

“Europe: Reinforcing Existing Trends”

Rik Coolsaet

[in: Mohammed Ayoob, Etga Ugur (eds.), *Assessing the War on Terror*. Lynne Rienner, 2013, pp. 137-159]

When al-Qaeda struck on 9/11, a large majority of citizens in Europe probably felt that the world would never be the same anymore. Although there are no reliable instant surveys to prove this claim, a quick glance at the newspaper headings of the hours and days that followed the attacks lends credence to the argument that most Europeans too saw 9/11 as a defining moment for a whole generation. In the midst of dramatic assertions that a Third World War had begun and sweeping portrayals of the future as an existential struggle between the West and the Rest (the latter soon came to be defined as some sort of a global Islamic insurgency), only a few voices called for a more balanced judgment of the tragic events of that day. It should also be noted that some comments showed a discernible lack of empathy when claiming that the United States were partly to blame for the attacks. But on the whole the tragic images of the burning towers, the poignant accounts by survivors and the burials of the victims in the following weeks, unleashed a demonstration of spontaneous solidarity with the United States, articulated by an editorial in the French newspaper *Le Monde* on September 13, 2001: ‘*Nous sommes tous Américains ! – We’re All Americans!*’.

Looking back, it can now be stated that as far as Europe is concerned, 9/11 was neither the definer of an era nor the watershed moment many Europeans considered it to be at the time. 9/11 undoubtedly had an impact, even a significant one, in both foreign and domestic policies. It reinforced pre-existing trends and tendencies, crystallized positions and hardened points of view. But a decade later this impact has largely subsided and has again given way to the same *forces profondes* that were shaping the continent before the terrorist attacks and that far exceed 9/11 in lasting importance. Only in one, unanticipated, respect did 9/11 have a lasting impact. It furthered political integration – in particular in the fields of justice and internal security – to a degree few would have imagined some years earlier. This illustrates an old truth concerning the construction of the continent: European integration moves forward through crises, each crisis pushing its member states closer together in an intricate web of interdependent relationships.

Assessing the overall impact of 9/11 on European societies and politics however is not an easy undertaking. Europe’s complex mosaic defies easy generalizations. Different political and cultural traditions, diverse approaches in dealing with ethnic and religious minorities, dissimilar national experiences with terrorism and lack of detailed cross-national research complicate generalizations .

The Fear Factor

It has often been assumed that following 9/11 Europe too fell under the spell of an all-pervasive fear of terrorist attacks and European citizens began to live in a constant state of anxiety about ‘Muslim terrorists’ plotting and planning imminent attacks in cities across the continent. Surveys however reveal a more nuanced account.

It has long been overlooked, but fear for terrorist attacks has never been equally strong across Europe. In 2006 Edwin Bakker for the first time explored the striking differences in threat perception among the 25 member states of the European Union, based upon the periodic Eurobarometer survey of public opinion across Europe.¹ In the spring of 2003, the public was asked for the first time to identify the two most important issues their country was facing. Only in Spain a majority mentioned terrorism, followed by the UK (28 percent) and Italy (24 percent). In Finland and Sweden a mere 3 percent mentioned terrorism, and hardly more Portuguese, Greeks and Irish did so. In 2004 the new member states in Central and Eastern Europe were included and an additional east-west gap appeared, with extremely low percentages declaring terrorism an important issue in ‘New Europe’ as compared to some of the original member states. No single explanation accounts for these discrepancies across Europe. Bakker identifies a set of factors that all played a part, such as recent and past experience with terrorism, involvement with the U.S. War on Terror, the way in which society and politics tend to react to insecurity and the presence of sizeable Muslim communities.

Notwithstanding the alarming headlines in Europe’s newspapers immediately after the attacks, Europe never completely subscribed to the American paradigm 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’, as president George W. Bush portrayed.² It is true that official discourse (and media) often described terrorism in similar existential terms, with the Spanish prime minister José María Aznar as a typical example: ‘Terrorism changed the agenda of the world.’³ But, with the exception of the UK and Spain, terrorism never became a prime concern for European citizens (save in the immediate post 9/11 months).⁴ Moreover, in academia and think tanks a certain scepticism as to the saliency of the threat has always been present, and increasingly so after 2004 – and in spite of major attacks in Madrid in 2004 and in London in 2005. The ‘state of the threat’ was a regular agenda item in terrorism-related meetings but it was often depicted in less dramatic terms than in American debates.

By the mid-2000s, when mainstream opinion in the U.S. imagined jihadist terrorism to be a hydra-headed foe of global dimensions and local terrorist groups to be part of a worldwide Islamist insurgency, directed and influenced in one way or another by an omnipresent al-Qaeda, European observers and practitioners were engaged in alternative analyses. A view that

circulated in that period in the European counterterrorism community was that of a ‘patchwork of self-radicalising cells with international contacts, without any central engine and without any central organisational design’. Such a patchwork closely resembled the radical left terrorist groups Europe had experienced in the 70s and 80s, or the anarchists in the late nineteenth century – or modern-day criminal networks, alternately cooperating and acting autonomously, depending upon circumstances.⁵

