



# STRATEGIC FILE

No. 7 (43), April 2014 © PISM

Editors: Marcin Zaborowski (Editor-in-Chief) • Maya Rostowska (Managing Editor)  
Jarosław Cwiek-Karpowicz • Aleksandra Gawlikowska-Fyk • Artur Gradziuk • Piotr Kościński •  
Łukasz Kulesa • Roderick Parkes • Patrycja Sasnal • Marcin Terlikowski

## When Symmetric and Asymmetric Threats Converge—A New (and Grim) Prospect for NATO

**Kacper Rękawek**

*Terrorism has never disappeared from NATO's list of security concerns. Nonetheless, its stature visibly diminished in the aftermath of the killing of Osama bin Laden and the notional end of the so called Global War on Terror. In early 2014, however, the Alliance is faced with a different type of terrorism that seems to have morphed into an element of a traditional, territorial threat as it emanates from two entities situated on NATO's eastern border: the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant in the South-East, which launches terrorist operatives into Turkey, and the Russian Federation, which utilised asymmetric means to annex Crimea and now stands accused of exporting terrorism to Ukraine. NATO's Eastern members are now concerned with the threat that Russia may use similar means, including terrorism, in order to foment instability on their territories, and the Alliance should now enhance its capabilities in helping them respond to it.*

With NATO preoccupied with issues related to the Russian annexation of Crimea and the events in eastern Ukraine, now is not the time, or so it seems, to talk about asymmetric threats, i.e., terrorism. Surprisingly enough, the events on the Alliance's southern and eastern flanks might force the allies to reconsider their disinterest vis-à-vis terrorism as it might be staging a comeback as a pressing threat to the security of NATO members. Of course, it has never completely disappeared from the Alliance's list of concerns but currently it might be morphing into a truly new challenge not present in North Waziristan but one that actively threatens NATO allies' territory (either from Syria or from Russia, as the Ukrainian prime minister says terrorism is Russia's main "new export" alongside oil and gas),<sup>1</sup> and demands new, "out of the box" responses. Moreover, it no longer solely serves as the weapon of different non-state actors (such as the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, ISIL) but also NATO partners (such the Russian Federation), both of whom could utilise it in their rivalry with the Alliance or its members.

### Is Terrorism Back?

Historically, terrorism has been a method of warfare that could be pursued by non-state actors but also by states, through state-sponsored terrorism. At least from the late 1960s onwards, NATO's Western European allies suffered from such attacks, perpetrated both by domestic and international terrorist entities, including state-supported terrorists who often targeted third-party interests in Europe (e.g., Middle

<sup>1</sup> "Jaceniuk: Nowy towar eksportowy Rosji... terroryzm," *Gazeta.pl*, 16 April 2014, [http://wiadomosci.gazeta.pl/wiadomosci/10,114927,15811007,jaceniuk\\_\\_Nowy\\_towar\\_eksportowy\\_Rosji\\_\\_\\_\\_terroryzm.html#BoxWiad2img](http://wiadomosci.gazeta.pl/wiadomosci/10,114927,15811007,jaceniuk__Nowy_towar_eksportowy_Rosji____terroryzm.html#BoxWiad2img).

Eastern terrorists settling scores or attacking Israeli or Jewish targets in Western Europe). These attacks were mostly regarded as matters to be addressed by intelligence/counter-intelligence or police forces, but there were instances (such as the U.S. bombing of Libya in 1986 in the aftermath of the terrorist attack on a Berlin discotheque) which resulted in a military response. Thus NATO, even though its personnel were targeted by a Soviet Union that supported leftist terrorists, was never at the forefront of combating terrorism.

The situation only seemingly changed in the aftermath of 9/11 when NATO invoked Article 5 of the Washington Treaty and used the Alliance bodies as a platform for discussing counter-terrorism issues and sharing intelligence about the threat. At the same time, NATO developed its expertise as a provider of assistance in relation to “major public events that might attract the interest of terrorists,” established the Defence Against Terrorism Programme of Work (DAT POW), which is intended to enhance the counter-terrorism (CT) capabilities of the Allies, and launched the NATO multinational Chemical, Biological, Radiological and Nuclear CBRN Defence Task Force.<sup>2</sup>

Nonetheless, it would not be an overstatement to claim that the Alliance positioned itself as a CT enabler or multiplier aware of the dominating non-military characteristic of the threat. Such an attitude ensured that NATO’s response to terrorism became the responsibility of the 2010-created Emerging Security Challenges Division. NATO’s 2010 *Strategic Concept* situated terrorism as a moderately pressing, “direct threat to the security of the citizens of NATO countries, and to international stability and prosperity more broadly.” It also promised that NATO would “enhance the capacity to detect and defend” against this threat as “extremist groups continue to spread to, and in, areas of strategic importance to the Alliance.”<sup>3</sup>

