



Foreign Fighters: Rebalancing Security, the Blame Game and Moral Panic

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Introduction

The attack by French citizen Mehdi Nemmouche on the Jewish Museum in Brussels on 24 May 2014, one day before the combined (regional, national and European) elections, drew the attention of the public 'back' to the threat posed by returnees from conflict-torn regions and countries. 'Back' because it is an issue that once in a while pops up on the radar and in which the public interest seems to fade rapidly. Syria is without any doubt the main, though not single let alone first, source of these foreign fighter¹ veterans or returnees.

In this e-Note we will look into the way the attack on the Jewish Museum has shaped the security discourse on the foreign fighters issue in the last couple of weeks and even days and how the debate on the trade-off

between security on the one hand and liberty and privacy on the other is being shaped right now. We will show that the blame game is entering the first stage and we will analyse whether the attack caused a moral panic. Finally we will argue for a long-term solution based on fear management in order to avoid some of the observed reactions we identify throughout the paper.

Rebalancing security: the trade-off with privacy and liberty

The Nemmouche case highlights aspects that have to be taken into account when assessing the threat from returnees. What are the motivations and objectives of these foreign fighters when they return to Europe? Is it likely that the few hundreds Belgian foreign fighters aim to overthrow the Belgian Government and establish an Islamic State for instance? Is it even likely that they choose to return to Belgium? If they would pursue a larger goal, as advocated by Al Qaeda, and choose American or Israeli targets, do these Belgians even have to

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return to Belgium in order to succeed? Does it not suffice to return to the EU, avoiding Belgium for detection, and exploit a vast area without internal borders and with many targets at hand to succeed?

In any case, to overcome this threat and provide some answers to the questions above, European cooperation is more than called for since, within the European Union, one country holds neither the resources nor the knowledge to handle this issue on its own. Not as long as an EU citizen can travel freely to Belgium for instance. The EU's Counter-Terrorism Coordinator Gilles de Kerchove insisted on improving information sharing between the Schengen countries, Europol and Interpolⁱⁱ. De Kerchove pointed explicitly to Nemmouche's abuse of the free movement of persons within the Schengen zone. It is interesting to notice that Belgium, in the light of the G7 summit in Brussels and the presence of President Obama, has executed border control actions for the first time since the Schengen area was implemented almost 20 years agoⁱⁱⁱ. Regardless of the fact that a country's border surveillance (including air and seaports) is always reinforced when a G7 summit takes place, the threat assessment leading to the current border control action cannot be seen as entirely independent from the attack on the Jewish Museum by a European citizen using the free movement within the Schengen area to the benefit of his terrorist attack. The adopted measures clearly constitute a rebalancing of security over liberty.

This brings us to the recent call^{iv} of the Belgian incumbent minister of internal affairs to establish a European Passenger Name Record (PNR) collecting the flight passenger data in Europe. De Kerchove agreed with re-launching the debate on the establishment of a European PNR. This record, based on what the United States of America developed in the wake of the 9/11 attacks, should allow European security services to closely monitor suspected terrorists. Opponents within the EU refused to adopt such a system due to privacy issues and the proposal stranded at the European Parliament. As is always the case when a terrorist attack (or any other real or discursively created catastrophic event) occurs, governments try to rebalance security over privacy. Attacks of this kind create the momentum for policymakers to impose changes without much resistance within the general public. The change in the political landscape within the European Parliament after the elections and the recent events might alter the Parliament's view.

Even though the scale of the recent attack does not compare by far with what occurred on 9/11, the idea of invoking more security to the expense of privacy is common to both. Besides privacy, we saw that liberty also figures in a trade-off with security. This debate grew largely after the 9/11 attacks in the US. During the trade-off after 9/11 it was considered a legal constraint on habeas corpus to intern suspected terrorists at Guantánamo but the internment at Abu Ghraib was considered illegal^v. Some of the measures constraining liberties would never have been accepted if not for the momentum created by the 9/11 attacks. Regardless of this rebalancing we could ask ourselves why security was not appropriately balanced in order to prevent the attack on the Jewish Museum from happening in the first place.

The blame game: intelligence and policy

Even if the different national security agencies and national policymakers do their best to gather statistics on the number of their own nationals engaged in foreign fighting, the recent case in Brussels however, based on today's assumptions and declarations, regretfully shows that the information on French foreign fighters was not systematically shared^{vi} between the security services. This seems to expose a lack of cooperation on a bilateral and multilateral level, between the different nations involved and the European Union.

