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Switzerland's response to the new terrorist threat

by Fabien Merz

Since 2013, the Swiss Federal Intelligence Service (FIS) has warned of a heightened threat emanating from jihadi terrorism in Switzerland. According to FIS's assessment, the threat has continuously risen since then and reached a new high in 2016. This is a new situation for a country that has, since the two attacks conducted by Palestinian groups targeting an El Al airplane in Kloten in 1969 and the bombing of a Swissair machine in 1970, remained largely unscathed by terrorism. This has remained true even in the decade after 9/11 when a wave of jihadi terrorism inspired and often directed by al-Qaeda struck urban centers in Europe and elsewhere on multiple occasions.[1]

A few reasons are usually named why Switzerland has been less affected by jihadist terrorism than other European countries. Most notably, its foreign policy informed by neutrality that made Switzerland less likely to become a deliberate target of jihadi groups as well as the country's low levels of domestic radicalization. Indeed, a study conducted by ETH Zürich in 2013 found that Switzerland has been less touched by jihadist radicalization than other European countries. This, the study argued, was due to a number of factors. Firstly, the absence of "infecting clusters", i.e. a jihadist mosque or a network of committed jihadists operating on its soil. Secondly, Switzerland's ability to provide a good degree of social, economic and cultural integration to most Muslims living in Switzerland. Thirdly, the fact that 80-90% of the Swiss Muslim population trace their roots back to the Balkans and Turkey and that they often practice a tolerant and apolitical form of Islam thereby makes them more impermeable to radicalization. Finally, Swiss neutrality and the foreign policy resulting from it also plays a role by not giving any reasons of resentment to most Swiss Muslims.

The new nature of the terrorist threat for Switzerland

Despite this, Switzerland has not shown to be immune to the wave of radicalization that has accompanied the war in Syria and the rise to power of the "Islamic State" (IS) from 2012 onwards. Like in other Western countries, jihadist radicalization has also led to a number of individuals leaving Switzerland to join jihadi groups in Syria and in Iraq. Until Mai 2013, the FIS had registered around 20 jihadi travelers that had departed Switzerland for a conflict zone. One year later, in Mai 2014, these number had risen to 40. To this date, the FIS has registered 77 such jihadist motivated travels of which 63 left for the conflict zones in Syria and Iraq.

The total numbers may appear unimpressive in comparison to other European countries (approximatively 800 from Germany, 300 from Austria, 1700 from France, and around 470 from Belgium to name a few). For a country the size of Switzerland, which has long been used to exceptionally low levels of radicalization until 2013, these figures must however be considered significant. The potential threat such individuals can pose has been demonstrated repeatedly by recent attacks across Europe which involved foreign fighters, including the November 2015 attacks in Paris.

In addition to this uptick in domestic radicalization, IS, the group driving these trends, has displayed a willingness to systematically target the West. This has further heightened the terrorist threat not only for those countries directly involved in military action against IS but for the Western world at large. These developments have also impacted Switzerland, which, despite its neutrality, fits into IS's broader concept of the enemy. Although not considered a primary target, there have been instances in which the group's propaganda named Switzerland or [displayed the Swiss flag](#) along those of countries participating in the "crusade" against IS. Congruently, there is also an increased danger that Switzerland could be used as a preparation and transit area for attacks in countries engaged militarily against IS, or that the interests of these actors could be targeted directly on Swiss soil. In that regard, international Geneva, Bern with its embassies and Zürich as a hub of international finance seem particularly threatened.

Response at the international level

Fully aware of this new set of circumstances, Switzerland has increased its effort to tackle these issues in the framework of organizations such as the UN, the Global Counterterrorism Forum (GCTF), the Council of Europe and the OSCE. For example, for its OSCE presidency in 2014, Switzerland has included the topic of returning jihadist foreign fighters among its priorities. This resulted in the [Ministerial Council Declaration on the OSCE Role in Countering the Phenomenon of Foreign Terrorist Fighters](#). Since 2015, Switzerland has also consistently emphasized the importance of Preventing Violent Extremism (PVE). Switzerland was a staunch supporter of [UN's Action Plan on Preventing Violent Extremism](#). In that vein, Switzerland co-organized the [Geneva Conference on Preventing Violent Extremism](#) with the UN in April 2016, where the Swiss Government also presented its [Foreign Policy Action Plan on Preventing Violent Extremism](#). Additionally, Switzerland is one of the largest contributors to the Geneva-based [Global Community Engagement and Resilience Fund](#) (GCERF). As one of Switzerland's foreign policy priorities in the field of counterterrorism in the nation's [Foreign policy Strategy 2016-19](#), Switzerland's engagement against violent extremism is likely to remain strong in the years to come.

