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NATO Special Operations Headquarters, Mons, Belgium, provides training for allied and partner special operations forces to improve their interoperability. The purpose is to create an international network of trained personnel who can respond to a range of scenarios that may arise simultaneously in multiple NATO nations.

# NATO Special Operations Forces, Counterterrorism, and the Resurgence of Terrorism in Europe

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*The rise of violent extremism and the recent terrorist attacks show we are dealing with a qualitatively new challenge.*

—NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg

The Islamic State (IS) has expanded into the realm of international terrorism, with the downing of a Russian airliner over the Sinai in October 2015, suicide bombings in Turkey in 2015 and 2016, and attacks in Paris in November 2015.<sup>1</sup> Consequently, North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) member states, overwhelmed by the magnitude of a foreign-directed threat, could invoke Article 5 of the 1949 North Atlantic Treaty for collective defense in Europe.<sup>2</sup> Article 5 states that the signatories “agree that an armed attack against one or more of them in Europe or North America shall be considered an attack against them all.”<sup>3</sup> This principle of collective defense recognizes that terrorism is a threat to the NATO alliance.

In the weeks that followed the 2015 attacks in Paris, there was significant discussion of whether France would invoke Article 5.<sup>4</sup> France chose not to. In fact, the al-Qaida attack against the United States on 11 September 2001 is the only case of an allied nation invoking Article 5 in an effort “to restore and maintain the security of the North Atlantic area.”<sup>5</sup> In less than twenty-four hours following 9/11, the NATO alliance determined that the United States was the object of an armed attack and that the attack had been foreign directed. Subsequently, NATO assisted the United States with seven NATO airborne warning and control system aircraft, conducting more than 360 sorties in U.S. airspace as well as supporting maritime operations in the Mediterranean.<sup>6</sup>

## Need for NATO Special Operations Forces

Notwithstanding a clear and demonstrated cross-border terrorist threat to NATO as a whole, whether through a failure of politics or a rejection of reality, counterterrorism (CT) is not yet a principal mission of NATO special operations forces (SOF). As a result,

without a doctrinal CT mission, it is likely NATO SOF will formally, or informally, be supplanted by a member state’s national SOF CT units in the event of a large-scale terror crisis, a much less effective approach to dealing with a collective problem. Consequently, in light of the rapid expansion of IS and the increasing threat of terrorism in Europe, it is time for NATO SOF to establish CT as a principal mission.

NATO’s website makes it clear that NATO SOF are ready to deploy to Asia, Africa, or the Middle East, but it also acknowledges that its SOF may be required to operate in Europe as it adapts to new threats.<sup>7</sup> Although

France chose not to invoke Article 5 in the latest terrorist event, it is not inconceivable that one or more member states that possess less robust SOF capability than France could be overwhelmed by a large-scale terrorist attack similar to 9/11 or, more likely, a series of complex attacks similar to the attacks in Mumbai and Paris.<sup>8</sup> Many of the NATO signatories that joined after the fall of the Soviet Union simply do not have the organic capability to deal with foreign-directed and well-resourced terror networks operating in or between European countries. Any member state with underdeveloped law

enforcement CT or SOF CT capabilities is more likely to invoke Article 5, thus obliging allied nations to take “such actions, as it deems necessary” intended to “restore and maintain security.”<sup>9</sup> Therefore, NATO SOF should be the NATO element capable of providing CT support to these younger member states.

On 29 September 2015, Hungary’s prime minister warned that mass migration from countries such as Afghanistan, Syria, Iraq, and Libya risked destabilizing Europe.<sup>10</sup> Germany alone expected to receive eight hundred thousand to one million refugees by the end of 2015. Some of these are believed to have traveled on fake Syrian passports.<sup>11</sup> At least one of the Paris attackers from November 2015 was found to have traveled on such a passport, and Frontex (the European Union’s border agency) has reported that a number of individuals have requested refugee status based on false Syrian citizenship.<sup>12</sup> The Danish General Intelligence and Security Service reported that in the first decade of the twenty-first century, terrorist groups such as al-Qaida are



(Image courtesy of NATO Special Operations Headquarters)



(Photo by Peter Andrews, Reuters)

Polish special military force personnel from Grupa Reagowania Operacyjno-Manewrowego (Group [for] Operational Maneuvering Response, or GROM) secure hostages during hostage-rescue training 13 April 2012 as part of preparation for the UEFA Euro 2012 (European soccer championship) in Gdansk, Poland.

