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Twenty years of countering jihadism in Western Europe: from the shock of 9/11 to ‘jihadism fatigue’

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ABSTRACT

This article provides a reflection on the jihadist threat, the policies and actors that deal with this threat and the impact of jihadism and counterterrorism in Western Europe in the past twenty years. It describes how the threat, counterterrorism policies and their impact have developed over time and demonstrates how threat perceptions in society and the political arena have not always been aligned with the actual threat. There have been periods of disbalance between the threat and responses to it, leading to both overreactions and inflated threat descriptions and fear levels, as well as periods with limited attention that might have contributed to unpleasant surprises at a later stage. Against this backdrop, the article criticises the incident-driven approach to counterterrorism and warns against both overreactions as well as ‘jihadism fatigue’.

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Introduction

More than twenty years after 9/11, it seems high time for a reflection on how the jihadist threat, the policies to deal with it and the impact of both on politics and societies have developed in Western Europe in the aftermath of these attacks. This article aims to provide such a big picture and answer the question to what extent counterterrorism (CT) and the impact of terrorism corresponded to the threat in the past two decades.

First, we explore the body of literature that reflects on the development of the terrorist threat, CT policies and their impact in Western Europe in the past twenty years. Next, we investigate the changing characteristics of the jihadist threat to Western Europe. We show how it developed from being primarily seen as a foreign threat around 9/11, to a home-grown threat that is closely linked to a global jihadist movement. Third, we examine how CT actors and their policies varied against the backdrop of major terrorist attacks, the phenomenon of foreign fighters, and the rise and fall of Islamic State (IS). Fourth, we investigate the impact of both the jihadist threat and the policies to counter it on politics and society. Finally, we reflect on counterterrorism policies and how this is linked to the

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development of the threat. We notice that public and political attention for jihadism have not always been aligned with the actual threat. Certain periods were characterised by overreactions to the threat. Today we see ‘jihadism fatigue’: a lack of public and political interest after a period of much attention.

Literature, sources and approach

The tenth and twentieth anniversaries of the 9/11 attacks have led to dozens of studies and conferences reflecting on the jihadist threat and the policies that dealt with it, particularly in the US. Examples are Acharya’s book ‘Ten years after 9/11: rethinking the jihadist threat’ (2013), the study by Hartig and Doherty (2021) into the enduring legacy of 9/11 and events organised at universities and think tanks on the eve of the twentieth anniversary. In Europe, however, the anniversaries of the 9/11 attacks did not lead to such a wave of interest and reflection. In fact, the past decade saw few academic publications or reports that focused on general trends and developments in jihadist terrorism and counterterrorism policies in Europe.

While a lot has been written about the jihadist threat, these studies often focus on a particular aspect of this threat or a particular period. Examples are the edited volume by Ranstorp ‘Understanding Violent Radicalisation: Terrorist and Jihadist Movements in Europe’ (2009) and Coolsaet’s edited volume ‘Jihadi terrorism and the Radicalisation Challenge: European and American perspectives’ (2008). These studies mostly focus on one period: for instance, the wave of Al-Qaeda attacks at the beginning of this century, or, alternatively, the rise of IS-inspired attacks (Hegghammer & Nesser, 2015). One of the few more comprehensive works is the book ‘Islamist terrorism in Europe’ by Nesser (2016). This study, however, covers the period 1994–2015 and does not include the rise and fall of IS.

In addition to these broader studies, there are several that investigate a particular aspect of jihadist terrorism, such as the reports on the foreign fighter phenomenon in Europe by Van Ginkel and Entenmann et al. (2016) and on lone actor terrorism by Ellis et al. (2016). What these have in common is that they often focus on the latest developments, or look back on a short period of time. The same holds for publications on the impact of (counter)terrorism on societies, which often investigate specific periods or events.

