

THE INVOLVEMENT OF EUROPEAN UNION STATES IN THE WAR AGAINST TERRORISM

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***Abstract:** Terrorism is a direct threat to citizens' security and to international stability and prosperity. It is a persistent global threat that knows no borders, religions or nationalities, and it is a challenge that the international community needs to solve together. Western counter-terrorism activities focus on improving threat awareness, developing training and response capabilities, and enhancing engagement with partner countries and other international actors. The fight against terrorism and its causes is now seen as a collective effort that needs to be made by all members of the international community.*

***Key words:** terrorism, Islamic state, counterterrorism, threat, risk*

Foreword

Over the past few years, several EU Member States have launched military operations against terrorist groups in remote areas, but had little thought about the obvious risks involved in these operations.

The military action is only to succeed against terrorist groups when it is compensated by a political solution on the ground. Otherwise, it will be ineffective in reducing the threat of terrorism and may even be counterproductive. In our opinion, EU Member States should develop stricter guidelines for deciding when military forces should be used against terrorist groups.

In the aftermath of September 11 attacks, most European officials and politicians criticized the "global war on terror" initiated by the United

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States. However, confronted with the rise of ISIS and the persistence of other jihadist groups, European countries have taken military action against terrorists in Iraq, Syria and Afghanistan.

European Union's implications in the fight against terrorism

European military campaigns against terrorist groups form only part of the European counter-terror effort. However, these operations marked a departure from the previous practice of the EU Member States, and European governments seem to have paid little attention to the risks involved. The new European wars to fight terrorism are of hybrid nature. European countries pursue different approaches to the threat posed by jihadist groups in a number of countries in the Middle East and North Africa, and it is difficult to clarify the goals behind their actions. European actions range from efforts to strengthen the capacity of states and non-state base forces, direct support for their military ground operations, including the deployment of special operations forces, to air strikes designed to weaken armed groups targeting the killing of group leaders or fighters allegedly involved in terrorist attacks.

The EU has often been divided on the use of military force, but these operations seem to have enjoyed broad European support. France, the United Kingdom, Germany, Belgium, the Netherlands, Denmark, Italy, Spain, Poland were all directly involved in conducting or assisting military actions against jihadist groups in neighboring regions of Europe. Several other EU Member States are involved in training missions of local security forces or helping countries in the region to strengthen their counter-terrorism capability. The evolution of the European military counter-terrorism operations involved close coordination between the EU Member States and the United States of America and there was a notable convergence between Europe and the US on military action against terrorists.

Most European strategies agree that ISIS and other groups pose a threat to the EU and that they must play an important role in military actions to counteract them. Yet, the European military counter-terrorism incursions were determined not only by strategic calculation, but also by political considerations designed to show that governments take vigorous action against the groups that terrorize their citizens. In pursuit of this objective,

European governments are at risk of taking military, inefficient measures to achieve the declared objectives, which may even be counterproductive. They are also in danger of following the United States in establishing dangerous expansive legal precedents for using force against non-state groups. We believe that EU Member States should adopt a more limited but fairly concrete military approach against terrorism so as to promote European security and contribute to the consolidation of an international order in line with EU interests and values.

The European measure of involvement in a war on terrorism was triggered by the emergence of jihadist groups in the wider periphery of Europe that functions as insurgents or state military forces, as well as the practice of conventional terrorism against overseas targets. Former French Defense Minister, Jean-Yves Le Drian, said that "the militarization of terrorism calls for a military response."¹ In particular, ISIS is a mix of terrorism and military approaches.

