

Commentary, March 23, 2016

## BRUSSELS ATTACKS: A FRENCH LESSON WE HAVE NOT LEARNT

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Since the terrorism wave in Europe started with Charlie Hebdo and the Paris attacks in November, Brussels has been presented as the crib of foreign fighters in Europe. The attacks of yesterday morning in the city, which is the heart of the European Institutions, have demonstrated that Brussels is not just the nest where the eggs are brooded, on the contrary it could be the vulnerable theatre of terrorism and fear.

One question arises from the tragedy: How?. This is not just rhetoric, but rather a reflection on the failures of the intelligence system and of the counter-terrorism measures put in places by the Belgian and French government until now.

If one positive outcome has emerged from the Paris attack, this concerns the raising awareness in Europe about the trans-national identity of Islamic Radicalization. After the Paris attacks, France and Belgium realized to be more linked than expected in the struggle for finding effective counter-terrorism measures. A more intensive collaboration between the Belgian and French intelligence was urgent and needed.

Since then, few steps ahead have been made. At the UN

Climate Summit in December, the French Prime Minister Manuel Valls and his Belgian counterpart Charles Michel announced the will to create a system of information sharing<sup>1</sup>. The French Ministry of Justice also proposed to establish a liaison office<sup>2</sup> in Brussels to tackle important cases. Those measures required implementation, and most of all the will to think that sharing intelligence, professionals and knowledge is far more effective than treating terrorism as a domestic problem.

When Salah Abdeslam, the most wanted terrorist in Europe after the Paris attack, was captured on March 18, it has been reported as a success from both the Belgian and the French side. Apparently, Belgian security forces had overcome the limit that the Ministry of Interior Jan

<sup>1</sup> France, *Belgium pushes intelligence sharing after Paris attacks*, Euractiv.com, December 1, 2015 <http://www.euractiv.com/section/justice-home-affairs/news/france-belgium-push-intelligence-sharing-after-paris-attacks/>

<sup>2</sup> France, *Belgium to step up counter-terrorism cooperation in wake of Paris attack*, France24, February 2, 2016, <http://www.france24.com/en/20160202-france-belgium-step-counter-terrorism-cooperation-paris-attacks>

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Jambon had underlined in November: there are 19 municipalities in Brussels with 19 Mayors and 6 police departments, and this makes difficult to coordinate effective police operations<sup>3</sup>. However, after Salah's capture, Jan Jambon himself demonstrated to be forward-looking, claiming that "dismantling one terrorist cell could activate another"<sup>4</sup>.

According to that, counterterrorism strategy should address the network behind the terrorist more than single individuals. Salah Abdeslam has been probably hidden in the Belgian neighborhood of Molenbeek for several months before being captured. It follows that he has

been facilitated by a network of terrorists. In addition to that, the attacks in Brussels and Paris, as they have been planned and coordinated, required technical skills, time and, most of all, an important number of participants.

Based on the "Iceberg Theory"<sup>5</sup> proposed by Clint Watts, Professor at the George Washington University, Salah Abdeslam might be seen as the tip of an iceberg. The part that is underwater represents the plot and the network, which are quite impossible to see and that have to be handled through a coordinated action between not only Europeans, but also Middle Eastern countries.

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<sup>3</sup> M. Esposito, *Radicalism and homegrown jihadism: why Belgium matters*, ISPI, November 17, 2015, <http://www.ispionline.it/it/pubblicazione/radicalism-and-homegrown-jihadism-why-belgium-matters-14200?platform=hootsuite>

<sup>4</sup> C. Kroet, *Abdeslam arrest could activate other terror cells*, Politico Europe, March 21, 2016, <http://www.politico.eu/article/abdeslam-arrest-could-active-other-terror-cells-minister/>

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<sup>5</sup> N. Bertrand, *The Brussels attacks hint at a worrying 'iceberg' theory about terror networks in Europe*, Business Insider India, March 22, 2016, <http://www.businessinsider.in/The-Brussels-attacks-hint-at-a-worrying-iceberg-theory-about-terror-networks-in-Europe/articleshow/51513910.cms>