Such analyses mirrored a deeper trend in European public opinion in the decade following 9/11. Even in countries where anxiety over terrorism scored high at times in public perceptions, it nevertheless showed an inexorable decline after 2001, interrupted only by occasional spikes each time a significant terrorist incident occurred. In 2004 as many as 16 percent of European citizens identified terrorism as one of the two most important issues facing their countries. It has since dropped steadily (with an unexpected rise to 7-13 percent in 2010-2011), to an historic low of 2 percent in May 2012. This in turn reflected the decreasing significance of terrorism in Europe, as is made clear by the Europol statistics. Even if (for methodological reasons) the absolute figures of the Europe-wide police agency should be approached with caution, the declining trend in terrorism related arrests and plots in the 2000s is obvious. In 2009 the number of (failed, foiled, or successful) attacks was almost half the number of attacks in 2007 and this pattern of sustained decrease has persisted ever since.⁶ In 2011 not one single “religiously-inspired” terrorist attack on EU territory was reported by member states. This stands in stark contrast to 110 separatist attacks for that year. Although mostly small scale, in Europe the separatist strand of terrorism (Corsican groups in France, Euskadi Ta Askatasuna in Spain, or the Irish Republican Army in Great Britain) has always been many times larger than the jihadist strand, as the Europol statistics also make clear. But overall, since 2007 all forms of terrorism have been declining in Europe, as the following chart shows.

Number of (failed, foiled or completed) attacks; number of arrested suspects in EU
(2007-2011)



Source: *Terrorism Situation and Threat Report (TE-SAT)*. Europol, 2012

Despite the official European discourse routinely describing terrorism, and especially its jihadist strand, as a threat to the European way of life and its values, by and large Europeans showed greater skepticism than what this discourse might suggest. In the 2000s the issue of terrorism never became of overriding concern to most Europeans – especially when compared to more pressing issues such as the economic situation, unemployment, rising prices – and immigration.

Immigrant a.k.a. Muslim a.k.a. Terrorist

Commenting upon the London attacks, Charles Krauthammer wrote in the *Washington Post*: ‘Europe has incubated an enemy within, a threat that for decades Europe simply refused to face.’⁷ Ever since 9/11 right wing pundits have been linking immigration with terrorism. In doing so they were building on an anti-Islam tendency that had started to take shape prior to 9/11. This fact has been overlooked as a result of the maelstrom of vitriolic anti-Islamic rhetoric that followed the terrorist attacks, but prior to 9/11 Islamophobia was already considered such a growing global phenomenon that immediate action was considered necessary to combat its spread. As Christopher Allen has judiciously noted, just a few days before 9/11, the UN sponsored World Conference against Racism in Durban formally recognized Islamophobia, ‘thereby establishing anti-Muslim and anti-Islamic prejudice, discrimination, and hatred and placing it alongside other equally discriminatory and exclusionary phenomena, such as anti-Semitism and anti-Roma’.⁸

September 11 thus did not create Islamophobia, but its fallout built upon preexisting attitudes and sentiments in the member states of the European Union, reinforcing them and broadening their audience from the radical right to mainstream politics and even forging a rare rapprochement between rightwing and leftwing criticism of Islam and Muslims.

The beginnings of Islamophobia in Europe were visible two decades earlier. In the mid 1980s, the author and playwright Caryl Phillips travelled through Europe and wrote in his travel narrative, *The European Tribe* (1987), how he felt racism and the radical right were increasing everywhere as a result of the disappearance of religious, political and cultural frontiers.⁹ In October 1985, *Le Figaro Magazine* carried a cover story representing a bust of a veiled Marianne, accompanied by the distressing headline ‘*Serons-nous toujours Français dans 30 ans ? – Will we still be French in 30 years time ?*’.¹⁰ The journal articulated a growing concern over immigration in the 1980s in Europe, when Europeans began to realize that the ‘migrant workers’ who had arrived *en masse* in the 1960s to compensate for domestic labor shortages, were here to stay and were joined by their families in the following decades. Between 1981 and 1990, according to the European Values Systems Study, intolerance significantly grew,

as did feelings of ethnic threat by cultural minorities, at least in some member states. However, throughout the 1990s, sentiments of intolerance towards ethnic minorities fluctuated and were never static. In that decade they first tended to stabilize,¹¹ but increased again after 1997. Eurobarometer surveys similarly point to a general increase of resistance to multicultural society between 1997 and 2000 and a similar increase in respondents confirming that multicultural society had reached its limits.¹²

Radical right parties capitalized on these incipient but fluctuating apprehensions, exactly as the nativist movement had done in 19th century America or in the 1920s, when mass arrivals of Italians, Poles, Jews and Slavs sparked fears of the ‘mongrelization of the white race’. As always in the history of mass migration, particular cultural characteristics were now again singled out, because they offered the visual identifiers that set newcomers apart from native society. In the 1990s it became standard practice, in particular in the radical right, but not limited to this fringe, to equate ‘immigrant’ with ‘Muslim’. In the Netherlands, maverick politician Pim Fortuyn (who was murdered by an environmental activist in 2002) warned against the ‘Islamicisation of our culture’. In France, the Front National campaigned on the platform of the return of Muslim immigrants to their countries of origin, claiming that Islam was incompatible with European culture. In Belgium, the comparable radical right party Vlaams Blok (‘Flemish Bloc’, predecessor of the actual Flemish Interest) made the suppression of Muslim influences a central feature of its anti-immigration campaign. Communities, who by visual identifiers were easily associated with Islam, were thus particularly and increasingly at risk of becoming targets of ethnic xenophobia directed towards ethnic minority communities.¹³

But throughout the 1990s alternative narratives co-existed to explain the difficulties of the multicultural society. The culturalist finger-pointing of the radical right was met with warnings about the dramatic socioeconomic position of the immigrant ‘subclass’, that fueled a considerable amount of potential discontent waiting to erupt.¹⁴

The attacks of 9/11 anchored the European debate on immigration firmly around the culturalist paradigm. In mainstream thinking too, their culture now came to be seen as the major obstacle to the immigrants’ integration.¹⁵ Topics such as discrimination, disadvantaged socioeconomic position, and unemployment in the immigrant communities faded away from the public discourse. A social question thus came to be seen through an essentially cultural lens, even narrowed down to a question of identity. In this perception, the significant diversity within Muslim communities and diasporic communities from Muslim-majority countries was compressed into a single monolithic category of ‘Muslims’, conflating ethnicity with religion.

