

Integration and Resilience: European Tools against Terrorism

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Brief Analysis

In order to start a “holy war” against the West, al Qaeda tried to lure Western countries into the Middle Eastern military quagmire. ISIS’ goal, however, is to create a social conflict in the West in order to weaken it, since a weakened enemy is an easier target in the long run.

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In order to start a “holy war” against the West, al Qaeda tried to lure Western countries into the Middle Eastern military quagmire. ISIS’ goal, however, is to create a social conflict in the West in order to weaken it, since a weakened enemy is an easier target in the long run. As an article in The Guardian recently said, “ISIS leaders and their underlings have devised ways to try to weaken western societies from within.”

To do this, ISIS coupled increasingly sophisticated acts of terrorism with grassroots stimulation and military expansion in Syria and Iraq, attacking Western tourists first and then Westerners in their own nations, such as France. The ISIS strategy has two specific objectives: to fuel a “clash of civilizations,” and to create a crisis of Western democracy which is based on cohabitation of diversity, individual freedom, and citizenship equality. Without a major social conflict in Europe, ISIS could not, in the long run, hope to survive militarily in the Middle East – indeed, until now, it has been resoundingly defeated. But this is not a result of effective security decisions by Europe: rather, it is a result of its strong social integration and democratic resilience.

The “clash of civilization” attempted to strategically create divisions, suspicions, and prejudice in order to facilitate some type of low-intensity conflict among Christian and Muslims in Europe. The perfect place to start was France, due to its high number of Muslim migrants, its past colonial influence – which created both legitimacy in the eyes of terrorists and generations of alienated youth for terrorist cells – and because of what it represents as an alternative to the vision of a strict “Political Islam”. Additionally, France has Republican, secular, foundational values based on

the separation between religion and state, and, as a consequence, some Muslims have experienced discrimination because of religion (from the halal or kosher meat in the public schools to the more recent Burkini issue). But this social fracture for a low intensity conflict did not happen in France or anywhere else in Western Europe, due to the multiculturalism of European society. Even if lone-wolves, homegrown extremists, and European citizens who left to fight alongside the Islamic State have been able to create panic and despair with their plots, they did not change a social fabric and identity built upon centuries of “wars and peace” and, more recently, accommodation among ethnicities and religions.

The second goal was related to the first: bringing the fear of constant attacks to daily life. From restaurants to beaches, the jihadist terrorists wanted to attack Western liberal democracy, with its rule of law, inclusive democracy, and liberal freedoms. The strategy was to facilitate a permanent “state of exception,” to restate Agamben, putting the citizen’s lives under constant control to avoid the risk of attacks (in a similar way to the situation in Israel for example). It was probable for ISIS to achieve this goal, especially given the economic depravity of the West, and the rise of populism and rightwing parties. Technically, France has been under a “state of emergency” since November 2015, with special powers granted to the executive branch. But it is still very difficult to change the European rule of law and civil cohabitation with some terrorist attacks.

But Europe needs to keep vigilant on its path, even if the summer was not as violent as expected. It cannot be confused in its reaction to another terrorist attack. For every crisis, there is the moment of reflection after the moment of chaos, used to prepare the strategy for the reaction and counteroffensive – and Europe is in this moment now. The strategy that Europe needs to implement to fight and finally win against jihadist terrorism must be based on social integration and democratic resilience.

Europe must improve its social integration, at both the economic and cultural level. It needs to enhance its economic health with more inclusion and development in order to appeal to disillusioned and alienated youth who may feel excluded from society.

European cultural structure must be improved to create future societies that can really resemble a melting pot, like the United States. European citizens, for example, should learn the languages of the new migrants, not only the other way around. They need to listen to their stories and discover other cultural heritages, not only the pride to talk about theirs.

Besides social integration, Europe also needs to maintain its democratic resilience, relearning how to come to a consensus, recuperating its values of freedom, transparency, visibility, and public life in the agora, for a new democratic renaissance. This is the strength that Europe and all mature liberal democracies need to reclaim: not only “government of the people, by the people, for the people” but government with the people. To overcome the current crisis of representative democracy, as the recent populist revival showed us, citizens need to participate more in the management of the “public,” the Res-publica, closing the gap between the parties and citizens, creating new forms of a more direct and participatory democracy. This includes the participation of Muslim citizens, who need to feel comfortable participating in the public sphere, and, in doing so, create a European Islam. As Holland recently said: “Can Islam accommodate secularism? My answer is yes. Clearly, yes. Nothing in secularism opposes the practice of Islam in France, and this is the essential point that complies with the law. What needs to succeed is the construction of an Islam of France.”

This democratic resilience has to be coupled with a new social contract between institution and citizens on security issues. Citizens have to participate in the protection of their own safety and security through discourse – not weapons. To trust in each other in times of fear, we must re-build that “social capital” lost in the recent excessive urbanization and technological revolution. As Robert Putnam famously argued, to “make democracy work”[1] we need a high level of social capital, based on civic engagement and participation, through active citizens who care

about the common good and so become able to better control their administrations, their environment but also to better protect themselves. Yes, security will have to be based on more coordinated programs among our states and polices, but it will also need more citizens' awareness: we need to learn how to maintain freedom with attention and care. To avoid any risk of a police state, we need to learn how to better protect ourselves. It will not be easy, as it will require an educational shift in our approach to daily and community life – but it can be done. This doesn't have to change our freedom. We need to keep our style of life, our sociability and openness, in all its aspects, with time dedicated to amusement and recreation in addition to social engagement. This is what we are and this is what we need to keep, against any terrorism.

The fight that Europe and the West must wage against jihadist terrorism will take some time, but if we live up to our values of integration and democracy, we will come out from it soon. As Giovanni Falcone, the Italian judge killed by the Mafia, once said about the Mafia: "It is a human phenomenon, and as all human phenomena has a start and an evolution, it will have also an end".

[1] Robert D. Putnam, Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy, Princeton University Press, 1994.

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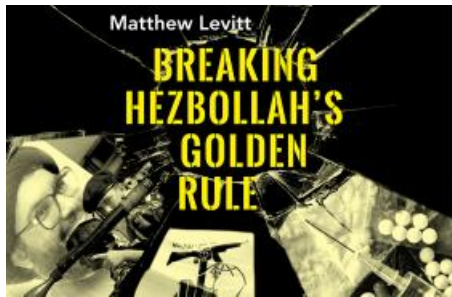
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