“stealthily taking root” in Europe.<sup>13</sup> These established terror networks in Europe will now have a new opportunity to recruit from this wave of mass migration from Syria and other parts the Middle East.

Islamic terrorism in Europe is often tied, directly or indirectly, to immigration and the challenges of societal integration or the rejection of assimilation, even in the second and third generations.<sup>14</sup> The 2015 refugee crisis has changed the threat of terrorism in Europe. First, terrorist organizations such as al-Qaida and IS will likely attempt to embed terror operatives among the legitimate refugee population for the purpose of conducting attacks or building a new cadre in Europe.<sup>15</sup> Second, former fighters fleeing or returning from the battlefields of the Middle East and North Africa will continue to pose a terror threat. Disillusionment in the reintegration process and the challenges of Western society could lead these combat-experienced individuals to radicalize and establish, or re-establish, previously held terror connections.<sup>16</sup> The third threat is the potential increase in second- and third-generation immigrants radicalized as independent cells or in concert with one of the other

two previously discussed groups.<sup>17</sup> In light of the 2015 IS attacks in Paris and the mass migration of refugees from war-torn countries, it is time for the NATO SOF to adopt CT as a primary mission.

## History of Counterterrorism Units

Historically, the establishment of national-level CT units and capabilities has always been driven by terror and crisis. The first impetus for the development of national-level CT capabilities in Europe was a response to an attack at the 1972 Summer Olympic Games in Munich, Germany. During the games, a Palestinian group called Black September entered the Olympic Village and subsequently kidnapped and killed several Israeli athletes. Amid the confusion and poorly managed law enforcement response, German police initiated a rescue attempt that ended in a catastrophic failure, with the deaths of nine Israeli athletes at the airport. None of the German police had training in hostage rescue, close-quarters combat, or sniping. Less than sixty days later, the German government formed the *Grenzschutzgruppe 9*

der Bundespolizei, or GSG-9, Germany's first dedicated CT unit.<sup>18</sup>

Shortly after what became known as the Munich Massacre and the establishment of the GSG-9, France followed suit with the creation of *Groupe d'Intervention de la Gendarmerie Nationale*, or GIGN.<sup>19</sup> A significant difference between the two organizations was GSG-9's status as a law enforcement organization and GIGN's position as a unit of the French Armed Forces.

This is a significant distinction because there are NATO nations whose militaries may not be allowed to operate in a law-enforcement capacity, and other partner states that do not allow foreign militaries to operate within their borders. The legal distinction of NATO SOF in a member state's Article 5 response is beyond the scope of this discussion, but it is an important distinction if NATO adopts SOF CT capabilities and responsibilities as a principal mission.

The United States chose to develop CT capabilities in both law enforcement and armed forces, but only after its own hostage crisis, the Hanafi Siege, 9–11 March 1977. Homegrown violent extremist (using the modern vernacular) and Muslim convert Hamaas Abdul Khaalis raised a group of twelve gunmen to lay siege to three buildings in Washington, D.C., holding 149 hostages for thirty-nine hours. Khaalis's group seized one floor of the John A. Wilson Building, the B'nai B'rith headquarters, and the Islamic Center of Washington, D.C. The gunmen made several demands that included the U.S. government handing over several men convicted of killing members of Khaalis's family and the destruction of all copies of the

movie *Mohammed, Messenger of God*, starring Anthony Quinn, which they believed to be an affront to Islam.<sup>20</sup> The thirty-nine-hour siege ended without a significant loss of life. Of the 149 hostages, two died from gunshot

wounds received in the initial attack, and the remaining hostages were released after negotiations led by Egyptian ambassadors.