By coincidence, this attitude was met with (and fed) a simultaneous development among the second and third generation immigrants from communities originating from Muslim-majority countries. These European-born Muslims were often better educated than their parents and thus more sensitive to the feeling of being considered second-class citizens in their home

countries. This tension is common among the children and grandchildren of immigrants regardless of era and ethnic origin. Some among the children and grandchildren of immigrants from Muslim-majority countries who had migrated to Europe in the 1960s started to identify themselves by emphasizing their religious affiliation – the perceived cause of their discrimination.¹⁶ Pew surveys in the mid-2000s found Islamic identity to be strong among Europe's Muslims with most self identifying as Muslims, rather than by nationality.¹⁷

Muslims thus often became 'stereotypically portrayed in media reports as a devoutly religious and undifferentiated group sharing a fundamentalist version of Islam'.¹⁸ Moreover, the once quintessential radical right anti-Islam stance was now joined by a rigorous anticlerical stance of the Left in some kind of a joint anti-Islamic *Kulturkampf*, propelling a fierce debate on the compatibility of Islam with western values. In most member states, this debate spiked between 2004 and 2006.¹⁹ The murder of the Dutch moviemaker Theo van Gogh in 2004 and the terrorist attacks the same year in Madrid and the next year in London played a crucial role in this polarization. The perpetrators of the attacks were not foreigners coming to Europe in order to carry out attacks but individuals mostly born and raised in Europe. But even in this 'long-term low in community relations'²⁰ in Europe, not all publics in the member states showed the same degree of hostility towards Muslim communities. Majorities in Great Britain and France, as well as pluralities in Spain and Poland, hold a somewhat or very favorable view of Muslims. Among the Dutch and Germans however a majority or plurality holds unfavorable views of Muslims (51 and 47 percent, respectively).²¹

This febrile atmosphere surrounding the debate on the place of Muslims in European society prevented bridge building between communities and the restoration of some degree of social cohesion. Simultaneously, surveys pointed to the emergence of a specific European Islam, marrying modernity and Islamic values. The same surveys clearly highlighted (as did some national surveys) that European Muslims' worries were essentially the same as those of their non-Muslim neighbors: they worried about their future, and they were more concerned about unemployment than cultural or religious issues.²² The most hopeful conclusion that these surveys produced, was that Europe's Muslims were part of the social mainstream:

'They side with Islamic moderates, not fundamentalists, and the overwhelming majority reject extreme tactics like suicide bombing as a way to win political objectives. These Muslims express more temperate views of Westerners than those in the Middle East or Asia. A majority also express favorable opinions of Christians and have less negative views of Jews. (...) While Europe's Muslim minorities are about as likely as Muslims elsewhere to see relations between Westerners and Muslims as generally bad, they more often associate positive attributes to Westerners – including tolerance, generosity, and respect for women. And in a number of respects Muslims in Europe are less inclined to see a clash of civilizations than are some of the general publics surveyed in Europe. Notably, they are less likely than non-Muslims in Europe to believe that there is a conflict between modernity and being a devout Muslim.'²³

But feverish debates in the European public sphere precluded any meeting of minds. They reinforced preexisting sentiments of ethnic threat posed by minorities. Nevertheless, by 2006 these feelings started to decrease in some member states and by 2007 even returned to 1991 levels in some countries.²⁴ In 2008 a Pew survey found that the views of each toward the other were far from uniformly negative. Even in the wake of the tumultuous events of 2005, solid majorities in France, Great Britain and the U.S. retained overall favorable opinions of Muslims. But in Spain and, more modestly in the U.K. positive opinions of Muslims declined.²⁵

Since 2006, positive and negative developments have co-existed and fluctuated. This made the European mental map as diverse as it had always been before 9/11. On the positive side, it is worth mentioning that – compared to the backlash that followed the murder of van Gogh or the publication of anti-Mohammed cartoons in the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten* in 2005 – no comparable reaction followed the release of an anti-Islam movie *Fitna* by the Dutch politician Geert Wilders in 2008. Similarly, when a Swiss referendum in the following year banned the construction of minarets and France and Belgium passed laws between 2010 and 2012 (in the Netherlands a similar ban is still under consideration) that prohibited the wearing of the *burqa* in public, there was no significant Muslim reaction. In 2010 and 2011, according to the annual surveys by the German Marshall Fund of the U.S., immigration continued to dominate headlines in Europe (and North America) as never before. But given the widespread worry about the economy and migration flows from North Africa, it should be noted that overall perceptions of immigrants remained stable. Moreover, majorities in all countries except the United Kingdom saw immigration as culturally enriching and publics generally did not agree that immigrants take jobs away from native workers. It should be noted however that in a number of EU countries, albeit not in all, Muslim immigrants often are seen as posing higher integration challenges than other immigrants.²⁶ In some countries anti-Islamic and anti-immigration parties started to lose some of their steam, as was experienced by the Vlaams Belang/’Flemish Interest’ in Belgium, the Folkeparti in Denmark and Geert Wilders’ Freedom Party in the Netherlands.

