



**Lina Kolesnikova looks at the global response to ISIS, and argues that cuts in spending on counter terrorism could leave us exposed to attack by returning fighters**

**O**n 15 September 2014 more than 30 countries, including ten Arab states, met in Paris and discussed the proposed US-led alliance to contain and combat the militants of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). The talks had been called to agree a strategy to combat the group, which controls large parts of Iraq and Syria. The CIA estimates that Islamic State has between 20,000 and 31,000 fighters in both countries. The summit declaration said participants were “committed to supporting the new Iraqi government in its fight... by any means necessary, including appropriate military assistance”.

But ISIS and its supporters pose a threat not only in Iraq and Syria, but also to Europe, the US and

Australia. On 20 September, Belgian authorities confirmed they had made several arrests as they sought to prevent jihadist fighters or sympathisers with ISIS extremist group from carrying out attacks on European institutions. Citing unnamed sources, NOS (the Dutch public broadcaster) said one possible target was the Commission building, with the aim being to kill as many people as possible, in a plot which bore similarities to the attack on a Jewish museum in May 2014. Belgian police reportedly found guns and bulletproof vests, while Dutch police uncovered jihadist literature. The arrests and seizure of arms resulted from simultaneous home raids in Brussels and The Hague. One raid was reportedly carried out in The Hague’s Schilderswijk district, where a demonstration in support of the Islamic State recently

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took place. NOS reported that a man and woman of Turkish descent were arrested early last month when they arrived in Brussels on a flight from Turkey. Both had allegedly been in Syria. The arrests come as Belgium's authorities are investigating extremism in the region and have detained a number of people suspected of having links with jihadists, Belgian daily L'Echo has said.

Meanwhile, in Australia, militants connected with ISIS were allegedly planning to behead a member of the public. More than 800 police were involved in a security operation in Sydney and Brisbane, which was described as the largest in Australian history and resulted in the detention of 15 people, police said. ISIS also threatened Russia, and Vladimir Putin in particular, in a video which was released in September. The group

denounced the Russian authorities for their military assistance of the Assad regime. ISIS is believed to include more than 800 people from Russia and the Russian Caucasus among its ranks.

Considering that citizens from more than 70 countries are fighting with ISIS, we may say that the group has now become an international security problem, adding new, more serious challenges to those already being faced in the region. But in spite of this growing threat, during the last ten years we have witnessed constant cuts to counter terrorism (CT) budgets in all countries. MI5, MI6 and GCHQ in the UK are all drawing up plans to cope with reduced funding. The US Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) has reduced training and travel and delayed information-technology upgrades due to the risk of budget cuts to their operations, particularly in the areas of counter terrorism and cyber threats. And, according to non-official information, Russia has also had to review its CT budget after spending a record two billion dollars on security for the Sochi Winter Olympics earlier this year.

Considering the current economic situation, we may assume that there will be more budget cuts in the very near future. It is wishful thinking to assume common sense will prevail in most of the countries facing terrorist threats, and that intelligence services' budgets will be ring-fenced. In his article "Old Allies and New Friends: Intelligence-Sharing in the War on Terror", Derek Reveron states: "The war on terror requires high levels of intelligence to identify a threat relative to the amount of force required to neutralise it"; as opposed to conventional wars where the opposite is true. Intelligence is therefore the cornerstone of effective counter terrorism operations in the post-9/11 world. But no intelligence service is able to meet challenges of modern terrorism alone – long term CT alliances should be built not only with traditional partners but also with non-traditional partners, or so-called "new friends" in the fight against terrorism. Traditional intelligence allies of the United States, for example, fall into two major groups: 5 Eyes (the term for the 1947 intelligence sharing agreement between the US, UK, Canada, Australia and New Zealand) and Nato. Meanwhile, new terrorist challenges will drive the US and EU to consider developing new working relationships with historically friendly and unfriendly nations. There are also opportunities to build some new intelligence alliances via intermediaries (third countries), if there is a need to work with otherwise unfriendly peers. Intelligence sharing via such arrangements may gain insight into threats from the experiences these nations have already had with specific terrorist groups and, possibly, employ comparative advantage and shared burdens for CT operations.

