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The Terror Attacks in Paris: Tip of the Iceberg or a Passing Episode?

Yoram Schweitzer and Oded Eran

The coordinated attacks by an Islamic terrorist cell against the satirical newspaper *Charlie Hebdo* and a Jewish supermarket in the heart of Paris, which caused the death of 17 people, realized one of the horror scenarios haunting the security services in Europe in recent years. The threat of a wave of terrorism has been looming in the continent since the attack by a salafi jihadist terrorist organization in Mumbai in late 2008 that claimed the lives of 166 victims; since then there have been warnings about terrorist attacks along the same lines in Germany, France, and the UK. The threat of a renewal of terrorist activity in Europe has grown in the past year, in light of the return from Syria of hundreds of Muslims and European converts to Islam to their countries of origin, primed to continue their struggle and inspired by the call for militant jihad. In the framework of their participation in the civil war in Syria, these volunteers have trained, gained combat experience, and undergone radical indoctrination that defines the West as an enemy that must be attacked. This phenomenon has sent a warning signal to security agencies in Europe about the immediate concrete danger that terrorism will be exported from the Middle East to European cities.

The murder of members of the *Charlie Hebdo* editorial staff – mostly caricaturists who according to the attackers' beliefs had desecrated the image of the Prophet Muhammad – was deliberately aimed against a fundamental value of Western democracy, i.e., freedom of expression. This was followed by an attack against a Jewish site, with the attacker appropriating the roles of judge, prosecutor, and executioner. Regardless of the identity of the jihad organization with which the attackers were affiliated – al-Qaeda in Hejaz or the Islamic State/ISIS – the terrorists embodied the same world view and radical ideology endorsed by these organizations.

As part of the recent wave of Islamic terrorist attacks in Western Europe, a number of attacks were carried out by “lone wolves” in French cities, while the Jewish Museum in Brussels was targeted seven months ago. A key question is thus whether this is merely the tip of a terrorist iceberg that can be expected to increase. Or, is it a passing episode

that despite its horrific nature will not change the policy in France or elsewhere in Europe against Islamic terrorism, because the trauma and outrage it evoked will fade with time.

Terrorist attacks by cells and “lone wolves” that identify with global jihad pose a security challenge for intelligence and law enforcement agencies. A failure to stem the outbreak of a wave of jihadi terrorism in European countries is also liable to spark a violent response against Muslims by extreme rightist groups, who can be expected to exploit the fear of radical Islam to justify their own terrorist activity, motivated by hatred of foreigners, Islamophobia, and anti-Semitism. For these groups, terrorist attacks carried out by extreme jihadi groups constitute grounds for violent action, which will bring about a cycle of violence in European countries that the security forces will be hard pressed to contain. In addition, the existing challenge posed by growing tension between the various communities in different countries will be greatly exacerbated.

For nearly a decade, the security services in Western Europe have foiled more than a few attempted showcase terrorist attacks by al-Qaeda and its affiliates, demonstrating that efforts by terrorist groups to disrupt the democratic way of life could be met effectively on an operational level. The recent attacks in Paris, however, raise the possibility that there were intelligence failures. Advance information about the perpetrators delivered to the French security services did not receive adequate attention – even though the intelligence services throughout the West cannot possibly completely eliminate the occurrence of terrorist attacks.

Yet in any event, Europe is clearly hesitant to act firmly against provocative action by separatist minorities, including violence and terrorism by belligerent minority groups in many European cities. This may reflect concern that a direct confrontation with these groups will develop into large scale riots like those that took place in Paris in 2005, when the outlying sections of the city became a war zone in which the French security forces were pitted against minorities, primarily from North Africa. There is also concern that launching a multi-faceted campaign against minorities on legal, policy, and cultural levels will be regarded by many, certainly by the minorities themselves, as a violation of individual rights. Europe is already experiencing a rising wave of xenophobia, and political parties espousing such ideology scored considerable success in last year’s elections to the European Parliament. At the same time, the minorities in Europe, including refugees who arrived in recent years from economically depressed regions and Middle Eastern battlefields, are not only a burden on welfare services; they also constitute a source of cheap labor. For this reason, their presence in the continent, where the population is aging, has positive economic value.

Many countries in Europe will likely prefer to have European Union institutions initiate legal and other action against certain aspects of immigration, certainly illegal immigration, and that means be taken through the EU to reduce the economic burden

related to immigrants and minorities, even though the countries themselves would still be responsible for much of the problematic aspects of immigration. Due to the sensitivity of the issue, particularly in Germany, German Chancellor Angela Merkel has spoken against the political and social movements opposed to minorities. For the same reason, Germany will likely prefer action in the EU framework.

The questions that must be asked, however, are: what action, and against whom? The frameworks for the war against terrorism have existed in the EU for years. These include a European Council resolution dated November 28, 2008 defining what constitutes a terrorist act (which revised a previous resolution from 2002), and the 2005 European plan for a war against radicalization and recruitment of terrorists. An anti-terrorist group has also been founded among the European institutions in Brussels. What, then can be added to this, other than declarations of intentions? Will the EU dare make decisions about restricting immigration, including legal immigration, and will the authorities in various European countries decide to take forceful action against minorities that have taken control of areas in major cities and have taken the law into their own hands?

Another key question concerns the possibility that the events on European soil will bring about a change in the policy of France and other leading European countries on the character and extent of their involvement in the campaign against ISIS in Syria and Iraq. At this stage, despite the sharp condemnation by leaders in France, Germany, the UK, and the US following the terrorist attacks in Paris, it is difficult to find any signs that the firm rhetoric will lead to the dispatch of ground reinforcements in Iraq or a change in the policy of the countries in the coalition fighting against ISIS in Syria. Another challenge shared by heads of state and public leaders in the West and their partners in the Muslim world is an effective ideological/value-based counter campaign with the aim of eliminating the ideology represented by the global jihad groups. Key Muslim community leaders and religious figures in the West should play an important role in leading a systematic, continuous, and public campaign denouncing the violent interpretation of the religion of Islam, and calling for a boycott of those bearing the jihad banner. Only a comprehensive rejection of the system of religious argumentation and justification motivating young people to join and support Islamic terrorist action will help reduce the number of volunteers in the ranks of the global jihad organizations.

The shock that has gripped France will probably wane as time passes, as will the urgency assigned to effective handling of the danger originating on the battlefields of Syria and Iraq that threatens Western democracies. The need to take up the challenge will be postponed to a time when the leaders of Western countries have no choice but to deal with it directly, on a broad scale, and perhaps violently. Presumably only a chain of exceptional events, i.e., showcase terrorist attacks that cause a large number of victims, will unequivocally highlight the risk incurred in not stepping up the military struggle

against the challenge to the West posed by the Islamic State organization. The terrorist attack carried out by al-Qaeda on US soil in 2001 was an event that changed the threshold criteria and led to decisive action against the organization. This is probably what will happen in the struggle against the Islamic State, al-Qaeda, and their affiliates in the West, unless operational, constitutional, legal, and value-related steps are taken against these organizations before then.