There are few studies that reflect upon and compare CT policies dealing with jihadism in Western European countries, which is indicative of the lack of comparative studies in the field of (counter)terrorism studies more broadly (Schmid et al., 2011, p. 160). There is, however, a relatively large body of literature that focuses on the role of the EU as a CT actor. Various scholars have examined how the EU became an increasingly important actor after the attacks in Madrid and London, which made countries aware that more international cooperation was needed to address the jihadist threat. Examples of such studies are the book by Argomaniz ‘The EU and counter-terrorism: politics, polity and policies’ (2011), or the special issue edited by Argomaniz, Bures and Kaunert in 2015. The latter point at the incident-driven nature of counterterrorism on the EU level, arguing that major attacks have generated ‘the impetus to move forward’ (p. 203). However, Bures noted in another study that this moving forward has mostly been on paper, as EU counterterrorism policy suffers from an ‘implementation deficit’ (2007, p. 57). As

Monar showed, looking back on EU counterterrorism twenty years after 9/11, counterterrorism in Europe has remained the primary responsibility of the individual member states, but the EU has provided added value (Monar, 2021).

As counterterrorism policies are still primarily made and implemented by national actors, there is a need for more comparative studies into different national counterterrorism actors and approaches. Looking at the body of literature on how countries have dealt with the jihadist threat in Western Europe, we observe that there are hardly any bigger picture reflections. This also holds for studies that look into the impact of both terrorism and CT policies on societies. Our aim is to offer such a more reflective article on the twenty years after 9/11, building upon the more detailed and specific studies that have been published over the years.

To that end we gathered data on policy measures, public opinion polls and terrorist incidents. The main source for data on terrorist incidents is the Global Terrorism Database of the University of Maryland. For data on public opinions, we used Eurobarometer, the polling instrument used by the European Commission, the European Parliament and other EU institutions and agencies. For an overview of policies, we made use of a research project by Leiden University on CT policies in several European countries and the US to deal with jihadism and foreign fighters (Wittendorp, Bont, De Roy van Zuijdewijn, & Bakker, 2017), which included a reflection by experts and practitioners (Wittendorp, Bakker, De Roy van Zuijdewijn, & Koebrugge 2020).

The development of the threat and CT policies

Terrorism and counterterrorism post-9/11

Around the turn of the century up to 9/11, jihadism was a threat primarily associated with groups in the Middle East, occasionally attacking western targets, such as the attacks by Al-Qaeda against US targets in Yemen and East Africa and attacks in France by Algerian jihadists. The mass-casualty terrorist attacks on the United States on 9/11 came as a shock to the US and the rest of the world. In Europe, these attacks were, however, regarded as being primarily focused on the US and less so as attacks on the West in general (Bakker, 2006, p. 52).

Prior to 9/11, counterterrorism policies differed strongly between Western European countries. Some, such as France, Germany and the UK, had experienced previous waves of terrorist activity, although mostly not by jihadists, and had already developed counterterrorism policies and legislation. Not all of these were sufficient or applicable to deal with the type of threat posed by Al-Qaeda and other jihadist groups. France was most oriented towards this threat, as it had faced various attacks by jihadist and Islamist groups in the 1990s, such as the Algerian Groupe Islamique Armé (GIA).

Until the 9/11 attacks, with the exception of France, the jihadist threat to Europe was often 'underestimated, overlooked and misunderstood' (Bakker, 2008, p. 69). Authorities deemed the threat to be mostly emanating from foreign groups and jihadist networks at home were often allowed to operate quite openly in the 1990s and early 2000s. Especially the United Kingdom, with its long tradition of civil liberties, was criticised for allowing extremist groups to operate with impunity to support individuals and groups that were part of the global jihadist scene. Due to the heavy presence of

extremist groups in the British capital, which posed a threat mainly to other countries including France, the French security services called it 'Londonistan' (Pantucci, 2010). The attacks on 9/11 made the authorities in the United Kingdom and across Europe realise that they were also facing a jihadist threat on their own soil which needed to be acted upon.

