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Facing Terrorism: European Perspectives and Strategies

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Background

The terrorist attack in Madrid on 11 March 2004 was a grim reminder of the global nature and reach of terrorism. Following the event, the EUISS decided to organise a seminar to reflect on the terrorist threat from a European perspective. Among the questions explored at the seminar were the structure of terrorist organisations in Europe, the progress achieved in the fight against terrorism in the last three years, and possible EU contributions to enhance security. A recurring theme throughout the seminar was the increasingly blurred line between internal and external security. According to participants, this line complicates the efficient implementation of anti-terrorism measures. While member states may more readily agree on external measures – such as the imposition of sanctions – participants noted that the process was more complicated at the national level given efficiency and subsidiarity issues.

Understanding the Threat

During the first session, participants characterised the terrorist threat facing Europe. With the blurring of external and internal security, a number of participants stressed that Europe now faces a new kind of terrorism, distinct from earlier waves of terrorist activities. Unfortunately, both policymakers and the European public at large still tend to underestimate the seriousness of this threat.

Concerning the nature of the terrorist threat, three trends were noted. First, Europe is facing a more deadly terrorism today than at anytime before. Terrorist cells are adept at using asymmetric means to target the most vulnerable parts of society and consciously aim to create mass casualties. Of special concern are terrorist organisations' increasing interest in chemical, biological, radiological, nuclear (CBRN) agents.

Second, terrorist organisations in Europe have regrouped and become more distributed since 9/11; several have started to act autonomously. While the increasingly decentralised al-Qaeda maintains points of contact in Europe, affiliated groups are progressively more responsible for operational planning and execution. As a result, it may be more difficult to incriminate al-Qaeda cells on the target list.

Third, the new wave of terrorism is linked to religious fundamentalism, but it has very political ambitions such as the toppling of pro-Western Arab regimes, the removal of Western influence in the Middle East, and restoration of the Caliphate. Given such absolute objectives,

these terrorist organisations are pursuing a long-term strategy. According to one speaker, “They believe that Allah is on their side so they will eventually win – even if it takes decades.”

With respect to the root causes of terrorism, speakers noted that both cultural and economic factors play a significant role. The frequent assumption that terrorists are poor or consist of asylum seekers is not accurate. Terrorists come from diverse social backgrounds and fit into their organisation according to their status, skills, connections, and fervour. Other assumptions, such as ‘globalisation breeds terrorism’ or ‘failing states are breeding grounds for terrorism’ also tend to be simplistic. A speaker noted that terrorism is a “movement for the poor, not by the poor.”

For Europeans to implement an effective strategy against terrorism, a better understanding of its root causes is required. Within Europe, this includes better comprehension of the role of high unemployment and social marginalization in the suburbs. The role of jails as recruiting grounds also needs to be assessed. A speaker who had interviewed roughly 65 jailed terrorists in France noted that many of them had been unemployed in spite of advanced educational training. Jails also serve as platforms for proselytism. In certain jails, those who convert to Islam are offered immediate protection. Religious propaganda and leaflets – frequently written in languages incomprehensible to jail staff – are used to keep inmates under tight control.

Funding strategies, especially in the form of foreign aid, also need to be revised. For example, it may be worthwhile to consider more dynamic (shorter) funding cycles that can compete more effectively with the support offered by the madrasas. Other measures might include less intrusive forms of charity deliverance (avoiding too many symbols and flags on packages), and increased engagement with moderate Islamic organisations and diasporas across Europe.

Three years of Fight against Terror – a balance

During the second session, speakers and participants discussed both the failures and successes in the fight against terrorism. In addition, participants identified areas requiring additional policy action.

Identified as the more notable successes in the recent fight against terrorism were the:

- Toppling of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan
- Continued international collaboration in the fight against terrorism
- Enhanced collaboration in the judicial and financial fields
- Increased sharing of intelligence between Americans and Europeans

On the other hand, several significant failures were highlighted, among them the:

- Inability to capture Osama bin Laden and Abu Musab al-Zarqawi
- Creeping back of the Taliban into Afghanistan
- Limited resources for Afghanistan, many of which have been diverted for Iraq
- Limited success in dialogues with internal and external diasporas
- Slow application of agreed measures (for example, about 100 countries have yet to incorporate the UN Convention for the suppression of the financing of terrorism from 1999).

