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To Counter Extremism, Europe Must Move Beyond Security and Focus on Neighborhoods

by Jeffrey Brown

Following a spate of deadly attacks in Western Europe, governments have adopted a largely military-oriented response to secure the homeland and counter violent extremism. The Belgian government has pledged €298 million (\$332 million¹) in additional funding to bolster the police, intelligence services and the judiciary; France has deployed ten thousand soldiers to the streets; and President François Hollande has declared that France must “use the arms of war” to check extremists. Although the deployment of troops may temporarily restore the public’s confidence, recent lone wolf attacks in Nice and Normandy have laid bare the limits of a security-centric response in which the line between policing and counterterrorism has become blurred.

Amid renewed calls for yet more security measures, and with Germany considering the deployment of soldiers to its streets for the first time since World War II, governments at the national and city level must not discount the efficacy of targeted, long-term countermeasures that seek to systematically demobilize radicalized citizens through policies that promote employment, social inclusion and mental well-being.

Violent Extremism and Exclusion: Europe’s Greatest Urban Challenges

While European leaders are fixated on preventing further attacks, returning fighters present an increasing threat to European security. A recent study by the International Center for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT)² in The Hague found that, in addition to being overwhelmingly young and male, 90 to 100 percent of European foreign fighters³ are from urban or ‘built-up’ areas, with many coming from the same neighborhoods and social circles. Of approximately 4,000 fighters, more than 2,800 hail from four EU Member States: France, Belgium, Germany and the United Kingdom. The ICCT estimates that 30 percent of fighters have already returned to Europe.

The homecoming of violent extremists to the same economically distressed neighborhoods and social circles from which they departed poses a twin challenge: policymakers must deradicalize or otherwise mollify returned fighters while simultaneously preventing the next generation of young Europeans from falling prey to the twisted temptations of violent extremism. Returned fighters also have the potential to amplify homegrown extremism, making it even more difficult for policymakers to demobilize already-radicalized elements within society.

Pulling off this feat is complicated by years of lackluster economic growth and the lingering effects of the 2008 financial crisis. In 2015, unemployment in the 28 European Union member countries among those aged 15 to 24 stood at 20.7 percent⁴, and in 2014 one in four European citizens (122 million⁵) were at risk of poverty or social exclusion. Without access to entry-level jobs and pathways to upward mobility, a small cadre of marginalized youth is likely to continue to be drawn to alternate value systems that promote violence and the facade of a cohesive, non-western utopia replete with opportunity.

Although the ills of the EU financial crisis are most often viewed through the macroeconomic instability of Greece and Spain, its local and neighborhood-level impact on ethnic and religious minorities residing in some of Europe’s most well-known cultural, political and economic capitals can no longer be ignored. Chronic underinvestment in

low-income neighborhoods and a lack of sustained attention from policymakers in local, regional and national power structures have only compounded the situation. For example, more than a decade after France's urban riots of 2005, the wave of emergency assistance and public spending unleashed in the *banlieues* has not corresponded with an uptick in employment and upward mobility for the 4.4 million people residing in so-called 'priority zones.'⁶ Speaking two weeks after the 2015 attack on a kosher market in Paris, Prime Minister Manuel Valls noted the continuation of "territorial, social and ethnic apartheid" in France and the failure of publicly financed urban renewal to generate fundamental change.⁷

Moving From 'Security Blanket' to Sustainable, Targeted Response

To date, the broad security dragnet instituted following the 2015 attack on the headquarters of the French satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo* has done little to deter further attacks. While the French government has launched the "#StopDjihadism" campaign to combat radicalization online, policies aimed at demobilizing radicalized citizens or returning fighters are nearly nonexistent.

Drawing on rich European traditions of civil society, bureaucracy, social investment and the welfare state, leaders in national, regional and local governments should shift their efforts at engagement and outreach back to neighborhoods grappling with the dual challenge of recently returned fighters and vulnerable citizens. State-funded efforts to improve coordination between social services and initiatives to spur employment, entrepreneurship and a sense of belonging should be paired with a greater role for civil society and neighborhood-level actors in countering radicalization. Due to the relatively small number of individuals involved, community and religious leaders could best target employment and housing resources to the most at-risk segments of the population, thereby making most efficient use of government resources while sapping support for violent extremism at its core.