In the wake of 9/11, many Western European countries increased the capacity of their intelligence agencies. Additionally, Western European countries joined the US in military counterterrorism operations abroad. As part of the so-called 'Global War on Terror' they took part in Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan, and a few months later also in the United Nations-mandated International Security Assistance Force led by North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). As such, the military, next to the intelligence agencies, became a significant player in the counterterrorism efforts in the years after 9/11.

The nature of the threat and the joint fight against terrorism abroad required much closer international cooperation: bilaterally, with neighbouring countries and with the United States, but also within the framework of the NATO-led military mission and within the European Union. In June 2002, the EU Member States adopted the Council Framework Decision on Combating Terrorism. They agreed on several measures to enhance their cooperation in the domain of counterterrorism. The Member States decided to recognise terrorism as a special offence and adopt a common definition of terrorism (Argomaniz, 2009). Moreover, they stressed the need to improve the legislative practices and policing capabilities in the individual states. An important measure was the European Arrest Warrant which gave an impulse to improve international cooperation between law enforcement agencies (Den Boer, 2003).

Terrorism and counterterrorism after the attacks in Madrid (2004) and London (2005)

After 2004, it was evident that Europe was also a target of jihadist terrorism. Moreover, the Madrid bombings (2004) and the London bombings (2005) showed that the terrorist threat not only came from foreign groups, but also from home-grown jihadists. According to some authors, the fact that European countries had joined the US-led Global War on Terror and that several of them contributed military forces to the US-led invasion and occupation of Iraq made these countries into targets of retaliatory and strategic terrorist attacks (Nesser, 2011, p. 287).

The intelligence services and law enforcement agencies managed to discover and foil several plots in the years that followed (Europol, 2007). In addition, there were several cases of failed attacks. Examples are the 21 July 2005 failed bombings on London's public transport system, just two weeks after the 7/7 attacks, the 2007 Glasgow Airport attack, or the 2010 Stockholm bombings in which only the perpetrator died: three examples of narrow escapes, next to dozens of other failed and foiled attempts throughout Western Europe. This might partially explain why the period between 2005 and the rise of IS in 2014 was characterised by relatively few successful attacks and not very lethal ones. Jihadists caused 11 fatalities in Europe in this period, including the lives of three of the attackers (Global Terrorism Database, 2022). Besides plots, intelligence agencies and the police also noticed the presence of Europeans in

foreign jihadist war zones, most notably in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq and Somalia (Europol, 2010).

It took a while to fully grasp the complex transnational nature of the threat of foreign groups connected with home-grown cells. The attacks in Madrid were a strategic surprise, allowed by intelligence failure and by deficiencies in international cooperation to address the jihadist threat (Reinares, 2009). In response, other European countries saw the need to improve coordination, both internationally and between domestic agencies. Several countries created coordinating agencies, such as the Joint Counter-Terrorism Center (GTAZ) in Germany or the National Coordinator for Counterterrorism (NCTb) in the Netherlands. Within two weeks after the attacks, the European Council established the position of a Counter-Terrorism Coordinator to foster cooperation and to step up the implementation of measures agreed upon since 9/11.

The growing awareness of the home-grown element of the threat led to changes in CT policies. Countries were grappling with the question how to stop their own residents and citizens from becoming terrorists. Policies focused on prevention emerged. A well-known example is the Channel programme as part of the Prevent strand of the UK counterterrorism strategy, which focused on 'providing support at an early stage to people who are identified as being vulnerable to being drawn into terrorism' (HM Government, 2020). As a multi-agency plan, it also meant that other actors, such as schools and social services, started to play a role in counterterrorism (Briggs, 2010, p. 971).

