



'13/11': Terror in Paris.

Context and Implications

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On the night of 13 November 2015, Paris was hit by a wave of events that stand out in Europe's history of encounters with terrorism. Starting with three suicide bombers during a friendly game between the German and French national football teams, a series of other assaults occurred throughout the city: People were shot indiscriminately at bars, restaurants, and a concert.

At the time of this writing, the number of fatalities had reached 129 with more than 200 other people severely wounded, meaning that casualty figures could rise even further. Second only to the Madrid bombings of 2004, this is one of the worst non-hijacking-related terrorist attacks in recent European history and happened less than one year after the assaults on the offices of the French magazine *Charlie Hebdo* in January 2015. At the moment, everything seems to indicate that this was but the latest attack of the Islamic State (IS) against Western countries that play an important role in the fight against the IS in the Middle East. It came only days after the French government had announced that it would deploy the aircraft carrier 'Charles de Gaulle' in the eastern Mediterranean to contribute to the international air strikes that are already taking place against the IS. How does this recent attack fit into the context of not only French but European terrorism? What are the underlying causes and finally, what are its implications?

Europe and terrorism

It has become somewhat commonplace to point out that terrorism did not start with the attacks of 11 September 2001 in New York and Washington. And yet it is important to reiterate that point. European nations have experienced terrorism in one form or another since at least the 19th century, and arguably longer. In tsarist Russia, members of the 'People's Will' (*Narodnaya Volya*) assassinated Tsar Alexander II in 1881 and committed attacks on other political and administrative officials. They liaised with terrorists abroad, for instance in Paris, and so-called anarchist terrorists were active in most European countries, including Italy, Spain, Germany, and France. While their goals were mostly political, nationalist terror was another strand of political violence that was also taking place in *fin-du-siècle* Europe. In Finland - which was at this time a Russian province - Eugen Schauman killed the



Papiers d'actualité / Current Affairs in Perspective

N°8 | November 2015

Russian governor-general, Nikolay Ivanovich Bobrikov, in 1904. Ten years later, in Sarajevo, Gavrilo Princip assassinated Austrian Archduke Francis Ferdinand and thereby set fire to the powder keg of European relations and started World War I. After the war, a Macedonian nationalist, Vlado Chernozemski, killed King Alexander I of Yugoslavia and French Foreign Minister Louis Barthou in 1934. At about the same time, Irish nationalists commenced their violent struggle against British rule over the island, while the ETA (*Euskadi Ta Askatasuna*) started its campaign against Spain for independence of the Basque country. From the late 1960s on, social-revolutionary terrorists started their attacks in Italy (Red Brigades), West Germany (Baader-Meinhof, the Movement Second of June, the Revolutionary Cells, as well as several right-wing groups), Belgium, and France (*Cellules Communistes Combattantes, Action Directe*). At the same time, Palestinian nationalist terrorists hijacked planes and raided the Munich Olympics in 1972, while Moluccan hijackers took trains hostage in the Netherlands to demand their independence in Far East Asia. There were even terrorists for hire, such as Carlos the Jackal, who contributed to the atmosphere of fear.

The wave of religiously inspired terrorism that has been rolling over Europe since the early 2000s is thus but the latest stage in what has unfortunately become a somewhat normal feature of European political history: terrorism. Yet the intensity and fatality of the attacks that have occurred since 2001 have been unmatched in post-war history. Al Qaeda and its subgroups that claimed responsibility for the Madrid bombings in 2004¹ and London in July 2005² are not dead – although its most notorious leader Osama bin Laden is – but have recently been overshadowed by the Islamic State (IS).

This group, while an offspring of sorts of Al Qaeda, is nevertheless very different from the latter. It is a hybrid of a religious and a nationalist terrorist group, which might make it even more dangerous. The IS has a *de facto* state-like structure and executes many functions just like a normal state including tax collection, healthcare, and policing. The underpinnings of this wannabe state include a very drastic understanding of Islam and the Sharia laws in place in IS territory make post-Islamic-revolutionary Iran and even Taliban Afghanistan pale in comparison. Then again, the IS is not only striving for religious truth and the implementation of a rigid religious regime, they are also fighting for control over a territory, something to which Al Qaeda never aspired. In many ways, the IS is a consequence of the problems that have been characteristic of the Middle East for decades, and the US invasion of Iraq and the subsequent instability in many regions of the country have contributed to the birth of the group. The IS commands an impressive number of radicalised fighters and as it provides stability and order, it still enjoys enough local support in some of its core regions that it has the power to resist an impressively large regional and international coalition set on destroying it.