It was generally agreed that the US-led war on Iraq had not diminished terrorist threat levels but had diminished the credibility of the anti-terrorism alliance in the Arab world. According

to a speaker, Iraq today is like the Afghanistan of 20 years ago or Chechnya of 5 years ago – a place attracting and inspiring radical militants. From a different angle, within certain European countries, the war in Iraq has contributed to growing anti-Americanism – especially in suburbs with high proportions of immigrants. With respect to US-European intelligence collaboration, a speaker pointed out that it was often challenging for European countries to use such intelligence for incriminating purposes since it periodically was not fully collected or available. Some participants considered it a failure that European public diplomacy had been unable (so far) to sensitise the larger public about the graveness of the current terrorist threat and its distinctness from ‘domestic terrorism’.

The EU and Internal Security

The third session evaluated the progress made by the EU in the area of Justice and Home Affairs (JHA) since 9/11. Participants were concerned that the removal of the internal borders has not been followed by greater harmonisation of policies or cooperation among relevant national actors – giving an advantage to terrorist groups. One speaker went so far as to say that the elimination of EU internal borders had resulted in an EU ‘common criminal space’.

Overall, the terrorist attacks of 9/11 gave a considerable boost to EU cooperation in the field of JHA. However, this boost was stymied due to a slow implementation process. Many of the measures suggested years ago are still not fully implemented. Thus, measures such as European Arrest Warrant (EAW) have yet to reach their potential. This limitation also means the JHA in many ways continues to be a ‘virtual world’.

Two fundamental collaboration challenges within the JHA field were identified. First, intelligence sharing, which tends to be based on secrecy, does not naturally lend itself to international cooperation. Second, the heterogeneous character of national actors also hampers multilateral cooperation. Beyond having different threat perceptions, different ministries or lead agencies are involved in the fight against terrorism – complicating collaboration. Participants identified three areas requiring additional resources or policy reviews:

1. *Intelligence gathering*: Terrorism prevention capacities have to be enhanced, especially in the area of human intelligence (HUMINT). Currently, there are too few analysts with the required linguistic and professional background. With respect to data sharing, overly restrictive regulations on data protection should be reviewed. Certain databases that would lend themselves towards the fight against terrorism (such as EURODAC) are currently not allowed for such purposes. The creation of other databases, such as an EU-wide ballistics database, could serve to facilitate investigations across borders.
2. *CBRN response*: Preparedness needs to be improved in the area of CBRN response. In practical terms, common exercises and training should be encouraged. A necessary first step would be to take stock of existing European capabilities.
3. *Capabilities at EU level*: Capacities for common analysis at the EU level should be increased. The hiring of additional experts by EUROPOL and additional resources for the Council Secretariat are positive first steps.

Several participants noted that the Council Declaration on Combating Terrorism (March 2004) provides the basis for addressing several of these shortfalls. At the same time, the European Security Strategy reinforces the need to look beyond the EU pillar structures to create more integrated policies. The eventual adoption of the European Constitution is likewise expected to have positive effects on cooperation.

Consequences for CFSP/ESDP

Concerning external measures aiming to curb terrorism, the EU tends to pursue a three-pronged approach based on the provision of assistance, support and/or pressure. For example, in terms of assistance, the EU provides foreign aid to foster development and democratization worldwide. It can also provide technical assistance, for example in support of WMD non-proliferation measures. With respect to pressure, the EU has introduced conditionality as a component of its international agreements – addressing the support for terrorism and WMD proliferation.

However, several challenges are inherent in this approach. For example, the dialogue between development and security communities is presently limited, opening the door to contradictory actions and policies. A participant noted that the pilot phase for technical assistance in the area of WMD had so far proven unsuccessful. Another participant wondered whether the EU would not diminish its capability to pressure if conditionality clauses were used in an inflationary way.

