Research Notes

On and Off the Radar: Tactical and Strategic Responses to Screening Known Potential Terrorist Attackers

by Thomas Quiggin

Abstract

Islamist inspired terrorists have carried out attacks in Europe even when they had been “on the radar” of officials. But they dropped “off the radar” and then struck. This phenomenon was noted by Dr. Bob de Graaff in a January 2017 article in the Groene Amsterdammer. More attacks followed by individuals who had dropped “off the radar.” De Graaff’s article questioned whether authorities were doing something wrong and whether they miss opportunities during moments of contact. The Dutch National Police (Taskforce Vreemdelingen en Migratiecriminaliteit) responded and organized a two-day event on this subject. Based on the presentations and discussions at the conference, the author of this paper suggests that tactical front-line officials can exploit opportunities to improve assessments that disrupt attacks. In the future, however, the attack levels in Europe will likely increase if no strategic level response is forthcoming. Reciprocal radicalization will also increase. Terrorism is a tactic. Therefore counter-terrorism activities are - by definition - at the tactical level. To be effective at the tactical level, authorities need an understanding of the principal problem at the strategic and operational levels. By analogy, it is as if NATO had been trying to defend Europe while refusing to admit that the Soviet Union existed. The European nations need to understand their invasive strategic level Islamist ideology problem. Without change, the prudent policy now would be to condition the public to accept the deaths and injuries caused by future terrorist attacks.

Keywords: Islamist extremism, Terrorism, Tactical counterterrorism, Strategic response

Terrorist attacks are often carried out by individuals who were “on the radar” and were known to police and intelligence services.[1] How do we assess such individuals more effectively to prevent future attacks? Current approaches appear fragmentary and lack the validation necessary to know if they work.[2]

Terrorism is a tactic used by individuals or groups who believe that violence, or the threat of violence, will help them achieve their political aims. This tactic of violence is part of an overall strategy of the group as it seeks to obtain its goals or objectives. By definition, counter-terrorism is a tactical level activity as it is aimed at preventing an activity at the tactical level (i.e. a terrorist attack). Terrorism itself is a symptom of the larger strategic problem.

The root problem at the strategic level is the rapid spread of Islamist extremism which is driven by the global struggle for the soul of Islam. The battleground is in almost 100 countries, many of which are in Europe and The West. On one side of the struggle is the Islamists – those who believe in a political, Salafist, and supremacist form of Islam. On the other side are the modernists – who want to see Islam as a modern religion accepting of democracy, science and women. The Islamists have the dominant voice in the West and increasingly have the upper hand in many Muslim majority countries. Historical analogies are dangerous, but the struggle for the soul of Islam can be loosely compared to the Protestant Reformation of 1517 to 1648. It should be remembered that 130 years of conflict caused Germany to lose about 40% of its population. The “Islamic Reformation” will last longer and may be deadlier.

Governments regularly tell their employees to “think outside the box” and then usually ignore them or punish them when they think differently. This is a problem at the operational and strategic levels. Strategic thinking has become nearly a lost art in government and even in the military. As Dr. Isabelle Duyvesteyn of Leiden University wrote: “We can at present not but come to the conclusion that we are quite good at tactical disruption of our enemy, instead of generating strategic effect.”[3] This statement captures the nature of the problem of the
invasion of the Islamist ideology into Europe and the West in general. We have tactical responses which are sometimes effective, but no strategy to defeat the problem.

Part of the “off the radar” problem is the increasingly large numbers involved. According to a variety of official sources as many as 85,000 Islamist extremists exist in the UK,[4] the Netherlands, France,[5] Germany,[6] Belgium, Spain and Switzerland.[7] This number could go past 100,000 if Denmark, Norway, Sweden, Finland, Italy, Portugal and Greece are included. Effectively tracking them all is a physical impossibility for the law enforcement and intelligence agencies. A typical full-time surveillance operation against one individual can take as many as 10 to 20 officers.

