



April 5, 2016

## Testimony before the Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs on Terror in Europe: Safeguarding U.S. Citizens at Home and Abroad.

Julianne Smith, Senior Fellow and Director, Strategy and Statecraft Program  
Center for a New American Security

Chairman Johnson and Ranking Member Carper, thank you for the opportunity to testify this morning. It is an honor to join this esteemed panel of experts on an important topic.

As you know, just two short weeks ago, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) carried out two major terrorist attacks in Brussels that killed 35 people and wounded more than 300. The horrifying attacks, which involved bombs at the Brussels airport and inside a local subway station, targeted innocent citizens going about their daily business (much as the attacks last November in Paris did). And for Europe, they could not have come at a worse time. Europe is buckling under the weight of a series of internal and external challenges, ranging from a historic migration crisis to a resurgent Russia to the rise of populism and the potential exit of one of its largest members. The Brussels attacks will therefore serve as a major test not just for Belgium but for Europe as a whole.

The Brussels attacks revealed a number of worrisome trends and glaring policy gaps inside Belgium, across Europe, and among the transatlantic allies. Any successful strategy going forward will require change at every level. First, Belgium is going to have to undertake a number of short- and long-term changes aimed at strengthening its counterterrorism capabilities and integrating its Muslim minorities. Second, Europe, through the European Union, but also in individual member states, will have to marshal the right mix of leadership, innovation, and will to break down the longstanding bureaucratic barriers that have hindered effective counterterrorism cooperation to date. Finally, Europe and the United States will need to capitalize on their individual strengths to form a much tighter ring of counterterrorism cooperation, which will require the two sides of the Atlantic to work through differences over data protection and privacy issues.

### **Belgian Shortcomings**

The Brussels attacks confirmed what many terrorism experts have been stating for years, that Belgium has one of the largest homegrown extremist problems in the West. Belgium is home to roughly 11 million Muslims, which represent approximately 6 percent of its population. Many of Belgium's Muslims originally came from Morocco in the 1960s and 1970s to help address its post-war labor shortages. The reluctance of some of these immigrants and their second- and third-generation offspring to embrace the societies in which they live, combined with the negligence of

*Bold.*

*Innovative.*

*Bipartisan.*

the Belgian government to effectively integrate such immigrant communities over several decades, means that a number of Muslims in Belgium have come to live in parallel societies or concentrated ghettos of mixed ethnic groups (a trend that one finds all across Europe). Some Muslim neighborhoods such as Molenbeek are considered “no-go” areas, which are infrequently visited by law enforcement officials.<sup>1</sup> The fact that Brussels has only eight community-relations police officers working the city’s majority Muslim neighborhoods says a lot about the isolation of these communities as well as the personnel shortages inside the Belgian security services.<sup>2</sup>

Over time, a small percentage of these communities have become radicalized due to an array of local and global grievances, often stemming from ongoing alienation, discrimination, and marginalization. Radical Islamist recruiters, such as those affiliated with the terrorist organization Sharia4Belgium, target susceptible young men and women both in person and on the web. Such groups have been especially successful in Belgium although the spread of radical Islam has become a key domestic and foreign policy challenge for European policymakers all across the continent. Approximately 500 Belgians have traveled to Iraq and Syria to join extremist militias, making Belgium the largest contributor of foreign fighters to Syria in proportion to its population.<sup>3</sup> At least initially, Belgian intelligence and law enforcement officials, overwhelmed with cases to track, were hoping that the radicals traveling to Syria might actually reduce the scope of the problem. But roughly 20 percent of those 500 fighters have returned to Belgium often with highly sophisticated training and unknown intentions.

In addition to highlighting Belgium’s failure to integrate its Muslim minorities, both the Brussels and Paris attacks have revealed a litany of intelligence and law enforcement failures.<sup>4</sup> Most notably, after searching for Paris terror suspect Salah Abdeslam for 120 days, Belgian officials found him just a few blocks from his family apartment in Molenbeek and just steps from a police precinct, apparently hiding in plain sight. Since Abdeslam’s capture and the attacks that came days later, press reports have portrayed Belgian intelligence and security officials as alarmingly incompetent and naïve. That accusation, while partially rooted in truth, isn’t entirely justified. Belgium is no stranger to terrorism, having dealt with it since the 1970s. For decades, Belgium has engaged in a number of successful counterterrorism operations, and it has shared valuable information with foreign services.<sup>5</sup> That said, the country has suffered from crippling budgetary constraints and personnel shortages among its security services. Belgium also hasn’t had a functioning federal structure for some time thanks to the deep schisms between its Flemish and French speaking citizens. As a result, Belgium’s ability to uncover and dismantle jihadist networks has been severely hampered over the years.

---

<sup>1</sup> Erik Wemple, “Belgian minister’s statement revives talk of ‘no-go zones,’” *The Washington Post* (November 16, 2015)

<sup>2</sup> Howard LaFranchi, “Bolster US-Europe efforts against terror? Not so easy.” *Christian Science Monitor* (March 29, 2016)

<sup>3</sup> Colin Clapson, “Nearly 500 Belgian Jihadis Left for Syria and Iraq,” *Flanders News* (September 12, 2015)

<sup>4</sup> Among the many revelations that surfaced in the wake of the attacks, the fact that Belgium’s 19 communes are divided between 6 police forces that lack the ability to share information is perhaps one of the more troubling.

