

Lessons learned by the French Counter Terrorism Services.

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Before I get to the core of the subject, I'd like to heavily underline some critical points that enlighten the overall background and landscape in which French CT services have to work :

1 / We have in France about 4.5 to 5 million Moslems, whether French born, naturalized or immigrants. This is around 8 % of our overall population. Figures are more or less the same in the other countries of the "old Europe", Belgium, Netherlands, Germany, United Kingdom and so on. There should be something like 25 million Moslems on US territory at the same proportion. We have to deal with this reality.

2 / To the eyes of many Europeans, the Arab and Moslem world is the neighbor next door. From a French point of view, the Mediterranean Sea is a kind of Rio Grande and the city of Marseille is a kind of Laredo. We have to deal with that too, just like the US has to be aware of the Latin-American countries. Thus, we don't forget the Alamo but we do not consider ourselves to be permanently at war with our neighbors and there are some good reasons for that.

3 / The most important one is that our model of integration is far from perfect but it works. Within our 5 million Moslems, transition to fundamentalism affects only a few thousand of them and the transition to political violence and terrorism has never implicated more than a few hundred. It means that only one in ten thousand is involved. Of course this transition to violence is socially unacceptable but the proportion is too low to trigger a mass reaction over a long period of time.

4 / The fact is that in France Islamic activists are only a handful. Therefore – like any other marginal activists – they are all the time looking for their environment to overreact to what they are doing. Then, it's a big mistake for the politicians and the press, and it's totally counter-productive, to over exaggerate horror and terror. In France, during the past twenty years, the total number of terrorist actions represents only 0.002 % of crime overall. Less than 10 % of these terrorist actions were linked to Arab or Islamic issues. The other 90% of terrorist crime was carried out by French-born citizens and generally good Roman Catholics such as the Corsicans, the Basques, the Bretons, and some wine-growers in the deep south of France.

Bidding over these figures, giving these actions more importance than they deserve, focusing on some individuals for their greater glory is precisely the trap in which the terrorist wants us to fall. By the way, this strategy is no big surprise. It's the essence of any asymmetrical conflict.

5 / In the West, and should our self-esteem and pride suffer, we must admit that our nations - including mine - are only collateral and occasional victims of a djihadist violence that mainly harms Arab and Moslem countries. The final aim of the salafists is definitely not to "Islamize" the whole planet. It is to lay hands on the power inside the Moslem world without any interference from the outside. From that point of view, the West is only targeted as far as it intends to step in the process, to protect his Moslem friends or citizens from salafist attacks or propaganda, to help democratic forces on their way in the Arab and Moslem world.

The French experience in counter-terrorism is probably the longest and the most diversified in Western Europe and more generally in the western world. It started in the early sixties during the height of the Algerian independence war. Then, by the end of the sixties and until the end of the

seventies, we had to face a long decade of extreme leftist euro-terrorism closely linked to Palestinian terrorist groups. During the eighties, France became a privileged target for the state-sponsored terrorism initiated by the so-called “rogue states”: Iran, Syria and Libya. Since the early nineties, and until now, we are confronted by Islamic actions just like every other country all over the world, with the extra privilege of being the only external target for a very special Algerian Islamic violence.

During a forty year period, France suffered more than 200 major international terrorist actions. This figure excludes domestic issues of the Corsicans and the Basques that are usually less harmful but provide useful experience too. Then, even the most stupid or slow-minded within the French security services had the time and opportunity to learn some lessons and to work out some empirical strategies.

The first lesson we learned was humility.

We were very satisfied in the sixties when we were able to get rid of terrorist actions linked to the independence of Algeria by military means. That's why we were very surprised by the professionalism and the extraordinary coordination shown during the first terrorist actions of the euro-terrorist groups, specially the “Action directe” group in France, the “Rot Armee Fraktion” in Germany”, the “Brigate Rosse” in Italy and so on. As we couldn't stop their operations by conventional military means, experts came to the conclusion that they were a huge army, heavily supported by external powers. We first suspected the USSR. But some experts remarked that these terrorists were mainly trotskyists or maoists and couldn't therefore be supported by the KGB. Experts also pointed out a possible American involvement against De Gaulle's regime. There were even some experts who asserted the existence of a top secret conspiracy between Moscow and Washington to weaken and undermine France and Europe. Let us not laugh about it ! In the very recent past, some experts asserted the existence of a conspiracy between Saddam Hussein and Oussama Ben Laden to harm the United States....