On the negative side, mainstream politicians have joined German Chancellor Merkel (who already had done so in 2004) in reigniting the discussion on integration, with British Prime Minister Cameron calling multiculturalism ‘dead’ and Volker Kauder, president of the CDU/CSU parliamentary group in the German Bundestag, emphasizing that Islam did not belong in Germany since it was not part of German tradition and identity.²⁷ None of them, however, detailed what this judgment implied for everyday life of immigrants and natives alike. During the 2012 French presidential election campaign, outgoing president Sarkozy tried wooing far-right voters by emphasizing nationalist themes, such as restoring border controls and limiting immigration, but also by trumpeting the threat of Islamist groups after an isolated lone wolf, Mohammed Merah, had killed seven people in a series of shootings in Montauban and Toulouse in March 2012. In some member states, anti-Islamic and anti-immigration parties have recently gained significant traction (such as the True Finns in 2011, Greece’s Golden Dawn and France’s

Marine Le Pen who obtained a high turnout in the first round of the French presidential elections in April 2012).

Clearly more worrying has been the crystallization, especially since 2008, of the anti-Islam and anti-immigration phobia of the radical right into a new generation of populist extremist parties and movements in a number of member states of the European Union,²⁸ some of them prone to terrorist violence. This new variety of European populism puts at the centre of its platform the pre-9/11 ethnic threat that immigration is imagined to pose to European culture and identity. When Anders Behring Breivik killed 77 people in Oslo in July 2011, he justified his terrorist attack with reference to a mixture of fear about the impact of Islam, globalization and the EU on the national (and European) identity. The German security services for their part came under fire at the end of 2011 for failing to effectively gauge the growth and danger of radical right extremism in the country. According to the Office for the Protection of the Constitution (BfV), Germany's domestic intelligence agency, right-wing violence claimed 47 lives in Germany between 1990 and 2009. Other estimates calculate even higher numbers, as high as 137.²⁹ The handling of the radical right extremism finally led to the resignation of the BfV's head and several other intelligence officials.

In other European countries, too, the emergence of radical right extremism has become of paramount concern. This trend is particularly worrying in Greece. Here, the economic crisis had clearly fuelled the rise of organized violent far-right activism directed against immigrants, reminiscent of the 1930s.

Europe has primarily been an emigration continent for most of its history. Now it matches North America as a region of immigration. Exactly as has been the case with the nativist movement in American history since the 19th century, the debate on immigration will undoubtedly go on, influenced by the changing composition of migration flows, with ups and downs and with diverging national characteristics, but largely dissociated from the security obsession generated by 9/11.

The Essence of Counterterrorism in Europe

Following 9/11, governments throughout Europe devoted much energy to counterterrorism: intelligence services and law enforcement capabilities were enhanced; specific counterterrorism legislation was adopted.³⁰ Europe did not react differently from the U.S. in doing so. But two distinct characteristics set European counterterrorism apart from the U.S. approach. The latter equated the attacks with a declaration of war and responded with a global decapitation strategy and a domestic mobilization of the nation. The former mostly pursued its traditional law enforcement approach, whereby terrorism was considered a crime to be tackled primarily through criminal law. The second quintessential European characteristic in post 9/11

counterterrorism was its focus on prevention through the identification of the underlying factors that led to terrorism.³¹ For many years this so-called root cause approach was met with overt hostility in the U.S. counterterrorism community, where it was seen as condoning terrorist acts.³² The divergence was one of the many reasons why transatlantic cooperation on counterterrorism proved so difficult in the years following 9/11.

European counterterrorism moreover was not as constant an undertaking as in the United States. Its dynamics can be compared to successive shock waves propelled by major attacks, but gradually winding down once the sense of urgency had faded away.

The 9/11 attacks themselves opened a window of opportunity to push forward earlier approved but stalled legislative proposals intended to harmonize national laws in the realm of internal security where national prerogatives had always been the bedrock of all arrangements. A comprehensive EU *Action Plan on Combating Terrorism* was adopted within two weeks of the attacks. This led in the following months to a number of significant decisions and measures. Foremost was the decision establishing a European arrest warrant through which extradition procedures between member states were greatly facilitated. Another major breakthrough was the adoption of the framework decision defining a common concept of terrorist offenses. This served as the necessary basis for intra-EU judicial and police cooperation by its inclusion into the member states' legal systems. Another scheme previously proposed – creating an EU-wide coordination body amongst magistrates to enhance the effectiveness of the competent judicial authorities of the Member States when dealing with the investigation and prosecution of serious cross-border and organized crime – was also rapidly put in place as 'Eurojust'. Additionally, within Europol counterterrorism now became of paramount importance, in stark contrast to the early days of the organization when terrorism did not even figure among its priorities.³³

By 2003, however, there seemed to be a diminished sense of urgency. The attacks at the Atocha railway station in Madrid put an end to this inertia. New operational arrangements were quickly decided on, including the appointment of a EU Counter-Terrorism Coordinator. However, as months passed by the drive to deepen cooperation once again lost momentum only to be revived by the London attacks.

The EU adopted its overall *European Union Counter-Terrorism Strategy* following the London attacks thus effectively streamlining the patchwork of decisions and mechanisms that had been put in place often in great haste following terrorist incidents. This had resulted in a policy architecture so complex that even EU-officials – let alone the public at large – lost sight of what had been decided, who was doing what when, and who was in charge of implementing the wide variety of decisions.