<sup>5</sup> Thomas Renard, “Why Belgium is not Europe’s Jihadi Base,” *Politico* (March 31, 2016)

## European Shortcomings

Belgium is not alone in its struggle to address homegrown terrorists and the roots of radicalization. Europe is home to over 13 million Muslims, many of whom live in parallel societies due to failed integration policies (or none at all). Preventing the radicalization of Muslim minorities has therefore become a priority for several European countries. But the tools with which national capitals can counter radicalization, slow recruitment, and seize and arrest terrorist operatives have suffered from a chronic lack of investment. The lack of security related resources is rooted primarily in the financial crisis and Europe's slow recovery. But it is also linked to the inherent tensions between intelligence services and political elites and their often contrasting views on accountability and transparency.

Europe's most glaring problem, however, lies in its inability to share information. ISIS has proven that it can seamlessly operate across national borders but Europe still lacks a shared list of suspected extremists.<sup>6</sup> The most recent example of an information sharing failure relates to one of the three Belgian attackers, Ibrahim el Bakraoui. Turkish President, Recep Tayyip Erdogan said that last summer, Turkey warned Belgian authorities of Bakraoui's terrorist ties when it deported him to the Netherlands, but this information was never followed up on, let alone, disseminated widely. The reasons behind such gaps are simple: each country in Europe has its own domestic sharing constraints. Therefore, any information sharing agreements that exist are considered voluntary not required. Cultural barriers also exist. Some countries in Western Europe refuse to share sensitive information with newer EU members in Central and Eastern Europe that were once part of the Soviet Union.

The preference for individual European policies doesn't just affect information sharing. It also applies to critical infrastructure such as national airports. For example, the EU has one set of standards and procedures for areas behind security check points. But the areas before security, exactly where the two bombs went off in the Brussels airport, are left to discretion of national governments, creating varying levels of security and an array of security procedures.

## Transatlantic Shortcomings

Challenges in counterterrorism cooperation are not limited to the European continent. There are other hurdles to overcome in regards to cooperation between Europe and the United States. To their credit, Europe and the United States undertook a number of measures aimed at strengthening their counterterrorism cooperation after 9/11. The Madrid 2004 bombings, followed soon after by the London 2005 bombings, further increased Europe's interest in deepening that cooperation. Over the course of a few years, the United States and EU enacted measures that significantly improved their ability to halt terrorism financing, share intelligence, safeguard border controls, and improve transportation security through initiatives such as the passenger name recognition (PNR) system. More recently, the U.S. and EU have worked closely together on countering violent extremism and halting the flow of foreign fighters. Although engagement with international partners, particularly the United States, has been a key tenet of the EU's counterterrorism strategy, serious gaps still remain.

---

<sup>6</sup> Griff Witte and Loveday Morris, "Failure to stop Paris attacks reveals fatal flaws at the heart of European security," *The Washington Post* (November 28, 2015)

When it comes to the United States, one of the primary obstacles to deepening transatlantic counterterrorism cooperation stems from European distrust on the issues of data sharing and privacy. The EU has long been an advocate of personal data privacy, regularly raising concerns about overreach by U.S. intelligence services. Those concerns grew more pronounced and the transatlantic divide over privacy widened after the 2013 revelations that the National Security Administration (NSA) spied on Europeans, including German Chancellor Angela Merkel. EU leaders, meeting in Brussels right after the news broke that the National Security Agency (NSA) had monitored the phones of 35 world leaders, stated that "a lack of trust could prejudice" intelligence-gathering co-operation.<sup>7</sup> The remnants of that distrust still echo throughout the transatlantic community today and has made information sharing between the EU and the U.S. far less effective than it could or should be.

Most specifically, distrust between the EU and U.S. as well as European concerns about how the United States might use any information that Europe does agree to share have hampered the full and EU-wide implementation of the PNR system. The PNR system allows airlines operating flights to or from the United States to provide U.S. authorities with passenger name record data in their reservations system within 15 minutes of the flight's departure.<sup>8</sup> Currently, PNR data is not regulated at the EU level, rather, individual countries collect their own individual PNR data and can share that information individually. An EU-wide PNR bill would not only regulate information sharing among EU members, but would subsequently increase the level of intelligence sharing between the EU and the United States. But experts believe the European Parliament will not vote on an EU-wide PNR bill until after the U.S. election later this year.<sup>9</sup> This is not only dangerous for Europe. Considering that most of the people responsible for the Paris and Brussels attacks held European passports, granting them visa free travel to the United States, a failure to fully implement the PNR bill would pose a danger for the United States as well.

