

EUROPEAN AND U.S.
COUNTER-TERRORISM
STRATEGIES:
QUO VADIS?

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“European and U.S. Counter-Terrorism Strategies: Quo Vadis?”

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Michael Whine

Michael Whine MBE is Government and International Affairs Director at the Community Security Trust and the UK member of ECRI, a human rights agency of the Council of Europe. From 2010 to 2012 he was the Lay Advisor at the Counter Terrorism Division of the Crown Prosecution Service.

Yonah Alexander described me as the UK Member of ECRI, which is a human rights monitoring commission of the Council of Europe, which I am. Every Member State nominates a Member, but our appointment is by the national delegations' representatives, and our task is to advise governments on human rights issues through the means of five-yearly inspections and policy recommendations.¹ But for 30 years I have been employed by the Community Security Trust, which advises the UK Jewish community on security matters. You have nothing like it in the U.S., although other European Jewish communities have similar agencies.² We are a civil society organization, and are funded by the Jewish community, although we now also manage and disburse government funds to enhance the security of the Jewish community and its institutions. We provide security advice and training but also research political and physical threats to our community. The product of our research goes to the community leadership and to government and law enforcement agencies. We have a contractual relationship with the police in Britain whereby we mutually share data on antisemitic incidents, and intelligence. We not only work with the police but also closely with government. So in that sense we are quite unique.

I also advise the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), the largest regional inter-government security agency in Europe, and for the last 18 months or so, I have been helping to draft 'Words into Action', a policy advisory for governments on the security of Jewish communities. It reminds states of their convention and other responsibilities but also provides much practical guidance on security for Jewish communities and how they can transpose best practice to all OSCE member states.³ I was at the launch of the project two weeks ago in the German parliament in Berlin and I shall be a panel speaker at the second launch, to the diplomatic and law enforcement community, in Vienna on the 7th of July. So that is me.

This session is about the U.S. and European strategies. I am no expert on American strategies, although I am here every year, talking to U.S. Government departments, and have participated in counter terrorism workshops and seminars with your security agencies in years past. I no longer have any operational role, but I was involved in the early stages of the Prevent mechanism, which is the UK strategy for countering radicalization and violent extremism. So I look at it from all those various perspectives now.

With that said, let me make a few points about European counter-terrorism strategies. The first is that the member states of Europe have primary responsibility for their own security. The second is that there has been a tremendous effort to enshrine multilateral cooperation through a series of agreements at European Union (EU), and the wider European level. The OSCE counter terrorism track exists primarily as a forum for the exchange of best practice, but the agency provides observers in contested areas and advisors for post conflict states as well as elections monitors. The EU and the European Commission (EC) have focused on binding multilateral agreements, and the establishment of agencies to facilitate counter-terrorist action. The first was in 2004

following the terrorist attacks in Madrid, when the Council of the European Union (the Council) adopted a declaration on combating terrorism.⁴ Among its measures was the appointment of a Counter-Terrorism Coordinator. His function is to coordinate the work of the Council in combating terrorism, present policy recommendations and propose priority areas for action based on threat analyses, monitor the implementation of EU counter-terrorism strategies, maintain an overview of all relevant EU instruments, coordinate the relevant bodies of the Council, the Commission and the European Action Service, and ensure that the EU plays an active role in this effort.⁵

In 2005, the Council adopted its Counter-terrorism Strategy, based on four strands: preventing people from turning to terrorism by tackling the root causes which lead to radicalization and recruitment, protecting people and infrastructures and reducing vulnerability to attack, pursuing and investigating terrorists across borders and disrupting networks, responding to terrorism by managing and minimizing risks.⁶

The Strategy was revised in 2014, but following the January 2015 terrorist attacks in Paris, the Council agreed to accelerate the implementation of previously agreed measures (they has already agreed a strategy focused on Syria and Iraq in October 2014).⁷ Over the course of the next two years they legislated by means of Directives on control of the acquisition and possession of weapons, strengthening the legal framework to prevent terror attacks and the growing phenomenon of jihadi volunteers, reinforcing checks at external borders (ie outside the Schengen zone), and improvements in the interoperability of national and regional information systems. They also mandated Europol to create an Internet Referral Unit to identify terrorist and extremist content online and to advise Member States accordingly, and to enhance cooperation with Middle East and North African states.

