

Event Report
BÖLL LUNCH DEBATE

After the Paris and Brussels Attacks: How can Europe Protect Its Open Society? ¹

Only three months after the devastating terrorist attacks in Brussels, a strange silence has fallen over Europe. Terrorism has disappeared from the headlines; think tanks and politicians have found other subjects to focus on. Everything seems to be ‘back to normal’ – as long as we accept the ubiquity of heavily-armed soldiers as part of our new normality and close our eyes to the creeping restriction of our privacy. But is it really over – have all necessary measures been taken to prevent new disasters? We all want it to be over, but deep in our hearts we know and fear that it’s not. In other parts of the world the vicious attacks on innocent people continue. Terror can return to Europe at any moment. Many questions remain: How serious a threat is Jihadi terror to European countries? How can open democratic societies protect their citizens against substantial terror threats without losing their open and democratic character? How much freedom are we willing to give up for security? How much security are we willing to give up for freedom? What can be done to prevent Muslim and non-Muslim populations in Europe from drifting further apart? Is it still possible to defend an open, democratic and multi-cultural society or are we fighting a losing battle?

If Europe wants to avoid repeating the mistakes of the US and its war on terror as a response to 9/11 and come up with effective counter measures, it is necessary to assess the threat of terror in Europe adequately.



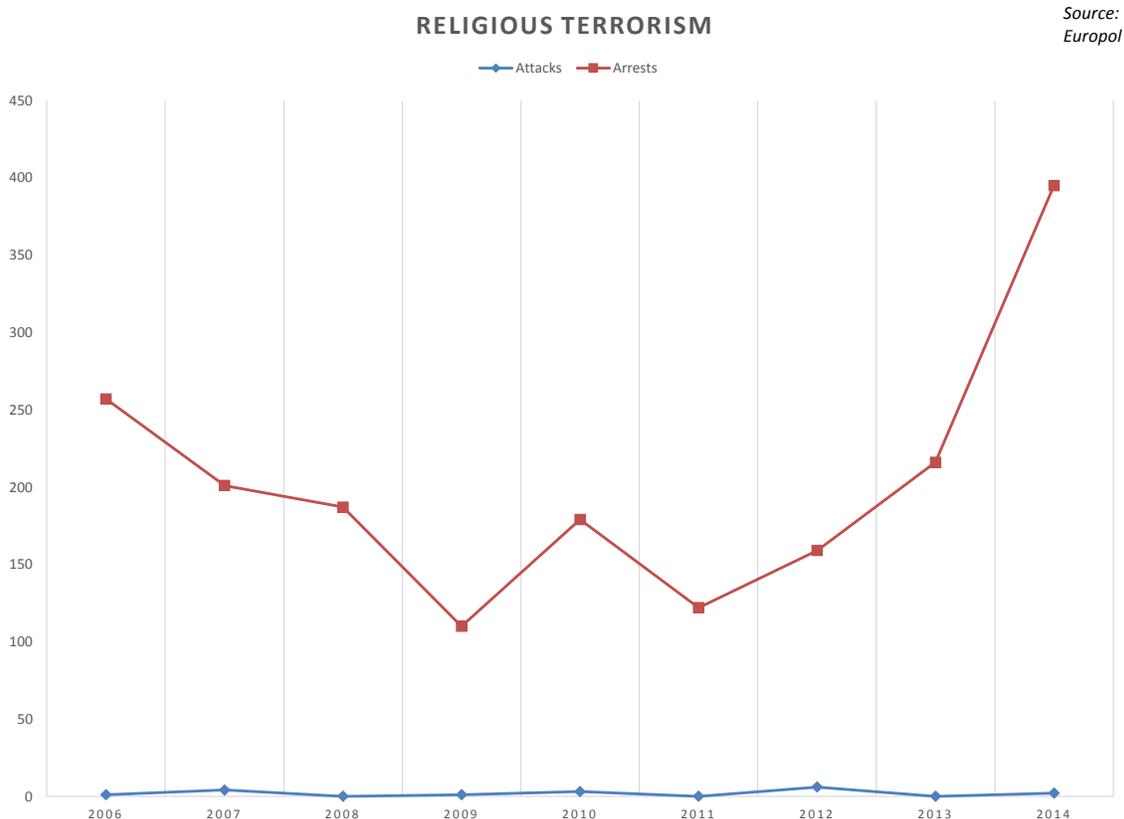
Peter Brorsen, EIP 1

¹ The event took place on 21 June 2016. Guest speakers were: Imade Annouri, Member of the Flemish Parliament; Peter W. Brorsen, External Relations and Europe Director at the European Institute of Peace; Prof. Thomas Renard, Senior Research Fellow at EGMONT - Royal Institute for International Relations; Ilke Toygür, Universidad Autónoma de Madrid, Department of Political Science and International Relations and Mercator- IPC Fellow Istanbul Policy Centre, Sabancı University. The debate was moderated by Klaus Linsenmeier, Director of Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung European Union. The opinions expressed do not necessarily represent the views of the Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung.



So far, Europe has known relatively few religiously motivated attacks compared to attacks inspired by other motives such as separatism. Interestingly, the number of arrests made for terrorist attacks motivated by separatism is similar to the number of attacks in the same time frame showing a direct correlation between arrests and attacks: on each separatist attack follows more or less one arrest.

However, this correlation cannot be found when looking at religiously motivated terrorist attacks. Here, the number of arrests varies greatly from the number of attacks. Up to 200 times more arrests are taking place than actual attacks, while the absolute number of religiously motivated attacks has remained more or less stable and on a low level. Especially in recent years the arrest figures in reaction to religiously motivated terrorism have risen substantially.



