After a new terror attack in Brussels – the status of jihadi terrorism in 2023

RETHINKING SECURITY IN THE 2020s SERIES *– COMMENTARY*
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INTRODUCTION

The chilling events that took place in Brussels on October 16, 2023, serve as a grim reminder of the enduring menace of terrorism in the heart of Europe. At approximately 7:15 p.m., the streets of Brussels were shattered by a deadly assault orchestrated by Abdesalem Lassoued, a 45-year-old Tunisian residing in Belgium without legal status. Lassoued unleashed a deadly fusillade upon unsuspecting Swedish soccer supporters en route to a match at the King Baudouin Stadium, resulting in the tragic deaths of two individuals and leaving one critically wounded. The serenity of the evening was abruptly shattered, and the repercussions of this heinous act would reverberate through the city for days to come.

In the aftermath of the attack, Lassoued swiftly fled the scene, leaving a stunned and grieving community in his wake. Almost immediately, the world witnessed the rapid dissemination of a video on social media in which the Islamic State (IS) claimed responsibility for this horrific act. This bold assertion cast a dark pall of terror over Brussels, prompting Belgian federal prosecutors to swiftly reclassify the incident as a terrorist act.

The morning following the attack, Lassoued was traced to a café in the commune of Schaerbeek. In a dramatic and fateful turn of events, Belgian police confronted him, culminating in a lethal confrontation that concluded with Lassoued's demise while en route to the hospital. In response to the attack, the terror threat level for Brussels was elevated to the highest tier, level 4, underscoring the gravity of the situation. The city was abruptly thrust back into a painful chapter in its history, reminiscent of the tragic events of March 22, 2016, when a series of bombings at the Maelbeek metro station and Zaventem airport claimed the lives of numerous individuals and left an indelible scar on the collective memory of the nation.

The horrors in Brussels were not isolated incidents; the ominous specter of jihadist terrorism cast a long shadow across Europe throughout the month of October. In France, a dreadful attack on a teacher sent shockwaves throughout the nation, as the educator was brutally stabbed by an individual professing allegiance to IS. France, no stranger to terrorism, vividly recalled past traumas, including the attacks at the Bataclan concert hall and the offices of Charlie Hebdo, among others.

These recent events have once again stirred profound questions within the European public regarding the enduring threat of jihadist terrorism. Following the apparent military victory over IS in Syria and Iraq, many in the West had hoped the terror group was vanquished. However, recent events raise unsettling doubts about the veracity of that assumption. It is imperative to scrutinize these developments and reflect on the evolving landscape of terrorism.

The events of October serve as a grim testament to the persistent threat of terrorism and the ever-present need for vigilant security measures and international cooperation to combat the scourge of extremism. The future remains uncertain, and the European continent must grapple with the shadow of terrorism while striving for peace and resilience in the face of adversity.

IS IN THE MENA REGION – CURRENT STATUS

Evaluating the current military strength and influence of the Islamic State (IS) is a complex undertaking, marked by opacity and evolving dynamics. IS, by its very nature, operates covertly and strives to remain beneath the radar, making it challenging to gauge its precise military capabilities. Nevertheless, several factors provide insights into the group's activities and its potential resurgence, particularly in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region.

Foremost among these concerns is recruitment. Reports from Iraq and Syria indicate that IS recruiters actively seek new adherents, often targeting individuals in vulnerable, precarious situations, such as refugee camps. The desperation and uncertainty faced by individuals in these camps render them susceptible to radical ideas, highlighting the grim reality that despair can poison morality, making individuals more receptive to extremist ideologies. Moreover, within these camps, refugees frequently find themselves dependent on radical or violent groups sympathetic to IS, further complicating the efforts of security forces, including Kurdish troops, who struggle to maintain control and prevent the radicalization of camp residents.

Secondly, the overall stability and security situation in the Middle East, particularly in Syria and Iraq, remains highly turbulent. Despite the world's focus shifting to other

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international hotspots, the inherent volatility of these regions cannot be overlooked. These states continue to grapple with instability and persistent uncertainty, making them potential breeding grounds for extremism and terror.

In addition, recent developments in Eastern Europe and the Gaza Strip directly impact the situation in Syria and Iraq. Russia's involvement in Ukraine diverts its military and strategic resources, leaving less attention and resources to address issues in the Middle East. Other nations also divert their attention to other conflict regions. This diversion of focus creates fertile ground for further anarchy in the region, something IS has historically exploited with deadly efficiency. The chaos and power vacuums resulting from international conflicts create opportunities for extremist groups to thrive and expand their influence.

Thirdly, the persistence of financial support for IS and its extremist ideology is concerning. Some individuals or groups continue to view investment in radical terror organizations as a viable business opportunity. This underscores the enduring appeal and influence of IS's extremist agenda, as well as the importance of tracking and curbing the flow of funds to such groups.

Key Takeaway:

The current military strength of IS in the MENA region remains somewhat elusive, but signs of its potential resurgence are evident. Recruitment, regional instability, and international distractions all contribute to the precarious situation in these areas. To effectively combat the threat posed by IS and similar extremist groups, a comprehensive and coordinated effort is required, addressing not only military aspects but also focusing on countering radicalization, stabilizing regions, and disrupting financial support networks. The past month's events serve as a stark reminder that the battle against jihadist terrorism is far from over, and continued vigilance is essential to ensure the safety and security of nations and their citizens.

