

Terms of Terror: What the Brussels Attacks Mean

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Region: [Europe](#)

Theme: [Terrorism](#)

"I do believe we are not addressing right the issue of terrorism today." Dominique de Villepin, CNBC, Mar 22, 2016

Normalising the state of terror has been an ongoing project for decades. In Europe, it featured the British response to the IRA; the Spanish response to ETA; and the Federal German Republic's approach to the Red Army Faction. The folly of assuming that the Cold War somehow did away with these stresses was evident when the sorrows of empire revisited the West in most spectacular form: the disintegration of the Twin Towers in New York.

Since then, the nonsensical talk of a "war" on terror took root with viral enthusiasm, the Bush-speak that President Barack Obama did, at least initially, try to place into deep, archival storage. Such policies, once created, cannot be undone.

The Belgian Prime Minister Charles Michel decided to leaf through the rhetorical set of the Bush presidency to hurriedly declare what took place in Brussels to be a matter of war. Three bombs had gone off – at Zaventem Airport and Maelbeek metro station.

France's President François Hollande did the same, using language he did when Paris was attacked last November. "The war against terrorism must be conducted across the whole of Europe, and with all the necessary resources, notably with regard to intelligence." [1] Again, abstract nouns could become the subject of military and security targeting.

Now, it was Europe, a civilisation attacked, its cultural institutions challenged. Unfortunately for guardians of a liberal democratic project, it would be absurd to even claim that the targeting of EU institutions by terrorists might necessarily constitute an assault on democracy, let alone a way of life worth defending. Belgian residents and tourists were in the firing line, but the overall targeting of institutions so far removed from democratic practice was an absurdity that should not be missed on the eurocrats.

What did matter here was a brutal realisation that bombs that rain down on Raqqa and other Islamic State positions in the name of civilisation (the appropriate one, in any case) will not immunise European states from retribution. Such measures serve to globalise the conflict, to enlarge the scope of a dispute that might well be far more localised by cooler, and wiser heads. Disaffected and disturbed youths keen for a fight and a mission, many of which can be found in Molenbeek, further complicate the mix.

The economy of the means terrorism employs relative to the state which responds to it is undisputed – while aircraft and missiles are deployed on Islamic State targets at huge cost, retribution can assume the form of bombs detonated near an airline counter at a fraction of the price.

Individuals like Hollande, to justify their continuous projects in the Middle East, have to extract every ounce of worth from the rhetoric of exceptionalism. The resort to the exceptional has not merely issued in the clichés of a security state desperate to claw back initiatives (all that surveillance; all those police and security officers, only to be foiled). It has seen networks in Europe and the United States broadcast wall-to-wall coverage of an event that saw 34 people killed and 170 wounded. Networks such as Australia's twenty-four hour news channel insisted on using the term "breaking news" long after the news had broken.

Celebrities dribbled with sentiment and heavy doses of celebrity, Twitter-driven grief. Supermodel Naomi Campbell and singer Miley Cyrus made the news (because their opinions count) by referencing the event.[2] *Je suis Bruxelles* sprung up like an emotive rash, meaning that no doubt, at some point, the colours of the Belgian flag may well shade social media applications. Such a hackneyed emotional reaction is merely another sign how empathy can be tactically prostituted for the sake of reassurance.

Deeper meaning can be found in the more divisive tools of cultural mobilisation such as Belgium's very own fictional detective Tintin, a reactionary creation who represents solidarity that is, as Scott Timberg suggests, "uncomfortably divisive." [3] "The Adventures of Tintin," goes a contribution in *Vox*, "written by Belgian cartoonist Georges Remi under the pen name Hergé, has long been a symbol of Brussels and a national hero in Belgium." Not to mention a symbol of racial characterisation, caricature and mockery. The fact that he was made to cry at the slaughter in recent depictions is scant comfort.

European and American networks give the airtime that can only be equated to a footnote when the next attack on a school in Waziristan, or the next daring slaughter takes place at the hands of Boko Haram. These events are far more destabilising in their dimensions, but are not the fodder of myopic celebrities who treat a tweet or a social network post as credible engagement. Where to now? More surveillance no doubt, more security baubles, and a fatter budget for an establishment that has not proven itself to be of poor worth. The language of reaction, rather than solution.

In the immediate aftermath of the attacks, talking heads such as Daveed Garstenstein-Ross, senior fellow at the Foundation for Defence of Democracies in Washington, D.C., would comment that, "Belgium is uniquely challenged and its counterterrorism forces uniquely overstretched." [4]

Islamic State and its brand of fiery ideology is only one facet of this broader conflict, which involves dozens of countries with mixed motives and interests. Not all converge with the common goal of ending that artificial experiment that only exists because it has backers who find it convenient. What is clear is that bombs in Raqqa will not end imminent attacks on European soil. The emergency, however fat the cow of counter-terrorism becomes, will continue.

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Notes

[1] <http://www.washingtonexaminer.com/hollande-to-europe-prepare-for-long-war-against-terrorism/article/2586467>

[2] <http://variety.com/2016/biz/news/brussels-attacks-celebrity-reactions-1201736246/>

[3] http://www.salon.com/2016/03/22/tintins_racist_history_symbol_of_brussels_solidarity_is_uncomfortably_divisive/

[4] <http://www.cbc.ca/news/world/brussels-attacks-security-forces-1.3502098>

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