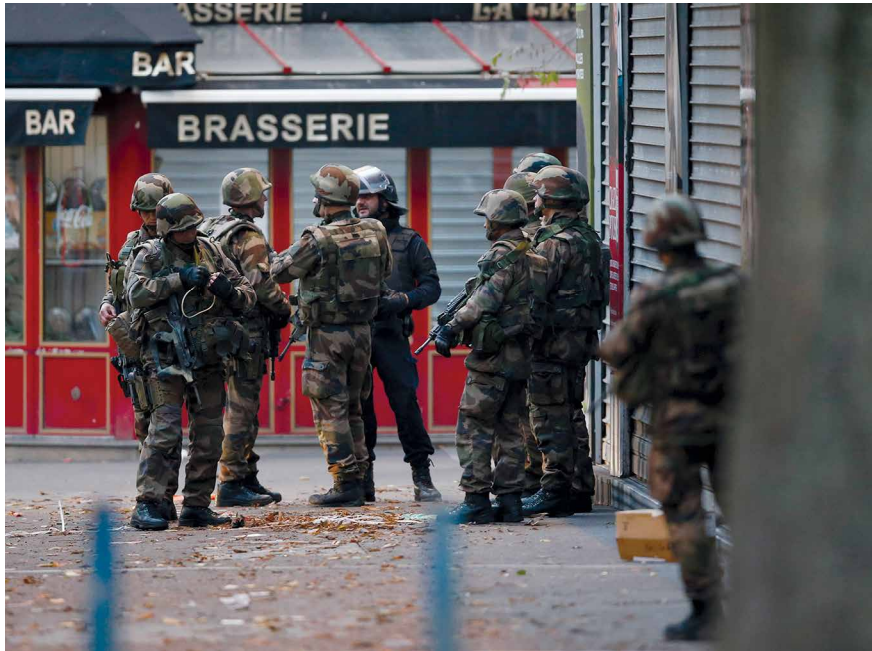
During the siege, U.S. leadership called upon the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and the Department of Defense (DOD) for assistance with a potential hostage-rescue mission.

Neither the FBI nor the DOD had units trained with the appropriate CT capabilities.<sup>21</sup> It had not been a priority in a Cold War military or in a domestic law enforcement community that believed terrorism was largely a European problem, but both the FBI and DOD would initiate efforts to develop significant CT capabilities within a year.

Each of these incidents represented a change in the national threat level, which required an increase in national CT capabilities; in turn, 2015 has seen a dramatic change in the European threat level. Transnational terrorism in Europe and the increased lethality of complex terrorist attacks should be the impetus for NATO SOF to adopt CT as a principal mission, before the formal request for collective defense arises.

## NATO Special Operations Doctrine and Counterterrorism

With an increased likelihood of NATO SOF being called to support a member state's special forces CT element or law-enforcement CT unit, NATO needs to



(Photo by Jacky Naegelen, Reuters)

French soldiers secure the area where shots were exchanged five days earlier in Saint-Denis, France, near Paris, 18 November 2015, during an operation to catch fugitives responsible for the deadly attacks.

determine the international coordination procedures for such actions at the interagency and interministerial levels. It was imperative to establish collective security arrangements for a CT response in advance of an Article 5 request due to the multinational nature of modern terrorism threats and the increasingly complex nature of the European security environment. This started in a general sense with the 2006

Riga Summit's decision to launch a SOF transformation initiative intended to increase interoperability and dialogue between NATO SOF units.<sup>22</sup>

As previously noted, NATO SOF doctrine does not hold CT as one of its three principal missions. The first NATO SOF doctrine publication, Allied Joint Publication (AJP)-3.5, *Allied Joint Doctrine for Special Operations*, identifies the three principal NATO SOF missions as military assistance, special reconnaissance, and direct action.<sup>23</sup> Surprisingly, AJP-3.5 only includes one paragraph dedicated to CT.<sup>24</sup> Ostensibly, NATO SOF CT doctrine amounts to four sentences taken directly from *NATO's Policy Guidelines on Counter-Terrorism*.<sup>25</sup> In comparison, AJP-3.5's "Record of Specific Reservations," which essentially notes disagreements on the use of joint-doctrine terms by partner nations, is a full page and a half.<sup>26</sup> AJP-3.5 does acknowledge that special operations can take place as "part of Article 5 collective defense or non-Article 5 crisis response operations to fulfill NATO's three essential core tasks (collective defense, crisis management, and cooperative security)," but it does not define any CT focus.<sup>27</sup> It is self-evident that any of the three NATO SOF principal missions could support or include a CT mission, but that is not sufficient for the current (and increasing) threat. In the modern threat environment, CT needs to be a priority of NATO SOF. It is unlikely the NATO leadership had a direct-action raid against an IS cell in a suburb of a European capital in mind when AJP-3.5 was drafted,

but it is becoming increasingly likely that NATO SOF could support such a mission.