Concerning ESDP, the recent approval of a modified solidarity clause means that ESDP assets may eventually be employed within the confines of the EU in case of terrorism related events. However, in the case of CFSP, a speaker noted that its limited budget is a hurdle for a more efficient fight against terrorism. Finally, with the prospect of a European Constitution drawing near, participants noted the need to reconsider the role of a potential future EU foreign minister and the unique opportunity the position represents vis-à-vis the policy choices and resource allocations.

Conclusion

The seminar found that while progress has been made in the fight against terrorism, current policies and tools are not adequately developed to counter the ‘new terrorism’. With an estimated 15,000-20,000 terrorist activists worldwide, terrorism will pose a continuing threat to our democracies for decades to come. Given its trans-national nature, the new form of terrorism is particularly challenging for the EU, where both external and internal security is still organised on an intergovernmental basis. The necessity to organise cooperation between 25 member states, and within each member state, numerous security agencies, puts the existing institutional structure at all levels under enormous pressure.

List of Invitees

- Patrick ALLARD, Conseiller, Ministère des Affaires Etrangères, Centre d'Analyse et de Prévision, Paris
- Edwin BAKKER, Researcher, The Netherlands Institute of International Relations, Clingendael, The Hague
- Rafael BENITEZ, Head of the Counter-Terrorism Task Force – Directorate General of Legal Affairs, Council of Europe, Strasbourg
- Niall BURGESS, Head of Task Force on Security Issues, Council for the European Union, Brussels
- Christopher COKER, Professor of International Relations, London School of Economics, London
- Anja DALGAARD-NIELSEN, Fellow, Danish Institute for International Studies, Copenhagen
- Sandro DE BERNARDIN, Minister Plenipotentiary – Coordinator for CFSP & ESDP, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Rome
- Gilles DE KERCHOVE, Director, DGH - Justice and Home Affairs, Secretariat General of the EU Council, Brussels
- Thérèse DELPECH, Directeur des Affaires stratégiques, Commissariat à l'Energie Atomique (CEA), Paris
- Nicole GNESOTTO, Directeur, IES-UE, Paris
- Peter HILL, Strategic Policy Team, Directorate of Strategy and Innovation, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, London
- Beata KOLECKA, European Correspondent, Deputy Director, EU Department, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Warsaw
- Gustav LINDSTRÖM, Research Fellow, EU-ISS, Paris
- Dov LYNCH, Research Fellow, EU-ISS, Paris
- Jean-Luc MARRET, Chercheur, Fondation pour la Recherche Stratégique (FRS), Paris
- Martin ORTEGA, Research Fellow, EU-ISS, Paris
- Lada PARIZKOVA, Former EU-ISS Visiting Fellow, Charles University, Prague
- Walter POSCH, Research Fellow, EU-ISS, Paris
- Fernando REINARES, Professor and Chair in Political Science; Director, Unit for Documentation and Analysis on Terrorism, Universidad Rey Juan Carlos, Madrid

- Guillaume RENAUDINEAU, Administrateur, Sénat, Service des Affaires Européennes, Paris
- Burkard SCHMITT, Assistant Director, EU-ISS, Paris
- Fidel SENDAGORTA, Head of Policy Planning, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Madrid
- Mariano SIMANCAS, Deputy Director - Serious Crime Department, Europol, The Hague
- Stephan SJÖBERG, Analyst, Centre for the Study of Low Intensity Conflicts & Terrorism (CLIENT), Swedish Defence Research Agency (FOI), Stockholm
- Karin VON HIPPEL, Senior Research Fellow, King's College, Centre for Defence Studies, London
- Anne WEYEMBERGH, Research Fellow, Institute for European Studies, Brussels
- Paul WILKINSON, Chairman, Centre for the Study of Terrorism and Political Violence, Department of International Relations, University of St. Andrews (Scotland)

Observers

- Timo BEHR, Intern (Germany), EU-ISS, Paris
- Javier TORTOSA, Intern (Spain), EU-ISS, Paris
- Thomas WEISS, Intern (Czech Republic) , EU-ISS, Paris
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