

Alerts, alarms and threats: how much should the people of Europe be told? (ARI)

*Fernando Reinares**

Theme: A public awareness campaign about what al-Qaeda and its affiliated groups keep trying to do in Western Europe should neither raise alarm nor minimise the problem.

Summary: Statements calling attention to international terrorism such as those made in September of this year by some Ministers and senior European security officials, some of which were repeated in October, should not be construed as exercises in political manipulation. While avoiding alerts like the one issued by the US State Department on 3 October, which can be misinterpreted because of the diffuse and non-specific nature of their contents, and with no need to alarm people by providing details that are not strictly necessary, the reasonable thing to do is to inform people –in the right measure– about a threat that is real and cannot be completely erased over the short term but which can be contained and lessened, as has been done over the past five years through adequate government policies and optimal cooperation between governments.

Analysis: A reflection on what and what not to tell Europe's citizens about today's international terrorism must distinguish between alerts, alarms and threats. These three notions are often mixed together and confused, both in the news media and in the language used by everyday people and even sometimes in the way the political elite talks about this phenomenon. This can end up turning what initially are mere alerts into real alarms, or end up raising doubts, through criticism of what is perceived as a manipulated presentation by this political elite, as to whether the terrorist threats cited actually do exist. However, the act of making people aware of what al-Qaeda and its affiliated groups or organisations continue to try to do in Europe should neither raise alarm nor minimise the problem.

Alerts

The act of alerting Europe's citizens to the public problem of today's international terrorism is, or at least should be, that of calling attention to the reality of this phenomenon and the very real possibility that, over the short or medium term, there could again at some point be –in one or more of the countries that make up the same single western geopolitical scenario– terrorist attacks with consequences similar to those of 11 March 2004 in Madrid and 7 July 2005 in London. The purpose of such a warning would be, among other things, for there to be a sufficient minimum of public awareness to allow people, if need be, to cooperate adequately with the security forces to prevent and repress this form of violence; or, in case there is a new act of Jihadist terrorism, for public opinion not to be disoriented or engage in the blame game that terrorists always seek.

* Senior Analyst on International Terrorism at the Elcano Royal Institute and Professor of Political Science at the Universidad Rey Juan Carlos.

Therefore, it should not be surprising that politicians and counter-terrorism officials do speak out from time to time, although perhaps not always in the right measure or in the most timely fashion. In September, a number of senior German, British and French officials spoke out publicly in this regard.

First it was Joerg Ziercke, head of the German federal office of criminal investigation, known by its initials BKA, who said on 6 October that the likelihood of terrorist attacks in Germany was increasing. Jonathan Evans, Director General of Britain's MI5, said just 10 days later that there was a serious possibility of an attack in the UK, with no indication that the situation would change any time soon. In fact, the official terror threat level in the UK had been raised on 22 January 2010 from substantial to serious, which technically means that a terrorist attack within the British Isles was highly likely. On almost the same day that Evans spoke, Bernard Squarcini, head of the French domestic security agency DCRI, said that France had never before faced such a great terror threat. The French Interior Minister Brice Hortefeux said on 19 September that 'the threat is real' as he commented on the possibility of a Jihadist attack over the short term in France and confirmed that the country's security forces were on heightened alert to try to prevent such an act of violence.

Except for some degree of controversy in France, which came with the spread of news reports about the existence of an alleged suicide bomber prepared to blow himself up in that country and false alarms over bombs targeting the Eiffel Tower, those authorised expressions of alert regarding international terrorism did not cause significant unease among the citizens concerned. The statements were not formulated as warnings of imminent attack, nor were they perceived as such. What is more, the European institution tasked yearly with coming up with a product to make people aware of terrorism, in other words the EU police agency Europol, had unveiled in April 2010 its TE-SAT report, which includes statements in line with those we have alluded to from the national security officials of three European countries. The report states that 'Islamist terrorism is still perceived as the biggest threat to most member states' of the EU. In the preface to the report, Europol's Director Rob Wainwright said that 'Islamist terrorists inside and outside the EU continue to aim for indiscriminate mass casualties'.