**"SOF should be utilized when there is high risk, a need for special capabilities, or requirements to conduct covert or clandestine operations."  
(NATO SOF doctrine)**

NATO SOF doctrine does state that NATO "SOF should be utilized when there is high risk, a need for special capabilities, or requirements to conduct covert or clandestine operations."<sup>28</sup> Take the case of the 2004 Madrid train bombing, in which 191 were killed and 1,800 were wounded.<sup>29</sup> The investigation

led Spanish authorities to an apartment building in the Leganes neighborhood of Madrid. On 3 April 2004, the Spanish *Grupo Especial de Operaciones* attempted a raid on the terrorist suspect's apartment building. Four terror suspects committed suicide by detonating a large explosive device in the building, killing one police officer and wounding eleven others.<sup>30</sup> Spanish authorities were not prepared for, or capable of conducting, a raid against an asymmetric threat on their own soil.

## Conclusion

NATO member states need one central institution for support when faced with an overwhelming terror crisis, and NATO SOF should be that institution. And, NATO SOF must be adequately resourced so their CT capabilities meet partner-nation requirements. In the case of the Madrid bombers, requirements may have included advanced explosive ordnance disposal personnel and equipment, a determination of which units were mission-ready, and transportation to Madrid.

Another challenge that will have to be addressed is the absence of NATO SOF CT *minimum capability requirements*. AJP-3.5 provides the minimum capability requirements for a number of NATO SOF elements, to include land and maritime units.<sup>31</sup> These minimum capability requirements include specialty skills such as "directing terminal guidance control of precision guided munitions" for a land element and "opposed boarding operations" for a maritime element.<sup>32</sup> However, not one of the deployable NATO SOF structures comes with defined CT

capabilities. In fact, there are no doctrinal minimum capability requirements for NATO SOF CT in AJP-3.5. If a member state invoked Article 5 today and included a requirement for CT support, that embattled nation would likely receive a hodgepodge of CT capabilities.

Estonian Maj. Margus Kuul, in "NATO SOF Countries' Three Main Mission Sets: Direct Action, Special Reconnaissance, Military Assistance," suggests most NATO SOF partners lack the resources to maintain SOF capabilities, including essential secondary capabilities such as maritime operations.<sup>33</sup> The question should be asked: What minimum capability requirements are more valid in the current threat environment, CT requirements such as hostage rescue and urban sniper or maritime skills such as "combat swimming operation using closed circuit breathing apparatus with man-pack explosive devices?"<sup>34</sup> The answer is beyond the scope of this review, but the question will have to be answered by NATO SOF leadership if CT becomes a principal mission in a resource-scarce environment.

Kuul recommends "mapping the real capabilities" of partner state SOF units to determine specific needs.<sup>35</sup> A survey of preexisting NATO SOF CT capabilities would certainly pay dividends if CT were adopted as a principal mission. Prior to establishing minimum

capability requirements for NATO SOF CT, a NATO-wide assessment of member-state training programs and doctrine should be conducted to find the most efficient path for CT standardization and training for NATO SOF.

Terrorism in Europe will continue to expand in the near term, and, regardless of current NATO doctrine and politics, CT will grow in importance for NATO SOF. NATO SOF should not wait for the next terror crisis to influence politicians to force a change in CT doctrine. They should begin preparation for CT as a principal mission now if they want to be relevant when a member state invokes Article 5.

Several steps should be taken in anticipation of a formal realignment of principal missions. First, conduct an honest survey of CT capabilities across NATO SOF partners. Second, begin a dialogue between partner states on what supporting CT roles NATO SOF should, or could, provide, following a single- or multi-state invocation of Article 5. Last, examine member-state SOF CT doctrine to develop the best plan for the standardization of training and resourcing the CT mission. In the spirit of the SOF adage, "Competent SOF cannot be created after emergencies occur," and neither can CT partnerships, doctrine, or mission capabilities.<sup>36</sup> ■

## Biography

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## Notes

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27. Ibid., 1-2.
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