Response at the domestic level

Implementing parts of relevant [UN Security Council Resolutions](#), Switzerland has adapted its [legislation](#) by explicitly forbidding IS and affiliated groups and made any kind of support to these groups a punishable offence. Currently the further tightening of these legal provisions is being [discussed](#). Further working towards the implementation of relevant [UN Security Council Resolutions](#), a legislative consultation is also ongoing in order to allow the security services to [prevent individuals more effectively from leaving Swiss territory in order to join jihadi groups](#).

In a referendum vote on 25 September 2016, the Swiss electorate also accepted a new [Intelligence Service Act](#), providing the FIS with up-to-date means for gathering information adapted to the new threats and to technological advances. Additionally to the creation of almost 100 new positions related to counterterrorism at the federal level and the provision of financing by the federal state for additional 20 positions in the cantons since 2015, the implementation of the Intelligence Service act will further increase the staffing of the FIS by 20 positions.

Emphasizing that Switzerland's fight against terrorism is to take place within the framework of the constitution and in accordance with international law, the publication of Switzerland's first ever national [Counterterrorism strategy](#) in 2015 can be seen as a further indication of Switzerland's decisive yet balanced approach to the new terrorism related challenges. This document also provides a written record of established activities and processes at federal and cantonal levels and thus creates a common basis for counterterrorism in Switzerland.

Early on a multi-agency task force (TETRA) was created in order to deal with the phenomenon of jihadi travelers. The task force has seen its mandate expand to deal with issues related to terrorism more broadly and serves as a coordination body, evaluates the threat and the current measures in place, and makes recommendations on how

to further improve the Swiss response to terrorism. TETRA presented two reports at the beginning and at the end of 2015, respectively, stressing the need to further increase cooperation and information sharing at both the national and international level and to more decisively take on the phenomenon of domestic radicalization.

Due to Switzerland's federal structure, the domestic dimension of preventing radicalization is the main responsibility of actors at the cantonal and communal level. Accordingly, the cantons and cities most affected have become active in the area. The canton of Geneva is the first and so far the only canton to introduce a comprehensive strategy aimed at preventing radicalization. Cities such as Bern, Zürich and Winterthur have, for their part, created new counseling services or prepared already existing violence prevention services to deal with cases of jihadi radicalization. Because coordination and information sharing is particularly important in a federal state, the Swiss security network (SSN), a co-ordinating body that comprises all federal, cantonal and communal security policy instruments, has elaborated an overview of existing measures for preventing radicalisation in order to pass on knowledge and ideas and make first broad recommendations. Building on this, the SSN is currently working on a National Action Plan for the prevention of radicalization and violent extremism that will, amongst other things, concretize the recommendations of the previous report.

Conclusion

Switzerland, which throughout recent history could be considered somewhat of a "special case" in terms of insulation from terrorist threats, has seen its situation change since the rise of IS and the upsurge of jihadi radicalization throughout the world. Despite having been spared by attacks so far, there are indications suggesting that the factors which used to mitigate the terrorist threat for Switzerland might be eroding. IS's propaganda makes clear that non-participation in military action against the group doesn't bar from being perceived as a legitimate target. Also, the assumption that Switzerland's particularities make it an exception when it comes to jihadi radicalization is increasingly being questioned by the numbers of foreign fighters hailing from Switzerland.

So far, on a domestic level, striking the balance between individual freedom and security, Switzerland has acted foresightedly in order to adapt to this new situation. Aware that certain aspects of these new threats cannot be confronted unilaterally, Switzerland has also increased its efforts to tackle these issues multilaterally, emphasizing the central role of the UN and respect for international law when tackling terrorism internationally. Switzerland has, therefore, confronted the new threats in a decisive yet balanced manner.

In the future, tackling radicalization and the phenomenon of foreign fighters will continue to be of paramount importance for Switzerland to be able to effectively mitigate the threat emanating from terrorism. In the wake of the developments on the battlefield in Syria and Iraq where ISIS has increasingly come under pressure—a development that could cause larger numbers of western foreign fighters returning to their countries of origin—it now also seems particularly important that the relevant services and actors in Switzerland are prepared for such an eventuality and that they have the resources available to adequately deal with a potential influx of returnees.

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1. However, Swiss citizens have been killed or kidnapped by various terrorist groups abroad. ↵

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