The number of extremists will continue to increase due to: (a) migration;[8] (b) the output of Islamist runs schools K-12;[9] and (c) populations that are growing under isolated and ghettoized conditions.[10]

The rapid rise and spread of Islamist extremism in the West is not random. It is organized by a variety of well-funded groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood,[11] Hizb ut Tahrir and the Iranian Khomeneists. Although these groups represent varying theologies, especially the Iranians, they share a common Islamist supremacist ideology. Their ideas on strategy and tactics also diverge on occasion. A variety of Gulf States also fund salafist groups which have strong Islamist leanings.

The United Arab Emirates, for instance, lists 83 groups as being terrorist groups, front groups, proxy groups or fundraisers for terrorist groups,[12] many of which are in Europe. Among the leading European organizations noted by the UAE are the Cordoba Foundation (UK), the Muslim Association of Britain, the Muslim Association of Sweden, the Islamic Society of Germany, the League of Muslims in Belgium, Association of Italian Muslims, Federation of Islamic Organizations in Europe, the Union of Islamic Organisations of France, and the Finnish Islamic Association. Also noted is the International Union of Muslim Scholars (IUMS) which has members in a variety of countries, including Europe.

The largest and most effective of the Islamist groups is the Muslim Brotherhood, founded in Egypt in 1928 by Hassan al-Banna. It has a permanent, structured presence in at least 81 countries and it continues to spread. The second largest global group is likely Jammat e Islami, founded as a sister group to the Muslim Brotherhood by Ala al Maududi in Pakistan in 1941. More importantly is the fact that many of the most dangerous Islamist groups have been founded by former members of the Muslim Brotherhood. Some of them are front groups (Hamas) while others are spinoffs created by former Muslim Brotherhood members who had different or emerging ideas on tactics. Among them are ISIS (Abū Bakr al-Baghdadi), Al Qaeda (Abdullah Azzam, Ayman al-Zawahiri, Osama bin Laden), Hizb ut Tahrir (Taqi al-Din al-Nabhani), the Abu Sayaf Group (Salamat Hashim), and Boko Haram (Mohammed Yusuf). As noted, also included in this list is Hamas (Ahmed Yasin, Abdel Aziz Rantisi) which openly identifies itself in Article Two of the Hamas Covenant as “one of the wings of Moslem Brotherhood in Palestine.”

There is no such thing as a “moderate Islamist” as their most fundamental belief calls for the domination of their form of political Islam over all others. The founder of the Muslim Brotherhood, Hassan al-Banna stated that “It is the nature of Islam to dominate, not to be dominated, to impose its law on all nations and to extend its power to the entire planet.”[13] The founder of Jamaat e Islami, Ala al-Maududi, stated that “Islam wishes to destroy all states and governments anywhere on the face of the earth which are opposed to the ideology and programme of Islam.”[14] The motto of the Muslim Brotherhood is Allah is our objective, The Qur' an is the Constitution, The Prophet is our leader, Jihad is our way and Death for the sake of Allah is our wish. Hassan al-Banna’s own slogan was “Islam is the solution.”[15]

Islamist groups should be seen as either “violent” or “not yet violent.”[16] Some Islamist groups have an overtly violent approach to almost every question or problem. This would include ISIS, al Qaeda, Boko Haram, the Abu Sayaf Group and Egyptian Islamic Jihad. Other groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood (and its front groups) take a more calculated approach. When operating in the West, for instance, their front groups continue to follow their “bottom up” approach to organizing at the community level. They reject violence and claim victim status at every opportunity. As with many of the Islamist groups, when they gain in strength they start
to become aggressive through campaigns of “Islamophobia” accompanied by lawsuits (lawfare)[17] in order to silence critics. Once in positions of some limited power, Islamist groups will become abusive of others. Once in real power, they become violent and oppressive towards all others (cf. Egypt 2012, ISIS 2014 etc.).