The EU counterterrorism strategy was based upon four strategic objectives, called 'pillars': 'Prevent', 'Protect', 'Pursue' and 'Respond'. Deliberately, 'Prevent' was mentioned as the first of the four. It stood for stemming the radicalization process by tackling the root causes

which can lead to radicalization and recruitment into terrorism. 'Protect' covered by far the broadest area since it aimed at sheltering citizens and infrastructure from new attacks. 'Pursue' related to the efforts to pursue and investigate terrorists and their networks across EU borders. 'Respond' intended to put into practice a 2004 'solidarity clause' by enhancing consequence management mechanisms and capabilities to be used in case of an attack in one of the member states. Most EU-wide results have been obtained in 'Protect', where the European Commission is a leading actor, and in 'Pursue', where the member states' vital interests are at stake and close cross-border cooperation is needed.

In the first and foremost pillar of EU's counterterrorism strategy, 'Prevent', progress has long been most laggard. It's the most complex and thus the most challenging of the four pillars, essentially because of competing analyses about the nature and scope of the radicalization challenge and the inherent difficulty of measuring success.

At a very early stage in their efforts against jihadist terrorism and drawing on their own experiences of terrorism, the EU member states have been acutely aware that victory would not be achieved as long as the circumstances by which individuals turn into terrorists are not addressed. September 11 caught most EU member states by surprise. With the exception of the French and Belgian police and security forces (who had had some experience with Iranian-backed and then Algerian Islamist terrorism in the 80s and early 90s) most European countries were unprepared when confronted with a seemingly new strand of terrorism and a new kind of terrorists who used religious discourse to legitimise their acts. It thus took some time for a consensus view on 'root causes' to emerge within the EU counterterrorism community. So the first references to 'root causes' in this particular variety of terrorism were quite diverse and impressionistic, including as diverse causes as radicalization, regional conflicts and failed or failing states, globalization and socio-economic factors, alienation, propagation of an extremist world-view, and systems of education.

Gradually however, radicalization emerged as the main focal point in combating terrorism. Originally it was perceived as the result of foreign extremists attempting to influence vulnerable youngsters through radical mosques, prisons, schools, neglected city districts and internet chat rooms. But from 2004-2005 onwards the view of terrorism as an external threat lost its pre-eminence and was replaced by the analysis of terrorism as a bottom-up process by which individuals 'self-radicalised' and 'self-recruited' into terrorism. A number of parallel developments explain this evolution.

This first was undoubtedly the Madrid bombings and its less than obvious links with al-Qaeda. The perpetrators did not conform to the implicit standard terrorist profile of a devout Middle Eastern Muslim, but originated from the important Spanish-Moroccan migration diaspora. Secondly, substantial research by the Dutch intelligence service (AIVD) provided the first solid moorings for the notions of 'self-radicalization' and 'self-recruitment' within EU

thinking. The AIVD was among the first intelligence services to emphasise publically that radicalization had become a major avenue by which individuals turned into terrorists, not so much as a result of active outside recruitment as by an autonomous, self-propelled process. The murders in 2002 of the libertarian Dutch politician Pim Fortuyn by a lone wolf activist and, especially, some years later of Theo van Gogh by a young member of a loose grouping of radicals, all of Moroccan descent and born or raised in the Netherlands (with the exception of one or two converts to Islam), turned the spotlight on home-grown terrorism. The AIVD was the first agency to introduce within the EU the notion of ‘decentralization of Islamist terrorism’.

The London bombings firmly anchored radicalization, intertwined with its home-grown nature, at the heart of EU counterterrorism endeavours. From then on the terror threat within the EU was thus increasingly seen as a home-grown challenge and threat. International events – and the Iraq war in particular – increasingly appeared to function both as a booster and a source of inspiration to radical individuals. Iraq was seen as a black hole that attracted individuals from all over the world.

Without fully realizing it, the EU found itself in new and uncharted territory, since this issue clearly impinged upon national sovereignty by going to the heart of political, social and cultural differences among member states. From the start, radicalization was indeed essentially intertwined with issues of integration, social policy, multiculturalism, and representation of minority groups. As a consequence, counterterrorism now had to involve actors that were largely unfamiliar with – and even hostile to – its sphere of operations: for example, integration officials and authorities, which were quite resistant to the idea that their longstanding endeavours should become entwined with security-related objectives, thus ‘securitizing’ social policies.

Since 2004-2005, a torrent of research on the issue of radicalization and de-radicalization has been unleashed, funded both by the European Commission and by member states. But the more research was produced on the issue, the clearer it became that the very notion of radicalization was ill defined, complex, and controversial. Notwithstanding the numerous endeavors in academia, police and policy circles no metrics exist to gauge radicalization. Most analyses of the growth or the scale of radicalization lack conceptual clarity and scientific fundamentals and therefore are incapable of providing empirical validation. Radicalization and de-radicalization have become catchall concepts. Religious and political radicalization were and still are often confounded,³⁴ coupling issues of identity, social cohesion with national security concerns. Many different expressions of an individual’s ideas and behavior are thus being labeled as signs or indications of radicalization, and these range from the increased presence of girls and women wearing the hijab, men dressed in Salafi trousers, Salafi preachers and the terrorists themselves. Putting these disparate signs together into a box labeled ‘symbols of radicalization’ empties this word of all explanatory meaning, turning it into a container concept.