Alarms

But there is a very fine line between informing or alerting people and actually alarming them, especially when it comes to terrorism. Indeed, alarm was in fact caused by some sentences that were quite similar to those in the Europol report, and even less forceful than those of the senior European security officials in September, but which came this time from the US Administration. They were issued not with the regularity of that periodical report or of the warnings made by those senior officials, but rather in an exceptional fashion: in a travel alert released officially by the State Department on 3 October. In other words, a warning is normally associated with the imminence or proximity of an attack, about which there is solid information as to preparations but which counter-terrorism officials admit they will have difficulty in thwarting in time. The sense of alarm was enhanced both by the generic content and impracticable recommendations contained in the American document and the interpretation given to it by many European news media, which was not carefully weighted.

The travel alert, aimed at US citizens, brief and effective until 31 January 2011, mentions specifically 'the potential for terrorist attacks in Europe' and says current information 'suggests al-Qaeda and affiliated organizations continue to plan terrorist attacks'. It says

possible targets could be 'public transportation systems and other tourist infrastructure', recalling that in the past terrorists have attacked or tried to attack underground and train systems as well as aviation and maritime services. An initial evaluation of such an unusual alert would stress on the one hand that it does not add anything new to that which is already known. At the same time, and with the same stated reasoning, the alert could be used to warn any citizen, American or not, intending to travel not to Europe but to the US, where over the past two years there have been several Jihadist terrorist incidents not seen since the 11 September 11 2001 attacks, including attempts to attack the New York subway system, detonate a car bomb in Times Square or blow up a plane preparing to land in Detroit.

The State Department travel alert says 'US citizens should take every precaution to be aware of their surroundings and to adopt appropriate safety measures to protect themselves when traveling'. In other words, besides, the generic and vague contents of the warning, it makes terse recommendations of the kind that could be applied in the case of petty crime and other non-terrorism risks. And in practice the recommendations are impossible for people travelling in Europe to comply with, apparently unless they avoid using public transport or visiting tourist sites. However, given the exceptional nature of the document, this helped cause what was formally presented as a travel alert to be perceived as an alarm. Furthermore, many news media put an exaggerated spin on the alert, which perhaps also helped enhance this perception. At the same time, this was facilitated by the fact that the EU was slow to issue a unified statement to its citizens on this issue, so much so that some countries even issued alert warnings about travelling to neighbouring countries.

Threats

That said, to criticise alerts which for one reason or another are prone to being counterproductive or alarms formulated in inappropriate terms does not mean that one is underestimating the threat of international terrorism in Europe. Here we refer to the plausibility of new Jihadist attacks causing casualties or affecting political processes as well as the internal cohesion of European societies. It is a persistent threat which, although it affects the entire EU, is not spread uniformly around the EU's territory or around Europe in general. This stems from a series of factors whose weight varies from one country to another. The factors include relevant historic precedents, greater or lesser geographical proximity to areas that are hotbeds of Jihadism, the size of the local Islamic community and, in particular, the dynamics of the radicalisation observable within it, as well as circumstances having to do with governments' domestic or foreign policies, not to mention other issues which can also be manipulated in terrorist propaganda so as to single out certain countries. In any case, the countries that are particularly, although not exclusively, affected are those in Central, Western and Southern Europe.

Furthermore, from the information derived from the main counter-terrorism operations carried out in recent years in Europe and statements by the authorities who have addressed the issue recently, one deduces that the threat from international terrorism is of a compound nature and corresponds to the polymorphous character that the phenomenon currently exhibits. Although isolated terrorism acts by individuals or independent cells in Europe are possible, the prospect of ones that are major, complex and perhaps even more innovative than other spectacular attacks staged until now in Western countries is linked to the participation, either combined or not, of groups and organisations that have a structure, leadership and strategy. These include al-Qaeda itself. However, as its operational capability is reportedly limited, the most important groups to watch out for are

ones linked to that terrorist structure, such as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistán, Laskhar e Toiba, Tehrik e Taliban Pakistan and al-Shabaab, as well as territorial extensions of al-Qaeda, such as al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula and al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb.