The Muslim Brotherhood as it existed in its home country of Egypt did try from the 1970s to the mid-1990s to separate itself from the worst of its own violence. However, those behind that effort are now mostly dead or have been forced to the sidelines. The official line now of the Muslim Brotherhood to its own followers is one of violence and martyrdom.[18]

The recent rise of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIS) is but one small part of the overall problem. The demise of ISIS will not end the Islamist problem. The collapse of ISIS will simply be converted into “martyrdom” in the Islamist narrative and the struggle will continue. Of greater concern is that ISIS proved that Islamists built a caliphate which withstood the attacks of the West and its allies for four years from its inception and three years after it captured Mosul. There is now ISIS controlled territory in the Philippines (Marawi City)[19] as well as ISIS having a significant visible presence in Bosnia,[20] Gaza,[21] Afghanistan,[22] and Egypt.[23]

In the face of this global Islamist insurgency,[24] the EU and Western states collectively lack any shared understanding of the problem. No strategy has been formulated, nor does even a reasonable discussion occur on how to resist the invasion of this Islamist ideology. Much of what are called “strategic plans” or “strategic assessments” are little more that ill defined plans on how to deal with tactical issues such as terrorist attacks or deradicalization programs which are largely failing.[25]

To formulate a strategic approach to the invasion of the Islamist ideology, a variety of key factors need to be understood at the national and EU level. It must be understood that:

- A global Islamist problem exists.
- The Islamist problem is widespread in the Netherlands[26] and Europe generally, and it is growing quickly. Increased levels of migration increase this problem and promote reciprocal radicalization.
- The Islamist extremist movement is organized and well funded domestically and from foreign countries.
- The wide range of Islamist groups are driven by a common objective, even if they have different strategies and tactics.

Current approaches such as Confronting Violent Extremism,[27] Preventing Violent Extremism and deradicalization are having limited effects.

A national level/EU strategy to tackle the invasion of this foreign ideology would require, at a minimum, the following points:

- Identify the Islamist ideology as the problem specifically, not the general presence of Muslims. This must include a statement that political Islam has no place in Europe.[28] This could include listing foreign groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt or Libya as a terrorist entity, much as some Middle Eastern countries have done.[29] As noted, the United Arab Emirates list of terrorism entities includes multiple European and American groups.[30]
- European nations and the EU need to identify and map the extent of the Islamist networks in their midst. This includes networks, extremist mosques, charities, schools and cultural centres. It must also include supra-national organizations such the International Union of Muslim Scholars[31] run by Yusef Qaradawi, now living in Qatar. The UK report on the Muslim Brotherhood[32] can be seen as a good starting point, as is the Swedish report commissioned by the Sweden’s Civil Contingencies Agency.[33]
- The nations and the EU needs to defund and then undermine the platform of Islamist groups. Defunding should focus on removing the charitable status of Islamist groups as well as stopping the inflow of
foreign money that funds mosques, schools and cultural centres.

• At the tactical level, the above process will simplify and decrease the number and capabilities of the Islamist extremist networks. This will also give the operational and tactical levels the tools and knowledge needed to identify those individuals who go “on and off the radar.”

It should not be forgotten that part of the price of ignoring the invasion of the Islamist ideology is “reciprocal radicalization.” Countries as diverse as Canada[34] and Germany[35] are seeing deadly attacks against Islamists and (mostly innocent) Muslim migrants in general. The greater the spread of Islamist extremism and violence, the more likely that reciprocal radicalization will increase as a problem. Though outside the scope of the conference, it should be noted that another major economic downturn in Europe is likely. Quantitative Easting (money printing), long term low interest rates, high public and private debt along with an uncontrolled derivatives market will ensure that the next downturn is significant.[36] Historically, in times of economic downturn the general population tends to turn on the government and “the other.” In this case, “the other” will most likely be migrants, especially those who are identified as Islamists or Muslims.