In addition, like the United States, several recent attacks in Europe show that individuals with mental instability and criminal records (as opposed to committed violent extremists) are capable of carrying out deadly acts of violence. Therefore, additional resources should be devoted to bolster counter-radicalization in prisons and mental health outreach in distressed neighborhoods.

The Role of Trans-Atlantic Dialogue

In the wake of violent attacks on both sides of the Atlantic with suspected links to extremism, stepped-up cooperation between Europe and the United States cannot be limited to sharing airline passenger data and intelligence exchange. Trans-Atlantic dialogue could play a role in these efforts by highlighting successful cases of 'bottom-up' approaches to policymaking and by promoting the exchange of best practices regarding employment and social inclusion among policymakers, residents and community leaders.

Although Muslim immigrant communities in the United States and Europe cannot easily be compared, the United States, which draws its Muslim population from 77 different countries and where Muslims are twice as likely as the native-born population to have a household income of \$100,000 or more,⁸ could provide the basis for the exchange of best practices at the neighborhood level. Examples include Nashville, Tennessee, which started the MyCity Academy to teach its growing Kurdish and Somali immigrant communities about local governance; Dayton, Ohio, which supports economic development and neighborhood revitalization in areas populated by immigrants from the Ahiska Turk community; and the City of Houston's Office of International Communities and Refugees Affairs, which focuses on the social and economic integration of refugee communities. Dialogue among policymakers, citizens and civil society groups in American cities with a large Muslim community and their European counterparts would be a starting point in germinating durable, non-security oriented policy solutions.

Conclusion

Broadening policy responses from a short-term focus on human security to include long-term investment in employment and social inclusion is vital to staunching violent extremism. In line with the ever-morphing threat that

violent extremism poses, governments at the national, regional, and local level must adopt far more dexterous policy responses that build on existing and easily identifiable economic and social strengths. Despite the proliferation of security-focused rhetoric in response to violent extremism on both sides of the Atlantic, the need for sustained trans-Atlantic dialogue at the neighborhood-level has never been greater. With governments increasingly witnessing the limits of security-oriented responses, trans-Atlantic dialogue holds the potential to unlock a policy toolbox of fresh solutions that European policymakers are searching for.

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¹ Matthias Verbergt, "Belgium Unveils Plan to Combat Islamic Radicalism," *Wall Street Journal*, February 5 2016, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/belgium-unveils-plan-to-combat-islamist-radicalization-1454696873>.

² The International Center for Counter-Terrorism, *The Foreign Fighters Phenomenon in the EU – Profiles, Threats & Policies*, http://icct.nl/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/ICCT-Report_Foreign-Fighters-Phenomenon-in-the-EU_1-April-2016_including-AnnexesLinks.pdf.

³ The International Center for Counter-Terrorism defines "foreign fighters" as "individuals that have for a variety of reasons and with different (ideological) backgrounds joined an armed conflict abroad – since mid-2012."

⁴ Eurostat, "Euro area unemployment rate at 11.1%," <http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/documents/2995521/6862104/3-03062015-BP-EN.pdf/efc97561-fad1-4e10-b6c1-e1c80e2bb582>.

⁵ Eurostat, "The risk of poverty or social exclusion affected 1 in 4 persons in the EU in 2014," <http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/documents/2995521/7034688/3-16102015-CP-EN.pdf>.

⁶ Angelique Chrisafis, "'Nothing's changed': 10 years after French riots, banlieues remain in crisis," *The Guardian*, October 22, 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/oct/22/nothings-changed-10-years-after-french-riots-banlieues-remain-in-crisis>.

⁷ LeMonde, *Manuel Valls évoque « un apartheid territorial, social, ethnique » en France*, http://www.lemonde.fr/politique/article/2015/01/20/pour-manuel-valls-il-existe-un-apartheid-territorial-social-ethnique-en-france_4559714_823448.html.

⁸ The Economist, *Islamic, yet integrated*, <http://www.economist.com/news/usa/21615611-why-muslims-fare-better-america-europe-islamic-yet-integrated>.