

‘NEO-JIHADISM’ IN FRANCE: LESSONS FROM AN ANTI-TERRORIST OPERATION

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Early Saturday (10.06) morning, the “*Sous Direction Anti-Terroriste*” (SDAT, the French anti-terrorist unit) of the judicial police and the “*Direction Centrale du Renseignement Intérieur*” (DCRI, the “French FBI”) conducted a vast operation against Salafist militants in Paris, Strasbourg and the South of France. This raid followed the tossing of An Improvised Explosive Device (IED) – perhaps a hand-made grenade – against a kosher grocery store in Sarcelles (suburb of Paris) on 19 September. This act and the anti-terrorist operation of this morning are bearers of four important lessons: the mutation of the terrorist threat is a fact; the targets have changed and the Jewish communities are (and will remain) especially targeted; the “neo-Jihadists” are especially violent; intelligence efforts must be intensified and must be innovative.

1) The terrorist threat has changed a lot in France (and in Europe) over the past few years

For several years now, and particularly since the death of Osama Bin Laden (OBL) on 1 May 2011, al-Qaeda has no longer been able to conduct large-scale operations outside certain areas of traditional Jihad such as in Iraq, Pakistan, Afghanistan and, most recently, in Syria and Libya.

The OBL organisation seems at pains to regain the operational capabilities it once possessed in the West. The hundreds of American drone strikes ordered by President Barack Obama in various regions of the world (Pakistan, Yemen, etc...) have eliminated dozens of upper and intermediary level officers of al-Qaeda as well as an indefinite number of volunteers who were training for terrorist actions in the Western world.

The work of the police and of counter-terrorist services in Europe and in the United States has done the rest. Dozens of logistical or operational terrorist cells have been dismantled in Paris, London, Brussels, Berlin, New York and elsewhere these past few years.

But the terrorist threat was undergoing a profound change for at least the last five years and now is radically different. Though al-Qaeda seems to be no longer able to strike, Jihadist terrorism continues to exist. It is now borne by regional organisations (in the Middle East, in Asia, in North Africa, in the Sahel and in Sub-Saharan Africa, in the Arabian peninsula...) but also by supple and vague entities, taking on more the character of ‘urban gangs’ than of structured groups. The infra-terrorist movements operate on a reduced scale and most often number just a few persons who are often linked by family relations or by neighbourhood. They are thus virtually impossible to infiltrate. Worse still: though these tiny groups have few

or no ties with the 'heart' of the Jihadist movement (al-Qaeda and its franchised organisations), they are extremely difficult to spot and can remain 'below the radar' until the moment when they proceed to act.

2) The nature of the targets has changed: the Jewish communities in the frontline

These 'cells' or gangs do not have the resources (material or intellectual) to organise large scale attacks such as those of 09.11, of Madrid (03.11, 2004) or London (07.07, 2005). But they can practice 'terrorism of proximity' like that of Mohammed Merah, who attacked French soldiers belonging to regiments deployed in Afghanistan (and whose barracks were close to his home) or a Jewish school in his own town.

The attack of Sarcelles falls into this category. The objective may seem pitiful: throwing a grenade at a Jewish grocery store in the suburbs evidently is nothing like the slaughter we witnessed in 2001, 2004 and 2005, nor is it like those murders that continue almost daily in some regions of the world. But the symbolic meaning of this targeting is enormous: by attacking Jewish communities, the 'neo-Jihadists' are surfing a wave of anti-Semitism which is very widespread among many young people in the European Muslim communities. All of this is being done under the hazy pretext of attacking 'Zionism'.

In addition, the security concerns which arise from the attack on these '*soft targets*' are enormous: while one can protect (relatively) efficiently the airlines, the airports, military bases, government buildings and other major or important infrastructures, it is obviously impossible to do the same for some 'banal' civilian targets. If you consider just the Jewish communities, this means thousands of synagogues, community centres and schools which must be placed under protection. And if the risk to businesses and companies belonging to members of these communities grows, then we have tens of thousands of potential targets to speak of..

For us, this clearly indicates that the Jewish communities will remain targeted for the foreseeable future.

3) The neo-Jihadists are hyper-violent

Young, often coming from marginal milieus and/or having had many run-ins with the law and links to petty criminality, the neo-Jihadists may not be capable of high level strikes, but they are nonetheless extremely violent.

Let us remember the savagery of the attacks by Mohamed Merah in Montauban and in Toulouse this past spring. In Sarcelles, it was an explosive device which was thrown at a business, and there was the risk of killing those who worked there or who came to do their shopping. And Saturday morning, one of the persons targeted by the police operation did not hesitate to open fire, wounding three policemen slightly before being killed by return fire. The man did not fire by chance but with the manifest intention of killing: one of the policemen was wounded in the head and in the area near the heart and came out alive only thanks to his protective gear. Near Paris, another drama was barely avoided when the suspect was apprehended before he had the time to make use of his arms.

In fact, these 'neo-Jihadists' are very simply as violent as the 'new gangsters' who, for several years now, have been the talk of news coverage in France as well as elsewhere. There is nothing astonishing in this, because both groups are often linked and share a subculture of 'violence for the sake of violence' and a visceral rejection of the social norms.

4) The importance of intelligence

It is clear that in Europe like in North America, only a massive intelligence effort can contain this new threat. This effort must continue to apply to the heart of the Jihadist movement and to its 'franchises' (which remain dangerous on their own and because some neo-Jihadists can be linked to them: Mohamed Merah was trained in Pakistan....).

But intelligence must also be innovative. It is necessary to put the accent on intelligence work inside the borders of the Western states and, in particular, to conduct 'transversal operations' which bring together specialists in terrorism and Salafism, as well as experts on the new forms of criminality and the phenomena of organized urban gangs. It is firstly in this milieu that you find individuals having both the capability to act, easy access to arms and explosives and a level of 'rupture' with society which can easily lead them to move from 'ideas' to action. This shift to action is often the result and the ultimate expression of a dangerous mixture of a perfunctory and badly digested ideology, of an anti-Semitic or radical 'anti-white' racism and of a total revolt against a society in which hooligans of the 'neighbourhoods', Salafists and neo-Jihadists are unable to find their place. Or do not want to find a place.

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