The French decision to join the air strikes against the IS seems to be – as underscored by the declaration issued by the IS – the reason for the recent attacks.

¹ Which saw nearly 200 people dead and approximately 2000 wounded.

² With 52 people dead and more than 700 wounded.



N°8 | November 2015

They also signify a new development in the strategy of the IS. While thus far the IS has mostly concentrated on its struggle in the Middle East, the well-coordinated and planned attacks in Paris seem to suggest that the IS is truly going global now. Certainly, during earlier terrorist actions, such as the *Charlie Hebdo* killings, the perpetrators claimed to be acting on behalf of the IS but whether they were actually instructed to carry out these attacks by the IS leadership is doubtful. In contrast, the 13/11 attacks were meant as an attempt to blackmail the French (and by extension other European and Western countries) into withdrawing from the fight against the IS. They seemed to have happened on express IS orders and consequently, the Islamic State is now carrying the struggle to the metropolises of the West. They are spreading fear and insecurity, in the hopes of building enough political momentum to pressure Western leaders into bringing home their soldiers and planes and letting the IS continue their murderous and bloody business. If these decisions are taken, the IS - and its terrorism and blackmail - have indeed won.

However, while Europe has a long history of terrorism, it also has significant experience in dealing with it. Although not every decision ever taken was legally and morally flawless, overall the European nations have managed to maintain their way of life, rule of law, civil liberties, and human rights that are the very essence of what the IS has attempted to attack and which are well enshrined in the three outspoken themes of the French Republic: *Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité*. The approaches that individual countries have taken have differed, in accordance with their individual experiences with terrorism. The British, for instance, pursued a military approach to nationalist terrorism, one that in itself had its excesses and was perhaps the most significant instance in Europe where the terrorists came close to turning the state they were fighting into a terroriser itself. However, in the late 1990s, the British turned towards non-military solutions, which have secured relative peace and stability in Northern Ireland to date. On the other side of the spectrum, the Germans, faced with the terror caused by the Red Army Faction in the 1970s and 1980s, took a legal and police-centric approach to the challenges. They set up special counterterrorist units, passed and implemented new laws - some of which were heavily contested - and established a policy line that was meant to get the message across that terrorism was fruitless because terrorist demands would not be met. The Germans went to the limits of the constitution to fight terrorism, but not beyond. In the end, terrorism stopped, and the rule of law as well as liberal democracy prevailed. If history has any lessons to offer in the fight against terrorism today, it is this: the basic principles upon which modern European societies are built must not be sacrificed in the fight against the people who challenge them. The other lesson history offers is that the struggle against terrorism will take time, it will cost lives, but it can be won.

Implications of 13/11

What are the implications of the recent terrorist attacks? The brutal atrocities in Paris claimed many victims and created a lot of anger and calls for revenge. Domestically, French (and for that matter other European) decision-makers will feel pressure to implement thorough controls on who enters the country, better surveillance



N°8 | November 2015

of so-called ‘risk groups’, and tougher laws giving the authorities more tools to identify possible terrorists before they commit their attacks. The military might be more closely involved in domestic counterterrorism efforts. The country might feel even less inclined to accept Middle Eastern refugees for fears of having camouflaged IS fighters among them.³ Muslims might feel discriminated.⁴ In terms of foreign policy, if terror attacks continue – and distressing as this sounds but they might – there could be more and more voices in favour of pulling out of the fight against the IS so as to avoid being further targeted by terrorist attacks. All of these calls are understandable, and as in every democracy, will have to be discussed. Letting the IS continue its murderous business unchallenged, however, would not only be morally wrong, but it would not stop terrorism either. It signals to the IS that Western democracies can be manipulated into caving to terrorist demands.

