Dealing with Terrorism without Falling into its Trap

Yoram Schweitzer and Oded Eran

The March 22, 2016 terrorist attack in Brussels both shook the local population in the targeted country and sent shockwaves throughout Europe. The connection between the attack in Brussels and the November 2015 attack in Paris is already evident. Initial findings from the investigation and the arrest of suspects linked to both events make it clear that a single terrorist network is involved.

More important, however, is that these terrorist attacks were carried out at the order of the Islamic State in Syria through its unit for international terrorism. It was this unit that dispatched the key members of the network, and prepared and trained them to wage terrorism in Europe in its name and on its behalf. The Islamic State thereby proved to any who were still skeptical that the broad cadre of Western volunteers who streamed into Syria in recent years was not designated merely to serve as cannon fodder in suicide attacks in Iraq and Syria and disseminate propaganda, but has been trained purposely to carry out terrorist attacks in the West in accordance with what is needed and what is possible. Since these Western volunteers number in the thousands (various estimates put their number at 5,000-7,000), it can be assumed that more than a few will volunteer to commit terrorism, and some of them are liable to succeed in their efforts.

This understanding, shared by many in the Western intelligence services, did not penetrate the consciousness of national leaders, or at least did not motivate them enough to take adequate practical measures for effectively preempting the attacks. This may have been due to hopes that the threat would not materialize, based on the false assumption that the Islamic State was focusing its efforts on consolidating its presence in the Middle East, and would therefore refrain from adopting the strategy of international terrorism formerly attributed only to al-Qaeda. The attacks in France and Belgium, together with other attempted terrorist attacks in the past year in Western Europe, should push European leaders into adopting a concrete policy of taking preemptive measures before more attacks occur. Such a policy requires assigning a high priority to organizational and inter-organizational preparedness, including the allocation of sufficient resources and

means; training expert professional personnel; and providing strong support for intelligence, police, and law enforcement agencies, so that these will be able to cope effectively with the wave of expected threats facing them.

This is not the first time in the modern era that Europe has sustained a wave of terrorism striking its cities. In the 1970s and 1980s, Palestinian and West European terrorist organizations, succeeded in the 1990s by Lebanese Shiite terrorists following orders from Iran, conducted attacks in cities, airports, and commercial aircraft. They were followed in turn by members of al-Qaeda and their affiliates, who planned and carried out mass terrorist operations in the first decade of the 21st century, following the success of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks in the United States. The international campaign against terrorism by al-Qaeda and its affiliates succeeded in preventing most attempted terrorist attacks until the rise of the Islamic State, which now leads the global jihad camp. The Islamic State is a terrorist entity controlling extensive territory, and has access to more economic power and personnel than do al-Qaeda and its affiliates. Still, the experience and knowledge gained in the fight against global jihad under the leadership of al-Qaeda can be useful in dealing with the challenge posed by the Islamic State, with the strategy used in the campaign against al-Qaeda adapted to the Islamic State's methods and the conditions in which it operates.

The latest attacks in Paris and Brussels highlight Europe's dilemma and its need to choose between strict preservation of various individual freedoms and a decision to eliminate the terrorist bases of fundamentalist Islam in Europe. In practice, this latter struggle will require closer supervision of religious institutions, heightened monitoring of various charity organizations, and strengthened security systems at public facilities, such as airports and other public transportation venues. The cumulative effect of the reports about the Islamic State's cruelty, the destruction and devastation it sows, and its terrorist operations in important European capitals are increasing the European public's readiness to accept a breach, even if only partial, of hitherto sacred principles. The recent arrangements between Turkey and the European Union in an attempt to lock Europe's gates against the flow of refugees from Syria and other areas of civil war in the Middle East and North Africa indicate a material change in Europe's attitude to the tension between individual rights and individual security. Since it will be necessary to anchor the restrictions in a system of legislation, a public political dispute in the EU between the supporters of the liberal approach and the supporters of the conservative approach is likely, joining the other elements threatening to split the EU apart.

In order to prevent a complete breakdown in relations between the majority population in Western Europe and the nearly 50 million Muslims living there, the European leadership must state its position and persuade the Muslim population and its leaders seeking to live in peace and integrate in the European system that the struggle against terrorism does not

mean a struggle against Islam. A positive and cooperative attitude is likely to convince a majority of the Muslim public in Europe to take part in the campaign against Salafi jihad terrorism; it is important not to make that public part of the problem.

Playing into the Islamic State's hands must clearly be avoided at all costs. Beyond the Islamic State's desire to attack the West, undermine the feeling of safety among its citizens, and deter its leaders from continuing to attack the Islamic State in Syria, Iraq, and Libya, its initiation of terrorist attacks specifically aimed to create a provocation and cause violent clashes between the Europeans and the large Muslim communities residing in the West. This aim was reflected in the most recent speech by the self-appointed caliph of the Islamic State, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, whose approach bases building the Islamic State on the immigration (*hijra*) of tens and hundreds of thousands of Muslims from all over the globe to the newly established caliphate. He therefore strongly opposed the movement of hundreds of thousands of Muslims from the Islamic State to Europe, and warned them against the illusion that that the West would welcome them with open arms as equals in rights and value. Statements attacking Muslims like those by Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump, and harsh and indiscriminate reactions against Muslims in Europe as part of the measures against terrorism, are liable to serve al-Baghdadi's aims.

Another question concerns relations between Europe and Israel. For years, these relations have been under the cloud of heavy criticism by EU institutions of Israeli policy towards the Palestinians, especially on the question of the settlements. Yet despite the possibility of greater understanding in Europe of Israel's harsh measures against terrorists and their family surroundings in Israel, it cannot be assumed that such understanding will translate into greater acceptance of Israel's policy in the territories. On the contrary, Europe will likely voice increasingly severe criticism of Israel as a means of appeasing Muslim public opinion in EU member countries. Therefore what may well emerge is increased bilateral cooperation between Israel and the EU in eliminating terrorism and growing bilateral tension caused by European support for political initiatives, e.g., France's move to jumpstart diplomatic contacts between Israel and the Palestinians.

Success in the struggle against terrorism with Islamic ideological roots is obviously in Israel's interest, but it is also important for Israel to avoid putting itself in the forefront of this struggle, certainly on a declarative level. Israel has proven capabilities in anti-terrorism warfare, and when asked, it should be willing to render assistance. Official statements, and certainly critical and patronizing ones, will help neither the countries that suffered terrorist attacks, nor Israel.