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Belgium

The impotence of security policies and the search for a solution

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Description:

After the arrest of Saleh Abdeslam on March 18, for his suspected involvement in the attacks in Paris in 2015, the Belgian authorities were crowing about their victory. "We've got him!" A few days later the Daesh criminals struck in the heart of Brussels and in Zaventem at Brussels airport. Thirty-two dead, hundreds injured, children mutilated. This was a terrible massacre. Could it have been avoided? Maybe.

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The poor functioning of the security services in the case of Ibrahim Barkhaoui (the suicide bomber at the airport who with his brother who was involved in the Metro attack) was flagrant, and makes you think of the Dutroux case. [1] But Dutroux acted (almost) alone while Daesh has no shortage of aspiring suicide bombers, including people who are not from the Muslim milieu, thus less likely to be in the spotlight like Barkhaoui. The attacks in Verviers were stopped [2], but that did not prevent the other attacks.

Had Ibrahim Barkhaoui been arrested after his return from Turkey, he would have been able to recruit other jihadists in prison, and sooner or later he would have been released from prison too. So we should not lose sight of the wood for the trees.

It is an illusion to think that we can put an end to the scourge of terrorism through "better police", "better information", "targeted surveillance", etc. [3]

Suicide bombings

The problem is indeed this: nothing can stop a fanatical would-be suicide bomber from blowing themselves up in the middle of an innocent crowd of people. Once everyone is in the firing line, the number of potential targets is so high that it is no longer possible to even try to protect everyone. Even a police state à la Big Brother cannot stop jihadi terrorism. Such a state wouldn't even be able to prevent a suicide attack on for example one of our already very unsafe nuclear power plants. And do we want to live in such a state?

The all out emphasis on security policy to stop terrorism is clearly a dead end. It should be obvious that those responsible for the security services are at their wits' end. The threat level was increased to level 4 - the highest level- after the attacks. So what now?

Imposing a new generalized lockdown, like the one that paralysed Brussels after the attacks in Paris in November? Certainly businesses don't want to hear of this, it cost the economy too much money last time. The government has therefore excluded this "solution" in advance. In any event, a lockdown can only last a few days; it would be enough for terrorists to just wait a while until it is lifted...

What else is still possible? Have more soldiers patrolling the streets? It is clear that this doesn't achieve anything. There were soldiers at Zaventem airport. Even tanks in the streets and a submarine in the Brussels canal are completely meaningless compared with suicide bombers. The authorities know this all too well. The deployment of the army was for them a way to keep the population calm, to show that the state is protecting them at great cost.

The decision to close the entrances and exits of Brussels train stations and frisk passengers clearly shows the

impotence of the security policy. Probably this decision came as an alternative to a lockdown, to reassure the population. But it did anything but that -the opposite in fact. After all, a terrorist can perfectly well take the train with their explosives from a station anywhere in the country and blow themselves up in the middle of passengers in Brussels who are queuing to be allowed in or out. You wonder who thought of such absurd measures...

Total war?

We can continue imagining what measures the government will probably take. None of them offer fundamental solutions.

Launching a total war to wipe Daesh from the map in Iraq and Syria emerges as the "solution" that the more or less extreme elements of the right wing dream of. But consider: that's just the kind of approach which Bush went for in Afghanistan (and used as the excuse for the war against Iraq), and we know the result... Not only was Al Qaeda not destroyed (as opposed to the lives of hundreds of thousands of civilians), but Ben Laden's organisation gave life to another, even worse organisation: Daesh. Are they going to make the same mistake again? Can they not see how 'crusades' from the west against the Arab and Muslim world are part of a mechanism that only increases the hate-filled desire for revenge, which lead a number of people into murderous insanity?

We say clearly: this is part of the mechanism. There are a number of factors: complicity with the crimes of the Zionist regime against the Palestinian people, arms sales to fundamentalist dictatorships, relentlessly pushing back asylum seekers, the abandonment and ghettoization of poor neighbourhoods in our cities, where many people of immigrant origin live; racism, Islamophobia, police checks based on appearance, discrimination in recruitment, the hate campaign against women wearing headscarves, stigmatisation by the media Not to mention the cowardly "realpolitik" concerning crimes of the self-styled secular regime of Bashar Al Assad, the executioner of the Syrian people. What is amazing is not that this evokes hatred, but that some are still surprised that it does.