At the end of the day, and after years of investigations, we had to admit that these euro-terrorist groups didn't get outside support. Of course, they surfed the waves of East-West confrontation and the cold war. Of course, their ideology referred to some kind of early communism and extreme leftism. Of course, they were in contact with other terrorist groups in the third world, specially the Palestinians. Of course, some people in Moscow...and maybe in Washington...were happy with the problem we had. But, except from some logistical facilities they sometimes got from the East German Stasi, they never received any significant support from outside.

And much more than this for our pride, when we finally caught the entire group in a farm in the center of France, we realized that they were only a dozen intelligent but psychotic kids of the bourgeoisie, just like their German counterparts in the RAF and Italians in the Red Brigades. The whole story was hardly more than a cruel joke like the “Symbionese Army of Liberation” in California but certainly not a prominent episode in East-West or North-South confrontation.

Our original sin was that we had been blind to reality. We only saw what we wanted to see in accordance with the overall international situation of the time. We never took the time to sit down and think. Confronted by what we perceived as a military challenge, we responded by military means. Moreover, we were too arrogant to admit the fact that we had been defeated by a tiny gang of misfits. The result is that we took a machine gun to kill a mosquito. We didn't hit the mosquito and the collateral damage was heavy. In short, we fell into the usual terrorist trap which is – by focused and economical actions - leading the enemy to make an inappropriate response.

To conclude on this point : just because a super power has been surprised and defeated for a time does not mean that his enemy is itself highly sophisticated or backed by another super power. A rattlesnake can stop the latest battle tank if it bites the driver.

Maybe we should remember this lesson in the example of the so-called Islamic violence. If we refer to the excellent analysis that Mark Sageman provided in his “Understanding Terror Networks”, we find many points of comparison in the psychology and mileage of the euro-terrorists in the seventies and the violent Islamists of the nineties.

The second lesson we learned was to try to ask the right questions and not the wrong ones.

After a disaster like 9/11, the primary reaction is to ask “How did it happen?”. This is the wrong question. It’s the wrong question because terrorist actions always follow the same scenario whenever, wherever, whatever and whoever they come from. It’s the wrong question because it always leads you to the same undifferentiated, purely defensive and probably inappropriate response : isolating the country, closing the borders, enforcing exclusion laws, restricting civil rights, suspecting everybody and, finally, striking out with a big stick.

It is the wrong question because it leads to a wrong concept : the concept of “War on Terror”. Terror is an undefined abstraction without an upper or lower limit. There is no way to fight such an abstraction except by destroying everything you don’t understand as this could be a potential danger.

This is precisely the trap that the terrorists want us to fall into.

But if you reject the concept of war on terror, you can always make war on terrorists. This is a practical concept that leads you to the right kind of question.

And the right question is the one President George W. Bush asked on the 12th of September 2001. The right question is “Why?”, “why did it happen?”. Unfortunately, he didn’t try to answer it and came back to the “How?”.

Why? is interesting because it leads necessarily to a second relevant question : “Who?” and we come back to George Bush’s question : “why do they hate us?”. Who are “they”?

Answering those two basic questions – why and who – is the essential key to building a proactive and appropriate strategy in homeland security.

If I refer to many ground works by American authors and experts, whether independent or in the administration, it seems that the answers to those two questions were quite well known since the early nineties. Unfortunately these works were put back on the shelf and the US reaction took other forms. It’s obvious to me and to all the Europeans, including the ugly Frenchies, that the world is a better place without the Taliban, without Saddam Hussein, Mouammar Qadhafi and some others of their kind.

But the world is not safer. And the level of terrorist risk has never been so high, specially in the Arab world. And, if you try to answer “why and who” you notice that neither the Taliban nor Saddam were within the scope of these two questions. The problem is elsewhere.

