Counterterrorism and Intelligence-Sharing Cooperation in Southeast Europe: Combating New Post-9/11 Threats

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January 2015
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Abstract

The end of the Cold War more than 20 years ago created a world in which the relatively stable balance between the two superpowers has disappeared. During the Cold War, a country’s every action was conducted in the light of the adversary relationship between the United States and the Soviet Union. On 9/11/ the international community was introduced to a new type of terrorism, one that was truly global in its organization and impact. In both the European Union and the United States, it was immediately clear that an effective response would require new levels of intelligence cooperation in order to confront terrorism, Islamic networks, illegal immigration, and transnational organized crime in Southeast Europe. The article highlights the sense of urgency generated by the terrorist acts in New York (2001), Madrid (2004), London (2005), and Burgas (2012) in Bulgaria, which is accelerating measures that will have important consequences for Southeastern European counter-terrorism and intelligence-sharing cooperation.

Keywords: Intelligence-sharing, counter-terrorism, organized crime, illegal immigration, Islamic networks.

Introduction

The end of the Cold War more than two decades ago towards the end of the Twentieth Century created a world in which the relatively stable balance between the two superpowers has disappeared. During the Cold War, a country’s every action was conducted in the light of the adversarial relationship between the United States and the Soviet Union. The cataclysmic changes that took place in Central and Eastern Europe around 1990 inevitably changed the face of politics in Europe and in the Western world as a whole. The civil war in Yugoslavia was the first case of ethnic conflict in Europe in the post-Cold War order.

The post- September 11, 2001, era has challenged governments, policy-makers, religious leaders, the media, and the general public to play both critical and constructive roles in the war against global terrorism (Nomikos J: 2005) As the intelligence community works its way into the twenty-first century, it faces an unprecedented array of challenges. The chaotic world environment of the post-Cold War era (Arab Spring, Syria crisis, Euro-zone financial crisis, Iran nuclear issue, illegal immigration, Islamic networks, terrorism, and transnational organized crime) offers a wide range of different issues to be understood, and a variety of new threats to be anticipated. The rapidly
developing Information Age presents advanced and complex information technology and methodologies to be mastered and integrated into the intelligence process. (Monthorpe Jr. W: 1998).

It is in this context that the present article highlights past and present intelligence sharing networks in Europe such as the Trident, Kilowatt, and Megatonne networks; the Trevi and Berne groups; and the European Union Situation Center (SitCen) and points out the benefits of Southeastern European states’ counterterrorism and intelligence-sharing cooperation in order to combat post-9/11 threats such as illegal immigration, Islamic networks, human trafficking, and terrorism-organized crime groups.

Counterterrorism and Intelligence-Sharing Cooperation: From Past to Present

The early years of the European integration process also saw the emergence of the first two post-World War II intelligence cooperation frameworks, NATO’s intelligence sharing mechanisms and the Trident Network. (Nomikos J: 2007a) When discussing institutionalized forms of intelligence collaboration, it is important to distinguish their functional characteristics, which differ greatly from those of other open international cooperation bodies. Despite their often-dramatic names, these intelligence networks lacked permanent structures of their own, being dependent on the participating services to provide the necessary budgets, secretariat, and facilities. The main operational characteristics were standardized forms of communications, regular meetings, and permanent liaison, making information of common interest available on a multilateral basis. Due to the secrecy surrounding the activities of these frameworks it is hard to catalogue their exact development and modes of operation, but sufficient information is available to identify overall trends and methods to be explored. Moreover, one needs to answer the following questions in order to understand the advantages of counterterrorism as well as of intelligence-sharing in Southeast Europe:

Do the Southeastern European states have sufficient trust in each other to share effectively? How, if at all, do European Union institutions facilitate sharing? In what follows, few networks and institutions are described – the Trident, Kilowatt, and Megatonne networks, the Trevi and the Berne groups, and as last the Europol and the European Union situation center which the European Commission has created in order to support the sharing of intelligence.

Trident Intelligence Network

The intelligence cooperation framework formed in the late 1950s was Trident, also known as the “Treaty of Periphery” (Shpiro Sh: 1995) Trident was initiated in 1958 by the intelligence services in Israel, Turkey, and Iran, and was later joined by Ethiopia. Although not formally a European group, almost each of the Trident members was supported and “sponsored” to some extent by European and American intelligence services, which were the driving force behind its operations.

The aim of Trident was to provide intelligence cooperation against the rising tide of Arab nationalism. The Turkish and Iranian intelligence services enjoyed close connections with the intelligence services of several European states, while the United States was pushing into closer cooperation in the hope of exerting influence in a region where it formerly had few political and intelligence assets.