The fact that these collective actors of international terrorism are based in Pakistan, Afghanistan, Yemen, Somalia or Algeria, among other countries, does not mean that the threat they pose to Europe comes only from the outside. Of course, behind this threat are extremists who are foreigners or, often, legal residents living in European societies. But there are also others who are citizens with passports from European countries, often descendants of immigrants or people who have become naturalised citizens after living in European countries for varying lengths of time. Besides stating that they tend to be males between 20 and 40 years of age, it is not easy to come up with a socio-demographic profile of these individuals, because of their diversity, nor is it always easy to know if they embraced terrorist ideology inside or outside European societies. However, once they have turned radical, they tend to seek links with some Jihadist group or organisation abroad, rather than act on their own. In this regard, those who hail from Western Europe and travel for terrorist training or activity to south Asia, the Sahel or the Horn of Africa are a particular source of concern.

Conclusion: Despite the anti-Western rhetoric expressed by al-Qaeda or the groups and organisations linked to it, Europe is a secondary scenario for Jihadist terrorism, which mainly happens, even on a daily basis, in regions of the world with mainly Muslim populations. What is more, the people of Europe share public problems that are probably more serious and pressing than the threat inherent to this phenomenon in its various configurations. And our societies have proved so far to be very resilient in the face of terrorism's onslaughts. But expressions of alert or attention to terrorism such as those made in September by some Ministers and senior European security officials, some of which were repeated in October, should not be construed as exercises in political manipulation. On 17 October, the French Interior Minister again addressed the issue, alluding to warnings passed on from third countries to European intelligence services with regard to plans to attack Europe and, in particular, France. The next day, senior British security and defence officials reiterated that al-Qaeda was still 'the most powerful threat' to the UK.

Making people aware of what al-Qaeda and its affiliated groups continue to try to do in Western Europe should not raise alarm unnecessarily, nor should this happen when alerts are issued. After an unusual but generic one such as that issued by the US State Department, a terrorist attack may or may not take place. If it does happen, a warning was given, and, if there is no attack, it is quite possible that the cost of the warning is considered low by those who issued it. They are probably acting this way following errors in spreading a real alarm which in 1988 failed to head off the mid-air bombing that targeted Pan Am Flight 103 over the Scottish town of Lockerbie, even though the information available at the time was specific and even pointed to, weeks ahead of the attack, transatlantic flights of the company that was in fact hit. Unless there comes to be a more or less generalised state of anxiety and fear amid the population, the paradox of alerts that turn into alarms is that they end up having consequences similar to those sought by terrorists when they try to scare people with announcements of the atrocities that wish to carry out.

So long as they are alerts that cannot be misinterpreted, and do not alarm people with unnecessary details –perhaps with the exception of reasonable cases in which citizens can adopt effective precautions or it is reasonable to persuade them to temporarily modify their behaviour in a measured way– it is reasonable for authorities to inform people about a threat that is real and is not going to go away quickly. It is true that in recent years security officials in some European countries have expressed concern over terrorist acts that never materialised. But the atrocities in Madrid and London came with no warning and after the situation had been poorly assessed. Furthermore, since then European police and intelligence services have managed to foil several serious international terrorist attacks on European soil. Therefore, a timely reminder that terrorism linked to al-Qaeda is there and not going away should be accompanied by another message. To wit: although this is a threat that cannot be neutralised completely over the short term, it is possible to contain and minimise it, as has been done successfully in Europe for more than five years through adequate government policies and optimal cooperation between governments.

Fernando Reinares

Senior Analyst on International Terrorism at the Elcano Royal Institute and Professor of Political Science at the Universidad Rey Juan Carlos