



BRUSSELS BOMBINGS: IDENTIFYING POTENTIAL CAUSES

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As the world reels under the aftermath of the Brussels bombings, there remain a few questions yet unanswered and a few lessons to be learnt with the threat of terror still looming large. On March 22, Brussels witnessed twin blasts at Zaventem airport and another explosion at Maelbeek metro station, located astonishingly close to the European Union (EU) headquarters, exactly what Brussels is known to stand for. The Islamic State (IS) has claimed to have been behind the attacks at these high-profile locations.

Belgium has been referred to as the “jihad capital of Europe” with its heightening Muslim population expected to reach 700,000 this year¹ consisting of youth of Moroccan, Turkish and Algerian origin. What has further gained a lot of attention, amongst other things, is the Brussels district of Molenbeek, which has the population of approximately 100,000 Belgian Muslims. Molenbeek is an isolated ghetto rampant with poverty, unemployment and crime, providing a breeding ground for radical elements. This neighbourhood has had a history of links with

terror attacks that date back several years. It has accommodated one of the perpetrators of the Madrid bombings in 2004, the gunman who shot four people at Brussels’ Jewish museum in May 2014, as well as the AK-47 wielding man on the Amsterdam-Paris train last year.² Recently, prime Paris attack suspect, Salah Abdeslam was also arrested in Molenbeek.

Such neighbourhoods have originated in the 1960s due to mass migration of workers from Turkey and Morocco, followed by Egypt and Libya, as a source of cheap labour for the booming European economy. These migrants have stayed on and flourished in countries such as, Belgium and Netherlands, where currently the third or fourth generation offspring of the original migrants continue to live.

Europe has always faced the problem of integration and assimilation of immigrants into their societies and economies, one of the major problems that has been brought to the fore once again with these attacks. Statistics related to the



skill levels, income and employment of Belgian Muslims indicate the challenges of their integration into the mainstream, thereby remaining ghettoized and alienated further with laws banning traditional Islamic practices, such as, Islamic headscarves and face veils. Immigrants inhabiting districts such as Molenbeek are closely bound to each other because of their unique lifestyle embedded in their culture, habits and practices which make them different from the local population. They have created a world of their own in a country where they constantly feel alienated. It was not just religion or money that kept Abdeslam safely hidden in the area for four months; it was loyalty and bonds of friendship and brotherhood which provided him a safe haven. The youth (in areas like Molenbeek) seem to be easily attracted to causes such as jihad or Salafi ideology because there is not much attention paid to them causing them to become criminals or indulge in drug-related crimes. They thus become potential targets for well laid out networks of organisations and operatives who identify and motivate them to join organisations/movements such as IS. On the other hand, it gives the aimless and neglected youth a purpose and recognition which draws them into the cause further.

In Belgium especially, tribal squabbling and political discord between the Dutch-speaking Flemish part and French-speaking Walloon areas have prevented formation of governments, parliaments and functional state institutions. The

opening of Schengen borders within the EU has only made the situation more problematic in recent times, allowing potential jihadists posing as migrants to enter Europe through Greece and make their way to Europe. The Paris and Brussels attacks have been reminders of how social weakness, state disorder and regional incongruence can be capitalized on by terror elements.³

Another conclusion that can easily be gathered post Brussels incident is that terrorists who work for the IS think, cooperate and operate across borders, ignoring national boundaries. European databases have revealed the number of EU citizens that have travelled to Iraq and Syria to join extremist groups up to 5,000.⁴ Some of them have even returned and are known to have been “neutralized” by effective rehabilitation. However, all these efforts have not deterred handlers of terrorist organisations to have open and free access to potential vulnerable people living in the EU, which is evident from the number of European fighters joining IS in recent times.

Belgian security forces have faced ample criticism for being unable to take precautionary measures before the attack as fears of a possible attack in Brussels have been running high ever since the attacks took place in Paris last year in November. The Belgian government had locked down the capital last year after receiving special intelligence regarding the plotting of a Paris style

attack in Brussels. This lockdown was lifted after four days and concerns about Belgium's counter-terrorism capacity were reinforced when it took four months to track down Salah Abdeslam, followed by the uncovering of a larger than expected IS network operating largely from Brussels. According to Pieter van Ostaeyen, a terrorism expert, as many as 562 Belgians have fought in Iraq and Syria, out of which 124 hail from Brussels. Furthermore, Bruce Hoffman, Director of the Centre for Security Studies, Georgetown University, claims that key operatives and senior IS commanders are based in Brussels itself, where they are able to draw on a network of operatives and sympathizers.⁵

In recent times, the Paris attacks and now the Brussels attacks have demonstrated a greater degree of coordination and use of multiple tactics by IS, making the global threat of terror a painful reality for Western powers. Cross-border cooperation and efficient communication would have probably prevented the Brussels attacks. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has himself confirmed that one of the accused in the attack was deported from Turkey. However, whether this information was circulated among European intelligence agencies still remains unclear.

Alarmingly, no pan-European counter-terrorism network is known to exist, making it very difficult for EU governments to identify and track potential terror targets. There is a severe

need for European governments to work towards setting up a cohesive counter-terrorism entity on the lines of the Europol, for better counter-terrorism coordination and operational effectiveness. Only then can potential terror challenges and threats be identified and addressed. Perhaps the Brussels incident could be the catalyst for European governments to embark on a policy of more proactive and robust intelligence sharing and significant investments in technical intelligence.

Nonetheless, Europe is obliged to address their failure in social integration and assimilation and develop an effective mechanism for the same. Radicalization of ghetto colonies must be addressed with the objective of integrating the immigrant population into the local economy and society. Furthermore, the policies in this regard should aim to be somewhat reflective of the Pope's impactful gesture towards Muslim migrants recently for wider assimilation of diverse ethnic entities globally.

(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies [CAPS])

Notes

¹ Soeren Kern, "Why Belgium is Ground Zero for European Jihadis", *Gatestone Institute*, March 23, 2016, <http://www.gatestoneinstitute.org/7677/belgium-jihadists>, accessed on March 28, 2016

² Feargus O'Sullivan, "How a Brussels Neighbourhood Became a Breeding Ground for Terror", *Citylab*, November 17, 2015, <http://www.citylab.com/housing/2015/11/how-a->

brussels-neighborhood-became-a-breeding-ground-for-terror/416367/accessed on March 28, 2016

³ Sreeram Sundar Chaulia, "Hour of reckoning: How Islamic State exploited Belgium's status of being world's richest failed state", *Times of India*, March 24, 2016, <http://blogs.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/toi-edit-page/hour-of-reckoning-how-islamic-state-exploited-belgiums-status-of-being-worlds-richest-failed-state/> accessed on March 28, 2016

⁴ Matthew Levitt, "The Islamic State's Lone-Wolf Era Is Over", *Foreign Policy*, March 24, 2016, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/03/24/the-islamic-states-lone-wolf-era-is-over/> accessed on March 28, 2016

⁵ Dan De Luce, Elis Groll, "In Brussels, Chronicle of a Disaster Foretold", *Foreign Policy*, March 22, 2016, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/03/22/inbrusselsattackschronicleofadisasterforetold/> accessed on March 28, 2016

