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Europe's Response to Radical Islam

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The April 2004 terrorist attacks in Madrid and those carried out in London this July have turned Western Europe into a major battlefield for Islamist terrorists. Western Europe had previously played a significant role as a base for planning and organization by Al Qaeda cells: the September 11, 2001, attacks in the United States were planned by a Hamburg, Germany, cell of Al Qaeda; Ahmed Ressam, who was arrested on his way to bomb Los Angeles International Airport on New Year's Eve 1999, was linked with a French radical network; “shoe bomber” Richard Reid was recruited in a British jail; and Zacharias Moussaoui, believed to be a member of the 9-11 hijackers, found his calling in a London mosque.

Al Qaeda, moreover, is not the only radical Islamic group active in Western Europe. Other networks have acted independently, mostly sharing ideas and recruiting along patterns similar to those of Al Qaeda. (Examples include the Algerian terrorist Khaled Kelkal and Algerian Islamists known as the Roubaix group.) New independent groups could similarly arise in the future. The issue of radicalization and violence thus goes beyond the present challenge posed by Al Qaeda and could continue or increase even if Al Qaeda itself is destroyed.

Even more important, it should be noted that the terrorists acting in Europe did not come from the Middle East to perpetrate their attacks: they were born in Europe or came as students or political refugees. And it is in Europe that they became “born-again” Muslims and political radicals. In Western Europe radical Islamism is homegrown, not an import. This homegrown radicalism forms the challenge of Euro-Islam.

PROFILE OF A TERRORIST

Islamic radicals in Western Europe fall roughly into three categories: foreign residents, second-generation immigrants (most often native-born), and converts.

The first category is that of young Middle Easterners who come to Europe as political refugees or students, who speak Arabic, and who are from middle-class backgrounds. The 9-11 hijackers are an excellent example of this category; they became born-again Muslims only after coming to Europe and before joining a radical group.

The second category is made up of second-generation European Muslims, some educated but many more school dropouts, who usually come from destitute neighborhoods. They speak a European language as their first language and often are European citizens. Three of the July 2005 London bombers fall into this category.

Another of the London bombers, Germaine Lindsay, was a convert. Converts to Islam, many of whom became Muslim while spending time in jail, form the third category. It is the smallest in number, but not necessarily in significance.

Members of all three categories follow the same general trajectory of radicalization. Almost invariably, they become born-again Muslims (or converts) by joining a mosque known to host radical imams, and soon after that (in the span of less than a year), they turn politically radical and go (or try to go) to fight a jihad abroad. Before 9-11, that meant going to Afghanistan. Since May 2003, it may mean traveling to Iraq, as illustrated by a group of young second-generation French Muslims who left for Falluja in early 2005.

Notably, almost none of these radicals have gone to their country of origin or of their families' origin to wage jihad. And they have usually gone to the “peripheral” jihad—to Bosnia, Chechnya, Afghanistan, Kashmir, or New York—rather than to Israel

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and Palestine. (Two Pak-Britons did perpetrate a terrorist attack in Tel Aviv in spring 2003, but this is, so far, the only exception to the rule.)

In addition, almost all of these terrorists broke completely with their families only after entering their process of radicalization. Having done so, they usually became urban nomads of sorts, often changing places and even countries. Thus, these terrorists are largely supranational and socially atomized. They also tend to have a Westernized trajectory in studies (urban planning, computer science), in languages (all are fluent in Western languages), and in matrimonial affairs (often marrying or dating European women).

Such a Western profile is not only a function of their sociological situation, it is also a condition of success: they live totally immersed in Western society. The strength and the weakness of Islamic extremism in Western Europe are precisely that the radicals are not rooted among the European Muslim population. The strength is that they cannot be traced or spotted before going into action by police penetration of the local Muslim population. It is also difficult to enter their networks because they are cut off from the outside world and are highly mobile. The weakness is that they have problems of recruitment and logistics because they do not relate well to ordinary "civilian" fellow Muslims.

WHY THE TURN TO RADICALISM?

There is no clear-cut sociological profile of the Islamic radicals beyond that which I have sketched out. There is no characteristic that links them definitively to a given socioeconomic situation. More precisely, the reasons that may push them toward violence are not specific enough and include traits shared by a larger population that deals with similar situations in very different ways. Explanations based on poverty, exclusion, racism, acculturation, and so forth may contain kernels of truth, but they are not specific enough to be of much practical help in stopping terrorists from acting.

