

War on terror? Military logic is not an option!

The brutal terror attacks in Paris in November 2015 have rekindled the debate about how to counter international terrorism. France has requested support from its EU allies in the war against so-called “Islamic State” (IS) and the German Government has now decided to join the campaign and provide military resources.

From Bread for the World’s perspective, the narrow security policy logic which currently dominates the debate about countering terrorist violence threatens to lead up a blind alley instead of providing an effective response to the growing spread of terrorist groups, particularly IS. Defending ourselves against the spread of terrorism and the brutal violence with which it is associated is essential – that is beyond doubt. But it urgently needs long-term political strategies – and they are still not in prospect at present. Nor is there any sign that lessons have been learned from the failure, after almost 15 years of “war on terror”, to create more peace and security in the world and put an end to the terrorist threat. On the contrary, more and more armed groups that operate on a regional or national basis have become radicalised and have joined forces, extending their operations to the international arena.

Calling the fight against terror groups a “war” simply plays into the hands of the terrorists themselves by elevating the status of the attackers to that of a conflict party. Their claim to a separate state of their own is one outcome of this logic, as is their success in recruiting young fighters for a “war against the West”.

The military response has done little to dismantle or permanently weaken terror groups. Instead, it has displaced them from the intervention areas, enabling them to spread and thus destabilise more and more regions. Past experience has repeatedly

shown that a lasting victory over guerrilla forces engaged in conflict with national governments (e.g. in Latin America) is difficult, if not impossible, to achieve by military means. This applies even more to an international fight against terrorists, especially at a time when, and in regions where, national governments and therefore also state borders and security measures play virtually no role after decades of economic haemorrhage, environmental degradation and the collapse of social cohesion. Here, war economies and armed groups dominate, often driven by purely economic interests and yet using ideology to justify their actions. Due to a lack of essential resources, more and more governments can no longer offer their people any form of security – not economic, social, military or police-based – and so they slide into political irrelevance. Terrorists infiltrating these regions meet with little resistance; instead, they find that there is substantial recruitment potential. Intervening armies from the “coalition of the willing”, on the other hand, find that there is no local political authority that is recognised as legitimate and could serve as the counterpart for external stabilisation and thus form part of a political solution. A properly functioning social or humanitarian infrastructure is also completely absent.

The casualties in military action are, typically, civilians, along with the already weak civil infrastructure. This circumstance not only provides the terrorists with a steady stream of

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angry new supporters from every area drawn into the fighting; it also weakens the intervening powers' claim to moral authority, especially if they themselves violate laws and international conventions (targeted killing, torture, etc.).

The destruction of the remaining vestiges of infrastructure through military action, the impact on civilian life, and the lack of humanitarian provision in the affected regions all perpetuate human suffering, worsen abject poverty, and move these regions even further away from the attainment of international development goals. Fragile and conflict-torn countries have not met any of the Millennium Development Goals and will certainly not do so in the foreseeable future while military clashes between IS and the coalition of the willing are ongoing and gaining ground. As a result, these regions will remain, or will increasingly become, a breeding ground for radicalisation, violence and terrorism.

The logic of peace, not the logic of security policy

Viewed in terms of the logic of peace, it is clear that we should really be seeking to identify the causes of terrorism and our own contributions to its emergence and continued existence – and asking what we can do to dry out its breeding ground. In our view, anti-terrorism strategies should focus not on threat scenarios but on further conflict prevention.

This means that the methods to be deployed should not only be viewed in terms of their capability to combat an acute threat; the question which should be asked is whether they have the potential to worsen the conflict and lead to the emergence of more terrorist groups (here, the “do no harm” principle comes into play). The key question is to what extent they help to address causes – a lack of economic prospects, exclusion from the political process, environmental damage, etc.

As regards the medium-term response to these causal factors, we must analyse our own policies to identify anything that may contribute to the spread of terrorist violence, to the willingness to use violence and to fragile statehood, both internationally and at home. We must determine what kind of countermeasures are appropriate. In countering terrorism at home (as opposed to action in other countries), a law enforcement logic is applied – and rightly so -, with a focus on minimising violence and upholding the rule of law. It is not about claiming victory over an opponent, let alone destroying him. Instead, the law enforcement response is based on the understanding that terrorists should be dealt with as criminals, not conflict parties. That is why police – not military – capabilities and action are needed to tackle the problem. The same applies in the international framework: terrorism is a crime and should be dealt with as such.