The most significant obstacles to a more effective strategy on Islamist extremism in Europe might be political correctness and cultural relativism. The press and the police are literally afraid to discuss or act upon any issue that might identify them as racist or Islamophobic. While not specifically an Islamist group issue, consider that in Rotherham UK, 1,400 girls between the ages of 11 and 14 were raped, drugged and then forced into sexual slavery between 1997 and 2013. The victims were primarily white girls and the attackers were primarily Pakistani Kashmiri Muslims. The violence against these girls was known to police, the social workers and the city council since at least 2002. Collectively, however, they were unwilling to act for fear of being called racist or Islamophobic. When the Home Secretary commented on the official government “Jay Report”[37] on this long-term mass rape, she noted that the problem was one of “institutionalized political correctness.”[38] Denis McShane, the former Rotherham Labour MP was questioned by the media the day after the Jay Report was released. He made a stunning statement concerning the role of multiculturalism in the UK. Speaking to the BBC, he stated he was a “Guardian reading liberal leftie” and that “I think there was a culture of not wanting to rock the multicultural community boat if I may put it like that.”[39] Notwithstanding this official government report and the media reports around it, the problem has occurred in several other cities[40] and may be continuing now. If a variety of politicians at the municipal and national level cannot even act when such violence is occurring, how willing are they to tackle extremists Imams who preach the Islamist ideology?

The general knowledge of politicians, bureaucrats, academics and the press needs to be improved. Among the more thoughtless and ill-informed statements being made are:

• The current wave of terrorist attacks has “nothing to do with Islam.” This statement results from politicians who are completely submerged by political correctness or by apologists who have sympathy for the Islamist ideology. Muslims on both sides of the conflict are painfully aware that Islam has a problem as more Muslims die in this conflict than non-Muslims.

• “To try to understand their motives (ISIS) is futile because their motives are pure and unmitigated evil.” “These criminals are not motivated by any recognizable religion, but by a perverse view of the world.” These statements were made by Mayor Bonnie Crombie of Mississauga Canada, but they are common in much of the West.[41] The statement is defeatist in that it says it is futile to identify the motives, when in reality the motives of the attacks she was referring to were rather clear. Additionally, it states that the “criminals” were not from any recognized religion. In reality, large numbers of Muslims, such as the Muslim Reform Movement[42], have clearly identified that a virulent form of Islam is responsible for these kinds of terrorist attacks.

• More people die in their bathtubs every year than die from terrorism. This is perhaps the most disturbing statement when it comes from politicians or journalists. The weapon of the terrorist is not a knife, a gun or a bomb. The weapon of the terrorist is the fear that is injected into a society. Many terrorist groups call in their attacks before the bomb goes off. They want publicity for their cause, not death. Other ter-
rorist groups have made the assessment that the greater the number of deaths, the more press coverage (and effect) they will have. Whatever the situation, the measure of terrorism is not death, it is the level of fear and (over)reaction their attacks receive from the society they are attacking. By this measure, the Islamist are successful. Those who insist on using this sort of statement are either fundamentally ignorant of the nature of terrorism or are apologists for the Islamist cause.

- **Lone wolves are responsible for Islamist attacks.** The term lone wolf has come into popular usage, most likely because journalists and academics (to some degree) feel it is a “cool term.” The concept of a lone wolf in Islamist attacks is almost non-existent.[43] Many are sole attackers, but they are regularly a part of a larger network. “Lone wolf” attacks do occur, but the most recent tangible examples are Anders Breivik, Timothy McVeigh and Theodore Kaczynski (Unabomber). None of them were Islamists. Again, the use of this term either reveals general ignorance on the part of the person using it or they are attempting to downplay the networked nature of the larger Islamist problem.

- **The Internet causes radicalization.** The Internet does not “cause” extremism and radicalization. Terrorism existed before the Internet and Islamist extremism was operationalized before email and blogsites were available. CD Rom technology was used effectively to recruit for the Chechen jihad and in radicalizing others into being members of terrorist plots.[44] While greater awareness of the Internet and social media may be an effective tool at the tactical level, it will have little to no effect at the strategic level. The government’s interest in terrorism and the Internet seems to be part of a larger effort at the long-held wish to exert greater government control over the Internet.