As prevention of radicalisation gained prominence, governmental and non-governmental organisations were being drawn into the counterterrorism domain. Social actors and local (religious) communities became partners or even key players in implementing local or national counterterrorism policies. For instance, as part of the UK Prevent programme, authorities worked together with mosques to tackle radicalisation. Educational institutes also played an increasingly important role: the 2006 Education and Inspections Act placed a new duty on educational bodies to promote community cohesion. While the efforts to work together with social actors have been lauded, it has also been argued that their effectiveness in terms of 'challenging extremist ideology' might have been limited (House of Commons/Shawcross, 2023). Concurrently, several scholars have noted that it had negative effects on civil liberties and particularly affected British Muslims who might have felt they were seen as 'suspect communities' (Awan, 2012 Pantazis & Pember-ton, 2009).

Not criticism, but other factors challenged the continuation of these programmes in the UK and of similar programmes in other Western European countries. By the end of the first decade of the new millennium, the (perceived) threat of jihadist terrorism was decreasing. At the same time, the 2007–2008 global financial crisis had reached Europe and governments needed to implement budget cuts. Local prevention and community-oriented programmes were downscaled, and networks started to disintegrate (Noor-degraaf et al., 2016, p. 188). EU CT Coordinator De Kerchove commented upon this decreasing attention to counterterrorism in 2009 and spoke of a form of 'CT fatigue' (Council of the European Union, 2009, p. 2). Argomaniz, Bures and Kaunert characterised this phase in decision-making in CT on the EU level as 'inertia', as compared to the 'frenzy' after the attacks in Madrid and London (Argomaniz, Bures, & Kaunert, 2015, p. 204.) Clearly, counterterrorism was seen as less of a policy priority than a few years before and many initiatives came to a halt.

European foreign fighters and IS

Around the turn of the decade, assessments on the jihadist threat varied. It was not clear yet whether or not to expect a revival of the jihadist movement in the Middle East or in the Western world. The killing of Bin Laden in Pakistan in May 2011 did not lead to a wave of revenge attacks, and the Al-Qaeda leadership was weaker than ever. In Europe, threat levels were lowered. This situation quickly changed after the start of the civil war in Syria and the escalation of the security situation in Iraq. In 2013, hundreds of Muslims in Europe flocked to the battlefields. The number increased from around 600 in April 2013 to approximately 2,000 by the end of the year (Zelin, 2013). This growth came as both a shock and a surprise to many European countries. The next year saw the rapid rise of Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (which had grown out of Al-Qaeda in Iraq), and the proclamation of its caliphate on Syrian and Iraqi territory. European citizens were involved in some of the most horrific atrocities. Some 4,000 citizens and residents from EU Member States are estimated to have joined jihadist groups in Syria and Iraq over the years, including some 700 women (Van Ginkel & Entenmann, 2016, p. 4).

These foreign fighters did not only pose a threat to the region but were also regarded as a potential threat to their home countries. They tried to inspire sympathisers in the West to commit an attack, as also called upon by IS in its propaganda (Zekulin, 2020, p. 129). Other worries of home countries pertained to those who were stopped from joining the jihad abroad and decided to engage in terrorist activity at home instead, such as applied to the Lee Rigby murderer in 2013 who had tried to join al-Shabaab (Intelligence and Security Committee of Parliament, 2014, p. 25).

However, the biggest worries were about returnees coming home to stage an attack – ordered, supported or inspired by IS or other jihadist groups. Some of them managed to do so. The deadliest were the Paris attacks in November 2015 - 137 fatalities – and the Brussels attacks in 2016 - 35 fatalities (Global Terrorism Database, 2022). The majority of the attacks in the years after 2013 were, however, conducted by home-grown jihadists that were inspired by IS, but not directly linked to that organisation. Examples are the Nice truck attack in 2016 - 87 fatalities – and several less lethal attacks, often by lone actors or small groups operating independently (Ellis et al., 2016; Global Terrorism Database, 2022). Especially the attacks by lone individuals were characterised by low-effort and low-tech attack plans using deadly tools at hand, ranging from kitchen knives to cars and trucks. Winter and Spaaij witnessed an increase in the prevalence of lone actor attacks between 2013 and 2018, coinciding with the rise of Islamic State. Though less deadly, such attacks did pose a serious challenge to the security forces because they were considered more difficult to disrupt during the planning or preparation stages (Winter & Spaaij, 2021, p. 20). In general, the number of jihadist attacks in Europe went up from a handful in the years before the civil war in Syria and the rise of IS, to 17 in 2015 and 33 two years later (Europol, 2022a).