Trident was also supported to some extent by the French intelligence services, which at the time were embroiled in the civil war in Algeria, since Algerian rebels were supplied and trained by Egypt and other Arab states. Although its level of intensity fluctuated, intelligence cooperation under Trident was maintained until the 1979 revolution in Iran. Iran was a pivotal player and once it left Trident the intelligence cooperation all but stopped. Trident made a distinct contribution towards closer relations between the participating states in the Balkan-Mediterranean area.
Kilowatt and Megatonne Intelligence Networks

The war against international terrorism in the 1970s brought about two more institutionalized multilateral cooperation frameworks, the Kilowatt and Megatonne intelligence networks. (Nomikos J: 2005) Kilowatt was the code name for multilateral intelligence cooperation efforts among European and Mediterranean countries aimed at expanding the exchange of information in the fight against terrorism. Kilowatt was the first truly European intelligence forum, comprising representatives of intelligence services from the United Kingdom, France, West Germany, Italy, Belgium, the Netherlands, Switzerland, Denmark, Ireland, Norway, and Israel. Its main purpose was to provide exchange of information on the activities of Palestinian and international terrorists. Few details are available on the activities of Kilowatt, but it was an effective tool in reducing the level of terrorist activities in Western Europe and Balkan-Mediterranean regions in the late 1970s.

Even less is known about the activities of the Megatonne intelligence network, reported as a framework for sharing intelligence on the activities of radical terrorists in Europe. Megatonne was apparently sponsored by French intelligence services and aimed mainly at countering the threat of Islamic Algerian terrorists in the European mainland, activities that escalated in the early 1990s. Furthermore, two more cooperation frameworks are included in this article, although one was not strictly an arrangement between intelligence services but rather more a political and law enforcement structure. These are the Trevi and Berne groups.

Trevi Group

The Trevi group (Shpiro Sh: 1995) was officially formed at a meeting of the European Community Ministers of Justice and Internal Affairs in Luxembourg in June 1976. At the height of international terror activities in Europe, European Community member states sought to create a formal framework for police cooperation within Europe. The agreement reached established a multinational body within the European Community. But this body was not a part of any European Community structure, and the European Commission did not exert any significant influence on the organization to coordinate and enhance police cooperation in specific matters of common interest and against common threats. After 1992, the Trevi group was integrated into the European Union under new name the “Coordination Committee for Justice and Internal Affairs (K4)” and its functions expanded to regulate proposals over law enforcement and intelligence issues, including the interception of communications, information databases, and privacy.

The Berne Group

The Berne Group or Club of Berne (Nomikos J: 2007b) was formed in the 1970s as a forum for the security services of six European Union member states. It now has 27 members, including all 27 European Union member states, and the chair of the group rotates in tandem with that of the European Union. The Berne club serves as the principal point of contact of the heads of national security services that meet regularly under its auspices. The Berne club has established working groups on terrorism and organized crime and in 2001 created the counter-terrorist group (CTG) in which the European Union member states, along with the United States, produce common threat assessments that are shared among the membership and with some Union committees (Council of the European Union).

The Berne club does not base its activities on a formal charter and operates outside of the institutions of the European Union. There does not appear to be a formal commitment, or even an expectation, that participants will share all relevant intelligence in their possession with other members.
Europol

The European Police Organization, or Europol, was created by a convention signed by all European Union member states in 1995, and began operations in 1999. An important predecessor to Europol was the Trevi group (as pointed out above) created by the European Community member states in the 1970s as a part of European Political Cooperation (EPC).

Europol’s targets are illegal trafficking in drugs, human beings and vehicles; and illegal immigration, terrorism, forgery, money-laundering and cyber-crime that cross national borders. Its major objective is to improve the intelligence sharing on these matters between the European Union member states rather than engaging in security, police, or counter-terrorism operations directly. It encourages intelligence-sharing (EUROPOL: 2014) by obtaining and analyzing intelligence provided by all European Union member states. It notifies member states when it has information concerning them. It also notifies members any connections identified between criminal offenses, providing strategic intelligence and preparing general situation reports. Since April 2002 it has been establishing ad hoc teams of staff from Europol and interested European Union member-states to collect shared intelligence on specific terrorist groups. Europol has its own department of analysis and is supported by police and coast guard officers from national governments of the European Union member states.