- **Women emerging as terrorists is a new phenomenon.** Women have not, in general, played a leading role in terrorist attacks in Europe or North America with only limited exceptions. However, the view that this is somehow new is incorrect. In 1991, British journalist Eileen MacDonald wrote a book with the title “Shoot the Women First.”[45] It was based on research into female terrorists among the radical left and the Palestinians. She identified women as not only a threat, but they would be more likely to shoot first or attack when under pressure and therefore more dangerous than men.

- **The emerging threat from social media is the most dangerous aspect of terrorism.** Statements on the state of social media are frequently alarmist and focus on the “newness” of the threat. However, the governments of the day in 1848 were concerned about the social media of their day – the man portable printing presses that could put out pamphlets immediately after an event. Again, monitoring and attacking social media sites may be quite useful at a tactical level, but it will do nothing to change the strategic problem of the expanding Islamist ideology.

**On and Off the Radar**

It is possible, in the short term, to create a workable assessment model to more effectively measure the likelihood of whether one individual may be at higher risk of becoming an active terrorist than another. Such a tactical assessment model would include group association, ideological thought leader association, money trails, personal belief systems (identity vs ideology), place and nature of education, technical skills background, converts and their situation, quotations and references to extremist ideology in social media and leadership figures.

This model, however, would only function at the tactical level and could not be expected to stop all terrorist attacks. The increasing numbers of Islamist extremists in Europe now are simply overwhelming and are increasing rapidly.[46]

**Future Outlook**

An economic downturn in the West will seriously aggravate both the Islamist extremist problem and the reciprocal radicalization. It is unlikely that any government is ready for this problem. While this is not the place to discuss details, the next economic downturn could be worse than 1980/81, 1990/91, 1999/2000 or 2007/09.
Great Recession.

**Conclusion**

The military has an expression that says: “You cannot kill your way out of this problem.” The same can be said for law enforcement and the intelligence services in this case: You cannot arrest or disrupt your way out of this problem. The long-term solution to this problem is at the strategic level. This means the nation state and the EU.

If the nations and the EU do not devise a strategic response to the invasion of Islamist ideology onto their territory, then they must accept the idea that the ongoing fight at the tactical level will continue. The best policy without a strategic response is to condition the population to accept the costs of failure which are more terrorist attacks and more reciprocal radicalization.

**About the Author:** Thomas Quiggin has 30 years of practical experience in security and intelligence matters. He is a court expert in the reliability of intelligence as evidence and on terrorism (Criminal and Federal Court). His experience includes intelligence positions for the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, the Canadian Armed Forces, the United Nations Protection Force in Yugoslavia, Citizen and Immigration Canada (War Crimes), the International War Crimes Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia, the Privy Council Office of Canada and the Bank of Canada. He was also a Senior Fellow at the Centre of Excellence for National Security at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies in Singapore.

**Notes**

[1] Bob de Graaff, *Losers op en onder de radar*, 04 January 2017, De Groene Amsterdammer. This article is available online at https://www.groene.nl/over . Viewed 21 September 2017. Rated A2. (Sources in this paper are rated according the Admiralty System A1F6 or the NATO System. The A to F rating stands for the source of the material which is listed as highly dependable (A) down to not dependable (E) or Unknown (F). the 1 to 6 rating stands for the credibility of the information itself, separate from the source. It is rated as 1 (high credibility) down to 5 (low credibility) or 6 (unable to assess.)


[5] For more on the figures for France, Spain and Belgium see the article by Noor Nanji, *'50,000 militant Islamists in Europe’, warns top security chief*. This article is available online at https://www.thenational.ae/world/europe/50-000-militant-islamists-in-eu-rope-warns-top-security-chief-1.624849 . Viewed 21 September 2017. Not rated.