A sectarian mechanism

We will not get into a discussion about the reasons that could explain why this hatred takes the form of such a destructive ultra-violence, and an ideological form that comes straight out of a different era: pseudo-religious, ultra-macho, authoritarian and reactionary. Everything indicates that the uprooted young people who leave our neighbourhoods to join the jihad do so not so much on the basis of a radicalisation of their experience of Islam, but rather a pseudo-Islamisation of their radicalism. It is this "radicalisation" of their hatred without any real perspective that drives some, at particular moments to enter into a fantasy world: radical Islamism gives meaning to your life, the Islamic state offers you a kingdom of fraternity and your death as a martyr (in fact, as a murderer) opens the gates to paradise.

In short, the mechanism is sectarian, not religious. In this sect the exaltation of suicide is so effective that every time a "martyr" blows himself up, there are dozens of other candidates who step forward to take his place. There is no way for police to handle such a situation, even less is there any military solution. The only permanent solution is political, to ensure that the source of the hatred dries up.

This calls for a coherent and radical change of course in all areas we described earlier. A combined change of course, both in terms of domestic and foreign policy.

To start with: Belgian troops should withdraw from the regions where they are present today. The army should be sent back to barracks, in expectation of its pure and simple abolition. We should support the legitimate struggle of the Palestinian people for their rights. We should unilaterally put an end to arms sales to Saudi Arabia and other dictatorships, pending the cessation of arms production, with conversion measures for those working in the sector. We should support popular movements for democratic rights in Syria and elsewhere. We should accept refugees and asylum seekers and treat them with dignity. Let's free up resources for a policy of urban renewal that is worthy of the name in disadvantaged neighbourhoods. Let's put an end to provocations and violence from the police. Create high-quality jobs and invest in public infrastructure. Open the media to everyone. Let's set up a real participatory democracy, where neighbourhood committees, social movements etc. can make decisions. These are just a few suggestions that can reasonably be explored.

A wave of emotion

There is no simple solution to a complicated problem, and we certainly do not have a complete program to combat terrorism. The development of such a program can only be done in consultation with the social actors themselves. This takes time, and meanwhile the danger remains. But one thing is certain, in our opinion, a solution cannot be found if we dare not break with the current logic of a society based on injustice, violence and exclusion. We should go for a generous social policy, based on solidarity, democratic rights and freedoms, sharing of resources and the fight against inequality, at home and elsewhere in the world. As we said in our statement after the attacks: "Only through living can we fight the politics of death." This really is a question of life and death. It summons up a wave of emotion. Let's hope that this legitimate emotion helps us to think rationally about how we can stop barbarism.

Translated by Sean Collins

March 31, 2016

[1] Dutroux is a Belgian serial killer and child abuser. In 1989, Dutroux was sentenced to 13 and a half years for the abduction and rape of five young girls, the youngest being eleven years old and was then released on parole after serving just three years, despite the advice of the parole board.

Between 1995 to 1996 Dutroux went on kidnap, torture and sexually abuse six girls, ranging in age from 8 to 19, four of whom he murdered

Several incidents suggest that despite several warnings to the authorities, leads were not properly followed-up. Public outrage led to the largest demonstration in Belgian history, bringing 350 000 people onto the streets. The Dutroux affair led to a large scale reorganisation of the Belgian police and justice system.

[2] Town in Liège Province where a Daesh cell was detected by the police.

[3] We would not be surprised if Belgian Federal Interior Minister Jan Jambon and co try to turn this malfunctioning of the security forces in their favour, for example by arguing once more for excessive penalties, as the extreme right demanded during the Dutroux case. These were blocked by the citizen mobilizations supported by the Russo family. The Left has to be very careful today with its denunciation of the poor functioning of security policy.