

The Role of the Armed Forces in the Struggle Against Terrorism

Numerous experts foresee terrorism multiplying in the years to come. Most of our allies have made the anti-terrorist struggle a national priority and, to varying degrees, have committed their military to it. **What, then, is the French strategy on this matter?**

By MAJOR NICOLAS BRENGUES, STUDENT, 12TH CID

September 11th, 2001, the “Great Leap Forward”

Up until September 11th, 2001 the vast majority of strategic pundits downplayed the risk of terror. Today, many of them are outdoing each other's pessimism. They herald the advent of an era of asymmetric wars that, according to François Heisbourg, will last thirty years. Wars where western civilization lies in hard opposition to various factions. Accepting this analysis, which comes as timely backlash, seems simplistic, but denying further progression of events would be blameworthy.

Despite the efforts by Ben Laden and his accomplices to impose it on the entire *Oumma*, *Salafism* remains outside mainstream Islam. Other radical concepts of Islam vie with it. Notwithstanding predictions by Samuel Huntington and Benjamin Barber, the rallying of hundreds of millions of moderate Muslims is clearly not imminent.

Without falling prey to “**the sky is falling**” mentality inspired by some factions, one must admit two facts:

- the same Muslims or other political factions will certainly perpetuate these type of attacks again,
- this new, more global, more lethal, more strategic terrorism, is departing from its usual rationale.

Therefore, terrorism no longer falls under the sole jurisdiction of law enforcement agencies. In fact, it constitutes a veritable upheaval in international relations.

It is too early to try to measure the success of this modern terrorism in the long term, even if Alexandre Adler has already, not without ulterior

motives, “seen the end of the ancient world.” There is probably a limit to savagery just as to cowardice. Beyond this limit the “hyper-terrorists” will not be able to go without undermining their very relative legitimacy. Nevertheless, the birth of a feeling of fear among Westerners and the increasing spreading of Islamic propaganda constitute two intermediate successes that will encourage these extremists to continue.

The Armed Forces Involved in Many Arenas

Since the 90s, the three military services in France have been closely associated with the anti-terrorist priorities of security services. Despite its commendable interaction at start, this interagency cooperation did not grow.

The strategic choices of our allies might call us into question. Our allies, and not just those across the Atlantic, are studying different levels of military engagement in the struggle against terrorism. If nothing else, they all share the notion that the armed forces must participate either in action or at least in concept. This trend will surely grow stronger since NATO made the decision to take on the struggle against terrorism.

A country does not derive its defense policy from abroad, but in France the friction between the strategic role of the armed forces and the needs expressed by its public is striking. Taxpayers wonder about the necessity for some military spending while polls suggest that terrorism constitutes their first security concern if not the only. This apparent gap is all the more surprising, as the cause seems to reside at the strategic level. Whatever some great minds may think, the necessity to keep prepared for a high intensity conflict against a conventional enemy, whether



equipped with nuclear weapons or not, remains an absolute imperative. Taking into account its present manifestation, however, **terrorism is now also threatening the vital, strategic interests of France as a power. Defending these interests is the *raison d'être* of the armed forces as defined by the Constitution.**

In a similar vein, terrorist attacks are increasing in all countries at war. Proving thus that terrorism is tactically an acceptable course of action likely to be experienced in all modern conflicts. The attack against the shipyard directorate personnel in Karachi finally demonstrates that national defense, as a whole, is a target; its civilian industrial component included, and not only in countries openly at war.

Numerous Paths

We must be aware of one thing: “terrorist prehistory” is finished. The spread of terrorism cannot be explained simply by its low cost; it stresses the success of a concept that skillfully exploits some weaknesses of democratic societies. The impact of the media enables the terrorist, by virtue of a few victims, to take a whole population hostage. Up until this point, the infinite number of targets and of potential methods gave an

unequaled volatility to the threat, increasing tenfold in the future by considerable funding. The permanent harassment strategy of revolutionary guerillas finds new application of worldwide nature.