Only following the attack on the Jewish Museum, the Coordination Unit for Threat Analysis (CUTA) assessed the level of threat towards places with a Jewish character at the highest level^{vii}. Should this be regarded as an intelligence failure, less than one year after the government put an emphasis on developing plans to deal with foreign fighters? Will this failure, if considered as such, be attributed to the intelligence community or to policymakers?

The art of developing a threat assessment and producing intelligence in general is however far from being an exact science as many would like it to be. Intelligence, as Paul R. Pillar^{viii} successfully describes with respect to US foreign policy, has been heavily subjected to its politicisation^{ix}. This claim could even be generalised outside the realm of foreign policy and the US. Cited in Pillar's work, Mark M. Lowenthal explained that, in 2003, intelligence officers debated amongst themselves (in the light of the issue of weapons of mass destruction and Iraq) *"whether to maintain distance from the policymaker in the interest of preserving policy-neutral integrity or to get close to the policymaker in the interest of making intelligence more relevant"*. Could this be projected on our intelligence community?

Did our intelligence community fail in the Nemmouche case? In general, we tend to notice when something goes wrong but we ignore it when it does not occur. This might sound obvious but it is not so. One of the problems in order to evaluate our national intelligence performance is that the government and the agencies lack a sound communication strategy on security issues and the intelligence community's activities. We hardly notice foiled attempts or disrupted plots in the media and the media's attention, driven by public demand based on readers' preferences, is rather variable anyhow. We do occasionally get to hear about court rulings over terrorist events that occurred before but escaped public attention. Even though intelligence officers operate discreetly and their efforts are rarely publicly recognised, their work remains invaluable to the nation's security.

It is just what we 'do not see' that matters to evaluate the success of intelligence efforts. The Belgian Standing Intelligence Agencies Review Committee and Standing Police Services Review Committee review the activities and functioning of the related agencies. Even though the review is not systematic but conducted either on demand or on their own initiative, the different reports the committees publish are the most important official source on the functioning of the intelligence community in our country. The committees will most likely investigate how intelligence sharing faltered, if it did, in the Nemmouche case. Often, as Pillar describes in the above-mentioned book, the problem is not the lack of production of relevant intelligence but rather the use of it by policymakers.

In the wake of the attack in Brussels no public blame has been directed at the intelligence community so far. The blame game did start in the media^x by pointing to policymakers when Paul Ponsaers from the University of Ghent stated that little has been done to prevent radicalisation since 2008. He somewhat glorifies the driving force the university has represented in developing the national strategy on countering radicalisation. The strategy at which he points is the single guiding strategic document in the prevention of terrorism at this moment, so since this document stipulates what the government can do, the blame partly backfires. And finally, how does one measure the level of radicalisation? We should acknowledge that, even if the blame game is unavoidable in our political landscape reinforced by large media attention, in the end only institutions such as the committees mentioned above can provide neutral and objective analyses of the functioning of our security and intelligence services.

Anyhow it is clear that an event as the one in Brussels creates a momentum that many actors in the security realm wish to exploit to favour their projects and ideas. Re-launching the debate on preventing radicalisation in Belgium as Ponsaers suggests does not provide an immediate solution on how to prevent Nemmouche's attack, since he is French. Indirectly he does underscore the necessity of an integrated European framework for preventing radicalisation.

Moral panic and momentums

In both the policy community and in security organisations, the norm is to ‘wait for change’ or to learn lessons from the last crisis, thus leaving states inadequately prepared for new and emerging developments^{xi}. Once the danger has fully materialised, evident to all, mobilising action is easier – but it then may be too late^{xii}.

In order to illustrate this aspect we can look at Martha Crenshaw’s^{xiii} observation that

“[g]overnments [...] need time to organize a response: collecting and analyzing intelligence information, establishing special units in the security forces, coordinating bureaucratic resources, and securing legal changes to facilitate the apprehension and conviction of terrorists. All of these measures would be rejected by public opinion if terrorism were not obviously threatening.”

Additionally, bureaucratic inertia was quite suddenly lifted in the aftermath of the attacks on New York and Washington^{xiv}. Buzan and Hansen pointed out, in concert with the widening perspective of security studies, that in times of (discursively constituted) war, the money and manpower allocated to the military increase, and encroachments on civil, liberal and human rights are more likely to meet with public acceptance^{xv}.

