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WHY DID ISIS TARGET FRANCE?

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I SIS has clearly expanded its theatre of operations beyond the Middle East but why did it target France? In the aftermath of the Paris attacks of 13 November, world leaders argued that the goal of the synchronized attacks that killed 129 people and injured 352 more was to destroy key components of Western culture such as ‘freedom’ and ‘democracy’.

French president François Hollande blamed the ‘terrorist army Daesh (ISIS)’ and argued that the attack was ‘against France, against the values that we defend everywhere in the world’. Russian president Vladimir Putin added that the tragedy was an ‘additional proof of the barbaric nature of terrorism, which is posing a challenge to human civilization’ and for US president Barack Obama, it was ‘an attack on all of humanity and the universal values we share’.

However, is it accurate to say that ISIS is trying to destroy civilization or democracy? If so, is France the country that best represents democratic values and freedom? Or could it have something to do with the French foreign policy in the Middle East?

France has been more active in Syria than any other European Member State. French policy towards the civil war has been aimed at removing President Bashar al-Assad from power and launching airstrikes in Syria against The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL, or ISIS or Daesh, calling itself the Islamic State). The US has led the coalition carrying out air strikes in Syria for the last 15 months while Britain has chosen to remain more active in neighbouring Iraq.

ISIS claimed the Paris attacks were a response to France’s campaign against its fighters and insults against Islam’s prophet, an argument that was also voiced by the ‘lone wolves’ who attacked the *Charlie Hebdo* offices and the Kosher supermarket in January 2015. ISIS has warned that France would remain one of its top targets but announced that the next attacks would include the capital cities of Rome, London and Washington, D.C.

The terrorist response to French interventionism is ‘tit for tat’ but also indicates a radical change of strategy by ISIS. To date, most analysts argued that the goal of ISIS was to control territory in the form of a ‘caliphate’ which has been carved out of sections of Syria and Iraq.

With the Paris attacks, ISIS has engaged in a centrally planned campaign of terrorism aimed at inflicting huge civilian casualties on a distant country, forcing counterterrorism experts to recalibrate their assessment of the group.

During the past year, analysts have argued that ISIS was a state in the making instead of an insurgent group with global ambitions. It is no longer possible to argue that ISIS wants only to create an area of 'rebel governance'. Exercising the monopoly of violence in a territory was not a goal but a means to an end.

Besides ruling an Islamic State, the organisation wants to claim responsibility for and control of Muslims worldwide. Managing territory and infrastructures allowed ISIS to generate revenue, recruit militants, conquer new lands, and hence spread its area of influence further.

ISIS was born as a splinter faction of Al Qaeda in Iraq. The group soon became a rival trying to outbid Al Qaeda but, as time goes by, the two came to resemble each other more and more. Al Qaeda managed to provoke a series of military interventions after targeting the US in its homeland, an act of war that provided Osama Bin Laden's group with even more legitimacy.

France has declared war on ISIS and has intensified its bombardment of ISIS targets in Syria. One can only hope that the pertinent lessons from the US 'War on Terror' have been learnt (meaning to have clear military objectives and exit strategies).

The strategic evolution of ISIS also resembles that of Al Qaeda, which grew from being grounded in a handful of conflicts to organising its global struggle through a series of franchises with only loose connections to Al Qaeda Central.

ISIS will face the dilemma of solidifying the power of its 'caliphate' or growing into a global insurgency that can inspire Muslims across the world. The good news is that it will not be able to do both effectively.

The EU should stay calm and keep its perspective. As more details about the attack emerge, law enforcement agencies will be required to revise existing protocols, strengthen security measures and come up with new initiatives (e.g. tackling ISIS sources of funding such as oil revenues). Measures that deal with the internal and external dimension of the attacks will have to be revisited.

A radical change of security policies is not to be expected. France and the EU are likely to increase border controls (in the light of the forthcoming Paris summit), monitor jihadists known to the police, and expand surveillance operations to a wider range of suspected 'home-grown terrorists'.

Demands of further negotiations to end the Syrian war are also likely to emerge. France has responded to the attacks by bombing ISIS positions in Raqqa but calls for 'boots on the ground' might also follow soon. After all, the military intervention in Iraq and the civil war in Syria created the conditions that made the emergence of ISIS possible. Dealing with this 'fertile ground' for terrorism is a priority and the Paris attacks may open a window of opportunity for the de-escalation of the civil war where a plethora of domestic actors and international powers will participate.

French authorities will also seek to have Muslim communities on board. Religious leaders, local activists and families are cornerstones of prevention strategies. They can also be the best source of information on the insecurities and grievances that affect those in danger of being radicalized. For example, the grievances that gave birth to the revolt of the *banlieues* (e.g. level of integration and access to the la-

bour market) are still in place. Preventing the emergence of radical milieus among France's Muslim population will be essential.

The main victims of ISIS have been Muslim states and citizens. Destroying democratic values of the West has not been an ISIS goal and the reason for targeting France has more to do with its foreign policy in Syria. However, as France declares itself at war with ISIS, there is a danger of the conflict being perceived along religious or civilizational lines. Nothing would please ISIS more than using its on-line propaganda machine to disseminate an image of 'Christian crusaders' vs. 'Muslim martyrs' in order to attract supporters and revitalize its recruitment base.

As the fight against ISIS terrorism expands, both France and the EU need to make sure that their response to terrorism does not diminish democracy more than the acts of terrorism themselves. EU Member States have defined ISIS as the enemy, but they will do well to discriminate between militants and potential supporters, especially among those who live within its borders.