This technique is clever and its dangers numerous. We must be careful not to sink into **defeatism** by considering terrorism as a modern, elusive, and disembodied misfortune. On the other hand, we must also beware of the **wild goose chase** of always looking for a way of handling the previous attack. Only calm observation neither alarmist nor simplistic is likely to lead to an efficient reaction, aimed at the decisive weaknesses of the terrorists themselves (funding networks, training camps, hideouts, simplistic propaganda, and internal disputes).

Moreover, to be worth it, the investment cannot be limited to the action of a few dedicated services. It must be accompanied by effects **at all levels of public action** such as in bilateral relations with states guilty of ineffectiveness or complaisance toward terrorists.

The struggle against terrorism also requires an evolution of thinking: **communication** constitutes a major universal investment since public opinion is at the core of terrorist acts. So media attention, always quick to embrace just causes, must beware

of the risk of being used as instruments. Far from any censorship, the goal would be to encourage it to handle images with care and to mistrust a too often manipulated gibberish in which charia conceals a Saudi conception of the state, or *mujahedin* elevates the mission of the poor creature guarding the poppy fields in Afghanistan. Similarly it is time to enlighten those French populations most susceptible to propaganda. If Islam is indeed interested in European Muslims, it is primarily to recruit potential martyrs with a high symbolic value who are, moreover, totally free to move throughout Europe. Beyond this opportunistic manipulation, their mentors remain convinced that the young people from the *Maghreb* in the suburbs are definitely corrupted by the Western way of life.

Since it concerns **national security** as a whole, it seems indispensable to create mixed agencies within which joint actions by policemen and the military would be rethought - and not only coordinated. These entities might notably, before the advent of an unfortunate incident, study the legality of soldier participation in police tasks within the *Vigipirate* framework.

As for the **armed forces**, this process would require a thorough reassessment of the strategic situation, taking into account both other priorities and limited resources, in order to confirm or invalidate present priorities, particularly in budgets.

The **Army**, which is first to be committed, cannot be satisfied with the status quo. Ground forces must reexamine the way they conduct missions in France and abroad in the light of terrorist constraints. For units that are naturally used to engagements in a hostile environment this risk does not, in itself, constitute a revolution. However, area control operations, installation of checkpoints, the defense of sensitive locations, as well as all the active and passive security measures are destined to be reworked more or less. These adjustments might apply in all contexts of engagement. They concern infinite related subjects such as the mission of the defense attaches, the role of Special Forces, the fielding of new equipment, etc.

Overcautious Armed Forces

One may object that budgetary rigor and the task list of the armed forces prevent consideration of a whole new set of missions, especially since its implementation probably requires **intergovernmental cooperation**, traditionally not the strong point of the French executive.

France's history reminds us, however, that with regard to national security a mere lack of reactivity by the armed forces may go down in history as a reprehensible **wait-and-see policy**. Let us admit it would be rather difficult to explain why in 2004, the French armed forces do not possess a doctrine clearly defining its forces share, however small, in the struggle against terrorism, particularly since imaginable military actions are varied and modular: capture or neutralization of terrorists, destruction of their infrastructure, and assistance to requesting countries.

The pitfalls of hasty engagement in the struggle against terrorism are also very real. The **ad hoc measures** already taken by the armed forces (surveillance of coastal or airspace approaches, and localized engagement of special forces in Afghanistan), implemented by the whim of circumstance, do not constitute an anti-terrorist strategy. Similarly, disguising military operations as, "preventive actions to guarantee lasting development" do not automatically transform them into appropriate responses to the plague of terrorism. Concerning the alleged relation between poverty and terrorism, it is enough to note that twelve of the nineteen terrorists of September 11th were citizens of Saudi Arabia, an underdeveloped country in many aspects, but that surely does not meet the definition of an impoverished state¹.

1 After WW II, in the USA, poverty was presented as the compost for communism in order to lead the American Congressmen to vote the Marshall plan funds.

Above all, France's **special historic and demographic relationship to Islam** forbids blind copying of foreign anti-terrorist strategy. Its six million French Muslims require us to treat this phenomenon with more subtlety; probably offering us unrecognized possibilities of success.