This dynamic can otherwise be compared to Stanley Cohen’s concept of moral panic^{xvi}. Shafir and Schairer^{xvii} offer a conceptualisation of Cohen’s approach that highlights the social and political process by which moral panics are created. They point out to four distinct features: the exaggeration of the threat, an overbroad definition of the social group, a disproportionate response to the exaggerated threat and the observation that a moral panic has a clear lifecycle by appearing, running its course and finally disappearing or more likely submerging. Considering that in 2013 a total of 9 persons died by walking over the railroad tracks^{xviii} in Belgium and only 7 died in terrorist attacks throughout the European Union, the current terrorist threat discourse clearly meets the first feature of a moral panic. The threat might be exaggerated but it has to be acknowledged that it is on the rise. Building on Europol’s Terrorism Situation and Trends Reports^{xix} (TE-SAT) foreign fighters’ potentiality (2013) to attack within the EU turned into willingness (2014) over one year and ultimately even led to a successful attack in Brussels only four days before the last report was publicly released.

With respect to the second feature we should be aware that not all foreign fighters are alike. Thomas Hegghammer indicates, in his article^{xx} explaining the variation in Western Jihadists’ choice between domestic and foreign fighting, that it is possible to identify multiple types of foreign fighters. He points to the difficulty of defining who we deal with because of the difference between fighting in one’s country of origin or in a third country. There is also a difference in fighting against one’s host country or against a third country and there is also the difference between leaving to train with international terrorists or joining a local insurgency. Not all Muslim foreign fighters leave with the same intentions so drawing up an assessment based on one single type is flawed. In the same way we can argue that not all returnees engage in violent attacks within the EU. According to Hegghammer’s study one in nine foreign fighters returned to commit terrorist attacks in the West (North America, Western Europe and Australia) between 1990 and 2010. When looking for accounts of a disproportionate response to meet the third feature one cannot ignore the city of Antwerp’s call^{xxi} to deploy Belgian Para Commando troops to assist the police forces in order to protect its Jewish community. Regarding the lifecycle of a moral panic we will most likely witness a downfall in attention to the foreign fighters issue as time advances. As seen in the references for this paper the media produces many articles a day on this topic at this moment while in a couple of weeks this will most likely drop significantly because of new priorities in the media or just because people have grown tired of the topic.

Conclusion: a call for resilience and fear management

According to the above observations, we can safely claim that a moral panic appears to be growing in Belgium and by extension even in Europe. How can we avoid winding up in a moral panic that inadvertently leads to panic policies that are driven by panic and fear?

Frank Furedi describes in his book *Invitation to terrorism* how a narrative of fear based on the unknown has gradually begun to usurp the role of empirical evidence and reason in policy-making. This possibilistic thinking authorises the act of speculation and imagination as a legitimate form of threat assessment^{xxii}. What we should do is limit the fear for terrorism within our society and the threat from foreign fighters returning.

Bakker and Veldhuis highlight the profound importance of managing our emotional and behavioural reactions to a real or perceived terrorist threat. They consequently point to the risk of breaking down democratic principles and undermining societies' capability to rise above adversity if we fail to attribute appropriate meaning to terrorist threats. Moreover, they specify:

"[o]verreactions in terms of false allegations, waves of arrests and specific legal or bureaucratic measures against members of [political or ethnic] groups could lead to increased polarisation and even (violent) radicalisation. In order to avoid the self-fulfilling prophecy of fatalism, pessimism and a dread of terrorism, societies need to show they are resilient to the potential damaging impact of terrorism."

Enhancing resilience would ensure that communities, corporations and governments have the capacity to withstand, respond, recover and adapt to terrorist disturbances, rather than being vulnerable targets. Managing fear and promoting resilience are crucial before, during and after a terrorist attack. Key principles to this are public education, communication, preparedness for mass catastrophes, coping strategies and rapid recovery. These should be part of a comprehensive counter-terrorism strategy that employs all tools available to governments in order to address the terrorist threat. The appeal terrorism actually enjoys can only falter when terrorists become aware that they cannot disrupt society as they have done before. On resilience, Bakker and Veldhuis conclude that dealing with the psychological effect of terrorism and bouncing back to healthy levels of functioning in the face of terrorism might well be a powerful tool in combating it.

The attack on the Jewish Museum has clearly led to what we might consider as a moral panic with the threat of causing more harm to the very principles we seek to protect. The first signs of what we call a 'blame game' have been sighted and the typical 'wait for change' attitude in security matters has been revealed once more. Stemming from the above analysis we can draw some conclusions on future efforts to be made on a national and regional level:

- Enhance European cooperation, intelligence sharing and monitoring of foreign fighters.
- Develop politically independent and empirical public threat assessments by the intelligence community in order to avoid wild speculation and sensationalist media reports on threats.
- Develop interlinked strategies on combating terrorism and preventing radicalisation (within a European framework and complemented by action plans with clear directives on implementation).

The final observation is worth stressing because, beyond theorising about strategy development, more attention should be paid to the development of implementation methods and follow-up mechanisms in order to adjust the followed course when and if needed.

