

Terrorism at the G7: The Persistence of a Failed Discourse

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Executive Summary

With the addition of Manchester to the extensive list of European cities recently affected by terrorism, the premise that our era has become the 'golden age' of terrorism apparently seems to hold true.

The date of the attack coincided with the high-profile NATO and G7 summits in Brussels and Taormina respectively. Unsurprisingly, the concurrence of such events has re-opened deep-seated insecurities regarding leaders' ability to respect one fundamental stance: citizens' safety. While the issue of terrorism has consistently been on the G7 and G20 agenda, the G7 leaders in Taormina made it clear that they would prioritise the 'urgent' fight against terrorism, most probably at the expense of environmental and economical concerns.

However, statistics tell us a different story. According to [the chart created by Statista](#) of the number of persons killed by terrorist attacks between 1970 and 2015, the number of victims in 2015 rose to 150. Yet, this represents only half of the casualties in 1988, with more than 420 victims in Western Europe. Despite the fact that if there were such a thing as the 'golden age of terrorism' in Europe, it would have happened a long time ago, statistics also show that more people are being killed outside Europe than within. In light of this, how can the G7, which is a Western-dominated forum, adequately deal with the intricacies that constitute the terrorist threat?

This policy brief argues that although the G7 Taormina Summit represented a unique opportunity for leaders to join

mutual efforts and improve intelligence sharing, the G7's military and financial approaches to eliminate terrorism fail to fully capture the factors that fuel this phenomenon. Yet, it can be noticed that the discourse surrounding terrorism is slowly starting to shift from traditional top-down measures, such as increased border security, to a broader, more bottom-up approach, including education and poverty reduction.

Where did the Previous Summits get it Wrong?

Since the 9/11 attacks in 2001, terrorism has taken an increasingly important space in the G7/G20 agenda. The timing of certain attacks, such as the one on 13 2015 in Paris that took place only hours before the beginning of the G20 Antalya Summit in Turkey, contributed to the construction of terrorism not only as an important security issue but also as an existential one. Whether such a securitizing move is justified or not, the immediacy with which these attacks

took place as well as the highly emotional atmosphere that resulted from them put considerable pressure on decision-makers to find an immediate but viable solution.

Yet, the succession of numerous G7 summits and the leaders' ritualistic condemnation of particular terror attacks, followed by their pledges to join effort in the fight against the 'evil of terrorism' leaves us with a bitter taste. It almost seems like the political treatment of this topic is one of a well-oiled and smooth-running machine. Beyond the usual statements indicating leaders' sympathy for the victims and their explicit rejection of the terrorist cause (through repetitive semantic choices to describe them as 'evil', 'barbaric', 'senseless', and 'monsters'), the initiatives proposed to address the phenomenon have remained the same. The financial capabilities that enable terrorist groups to prosper have traditionally been stressed as the root cause that ought to be acted upon and to be phased out. Specific measures to

combat the financing of terrorism involved actions like [imposing financial sanctions and freezing assets](#). Organisations like the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) were established with that prospect. It was argued that scrutinising cases of money laundering would limit transnational organised crime, which the G7 saw as an intrinsic facet of terrorism.

But more recently, the focus on the international financing of terrorism weakened so as to acknowledge the [‘growing flow of foreign terrorist fighters’](#). This clearly reflects on the question of human mobility, a category which now refers to terrorists as much as migrants. At first sight, the measures adopted in order to deal with this newly constituted security threat, such as border management and the limitation of migration, seem to be logical steps in the combat against terrorism. However, when looking at the recent terror attacks taking place in Western Europe, the perpetrators were in the majority, if not always, home-grown. In the case of

the Paris attacks, most of the perpetrators were French and Belgian citizens. The same holds true for the Brussels attacks in 2015, the 2017 Westminster attack, and the recent attack in Manchester.

It has been acknowledged that most of them travelled to warzones such as Syria and Libya and returned home for terrorist purposes, making the point about reinforcing border management to detect travel appropriate. Yet, dealing with the threat of terrorism solely through the lens of human mobility is prejudicial. First, it reproduces the bogus narrative linking terrorism to migration. In light of the Syrian refugee crisis that has continued to worsen since the beginning of airstrikes in 2015, the terrorism-migration nexus has had a highly negative impact on the way the G7 approaches the precariousness in which millions of migrants and asylum seekers find themselves. [Policies established by the previous G7 Summit](#) in Japan to answer the migrant and refugee crisis solely involved the fight

against migrant smuggling and the need to enhance legal channels for migration, thus framing the incoming body of migrants as a security *threat* for Europe rather than considering them as a *threatened* body to be secured. These framing measures regarding migrants are further implemented by the G7's policies that seek to contain the 'threat' of foreign fighters by increasing border control. While some of these measures have indeed shown to be necessary in order to limit terrorism, the similarity with which both of these issues are treated demonstrates the porous nature of what is presented as a terrorist threat.

