



STOP THE *BELGIAN BASHING*, BUT FACE REALITY

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Since the attacks on November 13, Belgian authorities have been blamed for their “weakness” in the face of terrorist threats, their “naivety,” or, even worse, their “stupidity.”

These critics and their disproportionate language, while being totally insignificant, are simply unfair. **Within their legal framework and with the resources at their disposal, the Belgian intelligence services are no worse at their jobs, all else equal, than anyone else.**

For sure, Belgium was not able to prepare itself for the attacks on November 13, nor for those on March 22. However, **this accusation can be made against all industrialized countries that have been victims of attacks within the last sixteen years.** What had the French services seen before the attacks on January 7 (*Charlie Hebdo*) and on January 10 (*Hyper Casher*), which were prepared and executed by radicalized men already known to authorities for their connections with Al-Qaeda and Islamic State? What had France seen of the preparation of attacks carried out in March 2012 by Mohamen Merah, a man who was under monitoring of domestic intelligence agencies? What had the British seen before July 7, 2005, the Spanish before March 11, 2004, or, especially, the Americans before September 11, 2001 and more recently the massacre in San Bernadino? **In all these cases, all the signs, or most of them, pointed to the presence of imminent threat. But it did not help.**

The answer lies elsewhere. These events did not occur because of “mistakes” made by intelligence services, but rather because of the magnitude of a security threat unprecedented since 1945: **while in the 70s and 80s, we were confronted with several dozen terrorists and, during the Al-Qaeda period, barely one thousand in all of Europe, we now face thousands of “suspects,” many of whom are (well) trained.**

Still, there remain two problems, one global and the other specifically Belgian.

Overall, the nature of the threat presented by the Islamic State is new: **a hybrid terrorism that merges classic jihadists**, (some of whom have been active for decades and are particularly experienced), **young “radicalized” people** (whose

radicalization sometimes happens in a couple weeks, making their detection impossible) **and individuals with criminal backgrounds**, who bring to jihad their criminal know-how, like the habit of “toying” with authorities, tricking police and, of course, their particular aptitude for finding arms and using them.

This new “reality” requires a change in culture within the intelligence community. What is needed is an understanding of these two approaches, that of classic extremists and terrorists, as well as that of thugs from within criminal circles and organized gangs. This idea will be further examined later on, in a more detailed briefing.

There is, however, **a Belgian specificity: the disinterest shown by the authorities during the last twenty years that has allowed Islamist radicalization to grow roots within society, to corrupt some groups of the youth, to recruit, and to settle permanently within the Belgian landscape.**

A very restrictive judicial framework (examples of which include current debates over whether or not to extend the time period permitted for police custody and the ten years it took for intelligence services to adopt the practice of phone tapping) clearly limits possibilities for services overwhelmed by the number of potential attackers.

Finally, **a lack of security culture and national sentiment, as well as the (almost) complete absence of a culture of responsibility make it hard for Belgium to learn from its mistakes.**

The answer is not to participate in *Belgian Bashing*, but rather to highlight these problems. To anticipate future threats and to allocate means to counter them (while knowing that complete security does not exist) instead of saying that it is time for things to change.

Will we need more massacres before we realize this? The credibility of Brussels, as the capital of Europe and the headquarters of NATO, is at stake.

The decision to create a parliamentary commission of investigation is a good start if this new institution can reach the root of the problem and completely redevelop a security system that has reached its limits.

And, finally, it is time to put words into actions.

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