More than three years after the adoption of this document, NATO finds itself in a situation in which an “extremist group”—the Al-Qaeda affiliate ISIL—is not only spreading in the “area of strategic importance” (the Middle East) but also controls territory on the Alliance’s border (Turkey/Syria), and most probably conducts terrorist operations on the territory of a member state (Turkey). Simultaneously, Russia, NATO’s neighbour and strategic partner, has utilised non-traditional methods to annex territory belonging to another NATO partner state. In such conditions it would not be unreasonable to plan for an eventuality in which it could also opt to threaten its Western, including Allied, neighbours with other asymmetric threats, such as terrorist violence perpetrated by unmarked operatives seemingly unconnected with Russia. Nowadays, planning for such a scenario, which only a few months ago might have been totally inconceivable, looks like a necessity. Interestingly enough, its development will see terrorism transform from a stand-alone threat emanating from the likes of Al Qaeda situated in distant Afghanistan, to an element of a more traditional and territorial threat, be it from a jihadist statelet (ISIL) or a NATO partner (Russia), both bordering the Alliance. All of this indicates a surprising but also dramatic transformation of terrorism, and to an extent, its comeback, as a viable and pressing security threat to NATO.

## **The Threat from the Southeast: Al Qaeda for the Second Decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

ISIL is a terrorist entity with a long and rich history, albeit under different names (e.g., Tawhid al-Jihad, Al Qaeda in Iraq, the Islamic State of Iraq, ISI).<sup>4</sup> Its existence was announced in April 2013 when its leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, announced ISI’s merger with the jihadists of the Al-Nusra Front, which are fighting in the Syrian civil war. The merged organisation was to function under the name ISIL. The merger failed but ISI still re-branded itself as ISIL and branched out into Syrian territory from its native Iraq. During the ensuing fighting with forces loyal to the Syrian government and feuds with fellow jihadists and other rebels, it managed to win control over swathes of territory in northern and eastern Syria, especially the city of Ar-Raqqah and even parts of Aleppo, Syria’s largest city. It allegedly made the most of the Turkish support for Islamist fighters opposing the government of President Bashar Al-Assad, and managed to benefit from the leaky Turkish–Syrian border through which it was bringing foreigners to fight in its ranks and supplies. ISIL also established a fearsome battlefield reputation and marketed itself as a more effective and deadlier

---

<sup>2</sup> See: “NATO and the Fight against Terrorism,” [www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/76706.htm](http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/76706.htm).

<sup>3</sup> “Active Engagement, Modern Defence. Strategic Concept for the Defence and Security of the Members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation,” [www.nato.int/strategic-concept/pdf/Strat\\_Concept\\_web\\_en.pdf](http://www.nato.int/strategic-concept/pdf/Strat_Concept_web_en.pdf).

<sup>4</sup> ISIL is also popularly known as the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) instead of ISIL.

opposition to Assad than the more moderate rebel forces. At the same time, its members used brutal methods akin to the Taliban in pre-2001 Afghanistan in running the parts of Syria under its control.

Its extreme religious views and political aims (the establishment of a jihadist state in the Middle East or even the notional re-establishment of the Caliphate in territories controlled by ISIL), and its readiness to accommodate foreign fighters from Europe, turned ISIL into a major security concern for Turkey, the EU and the U.S.<sup>5</sup> To an extent, discourse about jihadists taking over the rebellion in Syria dominated the Western perception of the civil war in that country. ISIL, unsurprisingly, wished neither to change this narrative nor to endear itself to Western audiences, and as it began to control territory, it failed to adhere to geopolitical constraints governing the behaviour of established actors of international relations. By the fall of 2013, the jihadists were openly threatening Turkey with terrorist attacks over the closure of a crossing on the Turkish–Syrian border.<sup>6</sup>

At that time, one could have been forgiven for discounting the threats issued by ISIL as mere posturing on behalf of a terrorist entity. At the end of the day, terrorists live to threaten and quite a lot of their publicly announced intentions never come to pass. Nonetheless, it looks as if by late March 2014 the organisation made good on its earlier promises, or so claim the Turkish officials, and sent operatives (a Macedonian, a German Albanian and a Swiss-Kosovar) into Turkey to conduct terrorist attack(s) in Istanbul. Fortunately, they were intercepted, though already in Turkey, and were unsuccessful in carrying out any major attacks, killing just two people.<sup>7</sup>

If ISIL ordered this terrorist cell into Turkey as claimed, then one is effectively faced not with state, but statelet-supported terrorism (ISIL and the territory it controls) that emanates from just outside NATO's southeastern border. Moreover, many of ISIL's foot soldiers are NATO state nationals, and European intelligence services are rightly worried about their intentions after they come back from the civil war in Syria. This is even more worrying when France and the UK have already seen arrests in relation to terrorist plots involving Syrian jihad veterans, and other EU members have arrested individuals assisting terrorism in Syria or those suspected of funnelling fighters to the war there.<sup>8</sup> The non-Turkish "Syrian" plots and recruitment efforts could have of course been devised and run independently of ISIL, but with the alleged dispatch of the first attack cell against Turkey, one can easily imagine similar attempts against other European countries, including NATO members, by the organisation. In this scenario, ISIL becomes an Al Qaeda for the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, but one based in neighbouring Syria and not in distant Afghanistan.