An anti-terrorism strategy that aims to have lasting impacts must therefore be based around several pillars.

Firstly, it must seek to contain and curb terrorist violence. How can we limit the field of action for terrorist groups while ensuring that they can't simply move into other areas? Secondly, steps must be taken in order to restrict terrorist groups and cut off their grassroots support. How do we prevent more people from being drawn towards terrorist groups? And thirdly, we must consider pre-emptive and preventive action. How can we create conditions that prevent radicalisation and fanaticism in the first place?

Demands and responses

1. Containing terrorist violence

In combating terror groups, the options for action must be jointly developed and coordinated within the United Nations framework and on the basis of international law. The response must then follow the law enforcement logic, in line with the approach adopted in combating organised crime. Action against IS can follow this logic, based on respect for human rights and rule of law principles. This can be achieved

- by making full use of all non-military options, with a particular focus on drying out the war economy, e.g. by curbing financial flows and imposing sanctions on all individuals, companies and states which purchase oil, gas or antiquities from IS or supply it with financial donations and weapons;
- by launching an internationally coordinated search for IS fighters and recruiters who leave IS-controlled areas,
- by launching a targeted search for IS's leaders and ideologues with the aim of bringing them to international justice;
- by setting up exit programmes for (former) IS fighters, combined with preventive measures targeted at potentially violent Islamists.

With regard to the civil war in Syria, here the international community should focus on diplomatic endeavours which not only involve the conflict parties in Syria itself and in the wider region in the solution but also curb/end the escalating influence of other countries. A coherent and consistent response to international terrorists can only be achieved if countries act together.

2. Restricting terror groups

The social and economic conditions, in the regions of origin and in spillover areas, which have led to the emergence or embedding of terrorist groups must be reformed. Based on development policy and humanitarian objectives, development cooperation and humanitarian assistance will ultimately create conditions, in both the intervention and "at risk" areas, which prevent these groups from gaining a foothold or setting up new organizations.

More intensive efforts are needed from the EU and its members in the fields of economic, trade, agricultural and development policy, aimed at mitigating factors which are conducive to radicalization and the emergence of terror groups and state failure. The European countries should take more resolute steps to strengthen governance in fragile or failed states. This is not only about institutional reform. Above all, it is about creating peaceful and inclusive societies (SDG 16). The vulnerability of many economically and politically unstable countries to international terrorism can be greatly reduced if, above all, the economic and institutional frameworks for inclusive, responsible and legitimate governance conducive to the public good are established.

But in Europe too, the recruitment of violent terrorist offenders must be countered, mainly by offering marginalised groups of young people the opportunity for inclusion in social and economic life.

3. Preventing terrorism

The prevention of terrorism must be based on long-term strategies which aim to address its causes. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development offers a normative framework here. With the 2030 Agenda, the world's countries have committed to working together towards sustainable and equitable development. In order to

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do justice to the ethical principle underlying the Agenda, namely to “leave no one behind”, efforts must focus primarily on making progress towards better conditions of life and prospects for disadvantaged and marginalized groups.

By strengthening international cooperation in order to overcome poverty, unemployment and extreme social inequality and to promote social inclusion and protect the natural resources on which life depends in accordance with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), it is possible to counter hopelessness and frustration, especially among young people, who are particularly receptive to the messages of terrorist ideologues. Making the 2030 Agenda a reality would cut the ground from under terrorism once and for all. SDG 16 – which promotes the creation of peaceful and inclusive societies and effective rule of law institutions – must be a particular focus of attention. Here, the dialogue with influential representatives of other faiths has an important role to play in unmasking the abuse of religion by

those who promote radical and fundamentalist interpretations.

An approach based on the logic of peace will always look at our own role as well, and at how it may be worsening conflict. Looking at Germany’s current arms exports, it is striking that despite the massively escalating situation in North Africa and the Middle East, exports to Lebanon and Jordan – countries which directly neighbour the sphere of influence of “Islamic State” – are continuing as a priority. Exports have been going to this region for years, and not only weapons but also licences to reproduce German small arms have been provided. The lack of end-use controls, combined with the longevity of small arms and light weapons, means that German guns are proliferating throughout the region. So we are calling for a ban on arms exports to the crisis region in North Africa and the Middle East, the withdrawal of licences to reproduce German weapons, and action on disarmament and the decommissioning of weapons already in circulation.

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