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The Brussels Attacks: Challenges of Unravelling Terrorist Networks

By Romain Quivoij

Synopsis

The recent Brussels attacks claimed by IS underline the difficulties encountered by intelligence and security services to identify, monitor and neutralise terrorist networks before they move into action.

Commentary

TWO TERRORIST attacks struck Brussels' Zaventem airport and the Maalbek metro station on Tuesday 22 March 2016, killing at least 35 people (including three suicide bombers) and injuring 340. Prime Minister Charles Michel declared, "what we feared has happened". Five of the ten terrorists and suspected accomplices involved in the series of attacks that struck Paris in November 2015 were Belgian and French nationals living in the districts of Molenbeek-Saint-Jean and Neder-Over-Heembeek, West and North of Brussels, respectively. This led investigators to focus their attention on the Belgian trail.

The *modus operandi* of the Brussels attacks and the webs of individuals that are suspected to be involved suggest significant connections with the Paris attacks. Intelligence and security services are confronted with major challenges in dealing with terrorist networks responsible for such operations, as similar attacks are to be expected in the near future.

The Paris-Brussels Connections

Shared features between the Paris and the Brussels attacks highlight a significant degree of coordination, technical sophistication and strategic thinking, pointing again at the involvement of a well-structured terrorist cell. The explosions that targeted the

airport and the metro station were carried out within an hour of each other, suggesting that terrorists synchronized their actions in order to maximise impact.

The first two explosions killed at least 15 people in the airport, destroyed the facade of the entrance and led parts of the ceiling to collapse. The third explosion happened in a subway car, killing 13 people. While the concentration of people in a confined space explains the high number of casualties in the latter attack, the extent of human and material losses indicates the skillful use of powerful explosives, most probably triacetone triperoxide (TATP), a relatively easy-to-prepare explosive that was also used in Paris. The terrorists struck two transport systems in and around Brussels, in the same way that the Paris attackers selected key targets across the capital city of France.

The three suicide bombers involved in the Brussels attacks were actively sought by French and Belgian police for their involvement in the Paris attacks. Mohamed Abrini, who remains at large, is also considered to be a prime suspect in both series of terrorist attacks. Investigations related to the capture of Salah Abdeslam, who acted as a logistician before and during the Paris attacks, revealed that the number of Belgium-based individuals involved in the Paris attacks were at least three times more than what Belgian authorities initially thought.

Finally, the close timeline between Salah Abdeslam's arrest and the Brussel attacks may imply that terrorists would have struck the Belgian capital earlier than planned, presumably out of fear that Salah Abdeslam might disclose information about forthcoming attacks in Brussels.

The latter denied knowing the Brussels attackers, despite the fact that one of them rented an apartment that Salah Abdeslam used shortly before his arrest. These elements strongly suggest that Paris was one of the targets in a series of connected operations led by common networks implanted in Western Europe.

Connecting the Dots: Missing the Mark?

Belgium has been aware of high levels of threats over the last year, as illustrated by the dismantling of a terrorist cell in the city of Verviers in January 2015. The scale of the threat was at its peak last December, when no terrorist attack took place. Yet the Belgian Organ of Coordination for the Analysis of the Threat (OCAM), under the joint authority of the Belgian Home Office and the Ministry of Justice, kept the scale at a lower level between the arrest of Salah Abdeslam and the Brussels attacks, five days later.

High numbers of individuals suspected to be sympathisers or belonging to IS have been identified since 2014. The multiplication of transnational terrorist plots and the concomitant increase of successful attacks have also become key features associated with IS. This two-pronged proliferation and diversification of terrorist threats compels intelligence and security services to prioritize certain risks over others, for human and material resources devoted to intelligence gathering and analysis as well as "hard" police and military operations do not necessarily keep up with the demand.

This can lead to controversial decisions. Chérif and Saïd Kouachi, the authors of the *Charlie Hebdo* attacks who killed 12 people in January 2015 had been closely watched by the major French internal intelligence service, the General Direction of Internal Security (DGSI), until December 2013 and June 2014, respectively.

However, no suspicious activities were detected, leading to the surveillance on the two brothers being ended. The French Interior Minister Bernard Cazeneuve explained in January 2015 that “no incriminating element that would have been likely to lead to the opening of a judicial investigation had then been raised against them”.

As it tends to be the case when a terrorist attack is successful, several questions related to the effectiveness of local intelligence and security services have been raised. Ibrahim El Bakraoui, one of the suicide bombers at Brussels airport, had been arrested by Turkish authorities in Gaziantep, a Southern Turkish city close to the Syrian border, in June 2015, before being deported to the Netherlands.

If it turns out that other attackers have travelled to Syria and Iraq and/or entered Western Europe by mingling with refugees from these countries, as was the case for the Paris attackers, trust of Western European populations in the ability of their governments to protect their safety will be further eroded.

Need to Rethink Counter-Terrorism

Mass terrorism involving easy targets is nothing new. However, the greater frequency of these attacks requires counter-terrorist professionals to properly assess multiple threats involved; to devote limited human and material resources to the surveillance of numerous suspects and potential targets, and to ensure a constantly updated flow of intra/international cooperation between intelligence and security services.

Interestingly, recent episodes related to the identification of terrorists and suspected accomplices involved in the Paris attacks tend to show that granting intelligence and security services with increased surveillance powers and budgets do not naturally lead to the desired results. The hideout of Abdelhamid Abaaoud, the alleged mastermind of the Paris attacks, was reported to the French police by a friend of his cousin who provided him logistical support.

Similarly Salah Abdeslam was turned in by a friend who was asked to find him a new hideout in Brussels. Basing their work on this testimony, Belgian investigators could easily trace the suspect. Thus basic human intelligence remains a fruitful key to detection and identification. While offering potential solutions to the terrorist risk posed by IS is easier said than done, the Brussels attacks are a grim reminder that the adaptation of counter-terrorism organisations to the fast-evolving threat environment should be considered a top priority.

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