Dealing with foreign fighters and IS

Although the phenomenon of foreign fighters was not new to European intelligence and law enforcement agencies, the 'policy preparedness' to deal with this phenomenon varied considerably between Western European countries. Some already had policies in place

that helped to curb the flow of fighters to conflict zones, whereas others needed to introduce new measures. Initially, however, most countries made only limited attempts to stop Europeans from travelling to the Middle East. This changed in 2014 with the rise of Islamic State. Worries over returnees and a revival of home-grown jihadist terrorism led to fierce political debates on the need for new legislation and the effectiveness of counterterrorism policies to deal with IS, its online propaganda and recruitment.

Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany and the Netherlands focused on new and more extensive administrative measures, which could be applied without interference of a judicial entity. For instance, in the Netherlands, the law changed in 2017, enabling the authorities to revoke citizenship if a person joined a terrorist organisation (Ministerie van Veiligheid en Justitie, 2017). The UK already had such a measure in place since the 1980s and could also apply this to citizens without dual nationality after 2014 (Immigration Act, 2014, C22, Section 66). Belgium started to regard travelling abroad for terrorist purposes as a criminal offence in 2015 (Federale Overheidsdienst Justitie, 2015).

Eventually, across Western Europe, an extensive set of tools and measures was used, ranging from the prevention of radicalisation and travelling abroad, to dealing with online propaganda and supporting the reintegration of convicted terrorists returning from prison. Abroad, military instruments again became important counterterrorism tools. Western European countries joined the Global Coalition against Daesh that was formed in September 2014 after IS had proclaimed the caliphate. Many of them executed air strikes against IS targets. Some countries, most notably the UK and France, also executed targeted killings against their own foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq (Hasday, 2017; Wintour, 2015).

The development of the threat resulted in re-investment in a wider approach, also involving many non-security actors. Following the rise of attacks by lone-actor terrorists, some of whom some suffered from mental health issues, psychologists and other mental health experts were brought on board to counter this threat. The European Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN) of the European Commission established a special working group on mental health to establish an effective network of health practitioners.

Another group of actors that increasingly played a role in counterterrorism were social media platforms, which attempted to prevent terrorist groups from disseminating propaganda. Measures were taken to make sure extremist content was quickly identified and removed. Europol established an Internet Referral Unit in 2015 to detect and investigate malicious content. Thus, the wide or holistic approach to deal with terrorism was further widened to what some called a 'whole of society approach' to try to curb radicalisation and fight IS.

Dealing with returnees and the remnants of IS

The military defeat of IS as a semi-state and the fall of its self-proclaimed caliphate marked the start of a period of relative calm. Worries over a wave of returnees and attacks in Europe did not materialise. Many foreign fighters had been killed in battle, others were in detention camps. Those who managed to return to their home countries were arrested, convicted and closely monitored. The number of jihadist attacks in Western Europe went down from 33 in 2017 to 21 in 2019 and 11 in 2021 (Europol, 2022a, 2022b). Belgium, the Netherlands and the UK were among the countries that lowered their threat levels

(National Coordinator for Security and Counterterrorism, 2019; National Counter Terrorism Security Office, 2019; Veiligheid van de Staat, 2022).

With attacks in Europe subsiding and IS having lost almost all its territory by 2019, attention focused on the question how to deal with European jihadists still in Syria and Iraq and the remaining IS sympathisers and jihadist scenes at home. CT as a whole received less political and public interest. The fight against jihadism became less visible, but still had an impact on politics and society. Many of the temporary or ad-hoc measures that had been taken in the preceding years remained in place or had even been made permanent. For instance, while France in 2017 terminated the two-year state of emergency that had been declared after the November 2015 Paris attacks, many of the emergency measures were enshrined into regular law (Feinberg, 2018, p. 496).