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- ⁱ Hegghammer, Thomas. "The Rise of Muslim Foreign Fighter: Islam and the Globalization of Jihad." *International Security*, 28 June 2013 (http://www.mitpressjournals.org/doi/pdf/10.1162/ISEC_a_00023). The term "foreign fighter" refers to an unpaid combatant, unaffiliated to a regular army, who has joined and operates within the confines of an insurgency in a conflict state of which he/she is not a citizen and is widely used in the context of Islamist insurgencies.
- ⁱⁱ De Standaard, "EU moet bevreesd zijn voor gelijkaardige aanslagen", 3 June 2014 (http://www.standaard.be/cnt/dmf20140602_01126993)
- ⁱⁱⁱ De Standaard, "Voor het eerst in 20 jaar grenscontroles", 3 June 2014 (http://www.standaard.be/cnt/dmf20140603_01127809)
- ^{iv} De Standaard, "Milquet pleit voor Europese databank van reizigers", 2 June 2014 (http://www.standaard.be/cnt/dmf20140602_01126438)
- ^v Author's personal notes from the presentation by Dr Maria Rasmussen on liberty vs. security at the Program on Terrorism and Security Studies (July 2013).
- ^{vi} Knack, "Verdachte schietpartij Joods museum: 'Ik heb Brussel doen branden'", 1 June 2014 (<http://www.knack.be/nieuws/wereld/verdachte-schietpartij-joods-museum-ik-heb-brussel-doen-branden/article-normal-146745.html>)
- ^{vii} De Standaard, "Teruggekeerde Syriëstrijders zijn tikkende tijdbom", 2 June 2014 (http://www.standaard.be/cnt/dmf20140601_01126326)
- ^{viii} Pillar, Paul R. *Intelligence and U.S. foreign policy: Iraq, 9/11 and misguided reform*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2011.
- ^{ix} Pillar describes politicisation as not limited to partisanship but as including shaping of analysis either to stay in the good graces of customers who want to hear certain messages or to win support for certain favoured policies.
- ^x De Standaard, "Weinig gedaan om radicalisering te voorkomen", 3 June 2014 (http://www.standaard.be/cnt/dmf20140602_01127765)
- ^{xi} Lindstrom, Gustav, and Detlef Puhl. "Emerging security challenges: issues and options for consideration." Policy Brief, Emerging Security Challenges Working Group, Partnership for Peace Consortium, 2013.
- ^{xii} The 9/11 Commission, National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States. *The 9/11 Commission Report*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2004, 350.
- ^{xiii} Crenshaw, Martha. "How terrorism declines." *Terrorism and Political Violence* (Routledge) 3, no. 1 (1991): 69-87.
- ^{xiv} Mathiesen, Thomas. *Towards a surveillant society: the rise of surveillance systems in Europe*. Hampshire: Waterside Press Ltd., 2013, 78.
- ^{xv} Buzan, Barry, and Lene Hansen. *The Evolution of International Security Studies*. 5th. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013, 226.
- ^{xvi} Stanley Cohen coined the concept of moral panic in order to account for the animosity toward the hooliganism of the 'Mods' and 'Rockers' in British resort towns in the 1960s and the immoderation of English working-class culture in general. His focus was on the social construction of deviance in public and media discourse (Shafir and Schairer 2013).
- ^{xvii} Shafir, Gershon, and Cynthia E. Schairer. "The war on terror as political moral panic." In *Lessons and legacies of the war on terror: from moral panic to permanent war*, edited by Gershon Shafir, Everard Meade and William J. Aceves. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2013.
- ^{xviii} Infrabel, "Veiligheid langs de sporen en op het perron", 2014 (<http://www.infrabel.be/nl/over-infrabel/veiligheid/veiligheid-langs-de-sporen-en-op-het-perron>)
- ^{xix} The EU Terrorism Situation and Trend Report from 2013 and 2014 can be consulted at: https://www.europol.europa.eu/latest_publications/37
- ^{xx} Hegghammer, Thomas. "Should I Stay or Should I Go? Explaining Variation in Western Jihadists' Choice between Domestic and Foreign Fighting." *American Political Science Review*, February 2013.
- ^{xxi} De Standaard, 1 June 2014 (http://www.standaard.be/cnt/dmf20140601_01125926)
- ^{xxii} Bakker, Edwin, and Tinka Veldhuis. "A fear management approach to counter-terrorism." International Centre for Counter-Terrorism - Discussion paper. February 2012. (<http://www.icct.nl/publications/icct-papers/a-fear-management-approach-to-counter-terrorism>)

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