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Vigilance and Countering Fatigue in a Security Agency: The French Experience

Jean Francois Clair

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There is no such thing as a zero-failure security system. Politicians and the public must resist the urge to blame the security system in times of stress, says the former deputy head of the French security agency, DST.

A SECURITY department must be permanently alert because most of its activities are not reactive but preventive, to detect threats before hostile acts are committed against national security. On the other hand, in spite of the skills and experience of its personnel, a security department can have failures. Its members can commit mistakes, its strategy might not have been adapted to new threats, and there could be a lack of precise information.

But does one single problem mean the global failure of the security system?

This question was recently asked by some concerning Singapore after the escape in February 2008 of the most dangerous Jemaah Islamiyah terrorist, Mas Selamat bin Kastari, who is still on the run. The same questions were asked in the past after similar problems encountered by Western security departments.

The answer is not easy and needs both objectivity and long-term thinking. In spite of the skills and the motivations of the professionals in charge of security, there is no “zero risk” security system, especially in a democracy. This system may only exist in non-democratic regimes where security departments are more in charge of surveying their citizens than in protecting them. So we must keep in mind that, in our evolving world, the democratic practice of security must be constantly adapted and controlled, without weakening the security level and disarming the department in charge.

How can a security agency stay resilient, vigilant and counter fatigue? Four main criteria must be met.

1. Security personnel must be highly motivated

To resist the routine is particularly difficult during quiet periods, when nothing happens. The situation

is “easier” in France and Western Europe for security departments fighting terrorism. The Jihadist threat is permanent and we know it will not stop in the near future. Europe’s population understands the degree of the threat because of the cases we have had: Madrid in 2004 and London in 2005. Al Qaeda leaders, Osama Bin Laden and Ayman Al Zawahiri, and their followers, still threaten our countries and call the “believers” to attack us.

In spite of years of counter-terrorism efforts, the Jihadist threat is becoming more and more the domain of “home-grown activists” who do not belong to organised networks. Most of them are self-radicalized, often via the Internet, and are more difficult to detect. Security services have to develop a good “coverage” of the home ground in order to identify as early as possible such people. For the security personnel, it means a huge amount of routine work in terms of investigations, systematic monitoring of extremist websites, telephone interceptions, physical surveillance in hostile places. Most of the time the work is boring and non-productive.

2. Security personnel must be carefully selected

A security department must stay highly attractive, not only in terms of salaries or career advantage, but also in terms of protection because this job is difficult. Identities have to be protected, activities have to be classified, and information has to be kept secret. That is why French authorities announced, in the recent *White Book on Defence and Security*, their decision to prepare a specific law concerning the protection of activities and personnel linked to intelligence departments.

A security agency wants to recruit among the best in the country, that is to say, people who have first of all, a personal commitment to the collective interest. How to attract them? Of course, the present level of the national threat can play a role in motivating individuals. The more there is a need for operational work due to a high level of threat, the more there will be a greater number of candidates willing to join the security services.

Recruitment into a security agency requires specific qualities: strict security vetting, affinity for the subject matter, balanced psychological profile. The reason why a psychologist interviews all our candidates is that we need cold-blooded men. Rambo and James Bond are certainly interesting movie characters, but they are not our preferred professional profiles.

3. Security personnel must have specialised training

In the French Security Department, the initial training lasts only a few weeks, for recruits to learn basic principles in terms of ethics, procedures and activities. But the real “education” will be obtained in the field itself, under the supervision of the seniors. That is why it is important to develop an evaluation system where supervisors give advice and correct their staff. It is the duty of leaders to motivate their troops and to control them so that they do not commit mistakes. It is also their duty to recommend to the political leadership well-argued propositions for strategic approaches, but also to assess in a candid way their results.

4. Need for efficiency and win trust of political authorities and citizens

In France, we had in the past difficult experiences when members of our national authorities, stressed by public pressure during times of terrorist attacks, chose to put the blame on our security department in order to escape their own responsibility by designating a scapegoat. The result was clear: by their weakness, they compromised national unity whereas their duty was to strengthen it. In difficult moments, some politicians even decided to create dedicated teams under their direct authority, which compete with the national institutions.

For example, in the beginning of the 1980s, a president, convinced by ambitious assistants, authorized

the creation of a special cell to fight terrorism. This cell, in order to prove its efficiency, transmitted wrong information, forged evidence, and made unjustified arrests. The result was a clear failure and most of the leaders of this 'Elysean cell' were later condemned by French Justice.

Investigations against determined and efficient criminals are often long and complex. Sometimes they are solved with the help of the population. In 1987, four leaders of the extreme left terrorist group "Action Directe" that committed bomb attacks and killed two important French personalities were located with the help of their neighbours who saw their pictures on television. More recently, Yvan Colonna, a French terrorist who assassinated the Chief of Public Services in Corsica in 1999, succeeded in hiding in his region for four years before being located, thanks to technical and human intelligence sources.

In 25 years of struggle against various forms of terrorism, the French security department had some failures, but proved in the long term its capacity to fulfil its task. Since 1996, no terrorist attack has been committed in French territory. In the same period, around 800 people suspected to have links with terrorist groups were arrested and interviewed.

Our successes are not only the result of our efforts, but are strongly facilitated by the confidence of political authorities and public opinion. This is why it is more and more useful to communicate our actions. Though our modus operandi has to stay discreet to be efficient, we are not afraid to show that our investigations are conducted strictly according to the law. That is how we obtain the interest of the media and the trust of the public.

Mr Jean Francois Clair was Deputy Director of the Direction de la Surveillance du Territoire (DST), France, from January 1999 to March 2007. DST was a directorate of the French National Police responsible for domestic intelligence in France, including counter terrorism and the overall security of France against foreign threats. This commentary is adapted from his seminar at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS) on 12 August 2008.