### **Making Europe, and America, Safer**

There are a number of steps Europe, and more specifically, Belgium, should take to ensure the continued safety of both Europe and the United States. First, Belgium should undertake a full audit of its security procedures and capabilities. It should also review all security staff at key transportation hubs as Paris did after the November attacks.<sup>10</sup> Second, also mirroring recent French developments, the country is going to have to overhaul its surveillance laws. For example, police and prosecutors need greater access to technology usually reserved for intelligence services. The Belgian government also needs to determine ways to fix its stove-piped police agencies and encourage information sharing among its various forces. In the medium term, Belgium will need to expand its intelligence services, which are simply too small for the nature of the challenge. It may also want to follow the United Kingdom's lead and increase the number of officers with training to

---

<sup>7</sup> BBC News, "EU says distrust of US on spying may harm terror fight" (October 25, 2013)

<sup>8</sup> Kristin Archick, "U.S.-EU Cooperation Against Terrorism," *Congressional Research Service* (March 2, 2016)

<sup>9</sup> Howard LaFranchi, "Bolster US-Europe efforts against terror? Not so easy." *Christian Science Monitor* (March 29, 2016)

<sup>10</sup> Rory Mulholland, "Seventy Paris airport workers have security passes revoked over extremism fears," *The Telegraph* (December 13, 2015)

carry weapons.<sup>11</sup> Unfortunately, all of these measures will require Belgium to significantly enhance its small security budget at a time when resources are scarce.

It is important to note, though, that the threat of homegrown terrorism is by no means a strictly Belgian problem. Future attacks in other capitals are considered likely.<sup>12</sup> Inside Europe and in the short to medium term, European capitals will need to strengthen their ability to collect, analyze and share information. And the system shouldn't rely on voluntary contributions; sharing should be obligatory. Europol's new "European Counterterrorism Center," which was created after the 2015 Paris attacks and designed to increase information sharing and operational coordination among 30 European countries, is a good start. But it will not serve as a European Central Intelligence Agency, at least not anytime soon. Too many capitals insist on maintaining national control over their security forces and hesitate to cede control to an EU agency whose loyalties and priorities may or may not align with their own. That is part of the reason the EU's Counterterrorism Coordinator has largely served an informational (vs. operational) role.

In the long term, Europe, especially Belgium, will have to do more to address the grievances and isolation of its Muslim minorities. Complicating matters is the fact that European public opinion of Muslims is worsening just when greater integration is so desperately needed. Right-wing extremists and anti-immigrant political parties that play on xenophobia have gained ground in recent years, and Islamic communities as well as the refugees arriving from the Middle East have become targets of increased hostility. This environment, where European citizens are increasingly worried about rising unemployment, shrinking demographics, national identity, and crime - which is often associated with Muslims - has made it challenging for political leaders to promote multiculturalism, costly integration policies, and interfaith dialogues. In Italy, the anti-immigration Northern League has called for the closure of mosques, and Poland is now stating that it might not be able to take in a mere 400 refugees.<sup>13</sup> Despite such hurdles, however, a number of European governments have experimented with integration initiatives over the years. Not all of them have produced real results but some, like greater literacy and language training for Muslim minorities, have proven useful. While each European country faces unique integration challenges, EU should serve as a clearing house and help countries learn from each other's experiences.

When it comes to protecting their citizens from future attacks, Europeans should be careful not to limit themselves to internal measures. Europe must take a more active role in fighting ISIS and its affiliates well beyond its borders, in North Africa and the Middle East. Some countries like France, the UK, Denmark, and Belgium are already contributing militarily to the anti-ISIS campaign over Iraq and Syria. For those European countries that cannot or will not contribute militarily, they should find other ways to contribute to the region's future either diplomatically or financially. How might they do more to support the countries in the region that are housing millions of Syrian refugees? How might they contribute to the political resolution of the Syrian war? How might they

---

<sup>11</sup> Alexis Flynn, "U.K. to Increase Ranks of Armed Police by Nearly a Third in Terror Response," *The Wall Street Journal* (April 1, 2016)

<sup>12</sup> Tom McTague, "Paris Attacks: David Cameron warns UK terrorist attack is 'highly likely'," *Independent* (November 14, 2015)

<sup>13</sup> Norbert Röttgen, "To Unify Europe, Face the Mideast as One," *the Wall Street Journal* (March 31, 2016)

partner with allies in the region to establish humanitarian zones? As Norbert Röttgen noted in his March 31, 2016 piece in the *New York Times*, Europe also need a comprehensive Middle East strategy.

Finally, in the interest of the safety of both the United States and Europe, the two sides of the Atlantic must strengthen and deepen their counterterrorism cooperation much as they did after 9/11. Although difficult, a new transatlantic counterterrorism dialogue must start with the realization that our differences on data sharing and privacy have prevented us from developing a stronger, more effective, and common counterterrorism strategy. Given the wide array of views and policies inside Europe and America's experience in strengthening its own security services after 9/11, Washington may very well need to take the lead in breaking down bureaucratic barriers and charting the path forward. While the ultimate responsibility for European security rests with Europe, the United States can play an important role in fortifying European expertise, intelligence, and analysis of terrorists' motives, cells and activities. Attempts to isolate the United States from the European threat, as some in the United States advocate, would be both futile and unrealistic. They would also weaken our closest allies at a time when they are especially vulnerable. The threat of terrorism threatens both sides of the Atlantic. Our policies will therefore be stronger if they are rooted in transatlantic cooperation.

###