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The notable gap between attacks and arrests can be explained by the fear instilled into society by this type of terror. The fear is a bigger problem than the actual chance for people of becoming a victim. Although the possibility of becoming a victim of terrorism in Europe is slim, people are afraid. The attacks provoke fear way beyond the reach of terrorists. Next to the issue of home-grown terrorists, that of foreign fighters worries European societies. So far Belgium has produced the highest number of fighters leaving the EU to fight for IS in relation to the number

of inhabitants (about 45 per 1 million). Thus, we have to try to understand the underlying reasons why this country has produced so many individuals that want to join the conflict on the side of militant Jihadist groups. On the other hand, this problem is affecting not only Europe or especially Belgium: the number of foreign fighters stemming from the MENA region is substantially higher than that of fighters with European origin.

The particular characteristics of Jihadist terror and the perceived terror threat in Europe

While terrorism and foreign fighters are relatively old and well-known phenomena in many European countries, the pan-European scope is certainly new: almost all European states might become target of an attack. The types of attack are varying: the 'lone wolves' attacks, inspired by IS propaganda have been relatively ineffective (1.2 deaths per attack), but now with IS under pressure on the battlefield, the rhetoric seems to be changing. While in the last years IS used to recruit young people to come and fight in Syria or Iraq, they now appeal for more coordinated attacks in Europe using returned foreign fighters.

When analysing the background of radicalised individuals, we can establish a few common factors but no unique profile. Firstly, the average age of radicals has become younger with every wave of Jihadism – the youngest person so far was a 13 year old Belgian who went to fight in Syria. Secondly, they are disenfranchised and socially radical individuals, involved in small scale crimes, and have a criminal record. Thirdly, these individuals do not appear to be very religious beforehand. Many times, when they are subjected to a religious proficiency test upon their arrival in Syria, the results show that most of them lack deeper knowledge about Islam before joining IS. They seem to have been radicals before turning into 'jihadist radicals'. It seems therefore more appropriate to speak about the Islamisation of radicalism than about a radicalisation of Islam. Finally, in Belgium, there is a tendency of more young radicalised individuals with Moroccan descent in relation to those of Turkish descent. This is caused by a void of identity that young Moroccans experience, whereas the Turkish youth is very closely connected to the Turkish culture. Moroccans tend to be more oriented towards Belgium than towards Morocco, which leads to them feeling that their roots have been lost – also because they are often unable to read and speak Arabic. Turkish communities on the other hand, consume a lot of Turkish news, speak Turkish and are more involved in Turkish issues.