European heads of state agreed in February 2015 to strengthen the strategy by adopting the following security measures: to adopt an effective European passenger names record, systematic and coordinated checks on cross border movements relevant to counter-terrorist measures within the Schengen framework, improved and enlarged information sharing and operational cooperation by law enforcement and judicial authorities, improved cooperation to clamp down on illicit arms trafficking, improved security services cooperation, strengthened money laundering and terror financing mechanisms, and to work toward the adoption of a cyber-security Directive.⁸

Preventing radicalization and violent extremism was regarded as a key element in the Strategy and this measure included, inter alia, the identification and removal of internet content which promotes extremism and terrorism and encouraging greater cooperation between public authorities and the public sector, communication strategies to promote tolerance, fundamental freedoms and inter-faith and community dialogue, enhanced education, improved social integration and rehabilitation of former extremists.

Cooperation at the international level required a re-think about conflict in the Middle East, Balkans, the Sahel and Yemen, with the introduction of capacity-building projects and better targeted EU assistance to the countries involved, sustained and coordinated international engagement with the UN and its Counter Terrorism Forum, as well as the promotion of fundamental freedoms between cultures and religions.

The European Commission (the Commission) reported on the progress of implementing the enhanced strategy during 2015, noting improvements to the Schengen Information System database, the establishment of the Internet Referral Unit in Europol, the establishment of a platform to enable the rapid transfer of financial intelligence and other practical tools. Among these were the establishment of the Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN) which commissions research on countering radicalization and exchanges best practice through seminar and symposia, and the exchange of forensic data such as DNA, fingerprints, vehicle information and other operationally important intelligence, under the auspices of the 2005 Prüm Convention, a formerly limited agreement to exchange data on cross-border criminal investigations signed by 14 Member States, but since extended to all EU Member States and to include forensic data on terrorism suspects.⁹

It was under the Schengen accords that the Italian authorities have stated that they tipped off the British to their concerns about one of the London Bridge attackers, Youssef Zagbha, although there has been no confirmation of this (at the time of writing), that the British received the intelligence. The RAN initiative encourages the participation of civil society organisations, and I was involved in this when a group of us were invited to oversee a joint European initiative to develop counter radicalization models, using best practice learned from Dutch and Danish national models. These 'prevent' initiatives, such as the Copenhagen, Aarhus and Amsterdam models bring together educators and social workers to steer potential extremists and terrorists away from violence. They are not normally police led, although they may involve police officers, but are usually initiated by local authorities at the request of police and security services.¹⁰

In the UK, for example, local authorities, high schools and universities have a statutory duty to monitor violent radicalization, although some universities are reluctant to do so as they regard it as spying on their students.¹¹ A subset of the UK Prevent program, the Channel program focuses on individuals who may be on the path to becoming terrorists. Its purpose is to divert potentially violent extremists.¹² Again I was involved in a Channel program to do just that, but details are necessarily kept secret as the targets have not committed crimes and therefore must be regarded as innocent. Our target's communications were being monitored and it was clear that the person was researching bomb-making materiel and capabilities although it was too early to determine when and how any device might be used. I assume that the intervention was successful and that the target was channeled away from the path that they had previously embarked on.

These are the major elements in the Strategy. The primary institutions which institutionalise these agreements are the Schengen agreement, the European police agency Europol which now has an operational capacity as well as acting as a clearing house, Eurojust, which facilitates the exchange of information between the courts and the judiciary, and the European Union Agency for Law Enforcement Training CEPOL, which is headquartered in Budapest and which trains EU police officers and prosecutors on some counter-terrorism operational aspects, such as using the internet to access terrorist groups' messaging.

At the EU Foreign Affairs Council meeting in February 2015, counter-terrorism was fully mainstreamed into EU foreign policy.¹³

The counter-terrorism strategy is effective and it is only the failures that we hear about, but bilateral relationships between states' law enforcement and security agencies are regarded by many officials as more productive than multilateral arrangements. The former head of UK counter terrorism, Richard Walton, published a paper recently repeating the message he conveyed at the 2016 World Summit against Terrorism at the International Institute for Counter-Terrorism (ICT) in Israel. There he stressed the value of bilateral relationships. Stationing police officers in other states' police headquarters facilitates and enhances immediate and direct communications. Therefore, many EU states, and the US, send representatives to other states, and to Europol and Interpol. They can shortcut the multilateral arrangements and in many ways produce more immediate results because of personal rapport and understanding between services.¹⁴

The problems and the mistakes that do occur appear to be when information is not passed on fast enough, or because the sheer volume overwhelms services' capacities. In the UK there 20,000 suspects engaged in extremist activity, of whom approximately 3,000 are regarded as potential terrorists and who are under some level of investigation. Additionally, another 800 people went as volunteers to ISIS in Syria and Iraq. A number have come back, but not all are potential terrorists, and some may regard their commitment as over and wish to return to normal life. Nevertheless, there are several thousand people who are potentially engaged, or likely to be engaged, in terrorism. This represents a prioritisation problem for security and police services. Surveillance on an individual suspect might require the full-time commitment of 20 to 30 persons. Sometimes the authorities fail in their priorities, and that may have happened in recent months.

