' forms the basis of the increased solidarity among Muslims worldwide. Nothing creates so fertile a breeding ground for political radicalisation as the feeling of belonging to the camp of the losers and upholding potent and aspirational symbols to identify with. Inequity – whether perceived or real – has always been a catalyst for violent political movements. When in the midst of a social transformation, youngsters in particular – in all cultures and for times eternal – generally yearn for more rapid an evolution than their parents. They usually form the backbone of violent political movements and extremist tendencies.

Today exactly such a development is occurring within migrant communities with a Muslim background. Second and third generation youngsters form the core of radical groups of Salafist Islamists and some rapidly radicalise into self-declared local vanguards of the worldwide jihad, sometimes under the influence of a charismatic individual. By seemingly acting in community with a worldwide liberation struggle they develop a sense of self-esteem. This feeling of commonality with jihadi theatres of war is the ultra radicalised and polarising version of a more general sense of the aforementioned increased international solidarity amongst Muslims worldwide.

European security agencies have noted a growing tendency of self-radicalisation and self-recruitment of individuals. Self-recruitment now appears to have become a more important source of jihadi recruitment than any organised international network of recruiters (with the possible exception of recruitment for Iraq).

The process of radicalisation is couched in religious terms, but Islam is not the essence. Self-recruitment is largely the result of an individual track of self-radicalisation outside usual meeting places such as mosques. It more often than not involves individuals with college education.¹⁸

¹⁶ *Mapping the Global Future*. Report of the National Intelligence Council's 2020 Project. Pittsburgh, GPO, December 2004

¹⁷ *Views of a Changing World*. Pew Global Attitudes Project, June 2003; *Muslims in the American Public Square*. American Muslim Poll 2004. Project MPAS/Zogby International, October 2005

¹⁸ Peter Bergen, Swati Pandey, 'The Madrassa Myth', in: *New York Times*, 14 June 2005

Frustration offers the main engine for this process. It mixes a psychological process of personal **re-identification** based upon a growing mental dissociation with society, with a 'politicization' of the individual's views, implying searching (through chat rooms, prisons, backroom meetings) for others with a similar worldview in order to promote one's own agenda. In this process groupthink gradually eliminates alternative views, simplifies reality and dehumanizes all who are not subscribing to their extreme views – especially including fellow Muslims. Ultimately this strategy is self-defeating and will signify these groups's defeat, as was the case with Europe's leftwing terrorist groups in the 70s and the anarchist terrorist in the 1890s, because it increasingly isolates the extremists from the communities in whose name they claim to act.

It cannot be sufficiently stressed that this self-recruitment track only concerns a very limited number of individuals and that it occurs at the fringes of migrant and Muslim communities. But even if the numbers of youngsters involved is extremely small, overcoming this problem is not solely for migrant communities. They cannot solve this problem on their own.

This then goes to the heart of the European strategy for combating radicalisation and recruitment. Nobody in Europe will dispute the fact that preparedness to and prevention of new terrorist attacks are the necessary first level of any counter-terrorism strategy. Repression is thus needed. Hot spots must be checked. Networks must of course be disrupted. Extremist propaganda must be countered. Within the EU some member-states however warn that international and intra-EU cooperation against terrorism has been least successful where it matters most: victory will not be achieved as long as the circumstances are not addressed by which specific individuals turn into terrorists, both in Europe and elsewhere. By stressing the radicalisation process as the main track for counter-terrorism, the danger exists that we overstate the potential results of a purely repressive approach, by leaving a most vital, but less palpable question unaddressed: why do specific individuals appear to be most receptive to radicalisation in Europe ? Why do second and third generation youngsters from North-African descent, age 15-18, appear to be more vulnerable to political radicalisation and self-recruitment than their peers from Turkish descent ?

More important than the message and the messenger is the question why both message and messenger are so successful with specific youngsters. Without acknowledging the dynamics that lead these youngsters down this path of political extremism, EU authorities and member states will never be able to be abreast of events, and will constantly be confronted with the situation that for every 'radicalised would-be terrorist' caught, a new one is in the making, the source of potential recruits seemingly inexhaustible.

Social exclusion, a sense of alienation and the international dimension: all these factors feed into the mindset of youngsters in migrant communities, especially from North-African descent. Radicals capitalise on anger and frustration and propose a simple answer to all their ills: terrorism.

The terror threat within the EU is increasingly home-grown, and international events – and the Iraq war in particular – more and more appear to function both as a booster and a source of inspiration. Iraq is like a black hole that attracts youngsters from all over the world – including converts like Muriel Degauque, a Belgian woman of 38 who blew herself up in Iraq in November 2005. Iraq is now both the primary focus of international terrorist activity and a catalyst for self-radicalisation and self-recruitment worldwide (including the United States).

When President Bush declared: 'We're fighting the enemy in Iraq and Afghanistan and across the world so we do not have to face them here at home'¹⁹ – most European counter-terrorism officials draw exactly the opposite conclusion: we're fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan and doing so the number of would-be terrorists at home increases.

¹⁹ Presidents Bush's remarks at FBI Academy, 11 July 2005

Paraphrasing Abdul Cader Asmal, former president of the Islamic Center of Boston and former president of the Islamic Council of New England, I conclude by mentioning that because concerns of Muslims and migrant communities have been hijacked by a bunch of hoodlums as a pretext for terrorism does not delegitimize the concerns, nor does responding to them in any way justify terrorism. 'Until the issues are addressed, the war on terror will smolder on.'²⁰

²⁰ *Boston Globe*, 3 August 2005