Today, Southeastern European states are entering a fluid and uncertain period, due to a convergence of specific events and factors. In Southeast Europe, there are numerous countries where the situation on the ground can deteriorate quickly and dramatically. Nowadays, Mediterranean and Balkan countries face dramatic financial crises, which have led to an apparently increasingly violent polarization of political extremes. In addition, Europol’s TE-SAT 2012: European Union Terrorism Situation and Trend Report points out that Europe may see an increase in “lone wolf” plots and, not coincidentally, the enhanced use of new technologies and especially of social networking to influence impressionable minds with violent Islamic propaganda. (Deliso Ch: 2013). Unfortunately, this was the case with the murder of two U.S. soldiers in March 2011 by a young Kosovo Albanian immigrant in Germany, who stated that has been radicalized by the Internet. Nowadays, Internet Web sites in the Balkan and Mediterranean languages provide propaganda and serve as useful logistics hubs to distribute information and organize protests quickly, leaving state authorities at a tactical disadvantage.

The European Union Situation Center (SitCen)

The Joint European Union Situation Center (SitCen) is an “intelligence branch” of the European Union. In its early years, SitCen was a forum of exchange of open source intelligence (OSINT) between the intelligence services of Germany, France, Italy, the Netherlands, Spain, United Kingdom, and Sweden. The Lisbon Treaty (2009) provided the foundation for the functioning of SitCen, which is subsumed (along with the European Commission crisis room) within the European External Action Service (EEAS) (2010). (Crowe B: 2008) The SitCen monitors the international security situation and assesses terrorist threats to the European Union. It maintains regular contact with national security services of its member states as well as with the European Union Common Security and Defense Policy (CSDP) crisis management missions and personnel deployed as part of these military and civilian operations. The SitCen also initiates immediate actions in response to serious incidents involving the CSDP missions. (K. Davis Cross: 2011) Moreover, SitCen uses images from the European Union member states’ satellites, namely France’s Helios and Pleiades systems, Germany’s SAR-Lupe and Italy’s Cosmo-SkyMed, on top of existing data from U.S.-owned commercial satellites. However, SitCen work is limited to intelligence analysis, and it does not include operations.
or policy formulation for the European Union. Through informal channels, there is an exchange of confidential information among small groups of the European Union member states that have a history of trust and past experience in intelligence sharing. However, it is doubtful that the European External Action Service (EEAS) can effectively update the role of the Joint European Union situation center (SitCen) efficiently while many EU member states face the controversial issue of illegal immigration which can lead to explosive social unrest in Greece and Italy. Today, more than ever, a Common European Union Immigration Policy (CEUIP) is urgently needed. (Nomikos J: 2013).

Since 9/11, the transatlantic intelligence community has grown, and a productive European Union Situation Center (SitCen) consolidates its new role in the twenty-first century. It is becoming a worthy partner for intelligence and security communities in third countries, primarily the United States and Israel.

**Post 9/11 challenges and Islamic networks in Southeastern Europe**

In the twenty-first century, Greece faces new threats in Southeastern Europe. International terrorism remains a vital threat to national and global security threats. There are several specific reasons why the terrorist threat will grow in the near future, including an existing international support network of groups and states that greatly facilitates the undertaking of terrorist activities. (Nomikos J: 2010) The terrorist acts in Madrid (2004), London (2005), and Burgas (2012) underlined the opportunities offered to terrorists and criminals by hesitant or partial intelligence-sharing. Some of the suspects in the Madrid bombings had been of interest to the French and Spanish police in 2001, but were released for lack of evidence. By 2003, two of them were on a list of suspects issued by Moroccan police for a series of café bombings in Casablanca, but they were nevertheless living openly in Madrid. (Nomikos J: 2004) More remarkably, during early April 2004, the inability of the United States to provide Germany with access to a member of Al-Qaeda arrested in Pakistan and held at an undisclosed location, contributed to the early release of Mounir el-Mottassadeq, an important suspect (Nomikos J: 2004) who appeared before the courts in Hamburg, Germany, on charges relating to the 9/11 attacks in the United States.

Networks of Islamic non-governmental organizations (NGOs), charities, and cultural centers linked to Saudi Arabia managed to build and finance a large number of mosques in Kosovo, northern Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Former Yugoslavian Republic of Macedonia (FYROM). In September 2005, a Moroccan citizen, Anwar Mazrar, who was a leading member of an Islamist terrorist group in Morocco and had links with Al-Qaeda, was arrested on the Greek-Turkish border while trying to enter Greece via the Thessaloniki-Istanbul bus service (Nomikos J: 2004). Greek police stated that 90 percent of all illegal immigrants entering Europe do so from the Turkish-Greek borders and Greek islands. This situation has resulted in a national security threat that seems to be hanging over Greece (Nomikos J: 2013).