[6] Germany must brace for more attacks by radicalized Muslims: officials, 04 July 2017, Reuters News Service. The article can be seen online at https://www.reuters.com/article/us-germany-security/germany-must-brace-for-more-attacks-by-radicalized-mus lims-officials-idUSKBN19P1MY . Viewed 21 September 2017. Rated A2. For more on this see also Allan Hall, WE’VE LOST CONTROL! Germany cannot cope with ISIS terror cells because the country’s Muslim population has grown so rapidly, top intelligence official admits, 09 January 2017, The Sun. This article can be seen online at https://www.thesun.co.uk/news/2573662/germany-can-not-cope-isis-terror-cells-muslim-population-grown-intelligence-official-admits/. Viewed 21 September 2017. Rated C3. There may be as many as 400 extremist individuals being tracked in just Berlin by itself. For more on this see Mehr als 400 gewaltbereite Salafisten leben in Berlin. The article can be seen online at http://www.berliner-zeitung.de/28387288 . Viewed 21 September 2017. Not rated.
The Swiss authorities are believed to be monitoring some 500 Islamist extremists. For more on this see Swiss monitor 500 people for online jihadist propaganda, 14 March 2017, Swissinfo.ch. Viewed 21 September 2017. Rated B3.

For more on migration trends in Europe see the overview paper Anticipating Future Migration into Europe (2018-2050): Beyond the irresponsibility of current political and humanitarian short-termism. This paper is available online at https://www.laetusinpraesens.org/docs10s/futmigrat.php. Viewed 21 September 2017. Not rated.

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[26] Among the Muslim Brotherhood fronts in the Netherlands are the Es-Salaam mosque in Rotterdam, the Al-Aqsa Foundation (branch of German head office) and the Liga van de Islamitische Gemeenschap in Nederland (League of the Islamic Community in the Netherlands) or LIGN was founded in The Hague. The UAE list of terrorist front groups included the International Union of Muslim Scholars, which has Imams in the Netherlands. The UAE list also listed Islamic Relief UK, which has a branch office in Amsterdam. Another UAE listing was the Federation of Islamic Organizations in Europe which has a headquarters in Belgium but a presence throughout most of Europe. For source material on these issues see http://www.globalmbwatch.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/The-Influence-of-the-Muslim-Brotherhood-in-the-Netherlands.pdf. See also AIVD, The radical dawa in transition. The rise of Islamic neo-radicalism in the Netherlands (2007) pp. 49-52., file:///C:/Users/User/Downloads/theradical-dawa-in-transition.pdf. See also the UAE list at https://www.thenational.ae/uae/government/list-of-groups-designated-terrorist-organisations-by-the-uae-1-270037.

[27] See, among many others, Clarke Jones, Why countering violent extremism programs are failing, 30 June 2017, Asia and the Pacific Policy Society. This paper can be seen online at https://www.policyforum.net/countering-violent-extremism-programs-failing/. Viewed 21 September 2017. Not rated.


[36] A variety of economic observers believe that a combination of high speed trading, Quantitative Easing and long term low interest rates have essentially destroyed the price discovery aspect of most financial markets. Most of this economic activity has been driven by Central Banks who are attempting to re-inflate their respective economies following the 2007/2008 economic downturn. One side effect is that the process of creative destruction, that is to say the collapse of non-productive enterprises, has been avoided, meaning that the next economic downturn may be even more destructive. Increasingly high debt which is both private and public, means that governments may not have the resources for bail out and high social welfare costs.


Momin Khawaja was arrested in 2004 in Ottawa Canada for his role in a terrorism plot in the United Kingdom. During the investigation, it was revealed that he had used the “Russian Hell” set of videos about the Chechen conflict as recruiting tools. For more on this, see the report on his radicalization at https://www.start.umd.edu/pubs/START_CSTAB_2.5_MominKhawajaMechanismsofRadicalization_Aug2016.pdf . Viewed 21 September 2017. Not rated.


Germany had estimated that it had a potential problem with some 3,800 fundamentalist Sunni Muslims in 2011. That number is now over 24,000 as of 2017. For more on this see https://www.thesun.co.uk/news/2573862/germany-cannot-cope-isis-terror-cells-muslim-population-grown-intelligence-official-admits/ . Viewed 21 September 2017. Not rated.