There has been a major shift in the rhetoric used in European politics, society and even research when addressing the topic of Islam. When the political anti-immigration movements emerged in the 1990s, the difficulties in living together were explained by divisions between different ethnicities. This has changed and ethnicity has become intertwined with religion. When talking about 'Islam' nowadays, the term is used to describe a cultural phenomenon, not just a religion. The huge diversity among Muslims is often neglected. One has to note that Islam is a religion and does not determine the ethnicity of a Muslim. Muslims have very diverse appearances, ethnicities or cultures and a Belgian Muslim is culturally much closer to a Belgian Christian than to a Muslim from Senegal or Indonesia. In the current debate, culture and religion are described without the required differentiation. Another current trend is that Islam has become a very lucrative business. The amount of books which have been written and sold about Islam since 9/11 is considerable. However, only about 3% of those books are based on scientific studies, while the overwhelming majority is pure fiction. Selling books about Islam is good business. Islam as a lucrative market has also attracted Muslim business people. Because many young Muslims are looking for an identity, many businesses have opened that claim to sell Islam-fashioned clothes or 'real Islamic books' and it has become very trendy among young



Muslims to consume a lot of Islam-related products. In politics, where populist parties are using the topic Islam to get 'easy votes', we can observe a similar trend.

The political debate about Jihadist terrorism has turned from a fact-driven to an emotion-driven discussion, which is a victory for IS and shows the dilemma of politics. While politicians have the task to provide security for their citizens, no politician can ever guarantee 100% safety against terrorist attacks. And whereas terrorist organisations such as IS can in fact only threaten very few people in Europe, they manage to create a general fear among the whole population. Hence, even though it is still much more likely to be killed in traffic accidents than by terrorists, we are now having debates about Islam as a security problem. Even though the vast majority of Muslims lives well integrated within European societies, the discourse is that Islam cannot be integrated into democracy and poses a constant threat to European societies. Although facts prove that Islam has already become a peaceful part of our society, the fact-free debate responds to the imagined threat of terrorism. In this way, the emotion-driven rhetoric occupies the centre of the debate, and a politician who opposes this view easily gets the stigma of denying reality.

Dealing with terror and radicalisation

When debating possible tactics to prevent further radicalisation one must also take into account the new aspect that social media brings into the equation. This tool allows terrorist organisations to have a widespread audience and to recruit supporters. It also makes the terrorist organisation itself a moving and a globally active target. To include the options social media offers to terrorists in all counter extremism efforts is therefore of key importance. Politics and society have to create a counter-narrative that challenges the narratives extremist groups present on social media and offer young and disenfranchised individuals real opportunities in society. To achieve this, education has to play a major role and must be opened up to marginalised groups and individuals. It is important to stop the scapegoating of marginalised communities and, instead, stimulate the mutual assistance of communities and the understanding that all communities suffer from the fallout of terrorism. Politicians should stop using the phenomenon of terrorism as a tool to shape domestic politics for their electoral benefit – whether in Europe, in order to gain votes, or in Turkey where the government uses the definition of terrorism so widely that it can be used to silence opposition parties or critical voices in general. In order to combat terrorism, all countries must be motivated to work more closely together in the areas of intelligence sharing and collective prosecutions. Although cooperation on such issues will always be delicate and complicated, trust needs to be built in order to effectively trail terrorists across borders. There is no need for new institutions or more centralised competences: existing initiatives such as the Schengen information system (SIS) and others should be fully operationalised and implemented so that information can be passed on more effectively.

All in all, the real threat of terror in Europe is minor and does not justify the emotionally driven fear campaign conducted by certain political forces to increase their following. We should look at the roots of the problem with empathy and work together to avoid further radicalisation of young people by better including marginalised communities, improve the information sharing between states and pay special attention to the role of social media in radicalisation.