Arguably the most significant manifestation of the changing security agenda in the Balkan-Mediterranean region has been the continuous intensification and expansion of policing activities in and across the Mediterranean sea, aimed of curbing illegal migration, human trafficking, and other transnational challenges (Lutterbeck D: 2006). Many Mediterranean states have deployed coast guard forces as well as military forces to prevent migration and cross-border crime – and there has also been an intensification of law enforcement cooperation between the states north and south of the Mediterranean. While these measures are often officially justified both on security and on humanitarian grounds, it seems clear that they have also increased the risks for the would-be immigrants, in particular by forcing them towards more dangerous routes.
Furthermore, in Burgas, the fourth-largest city in Bulgaria, a terrorist incident took place that was a brutal attack against western targets in the Balkan peninsula, an area of fast-growing Islamism, specifically Wahhabism, an austere brand of Sunni Islam promoted by radical fighters who aim at causing bloodshed to western hubs as well as serving their domestic flag-waving visions. (Kourkoulos P : 2012). The Balkan states feel a disturbing thorn into their Achilles’s heels, which tends to jar their already weak economies. The rise of radical Islamist cells was inevitable, due to the fact that external actors lay around the corner to exploit the political and economic vacuum.

“According to U.S. estimations, among the 20,000 Muslim students in Bulgarian universities a number of 2-3 percent believe in Wahhabism and usually operate as apostles of radical Islam,” Alex Alexiev, president of the Balkan Center for Black Sea Studies, mentioned in a recent interview. (Kourkoulos P : 2012) Moreover, an important piece of the puzzle was made clear by a Bulgarian government commission in 2010, which concluded that drug trafficking across the country is of significant profit to the Lebanese Hezbollah terrorist organization. This enhances the fears of an organized-crime Islamist network that is fed by external sources. Another illustration of the benefits of such multinational cooperation is the recent arrest, by the Cypriot Intelligence Service and police, of a Hezbollah operative about to launch attacks on Israeli targets in Cyprus. (Fitsanakis J: 2012).

Nowadays, European Union member states are increasingly concerned about the emerging national security threat of “Jihadists returning home.” These are young Muslims, born in Europe and currently fighting or terrorizing civilians in Syria and Iraq, the two exploding flashpoints of the “Global Jihad” in the Middle East. The obvious fear is that – indoctrinated, radicalized to the core, and well trained in killing as part of their “holy” work – these young Muslims will form terrorist cells inside Europe with the objective of causing as much havoc as they can. Routes of returning to their home countries in order to commence terrorist action are well mapped. Perhaps the most obvious such avenue is the Turkey-Greece illegal immigration highway. (Symeonides T: 2014). Overall, this fast developing threat cannot be sufficiently addressed unless there is quick and coordinated work on counterterrorism and intelligence-sharing among the EU member states, covering the entire spectrum of jihadist attempts to join the black banners and then return home. Various reports already indicate that at least 3,000 European Muslims are under arms in Syria, and this number is expected to grow exponentially.

**Conclusion**

During the Cold War, Southeast Europe was regarded as of secondary importance. Since the end of the Cold War, the Balkan and Mediterranean region has assumed new importance as a focal point of Western concern. The renaissance of the Balkan-Mediterranean peninsula in intelligence and security terms is based on its growing role in the strategic calculus of the European Union, the United States, Russia (its role in Serbia-Kosovo), and the Middle East. (Nomikos J: 2007a). Since September 11, terrorism has shifted from being a risk to a threat. While global terrorism requires a military response, regional terrorism in the Balkan and Mediterranean region requires a more specific political response. The combination of internal political change and the continuing effects of the loss of Cold War moorings has significant consequences for the strategic environment of the states in Southeast Europe.

Although the environment in Southeast Europe is now more peaceful than during the 1990s, there still are multiple sources of insecurity. Societies across the southern and eastern shores of the Mediterranean (Arab Spring, Syrian crisis, and energy security in the Mediterranean Sea) are experiencing rapid political and economic changes. For the foreseeable future, security agendas in the Balkan and Mediterranean states will be driven to a considerable extent by internal security concerns.
The Madrid (2004) and London (2005) terrorist attacks deeply shocked the European Union member states and served as a terrible reminder of the threat posed by terrorism. The European response to Islamic terrorism was slow and hampered by lack of sufficient understanding of the nature and sources of the terrorist threat. (Nomikos J: 2007a).

Much has been achieved in reshaping the intelligence communities of Southeastern European states in recent years. However, there is still a long way to go in order to effectively confront future challenges and emerging threats. The world will require intelligence to be dispersed, sharing information and analyses among a variety of would-be coalition partners, including foreigners and institutions outside of governments such as specialized research organizations that focus their agenda on security-intelligence studies.

Last but not least, collective action among the intelligence services in the Southeastern European countries has depended on shared intelligence and common counter-terrorism assessments as the most important weapons in the battle to contain Islamic terrorism, illegal immigration, human trafficking, and organized crime groups in the twenty-first century.

References