No clear EU-wide consensus has thus emerged on what kind of radicalization is to be addressed, or on the degree to which radical, but non-violent religious discourse is to be included in counterterrorism. Some, but not all member states recognise that there is an inherent tension between the fight against terrorism – a crime – and the fight against radicalization – aspects of which are constitutionally protected as free speech. Moreover, most European experts now agree that the relationship between terrorism and (radical) interpretations of ideologies and religion is more tenuous than was first assumed and that focusing on ideology (or religion) is clearly not the best departure point for grasping why an individual turns into a terrorist. But nevertheless, intelligence and police authorities in some European countries still persist in a rearguard view according to which signs of increased (salafist) religiosity are precursors of an eventual process of radicalisation into violence. They point to the persistence of a loosely connected European network of Islamic neoradical fringe groups, whose names can vary, but typically begin with the label ‘Sharia4’, followed by the country in which they operate (e.g. ‘Sharia4UK’, ‘Sharia4Belgium’, etc.).³⁵

By 2010 – after a short-lived sense of urgency as a result of foiled plots in the UK, Germany, and Denmark – the drive for furthering EU-wide cooperation on counterterrorism had once again largely stalled. In November 2009, the EU Counter-Terrorism Coordinator, Gilles de Kerchove, pointed to a growing sense of ‘CT fatigue’.³⁶ The major reasons for this relative decline in EU counterterrorism activity are obvious. No major attacks have occurred since the London bombings. More crucially, jihadist terrorism has lost much of its formidable and larger-than-life character it once had. It largely defeated itself, since it proved unable to realize any of the objectives that it pretended to advance. The once extremely dense network of personal inter-linkages between individuals, groups and networks has inexorably unravelled and has been replaced by small, informal groups of wannabe terrorists with poor skill and terrorist tradecraft. Foreign fighters (trained militants returning from jihadist theatres) – once a source of major concern in the European counterterrorism community – proved to be much less of a threat than first imagined – even if in the course of 2012 the Syrian civil war has started to attract also youngsters from some (but clearly not all) European countries, as happened earlier in 2003 with Iraq.

Perhaps even more important, as the Dutch National Coordinator for Counterterrorism mentioned in his December 2012 *Terrorist Threat Assessment Netherlands*, the resilience against extremism and violence has grown substantially, both within the public at large and within Muslim communities, signaling an increased desire by the latter to publicly air their opposition to this kind of violent activism. Terrorism-related discussions have clearly receded in public discussions and concerns.³⁷ This assessment is in line with similar UK assessments that since 2007 sympathy for violent extremism has been declining rather than increasing.³⁸

Since 2009, many member states of the EU have thus officially lowered their threat levels. Taking into account this diminished threat, the EU (and UN) mechanisms in place are producing satisfying results, so that no new instruments appear needed for the time being.

Moreover, the EU-wide emphasis on radicalization and de-radicalization – the main focus of Europe’s counterterrorism in the decade following 9/11 – has reached its limits and the impossibility of implementing a Europe-wide ‘one size fits all’ de-radicalization approach is now widely acknowledged. Since terrorism is primarily the outcome of individual or small group dynamics boosting political radicalization into violent action, the local level is the primary and most adequate level for counter-radicalization initiatives.³⁹

Through a decade of counterterrorism legislation, EU member states have nevertheless gone far beyond what most observers and member states thought achievable – and desirable – in the field of justice and home affairs, where most of Europe’s counterterrorism endeavours are situated. This is without doubt the area where the role of the EU has grown most significantly in the first decade of the 21st century.⁴⁰ Counterterrorism has acted as a booster for cooperative cross-border arrangements going far beyond terrorism.

This in turn has led to mounting criticism that liberty has been sacrificed on the altar of security. The European Parliament – whose powers the Lisbon Treaty of 2009 significantly enhanced – increasingly made its mark on counterterrorism related issues. The European Parliament proved to be a formidable stumbling block for the EU’s 2010 compliance with the US Terrorist Finance Tracking Program (TFTP) as well as for the agreements reached by the European Commission and the United States on personal data exchanges (PNR). It will almost certainly be an influential voice in the elaboration and scope of a possible European PNR system in the year 2013. Leading MEPs have been calling for a thorough assessment of the impact of counter-terrorism measures, in particular on civil liberties and fundamental rights.⁴¹ It is indeed beyond dispute that counterterrorism arrangements have been infringing upon civil liberties and individual privacy: extension of detention time, increased surveillance of individual movements and information gathering, enhanced data recording and storage. Responding to such concerns over excessive state intrusion, the European Union is rethinking how it logs citizens' telephone calls and Internet use data for law enforcement purposes.

These mounting challenges to counterterrorism arrangements reflect by themselves the decreased willingness to accept the overriding priority of counterterrorism over other political concerns, the declining priority of counterterrorism in European governments’ policies and in EU institutions and, ultimately, the fading anxiety over terrorist attacks.

Europe's place in the world

The 9/11 attacks led to a spontaneous expression of European solidarity with the United States. The ensuing Global War on Terrorism (GWOT) shattered this transatlantic unity. Moreover, it divided Europe along the pre-9/11 fault line between Europeanist and Atlanticist countries.

After the end of the Cold War, a transatlantic debate had started on the commonality of American and European perspectives on world affairs. Especially in the original member states of the EU, a growing Europeanist point of view was stressing the need for the EU to speak with one voice in world affairs, commensurate to its enhanced economic might. Throughout the 1990s new arrangements were devised strengthening European decision making in foreign and defense matters parallel to NATO. Strategic partnerships were envisaged with other great powers, such as Russia and China, allowing the EU to take an autonomous stance in international relations. However, with new member states in Central and Eastern Europe joining the EU in the 1990s, this Europeanist development was slowed down, since the new members considered the United States and thus American leadership in NATO as the ultimate guarantor of their newly acquired independence.