For the moment though, the French have reiterated their commitment to the attacks against IS bases in the Middle East. While the general usefulness of this strategy of surgical airstrikes – or a military approach altogether – can, and should, be questioned, it appears to be the only sensible policy at the moment. The decision to join the international military campaign, contestable as it is, was taken according to French democratic procedures. If this decision was changed because of the attacks and out of a fear of future terror, then the atrocities carried out in Paris will have accomplished their mission and the IS will have won. Terrorists want to sow fear and despair – a feeling of insecurity that everybody could be hit – in order to implement their goals. If this fear were to become the motivation behind French policies, terrorism would succeed and a band of criminals would dictate a state’s policies. What is worse, aside from these rather philosophical implications, is that terrorists everywhere would also receive the message that terrorism is indeed a successful strategy if the number of victims is high enough. In the end, this would mean more terror attacks, not fewer.

This being said, the recent rhetoric that equates the attacks with an act of war is disputable. French politicians, including President Francois Hollande and the prime minister, declared war on the IS; and politicians in other countries, such as the German federal president, echoed this rhetoric. This actually grants legitimacy to the group and raises them to the category of a serious international actor with whom war can be waged. One of the aims of the IS is to be considered on par as states and not as just a band of criminals. The war rhetoric accomplishes just that. Terrorism is an illegitimate strategy and its perpetrators should not be legitimised. They are criminals and should be called and treated as just that. In international politics, it should not be through an act of terrorism that a group can acquire statehood.

³ Which makes the whole attack even more tragic as many of these refugees are fleeing the terror committed by the IS in their home territories.

⁴ Which might radicalise some members of the Muslim community and make them an ideal tool for future terrorist attacks.



N°8 | November 2015

What should be done?

It is difficult to prescribe solutions to a problem as complex as the one surrounding the recent terror attacks. History offers a basic lesson that, if all else fails, will be good advice: keep a cool head. Terrorism is a serious threat, it is an outrageous crime, one that cannot in any way be justified. Nevertheless, it can be dealt with and it can be contained – if perhaps never completely eradicated. Terrorism claims many innocent victims, but in terms of absolute numbers, it kills fewer than other scourges of the modern world: traffic accidents, cancer, or heart diseases for that matter. This is not to say that terrorism should not be taken seriously: the contrary is true. Terrorism requires determined, swift, and rigid responses. But it also requires sensitive ones, responses that serve the goal of reducing the number of future terrorist attacks rather than provoking more attacks through unreflective, hasty solutions inspired by fear and anger. The best service that a European government can do for a terrorist is to step down to their level.

Resisting the IS makes sense. Not only from a moral perspective (in light of the massive human rights violations committed in its name) but also because the IS is at the root of many of Europe's immediate problems, such as the refugee crisis. Whether bombing the IS is the best way to fight it is debatable. At the moment though, if only for purely symbolic reasons, this strategy must not be changed. At later stages, it can – and maybe should – be revised, but not in response to the terror attacks.

At the same time, France and other European countries must not sacrifice their basic ideals and principles in the fight against terrorism. Fear is a bad counsellor; if we pass laws that seriously limit our freedom, affect our way of life, impede the rule of law, reduce our open-mindedness because of fear, then the terrorists have indeed won. The best way for liberal democracies to prevail is by adhering to the very principles of *liberté*, *égalité*, and *fraternité*. Abiding by what makes us the target of these radicals is the best way to get back at them. Military engagement against the IS might be increased, new laws might have to be passed, police might have to be equipped with new tools. But all of these decisions should be thoroughly discussed and thought through. And the purpose of every new instrument should be weighed against the effects it might have on our democratic and legal principles.

In 1977, at the height of terrorism in Germany, then-Chancellor Helmut Schmidt, who passed away three days before the Paris attacks, addressed the Red Army Faction terrorists in a televised speech:

'You might experience a triumphant feeling of power at the moment. But be not mistaken. Terrorism does not stand a chance in the long run. For not only is the will of all state authorities directed against terrorism; against terrorism stands the will of the whole people.'

This statement was just as true in 1977 as it is 40 years later.



N°8 | November 2015

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N°8 | November 2015

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N°8 | November 2015