Counterterrorism policies in this post-caliphate phase were mostly repressive and reactive rather than being focused on prevention: the focus was on prosecution, followed by reintegration of jihadist returnees, including women and children. Most Western European countries started to adopt a judicial approach to deal with women, prosecuting them for offences such as membership of a terrorist organisation. Another broadly applied measure was the revocation of nationality of terrorists, which often meant that they were unable to return to their home countries.

The preference for revocation of citizenship signalled a general lack of appetite among European countries to repatriate not only the men, but also the women and children. Some countries, such as Sweden and the Netherlands called for the establishment of an international tribunal. Nonetheless, increasingly, more women and children returned to their home countries: some on their own, and others because judges in their home countries more or less forced the authorities to repatriate them and bring them before their court (Bakker, Sciarone, & De Roy van Zuijdewijn, 2019, p. 18).

In the post-caliphate period, the military approach to deal with terrorism became less important and received two serious setbacks. The first was the removal of US troops in northern Syria by the Trump administration in October 2019, which weakened the position of their Kurdish allies (Mogelson, 2020). The second was the withdrawal from Afghanistan by the US and its European allies in August 2021, which allowed the Taliban to regain full control over the country. Additionally, over the past years, European countries such as France scaled down their military involvement in CT operations in the Sahel region. Nevertheless, despite the decrease in large-scale military involvement, several European countries remain involved in military training and military intelligence operations abroad.

Now that, from a Western European perspective, the threat from jihadist groups emanating from abroad has decreased, counterterrorism actors seem to be primarily dealing with the 'remnants' of the Al-Qaeda and IS related waves of jihadist activity at home. These remnants, however, consist of a population of jihadist sympathisers that is much larger than around ten or twenty years ago (General Intelligence and Security Service, 2018).

Impact on politics and society

The post-9/11 feeling of vulnerability

In the twenty years after 9/11, both the jihadist threat and the policies to counter this threat have had an impact on Western European societies. How did this impact

develop in the past two decades and where does Western Europe stand today in terms of worries over terrorism and support for CT policies?

The shock of 9/11 propelled terrorism to become the main security threat and a societal and political priority. Western European countries became key partners of the US in its Global War on Terror. Political support for counterterrorism measures was widespread and united political parties across the ideological spectrum. Following the initial shock of 9/11, fear levels in Western Europe slowly decreased to pre-9/11 levels (European Commission, 2002, p. 5). The attacks were still primarily seen as American problem, as many Europeans did 'not regard themselves as principal targets of Al Qaeda' (Bakker, 2006, p. 52).

The attacks in Madrid and London turned jihadism into a more 'European problem'. Several of the perpetrators were born and raised in Western Europe and had been willing to use suicide attacks against their fellow citizens. This further elevated the fear of terrorism, but also influenced relations between different communities. This especially affected the Muslim communities, who some regarded as being at risk of radicalisation and hence, the attacks turned 'the Muslim presence in Europe and the United States' into 'a major political concern' (Cesari, 2010, p. ii). Other scholars have used even stronger terms, stating that Muslims were seen as the 'enemy within' (Fekete, 2016, p. 4).

In those years, the general feeling was that terrorism posed a major, if not existential threat (Mythen & Walklate, 2008, p. 225). The idea was that terrorists could strike anywhere and that countries had to take all possible measures to protect themselves. Such a 'vulnerability-led approach', as Frank Furedi called it, was accompanied by a focus on worst-case scenarios (Furedi, 2008).

While there was widespread support for expanding counterterrorism policies, there was less room for critical reflection on the side effects of counterterrorism policies. Some criticism emerged about legal measures, policies targeting Muslim communities and human rights issues, such as the situation in Guantánamo Bay. The almost unconditional support for the US in its Global War on Terror by Western European countries only slowly started to erode, especially after the Iraq invasion of 2003.