The 9/11 attacks and the ensuing uncertainty about the new contours of the post-9/11 world order pushed this nascent European autonomy in world affairs to the back burner. But this new spike in transatlantic rapprochement didn't last long. When American diplomacy shifted from its original multilateral reaction into an increasingly unilateralist policy, influential European voices were again heard insisting upon a distinct European position in the post-9/11 world. Even pro-American figures such as Javier Solana (Europe's first High Representative for the Common Foreign and Security Policy) or Chris Patten (European Commissioner for External Relations from 1999 to 2004) called for a strong and united European challenge to American unilateralism: 'The United States should not establish itself as the world hegemon, setting and imposing rules – but not itself being bound by them – in pursuit of its own national interest.'⁴² An influential essay by Robert Kagan, depicting the Europeans as naive Kantians and the Americans as realistic Hobbesians, was characteristic of this transatlantic divide.⁴³

The American global war on terror pitted two groups of EU member states against one another, labeled 'Old' and 'New' Europe by Defense Secretary Rumsfeld.⁴⁴ Especially in 'Old' Europe, American counterterrorism tactics were met with significant resistance: a string of CIA-run secret detention centers (so-called black sites in Poland, Rumania, and Lithuania), Guantanamo Bay, and the rendition program (abducting terror suspects from European countries and transporting them for questioning to third countries) were almost universally criticized. The U.S. led invasion of Iraq in 2003 was the climax of European division, some member states

participating in Operation Iraqi Freedom whilst others joined China and Russia and many other countries in strong condemnation of the invasion.

This period represented a low in European publics' confidence in transatlantic relations. Europe-wide surveys indicated how the EU desire for an 'American leadership role in world affairs' plummeted from as high as 64 percent in 2002 to an historic low of 36 percent in 2007-8.⁴⁵ Other surveys showed large majorities in EU member states, even in reputedly Atlanticist countries, asking governments for a more independent approach from the U.S. on security and diplomatic affairs.⁴⁶

In striking contrast to the United States, European countries never viewed the military as a prime player in counterterrorism – with the exception of the U.N. authorised war in Afghanistan. Even if the European Council in the immediate aftermath of 9/11 stated as its expressed aim 'to make the fight against terrorism part of all aspects of the EU's external actions', this never materialised. When in June 2004 the European Council asked the Political and Security Committee – the main decision-making body on foreign and defence policy within the EU – to elaborate upon the contribution the European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP) specifically could render in the fight against terrorism, a feeling of perplexity and bewilderment was palpable.

The arrival of the Obama-administration relaxed the transatlantic relationship. However, even though he enjoyed an extraordinary personal popularity in European surveys, even Obama was unable to restore the status quo ante in Europeans' confidence in the American leadership role. This never regained the high marks it had enjoyed until 2002. Years of transatlantic estrangement following 9/11 had left their mark. The Europeanist tendency within the EU has been strengthened by formerly Atlanticist member states, such as Poland, now adopting a more outspoken stance in favour of European defence structures and arrangements. The American attitude of benign neglect of Europe, now considered to be of less relevance in world affairs than the emerging powers in Asia, is increasingly met with European indifference towards US policies.

The main effect of the U.S. global war on terror on the foreign policy orientations of the EU and its member states has thus ultimately been the strengthening of the Europeanists' tendency claiming for a stronger European voice in world affairs. However, by 2012 the reality was a far cry from the vision of a powerful European voice in world affairs. Entangled in the euro zone crisis and disagreeing on how to move forward because of its cumbersome decision-making process projecting the image of a weak Europe, this crisis is likely to be of much greater significance as far as Europe's place in the world in the world is concerned than 9/11 ever was.

Conclusion

A decade after 9/11, the impact of jihadist terrorism has now largely subsided in both publics and politics. Law enforcement, intelligence agencies and police will probably concur that radicalisation into jihadist violence has passed its peak and is decreasing. It is probably fair to say that this strand of terrorism is now seen as any other form of terrorism in Europe: a minor, but possible risk, but no longer the existential threat official European discourse routinely evoked. In the post 9/11 era, notwithstanding the pervasiveness of this discourse, by and large Europeans often showed sound skepticism as to the level of the threat. Terrorism indeed never became a prime concern for most European citizens – save in the immediate post 9/11 months and even then with wide discrepancies in threat perception across the continent.

The main impact of 9/11 on European societies has been to crystallize the pre-existing debate on immigration around the culturalist paradigm. In mainstream thinking the culture of the immigrants came to be seen as the major obstacle to their integration. Issues as discrimination, disadvantaged socioeconomic position, and unemployment in the immigrant communities and their impact upon radicalization receded in the publics' mind. Whilst the febrile debate on the compatibility of Islam with western values that had ensued has abated, a decade long Islam-centered security obsession has left its mark. Anti-Muslim prejudice has gained traction in mainstream thinking – even if its most extremist expression has again become the hallmark of a new generation of radical right groups, who claim the anti-Islam and anti-immigration themes as their unique selling proposition. But as was the case before 9/11, the situation differs among countries, with some countries displaying a more serene debate about the place of Muslims and Islam in society than others. One could argue that as apprehension among the public about Islam fluctuates, polity and media shoulder a crucial responsibility as to the way this issue is framed and discussed. Immigration and integration will indeed undoubtedly continue to be matters of intense policy discussion, sometimes (but not always) linked to Islam. Since Europe too has become an immigration continent, it experiences the same fluctuating apprehensions about the newcomers' impact on society as the United States did with the nativist movement from the 19th century onwards. Nativist anti-immigration sentiments indeed remain present in European countries as well as grievances resulting from the fragile socio-economical position of immigration communities. This mix remains a potent cocktail for polarization and a major challenge for society in general. But they are now by and large devoid of the national security concerns they were associated with in the years following 9/11.