Second, it fails to recognise the inherently national and even local aspect of the threat; namely that radicalisation comes from 'within'.

The growing inadequacy of these policies has, however, been taken into account. Although the previous G7 Summit in Ise-Shima [re-emphasised the combat against the financing of terrorist activities](#) as one of the most critical

elements in the fight against terrorism, the G7 also raised the concern that 'the evolving nature of current terrorist financing threats requires us to adapt our existing measures to combat those threats', therefore acknowledging their obsolete understanding of terrorism.

The G7 Taormina Summit: A New Paradigm or a Mere Repetition of the Past?

The ritualistic pattern with which the G7 leaders commiserate and condemn recent terror attacks but then invigorate the sense of cooperation in the fight against the 'evil of terrorism' was, as expected, reproduced at the G7 Taormina Summit. All of the leaders started their press conferences with condolences for the victims of the Manchester attack as well as the ones in Egypt and Afghanistan.

The G7 Taormina Statement on the fight against Terrorism and Violent Extremism indicated that the Manchester attack reminded the international community

to [‘redouble’ their efforts](#) in order to turn the commitments adopted at the previous G7 Summit into action. Not much can be made from such vague statements that (voluntarily?) fail to indicate how to implement the idealistic commitments that unite the G7 leaders.

Yet, two innovative approaches broke through the usual, one-dimensional focus on combating terrorism that stresses the imposition of financial sanctions and scrutiny of money laundering, and have already been operationalized for years.

The first one was raised by British Prime Minister Theresa May who [blamed the Internet for enabling terrorism to thrive](#): ‘make no mistake, the fight is moving from the battlefield to the Internet’. To this, May announced achievable steps in order to manage online radicalisation, starting with an enhanced collaboration with social media companies to remove harmful content and signal it to the authorities, which she considers to be their ‘social responsibility’. To some extent, May’s acknowledgement of the

key role that the Internet plays in radicalising individuals challenges the traditional assumption of the terrorist as a ‘foreign enemy’ who, in his ‘irrationality’ and ‘religious backwardness’, seeks to ‘overtake’ the ‘West’. Indeed, the Internet blurs the boundaries that are so deeply entrenched in our Eurocentric understanding of the ‘us’ versus ‘them’ dichotomy. Thus, the mention of the Internet also encompasses the role of European citizens in terrorism. Yet, this aspect was completely ignored by May. What could have been an innovative step in capturing the evolving dynamics that allow terrorism to thrive simply remained a shallow and predisposed analysis of the political landscape.

Another opportunity for change at this G7 Summit was highlighted by Maruyama Norio, the spokesman of Japanese Prime Minister Abe Shinzo. Maruyama instead stressed the role of education and economic equality as well as social integration in preventing radicalisation. This softer and more

bottom-up approach better reflects, at least within Western Europe, the root causes of national citizens' motives to radicalise. Although there is no such thing as a typical 'terrorist profile', it must be noted that the recent wave of attacks that targeted member countries of the G7 were perpetrated by relatively young, home-grown citizens whose lifepaths were marked by 'ghettoisation' and a lack of social opportunity. [The same analysis was shared by newly elected French President Emmanuel Macron](#), who said that to fight against terrorism meant to 'have an agenda on development, education, and public health', because 'terrorists thrive in misery and despair'.

Yet, the important contribution of certain leaders in verbally recognizing the internal racial, social and economic dynamics that reinforce the exclusion of certain communities are quickly brushed over by 'hard power' politics. Exemplified by President of the European Council Donald Tusk, who stated that we should be ['tough, even](#)

[brutal' on terrorism](#), these highly masculinised narratives of conflict only succeed to reproduce a failed discourse on terrorism that engenders the very conditions for this phenomenon to develop.

Conclusion

This policy brief highlights the consistent failure of the G7 leaders to come up with innovative measures to combat terrorism globally. On top of the fact that discussions of terrorism are ultimately motivated by acts of terror that occur in the West, betraying the G7's inherent Eurocentrism, the declared strategies to put an end to it are based on misconceptions regarding the very nature of the concept. The failure of G7 members to recognise their share of responsibility in their support of economic, social and military policies that automatically alienate communities demonstrates that they have once again failed to address the root causes of terrorism. Although the combat against



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the financing of terrorism is relatively robust and already institutionalised, the G7 needs to further stress the national and even local dynamics that constitute terrorism. Until this happens, the G7's initiatives to end terrorism will be

doomed to fail. At least, our leaders will still be able to commiserate.

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