From al-Qaeda to IS

In the years 2006-2011, terrorism gradually became a less important security and societal issue in Europe. With terrorist attacks decreasing and issues such as the global economic crisis becoming a major concern, citizens regarded terrorism to be less of a priority. Late 2005, 14% of European citizens considered terrorism to be among the two important national issues and this decreased to 4% in late 2011 (European Commission, 2005, p. 20; 2011, p. 21). Also, the political interest in terrorism seemed to decrease. It was against this backdrop that the EU CT Coordinator spoke of a form of 'CT fatigue'. Amidst a variety of other crises that had a direct impact on peoples' lives, he noticed that it was only 'natural to ask whether terrorism is still something we need to worry about' (Council of the European Union, 2009).

This lack of interest proved temporary. When large numbers of citizens travelled to Syria around 2013, jihadist terrorism re-emerged as a prominent issue in Western Europe. Authorities referred to foreign fighters as 'ticking time bombs' (Busse, 2013). Such alarmist rhetoric was no exception and was indicative of a larger trend of increasing

worries (Bakker & De Roy van Zuijdewijn, 2015). Videos of attacks and other atrocities committed by European jihadists in Syria and Iraq led to public outrage and increased the pressure on authorities to stop this.

With the attacks in Paris in 2015, the threat of jihadist terrorism again became a top priority, particularly in France and Belgium. Worries among the public also increased considerably when more attacks hit Brussels, Nice, Manchester and other European cities (De Roy van Zuijdewijn & Sciarone, 2021). Responses to the jihadist threat were more visible on the streets than ever before, for instance in the form of roadblocks and extra police protection at certain locations. The French authorities declared a state of emergency and put thousands of soldiers on the streets after the Paris attacks. The Belgian authorities imposed a lockdown on Brussels after these attacks, as they suspected that some of the attackers had entered the country. Belgian soldiers remained deployed on key locations until September 2021, making the impact of the attacks a long-lasting one.

'New normal'

After several years of a sense of heightened threat, Western European societies gradually became accustomed to a less critical, but still present jihadist threat. Attacks, mainly by lone actors, continued after IS had lost ground. However, these attacks that caused relatively few casualties were felt to be part of the 'new normal'. In Autumn 2019, only 5% considered terrorism to be among the two most important issues facing their country, a decrease of 14% compared to Spring 2017 (European Commission, 2019, p. 21; European Commission, 2017, p. 8). Other issues were increasingly considered to be more important, ranging from the economic situation and climate change to health, which became one of the main concerns after the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic (European Commission, 2021, p. 23). Also, new and other types of terrorism and political violence were increasingly seen as more worrisome. Examples include attacks by right-wing extremists, in and outside Europe – Hanau, Germany, 2020, Christchurch, New Zealand, 2019 – and the storming of the US Capitol. Violent protests against COVID-19 measures and anti-government riots in general added to this perception that jihadism was no longer among the most worrisome issues.

Conclusion

Above we have described how the jihadist threat, the policies and actors that deal with this threat and the impact of both jihadism and counterterrorism have evolved over the past twenty years. In this final section, we will reflect upon main developments and assess how the counterterrorism policies and impact were aligned with the actual threat.

Starting with the development of the threat, we can distinguish five periods: (1) the years immediately after 9/11 in which the jihadist threat continued to be seen as a foreign threat, one that was mainly aimed against the US; (2) the years after the Madrid (2004) and London (2005) bombings in which the home-grown aspect received most attention, (3) the years between 2009 and 2012 when it became relatively quiet on the jihadist front in Europe in terms of successful attacks and attention for terrorism; (4) the years of the foreign fighter phenomenon in Syria and Iraq, the rise of IS and jihadist attacks between 2013 and 2017; and finally (5) the years after the fall of the IS caliphate in

which threat levels were lower, but the jihadist threat was still alive – a period that has been described as the ‘new normal’.