Now, the perception of the present Islamic violence by the French security services is somewhat different from the American official doctrine.

To our eyes, Islamic violence is the product and the synergy of three phenomenon not linked together but coming at the same time :

1 - The desperate need for religious legitimacy by the Saudi ruling family in the Arabic Peninsula after the Islamic revolution in Iran. Since the 80’s, the Saudis have tried to take control of Islamic institutions all over the world by the only weapon they know: money.

2 - The dispersion in the Moslem world, including communities in the west, of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood leaders after their failure following Sadate’s murder. Their extreme wing, known as the “Jamaa Islamiyya”, was the only transnational structure in the Moslem world able to come up to the Saudis’ expectation and receive the benefit of their generosity. All the “brains” of Islamic terrorism we have identified until now were top ranking leaders of the Brotherhood, including Sheikh Omar AbderRahman, author of the first attack against the W.T.C. and Ayman Zawahiri, whom we consider the real boss of Al-Qaïda, much more than the media figurehead

Oussama Ben Laden. Despite their failure in Egypt, the strategy of the Brotherhood remains always the same. In one of his speeches Zawahiri said : “We don’t fight to win the hearts, we fight to win the power.” This is exactly what Sayyid Qotb, the first ideologist of the Jamaa Islamiyyah, wrote in his book “Milestones” fifty years ago : “ It’s necessary that westerners hate Islam and Moslems so that they don’t care to help them when we come to power”.

3 - The permanent strategy of the United States and more generally the Nato members and the West which consisted in supporting the most religious and conservative regimes, supporting and training the most extremist groups and militias in the Arab and Moslem world, in order to contain and undermine USSR and the Eastern block. This strategy wasn’t bad in itself. The bad idea was to dump these gangs without any control after the collapse of USSR. Leaders of the Brotherhood had just to bend over, pick up these groups and enlist them for new exciting adventures with Brotherhood ideology, Saudi money and western military training and weapons.

Following this approach of the present Islamic violence, our analysis of it is again rather different. Our basic assessments are that :

- Transition to violence and terrorism is not intrinsic to the Arab area nor to Islam. Nor is it a moment in the evolution of that religion. The time of the “rogue states” and state-sponsored terrorism might not be over, but, for the time being, the present flow of Islamic violence is certainly helped by wahhabi donators but is not deliberately supported by any government. We are not in a clash of civilizations. The Arabs, and more generally the Moslems, are the first direct or collateral victims of the so-called Islamic violence.
- The transition to violence is promoted by a few small and scattered groups of individuals led by a handful of leaders coming out of the extreme wings of the Jamaa Islamiyyah. We know most of these leaders as they were in the defendant’s cage during the trial following the assassination of President Anouar es-Sadate. About 300 people were in that cage. About 50 were hanged, 50 are still in jail. But, 200 have been progressively released, including Sheikh Omar Abder Rahman and Ayman Zawahiri, most of them following the urgent request of US humanitarian associations. These extremist leaders, who are not religious leaders but sectarian “gurus”, then proceeded according to the methods usually used by all the other “gurus” of sects in the world.
- The breeding ground for recruitment of volunteers is inside some Islamic institutions around the world (schools, mosques, clubs, meeting rooms and so on), controlled by the Brotherhood and financed by public or private funds from the Arabic Peninsula.
- The profile, the behavior and the methods of the Islamic terrorists have more in common with those of the criminal world than those of the military. It means that we are facing non-professional, untrained and disposable candidates to violence.

Considering these conclusions, French security services developed some empirical and short term methods to face the threat which - until now – seem partly successful :

- Except in the particular case of the Taliban regime, because it sheltered the Qaïda group, a military response to the threat seems irrelevant to us. That’s why we developed a multilateral approach through the police, the judiciary system, the security and intelligence services, tightly linked to diplomatic, political and social measures.
- We developed abroad a tight net of assistance and cooperation with local intelligence and security services, specially in the Arab and Moslem world, in order to monitor the moves and prevent actions of those we considered to be dangerous people.
- Inside France, we have at our disposal a special branch of the police called “General Intelligence” for which every dictator, or would-be dictator, envies us. This particular branch - that fortunately has no judiciary power - was first designed by Napoleon to monitor the activities of his opponents: the press, the associations, the clubs and so on. This branch was reshaped in the nineteen nineties in order to monitor alien minorities and specially the important Moslem

community we have in our country. This service gives us a precious awareness of who is who, and who does what.