For example, there is clearly a generational dimension at work here. Islamic radicalism is a youth movement. Frustration is obviously a key element in their radicalization, but it seems to have more to do with a particular psychological dimension than with a social or economic one. A common

factor among known radicals is a concern for self-image and a desire to reconstruct the self through action. In this sense, young radicals are more in search of an opportunity for spectacular action where they will be personally and directly involved than with the long-term patient building of a political organization that could extend the social and political base of their networks. They are more present-oriented activists than future-oriented constructivists. They are thus far different from the Comintern agents of the 1920s and 1930s.

This narcissist dimension explains both the commitment to suicide attacks and the difficulty such people have in working underground without the perspective and prospect of action. Without terrorism, the young radicals do not exist. This commitment to immediate or mid-term action, as opposed to long-term political action, is probably the great-

est weakness of radical Islamists in Europe, but it also makes them very hard to catch and stop.

Clearly, though, only a small fraction of alienated Muslim

youth evinces these characteristics. Very few become terrorists. There is no obvious or practical way to tell one trajectory from others because, as was noted, it is less sociological than psychological.

Another significant pattern in Euro-Islamist radicalization is the blending of Islamic wording and phraseology with a typically Western anti-imperialism and third-worldist radicalism. For the most part, Euro-Islamist targets are the same ones that the Western ultra-leftist movements of the 1970s identified. The Islamists target "US imperialism" and "Zionism" in support of the "ummah"—the world community of Muslims that, like the world proletariat, is an abstract universal.

Islamists seek mass terrorism, and they do not target political or business personalities, as the European ultra-left did. Nevertheless, the paradigm of ultra-leftist terrorism from the 1970s might provide a bridge in the future to non-Islamic radicals, perhaps even to some in the so-called antiglobalization movement.

Again, though, many Islamic residents in Western Europe believe such ideologies, yet few of these ideologues become terrorists. We can array several perhaps necessary conditions for identifying an Islamist terrorist in Europe, but we cannot specify what the sufficient conditions are.

The real danger lies in Islamic radicalism enlarging its social base or connecting with other potentially radical movements or governments.

NEW PATTERNS

Since 9-11 and the US removal of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, Islamist terrorists have faced two new problems that have immediate consequences for their ability to act in or from Western Europe. These problems are organizational and political.

No longer is there easy sanctuary for Islamist radicals in European Union countries to meet, train, and forge esprit de corps and link with other groups—in a word, to coalesce a ragtag collection of activists into a cohesive and disciplined organization. It is becoming far more difficult to become organized and maintain communications with leaders within and outside a country.

A specific dimension of Al Qaeda was its veterans' solidarity: many young radicals, who met first as groups of "buddies" in Western countries, turned into efficient cells only after having lived in Afghanistan or after being led by someone who had been in Afghanistan and returned. Moreover, Al Qaeda exhibited a distinctive pattern of turning personal links among veterans of the Afghan jihad into an efficient but flexible chain of command. This is obviously no longer the case.

As for political problems, the West's demonization of Islam has put the Muslim population in the West on the defensive. Although this demonizing may have turned some individuals more radical, it has convinced most Muslims living in the West to adopt a clearer attitude and to advocate greater integration into Western societies. European authorities have contributed to isolating the radicals by responding positively, at least in terms of rhetoric, to the quest for recognition and integration. Isolation among and alienation from the European Muslim population are now among the radicals' main challenges.

As a consequence of these developments, two new patterns of Islamic radicalism are emerging or will emerge. The first we may call "franchising." Local groups based on local solidarities—most likely those of neighborhood, extended family, and university—with few or no ties to Al Qaeda, will assume the label and act according to what they see as Al Qaeda's ideology and strategy. The Internet is playing a role here at three levels: motivation (by providing propaganda), technology (how to make bombs), and communication (connections between people who do not need to meet physically).

The second pattern is a quest for allies and support beyond the pale of Islamic fundamentalism. Radicals may try to find allies and fellow travelers at the expense of the purity of their ideological message. They could find it among the European ultra-left or, less probably, the ultra-right. They could find allies among other "liberation" movements (for instance, former Baathists in Iraq). Some might even serve as proxies or gunmen for rogue states. They may also develop links with local delinquents (as illustrated by the Roubaix gang in France and the Madrid terrorist ring, which was associated with drug dealers).