In the past twenty years, the actors and policies adapted to the evolving threat. We observed how CT evolved from the domain of a few specialised CT actors, such as the intelligence services and special police services, to one characterised by a multitude of actors. Today’s so-called wide or holistic approach also includes various non-security actors that were drawn into the domain of dealing with jihadism, ranging from mental health organisations and youth workers to private actors such as social media companies. In most Western European countries, the focus shifted from monitoring and apprehending terrorists to preventing radicalisation. At the same time, the past twenty years are also characterised by an active involvement of the military, both abroad as part of military missions against Al-Qaeda and IS, and sometimes also very visibly on the streets at home.

In terms of policies and measures, the CT toolbox expanded considerably. Major attacks proved to be the main catalyst for policy change and policy-making was rather incident-driven. We would argue that this incident-driven nature, already observed by Argomaniz, Bures and Kaurert for the first decade after 9/11 and with regard to the EU as an actor, has continued. After 9/11 and the jihadist attacks in Europe, there was a climate of vulnerability with heightened worries. Against this backdrop, measures and laws that were generally regarded as extraordinary or politically unacceptable around 2001 became part of the standard CT equipment to deal with jihadist terrorism. There was little room for critical reflection on the side effects of policies. Even when periods of relative calm followed, such as in period 3, it proved difficult to downscale or revert measures that had been previously taken. A similar pattern was visible again during the period of the rise of the number of foreign fighters and IS (related) attacks, and after the fall of the caliphate. In this period, temporary measures, such as the state of emergency in France, often became enshrined in law.

When looking at the societal impact of jihadist terrorism in the past twenty years, we see that public perceptions of terrorism fluctuated. Worries about terrorism were relatively high in the mid-2000s, a low was reached around 2010, followed by a rise in the years 2013–2017. After the fall of the IS caliphate and with much lower numbers of attacks and casualties, other issues such as COVID-19 were considered much more worrisome than terrorism. Already before the pandemic, some observed a loss of interest in terrorism and spoke of (counter)terrorism fatigue. The Belgian scholars Coolsaet and Renard warned against such a fatigue which reminded them of the situation around 2010 when there was a sense of relief about the decrease of the threat and the lowering of threat levels, which was followed by the surprise of the increase of foreign fighters (Coolsaet & Renard, 2018).

Today, more than twenty years after 9/11, we would argue that it is not so much (counter)terrorism fatigue as ‘jihadism fatigue’: there is in fact growing interest in (countering) various forms of terrorism and political violence, but considerably less public and political interest in jihadism. The public seems to have grown accustomed to this threat, which is also less threatening than in the past. But it is not gone. In fact, although security and intelligence services have indeed assessed that the jihadist threat to Western Europe has decreased considerably compared to some years ago, it is ‘still very much alive, and it remains conceivable that small-scale attacks will continue to be carried out in Europe’ (Nationaal Coördinator Terrorismebestrijding en Veiligheid, 2021). Against this

backdrop, experts and professionals have warned against a lack of attention and the capacity to monitor and analyse the jihadist movement (Wittendorp, Bakker, De Roy van Zuijdewijn, & Koebrugge, 2020, pp. 69-70). One of them, EU CT coordinator De Kerchove, emphasised the need to ‘remain focused and allocate the necessary resources, and to ensure that we are not just reactive to ... threats but that we anticipate them’ (International Review of the Red Cross, 2022).

This brings us to a final observation. Public and political attention for jihadism are not always aligned with the actual threat. One could say that there has been a disbalance between the threat and the responses to it. There have been overreactions: inflated threat descriptions and high levels of fear, which partially resulted from alarmist rhetoric and a climate of vulnerability. However, in the years between 2009 and 2012, there was also a lack of attention that contributed to ‘unpleasant surprises’: countries being shocked by and unprepared for the wave of foreign fighters and attacks that, in several cases, intelligence agencies had already warned for. We would argue for a less incident-driven and more balanced counterterrorism approach that can limit the chance of overreactions and terrorism fatigue, decreasing the impact of both terrorism and counterterrorism on societies.

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