



PERSPECTIVES

THE BEGIN-SADAT CENTER FOR STRATEGIC STUDIES

How to Reduce Terrorism

by Maj. Gen. (res.) Yaakov Amidror

BESA Center Perspectives Paper No. 593, September 20, 2017

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Over a matter of days recently, ISIS adherents committed major attacks in Barcelona as well as stabbings in Siberia and Finland, and several other incidents remain murky. Analysts set about explaining how little Europeans know about fighting terrorism, with some even seeing these events as the beginning of the end of Europe. While that is blowing things out of proportion, it is true that ISIS will continue to wreak havoc in Europe even after the group is formally defeated. If Europe is to cope with the threat effectively, it will have to change its cultural approach to the problem of terrorism.

"ISIS" is an anachronistic name. It is an acronym for "Islamic State in Iraq and Syria," but those aspects of the name have faded away or are about to. The "Islamic State" has ceased to exist. It no longer controls contiguous territory or civil systems. It is in the process of being wiped out across the Middle East: it has lost almost all its former holdings in Iraq and Syria, and its people are fighting for their lives in the few places they have kept hold of.

From now on, the organization will be yet another version of a Sunni terrorist group like al-Qaeda, whose only advantage is that the volunteers who fought for it in the Middle East have returned to their home countries and now have an easier time planning and carrying out terrorist attacks.

It is true that the idea of an Islamic caliphate, which ISIS brought to the forefront of the collective consciousness when it was at the height of its power, will continue to resonate for many Muslims after ISIS's collapse. It is also true that the Sunnis, who feel the entire world is against them (reasons for which include the cooperation between Russia and Iran in Syria and the American acceptance of the Shiite-Alawite victory in Iraq and Syria), will keep looking for ways to

vent their frustration, and ISIS can provide a means. But ultimately, ISIS is a defeated organization. Once again, it turns out that strong armies in conjunction with determined local forces can beat a guerilla group, even if that group's fighters are fired up and willing to die for their cause.

With that said, ISIS will keep trying to execute terrorist attacks worldwide. It will be motivated by a desire to settle historic scores – such as its claim that Spain is a Muslim country that was conquered by the Catholics at the end of the 15th century – but will work wherever it can across the globe. It will use well-organized, longstanding cells, making its actions more "effective" – meaning they will have the potential to murder more people. The group will also keep up its attempts to recruit individuals online, "lone wolves" who can carry out serious attacks but who are limited in the extent of the havoc they can cause.

It is thus ridiculous to think global terrorism can be reduced to zero. Israel has not managed to accomplish this in Jerusalem, and there is no reason to think any other country will be more successful. But by no means should we conclude that there is nothing to be done. It is possible to drastically reduce both the amount of terrorism and its efficacy if we are prepared to pay the political and cultural price.

The expression "there's no such thing as a free lunch" applies to counterterrorism. To succeed, we must invest and take risks. The truth is that the world has racked up many successes in containing terrorism. Many improvements have been made, but most countries – mainly in Europe, where there are a lot of terrorists, relatively speaking – have a long way to go.

Three areas must be addressed if we are to see major gains in our ability to battle terrorism. First, the way the legal system views terrorism – particularly in the sense that it approaches terrorism the way it approaches crime, which plays into terrorists' hands – must change. This will be an enormous but necessary political and cultural change. Administrative arrests will have to be made. Intelligence-gathering goals will have to be defined based on ethnicity and religion, and the security services will have to have the ability to detain suspects for questioning and even punish people who have not yet committed the act. It must be understood that even considering the idea of terrorism is a punishable offense. Implementing these changes, which will entail giving up a small degree of citizens' personal freedom, will be conditional on the political echelon's telling itself and its citizens the truth.

The second effort needed is to focus intelligence work on the relevant communities. It appears that much has been done in this field in recent years, but international cooperation must be improved and more aggressive interrogations permitted, based on intelligence, before an act is carried out. Even good intelligence can't prevent "lone wolves" from appearing. They present a serious challenge, and intelligence agencies are finding it difficult to handle them.

The third effort is more complicated. It centers on causing ordinary citizens to respond quickly and aggressively when any terrorist action takes place. Israel has a clear advantage in this area, because many citizens are licensed to carry firearms and can take action even before the police and security forces arrive. Civilians carrying firearms are extremely unusual in many countries, so it will be difficult for them to respond quickly to contain the damage of a terrorist act underway, whether it is a stabbing or a car-ramming.

Again, none of these methods can completely wipe out terrorism, but they can significantly reduce the number of acts terrorists manage to commit, as well as the lethality of those attacks when they are carried out. It is a Sisyphean battle, one that is exhausting but crucial. There is no magic solution to Islamist terrorism. It stems from historical and cultural frustrations and cannot be prevented by Muslim immigrants' improved economic conditions.

After Israel created the necessary conditions to cut down on terrorism in the spring of 2002 [Operative Defensive Shield] by retaking Judea and Samaria, terrorism has been simmering away on a relatively low flame (the number of deaths has dropped to a remarkable 1% of the number of people killed when terrorism was at its height in the Second Intifada). The scourge of terrorism has not dramatically affected Israelis' day-to-day lives.

The al-Qaeda terrorist attacks in New York and Washington on Sept. 11, 2001, the deadliest terrorist event in history, affected mainly flight regulations, but not the US political culture. Europe is no different. It is highly unlikely to change dramatically because of terrorism.

The mass migration to Europe from Muslim countries could turn out to be what decides the continent's fate. As most attackers are first- or second-generation Muslim immigrants, Europe might contain that immigration as a response to terrorism.

We must hope Europe will use every means at its disposal to fight terrorism, but it is a mistake to hope terror will cause the continent to change its character and its approach to the problems of the world, including its relations with Israel.

This is an edited version of an article that was [published](#) in Israel Hayom on September 3, 2017.

Maj. Gen. (res.) Yaakov Amidror is the Anne and Greg Rosshandler Senior Fellow at the Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies. He is also a distinguished fellow at JINSA's Gemunder Center for Defense and Strategy.