It is now necessary to look for new, to some extent unconventional, counter-terrorist solutions. The situation with ISIS has clearly shown that only joint efforts can help to minimise the risk of attacks performed by returning militants (for example EU citizens of various origin returning back home to the EU). Mehdi Nemmouche, who carried out the attack on the Jewish museum in Brussels, was under close surveillance at the time and was on the border watch list. He did not enter

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Belgium directly, however. Instead, he managed to re-enter Europe through Germany and then moved on to Belgium, thus avoiding controls at the Belgian border. This suggests that, despite the aired concern about militants originating from Europe and coming back after having fought in Syria, actual control over movements of such people is not in place. Certainly, it is not co-ordinated across Europe. This might mean that Europe-wide co-operation in following up the ex-ISIS fighters is inadequate or non-existent. Being under police surveillance in one EU country, terrorists may well try to carry out terrorist attacks in another EU country or the US or Australia. There is an urgent need for a common database or shared lists of people, including all nationalities, who fight in Iraq and Syria. It is necessary to consider not only airports as points of entry but also buses, trains or even boats with illegal immigrants. This does not fit well with the current policy of “no internal borders” between most of the European countries, however.

Another serious threat is that of potential terrorists who never travelled to Middle East but are inspired by the violence there. The fighting in Syria and Iraq has spawned propaganda that may lead to attack plots in Western countries. Promoting this cause is central to terrorism. ISIS members appear to have adopted social media to spread their message, among other means.

In spite of all these threats, law enforcement and crisis management agencies risk losing their budgets. There is a common opinion that current resources can be used in a more efficient way. But there is also a certain degree of risk that further cuts could lead to a reduction in the safety and security of citizens in most countries. Several areas of law enforcement and emergency response that would suffer tremendously from budget cuts. For example, training will diminish, and as a result this will cause a lack of frontline skills, investigative know-how, new technology knowledge, etc. The use of less well-trained personnel may lead to under-performance compared to the current situation. It is already clear that there is a lack of highly trained cyber professionals in law enforcement, which will increase with budget cuts.

Information is the life blood of counter terrorism efforts, both at global level and locally. With less information and fewer informants, authorities may lose their ability to prevent attacks. Under-financing may also lead to a loss of surveillance capability or curtailed surveillance operations. Less surveillance may also mean less information and the loss of closer follow-up on groups and individuals.

With smaller budgets for policing and emergency response, authorities may not be able to afford to maintain their frontline operatives on alert for longer periods of time, and may be forced to reduce field time. That may lead to increased gaps between higher and lower activities by the authorities. The emergency response and SWAT response may slow as well. Linked to the point above, team and delivery capacity may also decrease.

The effect of budget cuts on morale may lead to early and/or undesirable increasing number retirements and, subsequently, loss of some expertise. This would further impact available capacity, and, ultimately, capabilities.



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Lower budgets naturally mean that the authorities will have to be more careful in choosing “projects” on which they are prepared to spend, and decrease the number of new investigations.

Preventative activities, which always bear the risk of wasting budget by pursuing innocent targets, will suffer, and counter-proliferation work will be jeopardised. Undertaking less activity will diminish the chances of authorities catching would-be terrorists and preventing an attack while still in the planning phase. Having available the maximum possible information increases the chances that authorities can prevent or deter potential attacks. Reducing the number of agents will debilitate this information gathering, and thus might reduce authorities’ ability to identify and to counter threats.

Budget restrictions have and will continue to impose limits on resources, including personnel and equipment, that are available for CT operations. Given the advances in information technology and, in particular, the wider use of encryption, restrictions in surveillance technology means the facilities used for terrorist communications will not be monitored sufficiently. This may lead to, even temporarily, more and faster communication between terrorist groups and their better co-ordination in preparing their attacks.

***On guard: cuts to counter terrorism and security budgets could leave countries vulnerable to attack***

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