Since September 2001, the United States has been involved in an armed conflict with Al Qaeda, the Taliban and their associated forces. In fact, from the very beginning, there were two distinct military campaigns. In Afghanistan, the US Armed Forces helped overthrow the Taliban regime in Kabul and then, for many years, tried to defeat the Taliban insurgency movement, an effort that led to the expansion of the US forces' missions in Afghanistan. Many European countries have been closely involved in this effort: NATO has led a large force of security assistance in Afghanistan between 2003 and 2014, followed by a lower force that continues to date.²

Even for European countries such as Spain and the United Kingdom, which have been hit by Al-Qaeda attacks, direct military action against Al-Qaeda members abroad has been seen either as unjustified and counterproductive, or as a secondary contribution to defending the European territory against terrorism. Unlike the terrorists who launched the attacks on September 11 in the United States, the authors of the terrorist incidents in Europe were mainly citizens or residents of the countries where the attacks

¹ Jean-Yves Le Drian, *La militarisation du terrorisme exige une réponse militaire*, in <http://www.lejdd.fr/International/Jean-Yves-Le-Drian-La-militarisation-du-terrorisme-exige-une-reponse-militaire-708900>., accessed on 30.04.2017

² Resolute Support Mission in Afghanistan, NATO, June 13 2016, in http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_113694.htm. accessed on 03.05.2017

took place. The main focus of European counter-terrorism efforts has generally been related to internal law enforcement, information activities, and anti-radicalization programs.

In recent years, the terrorist threat, as perceived in Europe, has changed dramatically and terrorist groups have managed to take control of large populations of the periphery of Europe.

These developments have been rooted, among other factors, in the fundamental changes in the Middle East and North Africa, by the side-effects of the 2011 Arab Revolutions.³ A turning point was in 2012 when a Tuareg-led rebellion in northern Mali favored jihadist groups, including Ansar al-din and Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb to take control of much of northern Mali. In January 2013, these groups launched an offensive in central Mali, raising fears that they could conquer the country's capital, Bamako. In the estimate of France's Foreign Minister at the time, Laurent Fabius, the aim of the jihadists "was to control the entire Mali in order to establish a terrorist state that threatens the whole of Africa and Europe."⁴

Despite the constant anti-French and anti-Spanish rhetoric of its leaders, AQIM did not attack Europe; unlike Al-Qaeda, which focused on the "near enemy" of the regimes in North Africa.⁵ However, jihadist groups in North Africa already announced that they had kidnapped European and other foreign nationals and attacked North African targets in which they were interested.

The Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) grew in international notoriety in early 2014 when, relying on a territorial presence it had established in Syria on the backdrop of civil war, it quickly advanced north-east of Iraq and seized the city of Mosul in June 2014. Rapid progress of ISIS in front of the collapsed Iraqi army raised fears that it could attempt to move to the capital of Baghdad. The resources, money and weapons that

³ *Exploiting Disorder: al-Qaeda and the Islamic State*", International Crisis Group, in <https://www.crisisgroup.org/global/exploiting-disorder-al-qaeda-and-islamic-state>, accessed on 03.05.2017

⁴ Press conference given by Laurent Fabius, Paris, 11 January 2013, in <https://uk.ambafrance.org/France-supporting-Mali-against>, accessed on 05.05.2017

⁵ Christopher S. Chivvis , Andrew Liepman, "*North Africa's Menace*", RAND, 2013, in http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR400/RR415/RAND_RR415.pdf, accessed on 06.05.2017

ISIS captured during its campaigns on cities and military bases in both Syria and Iraq, as well as the large number of recruits in its ranks, made it seem more like the military force of a state than an insurgent movement or a traditional terrorist group.⁶ This impression was reinforced after ISIS leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, proclaimed the restoration of the caliphate in the territory he controls.

The continued progress of ISIS against the Iraqi and Kurdish territories involves, in particular, the massacre of thousands of members of the Yazidi religious minority and is a response to the Iraqi government's request for assistance from the United States that started air attacks against ISIS in Iraq in August 2014.

In addition to the territory over which ISIS gained control, there was another reason why the group seemed to pose another threat to Europe than Al-Qaeda and other terrorist groups. Among foreign fighters who were convinced to join the ISIS in Iraq and Syria, a large number were Europeans. By April 2014, EU Counter-Terrorism Coordinator, Gilles de Kerchove, estimated that more than 2,000 fighters traveled to Syria from EU Member States.⁷

At the same time, ISIS has stepped up propaganda directed at the Western public. Since June 2014, it has released its first English film entitled "There is no life without the Jihad", giving as an example a number of British and Australian fighters.⁸ As a result of the US air strikes, ISIS released a series of videos that reveal the beheadings of Western hostages, with fighters directly approaching foreign leaders and putting executions into practice. On a background of massive public interest in Europe and the United States of America, European countries quickly joined the coalition carrying military actions against ISIS in Iraq.