Such a seemingly asymmetric threat, but also one of a territorial nature, is a novelty for Western decision-makers. While asymmetric, it is simultaneously posed by a non-state, terrorist actor with some attributes of territoriality based right on NATO's border. Would intelligence work in Syria, counter-intelligence in Europe, and the interception of communications between ISIL and its "agents," and individual members of the organization suffice to stymie the threat? Or perhaps, the Allies will invoke "collective defence" as enshrined in the *Strategic Concept*? Surprisingly, the Russian actions leading to the annexation of Crimea, in which a state actor used the cover of seemingly asymmetric activities for the achievement of symmetric goals, could help NATO answer these questions.

## **The Threat from the East: "Unmarked" State-Sponsored Terrorism, Sabotage and Urban Guerrilla Activity**

Crimea's short-lived independence, followed by its swift annexation by the Russian Federation would not have happened had it not been for the political crisis in Ukraine that allegedly forced so called local self-defence units to emerge to "protect" the predominantly Russian population of the peninsula. These previously unknown paramilitary cohorts had no overt military markings but their members carried

---

<sup>5</sup> "ICSR Insight: Up to 11,000 foreign fighters in Syria; steep rise among Western Europeans," <http://icsr.info/2013/12/icsr-insight-11000-foreign-fighters-syria-steep-rise-among-western-europeans>.

<sup>6</sup> "ISIS poses threat to Turkish Security," *Daily Star*, 28 November 2013.

<sup>7</sup> S. Idiz, "ISIS Emerges as a Threat to Turkey," *Al-Monitor*, [www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/03/isis-threat-turkey-syria-jihadists.html#](http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/03/isis-threat-turkey-syria-jihadists.html#).

<sup>8</sup> "Un attentat islamiste sans doute déjoué sur la Côte d'Azur," <http://m.20minutes.fr/societe/1334166-attentat-islamiste-doute-dejoue-cote-azur>.

weaponry akin to that of the Ground Forces of the Russian Federation and were dressed in recently issued Russian field uniforms. They encountered no Ukrainian resistance while taking control of the peninsula and were soon replaced by less disciplined, less well-trained and armed volunteer units, which performed security duties during the illegal referendum on Crimea's future on 16 March.

The emergence of the first wave of these all-volunteer militias was either a masterstroke on behalf of the Crimean separatists/proponents of joining Russia or a massive strategic omission on behalf of the Ukrainian counter-intelligence services. Their success could not have materialised without thorough training and preparation, which must have involved thousands of "volunteers." Alternatively, and most commentators suspect that this was the case, these "local self-defence units" were in fact locally stationed but had been shipped and flown into Crimea—Russian soldiers masquerading as Crimean volunteers. Their arrival and subsequent success was in fact an asymmetric realisation of a traditional, i.e., symmetric, military and territorial threat to a given state, in this case, Ukraine.

Due to the fact that the Alliance, unlike Crimea, does not play host to any non-Alliance troops, NATO should not expect a copycat situation to emerge within its borders. Nonetheless, the three Baltic state members of NATO, but especially Estonia and Latvia, have substantial Russian minorities within its borders. These might be offered "protection" similar to what Russia offered its "fellow citizens in Ukraine," and the presence of a Russian minority in these countries could theoretically act as a springboard for the emergence of counter-"local self-defence units."<sup>9</sup> Of course, such units would be no match for the Russian troops, which most probably masqueraded as Crimean volunteers in March 2014, and thus their capacity to head off any Baltic counter-reaction would thus be limited. Moreover, none in the Baltic trio are experiencing economic, political or social difficulties parallel to the situation in Ukraine such as those Moscow used as a pretext to interfere in the internal affairs of a sovereign and neighbouring state. Nonetheless, it would not be prudent for the Alliance to totally reject this possibility, or especially other asymmetric measures that could be deployed by Moscow on a large scale in order to overwhelm the Baltic states to create crisis-like conditions within the territories of its NATO neighbours.