- The French judiciary system enables the prosecutors and the judges to extensively harass the individual citizen without any possible and legal reaction. Thank God, they don't abuse this privilege. But in the example of the Islamic threat, this freedom is used on a wide scale. It allows the French security system to constantly put the would-be terrorists under pressure, to arrest them each time we think they are about to deviate from the straight and narrow. Even if we have to release them after a few days because of the lack of judiciary evidence, the process makes them very uncomfortable and prevented the transition to violence in many cases.

- Last but not least, French Government tries to undermine the Brotherhood influence and the effect of financing from the Arab Peninsula by a tight control of the organization of the Moslem religion in France, the training of the Imams in the mosques, the training of teachers in the religious schools and the origins of the funds irrigating the Moslem institutions in the country.

I said that these methods were empirical and short-term because we are always on the edge of national and international legality. They are relevant in a situation where the transition to violence remains marginal but couldn't withstand a massive or a professional attack. They are in a deep contradiction with the usual western standards of civil rights, law and order. Thus, they are hardly transposable to most of the western countries and definitely not to the Anglo-Saxon countries, the United States most of all. Furthermore, it would be dangerous if these methods lasted for a long time. Some people could abuse them for other ends.

Let us come to a conclusion

The good news is that transition to Islamic violence remains marginal even if the damage remains intolerable. The bad news is the great ability of the Brotherhood to improve their influence by turning in their favor any political, social, economic contradiction within the Moslem countries, within the Moslem communities in the West and between western and Moslem countries .

Whether they are justified or not, direct interventions – and specially military interventions - in the Moslem world trigger and stimulate the reaction of many youngsters, who build their self-image through a violent opposition to the west super powers. They are, or they will, be the manpower for those who incite political violence against the West in order to isolate the Moslem countries and seize the power or maintain and outdated theocracy. This partly explains the reluctance of many European countries and specially France to join the expedition in Iraq.

Those of us who have been living in the Arab or Moslem countries know perfectly well that these peoples are just like any other. They much prefer liberty and democracy instead of dictatorship and oppression. They dream of modern values and the standard developed way of life. Some feel guilty about that because their dream sometimes clashes with their traditional beliefs and customs. This triggers some irrational reactions. These reactions are strengthened and radicalized if we fall into the trap set by violent fundamentalism that incites us to see in every Moslem a potential terrorist.

We all understand that it was very difficult for the happy tax payer of the U.S. Middle West to accept the fact that the US Government spent billions of dollars on the most powerful, the most sophisticated military and security system ever seen and a gang of twenty psychotics was able to kill 3000 American citizens in just a few minutes. The average John Doe wanted revenge, anywhere, anyhow, against the first Arab face that could be found. This we can understand, but it's the responsibility and the duty of the policy makers to answer first the why and the who question, to find the appropriate response and the words to explain it.

The days of Teddy Roosevelt are over. If I refer to an old American caricature, in those days, a cop in a smart uniform, a friendly smile and a big stick was enough to maintain law and order.

We can no longer succeed in maintaining law and order by exhorting the peoples of the planet to talk to the policeman. We learned from World Wars I and II that the only victory that lasts is not the one we win on the battlefield, it's the one we win in the hearts.]

Then it's our duty and in our interest to understand that we must help the Moslem countries in their peaceful transition to modernity even if that transition might take different forms from the ones we expect. It's our duty and in our interest to accept that this transition takes time. Its our duty and in our interest to contribute to a fair and peaceful settlement of the conflicts in the Arab and Moslem area. Its our duty and in our interest to help Moslem peoples in their struggle or in their resistance to the most conservative and reactionary groups or governments within their own countries and not to back those groups or regimes.

In facing that challenge, Arabs and Moslems, Americans and Europeans are all in the same boat.

Thank you for your kind attention.