⁶ Audrey Kurth Cronin, "ISIS Is Not a Terrorist Group", *Foreign Affairs*, March/April 2015, in <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/middle-east/isis-not-terrorist-group>, accessed on 06.05.2017

⁷ Richard Barrett, "Foreign Fighters in Syria", the Soufan Group, June 2014, in <http://soufangroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/TSG-Foreign-Fighters-in-Syria.pdf>, accessed on 07.05.2017

⁸ Charles Lister: *The Syrian Jihad: Al-Qaeda, the Islamic State, and the Evolution of an Insurgency*, (London: Hurst, 2015), in <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/17419166.2016.1167541?needAccess=true>, accessed on 08.05.2017

As justification for military action, European leaders and officials cited the danger of letting ISIS strengthen its territorial control. France launched military attacks against ISIS in Iraq in September 2014, when Hollande, president at the time, described the action as “air protection operations” in support of the Iraqi authorities.⁹ Ten days later, Britain began struck in Iraq in order to “*stop the ISIL advance and help the Iraqi government.*”¹⁰ David Cameron told the Parliament that the operation was necessary to prevent the emergence of “a terrorist caliphate on the shores of the Mediterranean and neighboring a NATO member state with a declared and proven determination to attack our country and our people.”¹¹ Belgium, Denmark, and the Netherlands have also joined the US-led military campaign against ISIS in Iraq, along with other EU member states to provide support.

Bombing ISIS in Iraq was only part of Europe’s efforts to counter the threat posed by this group. During this period, EU Member States stepped up other measures aimed at limiting ISIS growth. They have continued their diplomatic efforts to promote a more comprehensive political approach by the Iraqi government, restrict the movement of foreign fighters across the Turkish-Syrian border, and try to reduce or end the conflict in Syria. On the domestic front, they strengthened programs to combat radicalization among their own populations, tried to limit financial flows and arms transfers to groups by using sanctions and implemented legal provisions, information measures, and other measures to face the flow of fighters.

However, despite the additional measures that states have taken against ISIS, its threat to Europe seems to degenerate. Shortly after the US and France began to strike against ISIS positions, group spokesman, Abu Mohammed al-Adnani (later murdered in a military attack for which the

⁹ Revivez les moments forts de la conférence de Hollande, in <http://www.lefigaro.fr/politique/2014/09/18/01002-20140918LIVWWW00148-suivez-la-conference-de-presse-de-francois-hollande-en-direct.php>, accessed on 09.05.2017

¹⁰ Defence Secretary Michael Fallon, quoted in “*RAF conducts first air strikes of Iraq mission*”, Ministry of Defence, 30 September 2014, in http://www.ecfr.eu/publications/-summary/europes_new_counter_terror_wars7155, accessed on 10.05.2017

¹¹ David Cameron, *Statement to the House of Commons*, 26 September 2014, in <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/raf-conducts-first-air-strikes-of-iraq-mission--2>, accessed on 10.05.2017

United States and Russia have claimed responsibility), issued a long-term appeal to his followers to conduct direct attacks against members of the coalition.¹²

The statement of support for ISIS by one of those involved in the coordinated attacks in Paris in January 2015 on the satirical newspaper *Charlie Hebdo* and a grocery store showed the potential threat of “amateur” or “low-tech” terrorism.¹³

At the same time, the number of European citizens traveling to Syria to join ISIS has reached alarming levels. According to an estimate, the total number of Western European fighters in Syria has reached over 5,000 between June 2014 and December 2015.¹⁴ During this period, ISIS also expanded its presence throughout the Middle East, accepting loyalty commitments from several other groups and declaring provinces in Sinai, Libya, Saudi Arabia and other countries.