Russia, as with the ISIL statelet carved out on the Turkish–Syrian border, is situated near NATO, so it could, if it were to borrow a page from its Crimean playbook, utilise such tactics as terrorism to unsettle some of its Western neighbours. Of course, such a tactic would be operationalised by unmarked and "unknown" assailants, not uniformed Russian operators, who would perform individual hit-and-run attacks. A variation on this tactic would be a situation in which "spontaneous" interventions by concerned citizens, either from within the Baltic states by representatives of the Russian minority or from Russia itself, would see them do such things as take control of a border village or town for a couple of hours. These outbursts of concern would not be isolated incidents and would only appear in the aftermath of unsettling news of sabotage or terrorist attacks on major population centres in the Baltic states.

The most extreme variant, but also the least likely as Russia would be unprepared for sacrificing its operatives, involves risky and suicidal Mumbai 2008-style urban-guerrilla/terrorist attacks on soft targets in the Baltic capitals. This would not only immediately result in media images of disturbing instability in Estonia, Latvia or Lithuania but also, given their relative unpreparedness for dealing with complicated terrorist incidents, severely test the Baltic states' security sectors. Moreover, the situation would only worsen if these were to be repeated after a short interval or, which is far worse, a number of such incidents were to materialise simultaneously.

These attacks would, of course, be meticulously planned and well-prepared, but would also be juxtaposed with more amateurish efforts. The latter would probably solely be conducted by local elements and with only limited support from the state ordering them—along the lines of the Intermovement, which in the late 1980s and early 1990s was opposed to Estonian independence and resorted to terrorist activity to achieve its goal. The less professional (and more numerous) deeds and plots could work as cover for a state sponsor of terrorism to deflect attention from the relatively rare but highly visible, sponsored incidents. In this scenario, the likely lack of success of the Intermovement 2.0 operatives could also be ridiculed by Russia as amateurish, desperate and Russo-phobic attempts by the Baltic states to produce fake "Russian" terrorism to demonstrate to their Western allies Russia's malevolent intentions. Simultaneously, Russia could undertake its own activities aimed at deflecting attention and construct a "terrorism victimhood"

---

<sup>9</sup> "Russia reserves right to protect compatriots in Ukraine," *Reuters*, [www.reuters.com/article/2014/03/14/us-ukraine-crisis-russia-east-idUSBREA2D0M620140314](http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/03/14/us-ukraine-crisis-russia-east-idUSBREA2D0M620140314).

narrative by opening investigations into alleged acts of terror or plans for it within its borders by previously unknown “foreign extremists”. An example of this tactic might have been on display in early April when Russia revealed it had dismantled a “Ukrainian terrorist cell” within its borders, just as Russian troops were massing on the Russo–Ukrainian border.<sup>10</sup>

### **“Plus ça change...”**

The potential return of terrorism as a security concern for NATO is, to an extent, a surprise for the Allies, who by now might have become accustomed to the post-Global War on Terror discourse on security. In fact, in 2014 they find themselves faced with a reality of “the more things change, the more they stay the same”, as the seemingly forgotten territorial threat stages a dramatic comeback along with a transformed asymmetric threat that many saw as finished with the killing of Osama bin Laden. To make matters worse, the two threats could morph into one and stand poised to threaten the Alliance in a modern, post-Cold War, post-9/11 and post-Global War on Terror reality. Moreover, these threats could additionally be supplemented with other asymmetric and destabilising low-level threats that could serve either as a prelude to a full scale, traditional invasion or constitute elements of a strategy of testing the Alliance’s resolve in responding to a variety of previously unseen challenges.

These challenges, whatever form they might take, can only be combated if the Allies pool and share different capabilities, not only military, and agree on their deployment to eastern (or southeastern, and perhaps also if need be, southern) members of NATO in a responsive and responsible manner. Most probably this would not only necessitate the enhancement of such missions as Baltic Air Policing or stationing of permanent land forces in Central and Eastern Europe but also more real-time intelligence sharing and the deployment of rapid-response military and police units, the usage of special forces and gendarmerie formations against infiltrators on NATO’s borders. Not all of these capabilities are of a purely military character, but cooperation and communication on sharing and rapid deployment could be organised via NATO channels, as these forces would ultimately be both positioned to collectively help defend Alliance territory and to assist in crisis management—both core NATO tasks. Moreover, the establishment of these military and non-military capabilities and their deployment could also be used to enhance the seemingly moribund NATO–EU cooperation, which in the current geopolitical circumstances should not be trivialised or overlooked by the Allies.

---

<sup>10</sup> “Russia accuses 25 Ukrainians of planning terror attacks,” *BBC*, [www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-26878193?utm\\_source=Sailthru&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_term=%2AMorning%20Brief&utm\\_campaign=MB%204.4.2013](http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-26878193?utm_source=Sailthru&utm_medium=email&utm_term=%2AMorning%20Brief&utm_campaign=MB%204.4.2013).