COUNTERING THE ISLAMISTS

Whatever the differences among the European countries, including their appraisal of US policy, European Union members share many interests and policies.

All European governments are reluctant to drastically alter their legal systems and basic political approaches to terrorism. The issue of homeland security was raised and essentially settled a long time

ago when these governments faced a more "indigenous" terrorism (Spain's ETA, Ireland's IRA, Germany's Baader-Meinhof gang, and Italy's Red Brigades). In this sense, the Europeans have a more seasoned and experienced counterterrorism homeland apparatus than the Americans do.

In countries where the "Islamic" threat had been identified at least a decade ago (as in France), the security apparatus is efficient.

The recent terrorist attacks have engendered greater cooperation among the different countries, as well as with the United States, in most cases. But this cooperation has not led to the importation of political differences among governments into their thinking about security, partly because domestic procedures are institutionalized and partly because this is not a new concern.

In addition, as far as European countries are concerned, the fight against terrorism is a matter of police and intelligence, not military action. The growing isolation of Islamic radicals in Europe should allow the Europeans to continue with this "soft" approach: police and intelligence services are efficient to the extent that transnational cooperation works and will probably provide sufficient tools to carry out counterterrorism.

However, this approach will never totally eradicate terrorism. The European tradition of terrorism

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and political violence that has forged the experience of the counterterrorist institutions makes it easier for young activists to become violent. Put somewhat differently, the stigma attached to carrying out violence is relatively weak in Europe. Young men who want to become radical and engage in a spectacular action to validate their confused and injured manhood will not be stopped by this soft approach.

Even concentrating on root causes—on the sociology and motivations of the radicals—while important for understanding the radicals' mode of recruitment, will be of little use in drying up the ground on which these extremists prosper. The aim of European policy is not eradication; it is to make terrorism a residual factor that can be lived with.

KEEPING THEM ISOLATED

Such a "soft" approach is sustainable in Europe only under one condition: that Islamic radicalism remains a fringe movement. The real danger lies in Islamic radicalism enlarging its social base or connecting with other potentially radical movements or governments. The challenge is not to go at the roots of terrorism, as European government spokespeople never tire of saying, for that is well-nigh impossible and will not eradicate terrorism in any case. The challenge is to prevent the radical fringe from finding a broad political base among the local Muslim population.

To regain their momentum and create that base, Euro-Islamic radicals will have to achieve two strategic goals: mobilize other Muslims and link up with non-Muslim radicals.

Eventually, Euro-Islamic leaders will try to mobilize elements of the Muslim community to provide shelter, logistics, recruits, and reliable communications. To do that, the activists will have to change their patterns of recruitment, which are currently based on spotting some individuals and taking them out of their social milieu. They will have to engage in a more collective *dawa* ("proselytizing").

This would put them on the same path as many nonpolitical conservative and even fundamentalist organizations, such as the Tabligh (a movement that urges Muslims to shun any form of assimilation or Westernization) and the Salafis (a Wahhabi-inspired group that urges Muslims to return to the basic tenets of their faith, bypassing Islamic cultures and history). Interestingly, many radical groups—like the London-based Hizbul-Tahrir (HT)—share the views of Al Qaeda but think the latter has been premature to launch jihad. They believe that one should first mobilize the Muslim community

through intensive proselytizing and political activity. (The British government banned HT after the London bombings, not because it had been involved but because of its radical views.)

Eventually, too, Islamist leaders will probably try to establish some sort of joint venture with remnants of the European extreme left who share the same hatred for "imperialism." Converts may play a particularly significant role here. Let us not forget that Carlos the Jackal, who carried out well-publicized terrorist attacks in the 1970s and 1980s, converted to Islam in jail and now praises Osama bin Laden. But given the social and psychological background of the radicals, it remains unlikely that they will develop a more sophisticated strategy.

The key issue is the attitude of the Muslim population in Europe toward radicalism and terrorism. And for three main reasons, the Muslim population in Europe has a far larger political stake, and plays a far greater political role, in their nations than does the Muslim population in the United States.

First, unlike in America, Muslim migrants are the main source of immigration in Europe. Second, this migration originates from Europe's neighboring southern countries. Legal immigration to the United States is far more diverse in its origins. Third, migration to Europe has created the bulk of the underclass and jobless youth. (In the United States, migrants want to find—and generally do find—jobs that quickly make them upwardly mobile.)