IS IDEOLOGY IN THE WEST

While it is imperative to closely examine military and ideological developments concerning the Islamic State (IS) in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, it is equally critical to assess the current state of affairs in the Western world. The global aspirations of IS have been no secret; the group has openly articulated its ambition to establish a worldwide caliphate. To realize this goal, it needs to garner support and spread its radical ideology beyond the borders of the MENA region.

The previous decade witnessed a series of terrorist attacks committed by individuals who were either directed by IS or shared the group's extremist ideology.

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Radicalization emerged as a pervasive problem, with a troubling number of individuals from various countries embarking on journeys to Syria and Iraq as so-called Foreign Terrorist Fighters, seeking to join the IS caliphate. The menace of radicalization continues to persist to this day.

It is important to underline that radicalization remains a major concern even today. Entities like the Belgian threat analysis body OCAD continue to rank Islamist terror, inspired by political Islam, as a top threat. Similar concerns are echoed by various European security organizations. In addition, the COVID-19 pandemic presented a unique opportunity for radicalists. The isolation and loneliness experienced by many individuals confined to their homes facilitated the spread of radical ideology, primarily via the internet. This digital realm became a breeding ground for the propagation of extremist beliefs, as vulnerable individuals sought connection and meaning in a time of uncertainty.

Furthermore, the issue of individuals who were convicted of supporting or being members of a terrorist group, including IS, but have now been released from incarceration, raises significant questions. It is essential to inquire into the extent to which these individuals received guidance and underwent deradicalization programs during their time in prison. The concern arises that some of them may not have renounced their radical beliefs and continue to pose a threat to national security. Unlike when they were incarcerated, monitoring the actions of these individuals, who have regained their freedom, is far more challenging and less conspicuous.

Key Takeaway:

While IS may have suffered military setbacks in the MENA region, the global threat it poses is far from extinguished. The group's global ambitions and its ability to inspire radicalization in the Western world continue to demand vigilance and comprehensive counter-terrorism measures. Addressing the root causes of radicalization, strengthening deradicalization efforts, and maintaining robust intelligence and security measures are essential to safeguarding societies and countering the persistent influence of IS and similar extremist groups. The ever-evolving landscape of extremism calls for a holistic approach to ensure the safety and security of nations and their citizens.

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CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the tragic attack in Brussels on October 16, 2023, serves as a stark reminder that the threat of jihadist terrorism in Europe is far from extinguished. Despite the initial optimism following the military defeat of the Islamic State (IS) in Syria and Iraq, recent events indicate that the group and its radical ideology continue to cast a long shadow over the continent.

1. The situation in the Middle East, particularly in Syria and Iraq, remains volatile, providing fertile ground for extremist elements to regroup and potentially reemerge. The recruitment efforts by IS and its splinter groups, particularly in refugee camps, pose a significant challenge. Desperation and vulnerability make individuals more susceptible to radicalization, and the control of such camps by various factions complicates the security situation.

2. Furthermore, international developments, including the conflict in Ukraine and the situation in Gaza, divert attention and resources away from the Middle East, potentially creating conditions conducive to anarchy and terrorist resurgence. Historically, IS has thrived in such environments.

3. The financial support for IS ideology also persists, suggesting that there are still individuals or groups willing to invest in radical terror. This underscores the enduring appeal and influence of IS's extremist agenda, as well as the importance of maintaining vigilance against the spread of extremist ideas.

4. Turning our focus to the Western world, the threat of radicalization and Islamist terror remains a significant concern. The global ambitions of IS persist, and radicalization is an ongoing issue. The COVID-19 pandemic has provided an opportunity for extremists to spread their ideology online, preying on isolated and vulnerable individuals.

5. Moreover, the release of individuals convicted of supporting or being members of terrorist groups raises questions about their rehabilitation and the extent to which they have renounced their radical beliefs. These individuals may still pose a threat to national security, even if they are no longer incarcerated, making their monitoring a challenge.

In light of these ongoing threats, it is crucial for governments and security agencies to remain vigilant, adapt their counter-terrorism strategies, and address the root causes of radicalization. The events of the past month serve as a sobering reminder that the fight against jihadist terrorism is far from over, and the international community must continue to work together to ensure the safety and security of its citizens.

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About the BIC

The BIC is an independent, non-profit, think-and-do tank based in the capital of Europe that is committed to developing solutions to address the cyclical drivers of insecurity, economic fragility, and conflict the Middle East and North Africa. Our goal is to bring added value to the highest levels of political discourse by bringing systemic issues to the forefront of the conversation.

Rethinking Security in the 2020s Series

This project takes critical aim at yesterday's approaches to security and defence, with a view towards developing proactive solutions to the evolving nature of insecurity and hybrid warfare. The series has three overarching themes, namely "New Geopolitical Landscape in the MENA Region", "Peacebuilding and Conflict Prevention" and "Transnational Challenges to Water and Energy"

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