More and more, the defense of European countries against terrorism has been at the heart of the justification for military engagement. In September 2015, France expanded its campaign against ISIS in Syria. President Hollande said that this was necessary because the attacks were organized from the ISIS base in Syria against several countries, including France.¹⁵ Even before, the United Kingdom conducted a drone attack in Syria in August 2015, that former Prime Minister Cameron described as a

¹² Charles Lister, *The Syrian Jihad*, in <http://www.middleeasteye.net/in-depth/reviews/book-review-syrian-jihad-charles-r-lister-1860395104>, accessed on 11.05.2017

¹³ Corri Zoli, “Lone-Wolf or Low-Tech Terrorism? Emergent Patterns of Global Terrorism in Recent French and European Attacks”, *Lawfare*, 17 August 2016, n <https://www.lawfareblog.com/lone-wolf-or-low-tech-terrorism-emergent-patterns-global-terrorism-recent-french-and-european>, accessed at 11.05.2017

¹⁴ Homas Hegghammer, Petter Nesser, “Assessing the Islamic State’s Commitment to Attacking the West”, *Perspectives on Terrorism*, Vol. 9, No. 4 (2015), in <http://www.terrorismanalysts.com/pt/index.php/pot/article/view/440/html>, accessed on 12.05.2017

¹⁵ François Hollande, *Ouvre la voie à des bombardements en Syrie contre l’Etat islamique*, *Le Monde*, 7 September 2015, in http://www.lemonde.fr/politique/article/-/2015/09/07/la-france-decide-une-intervention-militaire-aerienne-en-syrie-contre-l-ei_4748-129_823448.html#pI15IG6Jv7EXaWO.99, accessed on 12.05.2017

self-defense act.¹⁶ The French initiative (though limited) and the British one in Syria came to a period of renewed attention to the Syrian conflict, driven in particular by the wave of refugees fleeing the conflict going to Europe, and seemed partly motivated by the desire to become more active and more influential.¹⁷

However, these military attacks do not lead to a significant reduction in the threat posed by ISIS. Following the attacks in Paris, France called for mutual defense of the Treaty of Lisbon (Article 42 (7)) to request assistance from the other EU Member States in the military action against ISIS. In response, Britain, Germany, Denmark and the Netherlands announced that they would either join the air strikes in Syria or provide direct support for the French military efforts.

Counter-terrorist wars have brought together in a significant group the best military specialists of the EU Member States. Differences in national political culture continue to shape the policy and rhetoric of EU Member States. However, there is broad involvement and support for Europe's military measures against Islamic armed groups. A large number of European countries thus contribute to military operations and wider armed struggles against jihadist groups. European countries should focus on developing a clearly defined policy for military action against non-state terrorist groups. They should make sure that force is used only when there is a clear vision of the impact it is likely to achieve in reducing a real and pressing security threat. They should be particularly skeptical about any counter-terrorism intervention that is independent of a plausible strategy to restore legitimate authority and effective governance in the area where the target group is. In almost all cases, military action is, on short term, a poor method of preventing domestic terrorist attacks.

¹⁶ David Cameron, "Syria: refugees and counter-terrorism", *Statement to the House of Commons*, 7 September 2015, in <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/syria-refugees-and-counter-terrorism-prime-ministers-statement>, accessed on 14.05.2017

¹⁷ John Irish, Dominique Vidalon, "France launches air strikes against Islamic State in Syria", *Reuters*, 27 September 2015, in <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-france-syria-idUSKCN0RR07Y20150927>, accessed on 15.05.2017

Conclusions

In our opinion, EU Member States should act to minimize any precedent in the use of force within the territory of a state without its consent and without the approval of the UN Security Council. They should define and articulate a set of restrictive standards under human rights law. Finally, they should consider developing a standard of necessity as a basis for any use of lethal force against non-state armed groups if there is no effort to recover the territory.¹⁸

The impact of terrorism can be extremely destabilizing for a country, undermining both economic progress and development. Western states are working with its partners to exchange information and support counter-terrorism efforts.



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¹⁸ Europe’s new counter-terror wars, in http://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/-europes_new_counter_terror_wars7155 accessed on 17.05.2017

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