A EUROPEAN ISLAM

The social, geographic, political, and strategic implications of Muslim immigration to Europe are intertwined. In this light, European countries should pursue a double objective: isolate the Islamic radicals with the support of their own Muslim population, and seek out at least the neutrality of the nonviolent conservative fundamentalists among them.

Two different approaches have been in competition in Europe in this regard. The multiculturalist approach, tried mainly in Great Britain, treats Muslims as members of a minority group who should be addressed collectively and should benefit from a specific status. The integrationist strategy, which is the approach France has taken, seeks to grant full citizenship to Muslims as individuals but not to consider them as a separate community under any ethnic, cultural, or religious paradigm.

Neither approach seems to be working well. The multicultural tack tends to create ghettos. In Great Britain, even before the London attacks in 2005,

some members of Parliament were questioning this approach and called on the government to adapt a more integrative policy. The integrationist approach, however, ignores the quest for a new identity among uprooted Muslims. In France, amid an ongoing debate, the government has decided to establish an official representation of Muslims as a faith group, but not as a cultural or ethnic minority.

In Germany, although the laws on citizenship were slightly relaxed three years ago, the Muslim population, which is mainly Turkish, is perceived as foreign. Yet the fact that no Turks have been involved in terrorism has defused any reaction from the government and public opinion since the Madrid and London bombings. In Holland, by contrast, the government has toughened regulations on immigration—including an obligation to speak Dutch—since the killing of a controversial filmmaker, Theo Van Gogh, by a Muslim activist in November 2004. (In Holland, unlike France, Islam is still seen as a problem of immigration, not of second-generation residents.)

IN PURSUIT OF PLURALISM

However awkwardly, a common approach is slowly emerging in Europe: dealing with the Muslim population in purely religious terms. Encouraging the emergence of a European Islam will help integrate the Muslims, weaken links with foreign countries, and provide a Western-compatible religious identity. The problem thus far is that some governments (like that of France), as well as the bulk of public opinion, equate European Islam with “liberal” Islam. Calling on Muslims to adapt the basic tenets of Islam to the Western concept of a religion is a mistake.

For example, to officially sponsor “good and liberal” Muslims would be the kiss of death. It would deprive such liberal organizations and leaders of any legitimacy. Besides, the main motivation for youth radicalization is not theological—young people are not interested in theological debates. Instead, political radicalization is the main driving force. Moreover, modern secular states should not regulate theology as a matter of policy.

Is there a better approach? Yes. Genuine pluralism is the best way to avoid confrontation with a tight-knit Muslim community. Conservative and even fundamentalist views of religion are manage-

able in a pluralist environment, as shown by a host of Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish cases. A pluralistic approach allows civil society to reach the cadres of youth who could be ideal targets for radicals and neo-fundamentalist groups. State policy should be based on integration and the promotion of Muslim community leaders on a pluralistic basis. The emphasis should be on weakening the links with foreign elements by pushing for the “nativization” of Islam and for preventing the deepening of the ghetto syndrome. Transparency should be the aim.

If that general proposition is accepted, certain proposals seem to follow logically. There should be much tighter control on fundraising and subsidizing from abroad, which also means better access to open domestic fundraising and subsidies (for building mosques, for example). Governments should establish more links between Islamic religious teaching institutions and the university and academia. Religious representation should be encouraged without monopoly. Mainstream political parties should court and enlist Muslims as members and party leaders. Social policy must avoid confronting Muslims with black-and-white choices. It should instead work to let Muslim youth experience a diversity of opinions in line with the spectrum of political diversity in the West.

In this respect, the European debate on whether to support or not support the US military campaign in Iraq has had a positive impact. In Great Britain, as well as in France and elsewhere in Europe, Muslims did not feel isolated or targeted; instead, they felt as though they belonged to mainstream public opinion. In this sense at least, in the European context, the debate between so-called old and new Europe has superseded the debate on the “clash of civilizations.”

A policy of encouraging pluralism will meet the aspirations of mainstream Muslims in Europe—Islam recognized as a Western religion, Muslims as full citizens—while avoiding the creation of a closed community, ghettos, and minority status. This policy will contribute to the isolation of the terrorists and prevent them from building a dangerous political constituency. Approaches that by design or error drive Muslim communities inward and into themselves will backfire, to the regret of all concerned. ■