Notes

[for complete bibliography, see: Mohammed Ayoob, Etga Ugur (eds.), *Assessing the War on Terror*. Lynne Rienner, 2013, pp. 195-208)

-
- ¹ Bakker, “Differences in Terrorist Threat Perceptions in Europe,” pp. 47-62.
- ² President Bush’s March 2005 remarks at the National Defense University.
- ³ *Wall Street Journal*, 10 December 2001.
- ⁴ Bures, *EU Counterterrorism Policy*, p. 43.
- ⁵ Coolsaet, *Belgium and Counterterrorism Policy in the Jihadi Era*, p. 9
- ⁶ Europol, 2010 to 2013. Available at: https://www.europol.europa.eu/latest_publications/37.
- ⁷ *Washington Post*, 15 July 2005.
- ⁸ Allen, ‘Justifying Islamophobia’, p. 2.
- ⁹ Interview with Caryl Phillips in: *Knack*, December 24, 2003.
- ¹⁰ *Le Figaro Magazine*, October 26, 1985. Available at: www.mediapart.fr/files/media_56331/UNEFIMAG1985.png
- ¹¹ Dobbelaere, *Verloren zekerheid*, pp. 236-237.
- ¹² EUMC, 2003, p. 43.
- ¹³ EUMC, 2002, p. 35; Strabac, Listhaug, ‘Anti-Muslim prejudice in Europe’, p. 279.
- ¹⁴ In 1992 John Kenneth Galbraith offered a similar predicament for the U.S. in his *The Culture of Contentment*, where he invoked the continuing inequity in the American inner cities.
- ¹⁵ Zemni, “The shaping of Islam and Islamophobia in Belgium,” pp. 28-44.
- ¹⁶ International Federation for Human Rights, 2005, p. 12.
- ¹⁷ Pew Global Attitudes Project, 6 July 2006; Masci, “An uncertain road: Muslims and the future of Europe,” 2004; Walker, “Europe’s Mosque Hysteria,” 2006.
- ¹⁸ EUMC, 2006, p. 32.
- ¹⁹ Pew Global Attitudes Project, 17 September 2008.
- ²⁰ Burke, *The 9/11 wars*, p. 235.
- ²¹ Pew Global Attitudes Project, 14 July 2005.
- ²² EUMC, 2006; Silvestri, *Europe’s Muslim women*, 2008; Fadil, ‘Muslim girls in Belgium’, pp. 18-19.
- ²³ Pew Global Attitudes Project, 22 June 2006.
- ²⁴ Pew Global Attitudes Project, 17 September 2008; Billiet, Swyngedouw, *Etnische minderheden en de Vlaamse kiezers*, p. 2.
- ²⁵ Pew Global Attitudes Project, 22 June 2006
- ²⁶ *Transatlantic Trends: Immigration 2010*, p. 3; Id., 2011, passim.
- ²⁷ Reuters, 19 April 2012. Available at: <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/04/19/us-germany-islam-idUSBRE83I0DN20120419>
- ²⁸ Bartlett, Birdwill, Littler, 2011.
- ²⁹ *Der Spiegel*, 18 November 2011.
- ³⁰ An extensive analysis of the evolution of EU counterterrorism policies can be found in Coolsaet, *Jihadi Terrorism and the Radicalisation Challenge*, pp. 227-246.
- ³¹ Presidency Conclusions, Brussels European Council, 16/17 December 2004 (Doc 16238/1/04 Rev 1).
- ³² Nowadays and for the same reason, official EU statements no longer use the expression ‘root causes’. Preference is now given to the expression ‘factors which can lead to radicalisation and recruitment’ or ‘conditions conducive to terrorism’ (UN compromise formula).
- ³³ House of Lords, 28 October 2008.
- ³⁴ In 2008, an EC Expert Group had warned that: ‘Today’s religious and political radicalisation should [...] not be confounded. The former is closely intertwined with identity dynamics, whereas the latter is boosted by the [...] feelings of inequity whether real or perceived. Both expressions of radicalisation processes are thus the result of very different individual and collective dynamics.’ (European Commission Expert Group on Violent Radicalisation, 15 May 2008)
- ³⁵

<http://icsr.info/publications/newsletters/1339691206ICSRInsightGermanArrestsandtheRiseoftheMegaphoneJihadists.pdf>

-
- ³⁶ Council Note by the EU Counter-Terrorism Coordinator, 15359/09/REV 1, 26 November 2009.
- ³⁷ <http://www.nctv.nl/actueel/persberichten/dreigingsniveau-blijft-beperkt-maar-aantrekkingskracht-jihadstrijd-neemt-toe.aspx>
- ³⁸ <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201012/cmselect/cmhaff/1446/144602.htm>
- ³⁹ *The EU Internal Security Strategy in action*, 22 November 2010.
- ⁴⁰ De Vries, 30 June 2006.
- ⁴¹ European Parliament resolution of 14 December 2011 on the EU Counter-Terrorism Policy: main achievements and future challenges. Available at: <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?type=TA&language=EN&reference=P7-TA-2011-0577>.
- ⁴² Chris Patten in: *The Times*, 14 October 2002.
- ⁴³ Kagan, "Power and Weakness," p. 3.
- ⁴⁴ Secretary Rumsfeld Briefs at the Foreign Press Center U.S. Department of Defense, January 22, 2003. Available at: [<http://www.defense.gov/transcripts/transcript.aspx?transcriptid=1330>]
- ⁴⁵ *Transatlantic Trends 2010*, p. 11.
- ⁴⁶ Pew Global Attitudes Project, 23 June 2005.