At the aforementioned ICT conference, the head of counter terrorism at the Bundesnachrichtendienst (German Federal Intelligence Service) spoke about the continuing ISIS threat to European states from returning jihad volunteers and from locally radicalized potential terrorists. His and other services believe that the threats to at least six European states are immediate and continuing and that the prospects for Europe are alarming.¹⁵

Now some words about the recent attacks in the UK. My organization, Community Security Trust, has close connections with the British police. We have received warnings for the past two or more years from them to maintain our guard. The UK government has followed through effectively, and provides funds for us to enhance the security of our Jewish institutions, and we are now also asked to advise other faith communities who may be at risk. For example, we have run workshops and training for churches in the wake of the ISIS inspired attack on the Catholic priest in France and churches in the Far East, as well as for members of mainstream Mosques and Hindu temples. With 30 years' experience in researching terror threats and the operational security experience thus gained, we are happy to assist others beyond our own community.

The attack on Westminster Bridge and outside the Palace of Westminster on 22nd of March 2017 by Khalid Masood was similar to recent Islamist terrorist attacks across Europe; a hostile vehicle attack followed by a knife attack. This is specifically promoted in ISIS online journals, *Dabiq* and *Rumiyah*, and the following day ISIA claimed he was a one of their volunteers via their online *Amaq* News Agency.¹⁶ Masood was initially thought to be lone operator, but the ensuing police investigation has led to 11 arrests of potential collaborators. I would suggest that very few terrorist attacks in Europe today

are carried out by lone operators.¹⁷ Investigations can take years to complete and almost always reveal connections, either online or organizational, with ISIS, *al Qaeda* or other terrorist groups. The senior investigator of the 2012 Toulouse and Montauban attacks carried out by Mohammed Merah, addressing a meeting of police and Jewish representatives in November 2016 in Toulouse, stated that he had at first believed Merah to be a lone operator but that in the ensuing investigations he had established that Merah had travelled extensively in Afghanistan and the Middle East and had been in touch with others there regarding his planned attacks. He noted that it was taking years to trace these connections.

The bombing of the Manchester Arena on 22nd May by Salman Abedi, was again thought to be by a lone operator, but his sophisticated attack could not have been carried out without assistance. In his case, it is now thought probable that he had returned to Libya where his family originated to receive training from one of the ISIS offshoots that now operate there, and on 23rd May they claimed responsibility for the attack via the Telegram messaging app. Abedi had been considered suspicious because of his family's Muslim Brotherhood connections. Again, not truly a lone operator.

The London Bridge attack on 27th May was carried out by three men who had connections with *al-Muhajiroun*, an extreme Islamist group that is banned and which has been a crucial instrument in radicalizing young Muslims who become terrorists. At least one of them, Khuram Butt, was an *al-Muhajiroun* activist, who was featured on the Channel 4 TV documentary two years ago. Allegedly the police had been warned about him by moderate Muslims on several occasions.¹⁸ A second member of the group, Youssef Zagbha, of Moroccan Italian origin was considered a potential terrorist by the Italian police when they had prevented him from travelling to Syria. They have claimed that they had reported their suspicions to the British authorities via the Schengen agreement. The third terrorist, Rachid Redouane, had been excluded from the UK some years ago, but had travelled to Ireland where he had married a British woman thereby enabling him to subsequently enter the UK. So all three members of this group had previous involvement with violent extremism that the authorities had been aware of. But they had failed to maintain their surveillance.

In conclusion, the threat of terrorism in Europe is a continuing one and as a consequence the European institutions have had to redefine their missions and enhance their counter-terrorist capabilities. They also need to engage more effectively with civil society in order to gain information from affected and threatened communities, and to counter radicalization. Terrorism can only be defeated by effective and sustained counter-terrorism strategies which involve society as a whole.

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