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Europe Post-Brussels: How It Should Respond to IS

By Rohan Gunaratna

Synopsis

With about 5000 European fighters in Syria and Iraq, the self-styled Islamic State is bound to strike Europe again. The law enforcement-centric European response is inadequate to manage the threat.

Commentary

THE TERRORIST attacks in Paris in November 2015 and Brussels in March 2016 show the magnitude, scale and severity of the threat to Europe. Despite the range of measures taken in counter-response, two large-scale attacks within five months exemplified Europe's challenges in cooperation and collaboration to meet the common threat.

While the self-styled Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), also known as IS, had attracted about 5,000 Europeans to its ranks, the targets are both in the Middle East and Europe. Although directed from IS Central, Belgium was the launching pad for the attacks in Paris, which killed 130 and maimed and injured some 370. The attacks in Brussels killed 30 and injured 340, all civilians. Notwithstanding the coordinated nature of the attacks and the widespread severity of the threat to their countries, the European governments have been reluctant to respond decisively while the bulk of Europeans were unwilling to change their way of life.

The Threat Driver

The terrorist attacks in Paris and Brussels triggered a law enforcement response. France stepped it up in Syria and enhanced cooperation within Europe and beyond. Belgium followed suit. Neither France nor other European states addressed the

fundamental driver of the threat - the extremist ideology spreading in both the physical and cyber space. We can expect IS to strike in Europe again.

Ideology is the centre of gravity of the threat and the glue that keeps the networks intact and fuel support for the attacks. In addition to strengthening and broadening the existing counter terrorism framework, Europe needs to create new partnerships to win the hearts and minds of the Muslims.

An IS sub-culture is emerging among European Muslims. In the margins of Muslim communities in Europe, IS ideology is steadily replacing European Islam. The European Muslims that advocate, support and participate in the attacks identify with IS more than with their countries of domicile and their neighbours. Although they live in France, Belgium, Germany, the UK and elsewhere in Europe, their loyalties have begun to shift.

With the rise of IS, they increasingly perceive the governments of the very countries they live and work in as acting against their faith (Islam) and the faithful (fellow Muslims). To them, fellow Muslims are fighting back against Western interventions that have literally destroyed nations in the Middle East. With Europe stepping up the fight against IS, the radicalised and militarised Muslims of Europe will want to join IS, or enable and support their operations on European soil.

Fighting Back

To cripple the current and emerging IS ideological and organisational threat landscape in Europe, the governments should fight back using a range of tools. To prevent recruitment and radicalisation of foreign fighter recruits and rehabilitate those supporting and conducting attacks, Europe should complement its operational response with a strategic counter terrorism response.

At the heart of fighting back is to understand the IS mindset and messaging. IS attacks are designed to influence public opinion, governments and coalitions fighting them. To magnify the impact, IS and its supporters issue frightening threats before, during and after attacks. The IS messaging after the Brussels attacks targeted the Belgian people and government as well as Europe, and “the Crusader alliance against the Islamic State”. The messages were calibrated to invoke fear to deter governments and encourage those radicalised and militarised to fight their host countries.

Post-Brussels – IS Threat and Message

Justifying the Brussels attacks in a video Abu Hanifa al-Beljiki, a Belgian fighter in ar-Raqqa Province in Syria said: “But one operation from the brothers in your (area) terrorised you, and you have come to live in fear, and your borders are all closed, and you have raised the emergency level to four, which is the highest. Look how we live and how you live. We live - praise be to Allah - in dignity, while you live in humiliation and fear.

“Do you know why? Do you know the reason? Because the Lord of the Worlds is with us, and that is enough for us. This is a message I direct to the failed government

of Belgium, the humiliated slaves of Obama. I say to you: Did we not warn you before? You learned nothing from the lessons of Paris, because you continued fighting Islam and the Muslims. For this I want to tell you that the attack in Brussels is reaping what you had sown with your own hands.

“Just as you bomb the Muslims with your F16s, we will fight your people. Just as you make our women widows, we will make your women widows. And just as you kill our children, we will kill your children.” To make the threat appear serious, at the end of the nine-minute video translated by SITE Intelligence Group, IS executed a captive alleged to be a spy for the “Crusader coalition”.

Countering the IS Influence

IS promotes the message that despite the coalition strikes, IS prevails and that in what it calls the Islamic State “The Muslims live in happiness. Business continues. The children laugh and play in the parks, and the Mujahideen are breaking through in the fronts. And despite your bombing, the immigrants are still coming to the Islamic State”.

To counter the IS message, European governments should work with Muslim religious, educational, media and other community organisations to reach out to the Muslim diaspora and migrant communities. As the communities are increasingly influenced and driven by the developments in Syria, Iraq and other Muslim conflict zones, the investment should be to both counter the ideology and promote moderation, toleration and coexistence. Until European governments and their partners engage the Muslim communities on the ground and in the cyber space, Muslims will be influenced by IS messaging.

When the terrorists strike, the most effective government response is to dismantle the terrorist infrastructure. For decades, terrorist and extremist groups misused and abused the freedoms enshrined in Europe’s constitutions to build terrorist support infrastructure. Like the UK, France and Canada, Belgium was the host of a dozen terrorist groups that influenced mainstream Muslims to embrace the ideologies of al Qaeda, IS and other threat groups. Furthermore, Belgium hosted two dozen extremist groups – the most notorious being Sharia4Belgium.

There is no better time for Europe to act. The response should be multi-pronged, multi-dimensional, multi-agency and multi-jurisdictional. To start with, Europe should upgrade the laws to criminalise support for IS and other threat groups, dismantle the terrorist and extremist support infrastructure, and create efficient platforms for European and global cooperation and collaboration to unilaterally and multilaterally fight the threat.

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