

Brexit and the Fight against Terrorism in the United Kingdom

Written by Olayinka Ajala

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OLAYINKA AJALA, MAY 31 2018

On June 23 2016, 51.9% of the United Kingdom's (UK) EU referendum votes were in favour of leaving the European Union (EU) as opposed to 48.1% in favour of remaining (BBC, 2016). The implication is that the result which represented 72% of eligible UK voters effectively ended the 43 year membership of the UK in the EU. During the EU referendum campaign, one of the issues that featured prominently is the ability of the UK to effectively continue to deal with rising terrorism threats outside of the EU. Presently, there is a joint effort by the European Commission and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization to fight against terrorism and prevent the rise of radicalization since the 9/11 attacks in the US and in the wake of attacks in several EU countries. Contrary to the perception that the exit of the UK from the European bloc will negatively impact the ability of the UK to fight terrorism (Fuller, 2016; Inkster, 2016; Crisp 2017) this article will argue that the exit of the UK from the EU will strengthen the resolve of the country to combat terrorism not only within its borders but within the European community as a whole. The article will explore the role of the UK within NATO, the ability of the country to protect its borders and to remove people of potential threats to the country.

NATO Alliance

Britain has contributed immensely to the operations of NATO and the country is currently the third largest donor (NATO, 2017) as well as one of the highest troop contributors to the alliance. Apart from the contributions of funds and personnel, Britain also contributes immensely to the missions in terms of equipment and weapons. For instance, the UK agreed to send five ships to the Baltic region from 2016 as part of NATO build-up against Russia (Macaskill, 2016). Following the annexation of Crimea by Russia in 2016, many Eastern European countries including Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland expressed concern about the activities of Russia and have sought support from the major powers within NATO to stave off any aggression against Russia. The post-Brexit commitment of UK to send 800 troops to Estonia and Poland on a permanent basis from 2017 is a significant indication that the country is strongly committed to the activities of NATO in defending EU countries (Mortimer, 2017). Furthermore, the UK has pledged that despite exiting the EU, the country will continue to spend a minimum of 2% of its GDP on defence in adherence to the recommendations of NATO which further strengthens the country's allegiance to the alliance in the long term (Full Fact, 2018). The commitment of UK to continue its support for NATO goes a long way to reassure other European allies that the UK will continue to be an important partner in the war against terrorism.

Before the attack on America on September 11 2001, NATO did not consider terrorism as one of the important areas to focus on (Bird, 2015). At the Washington summit in April 1999, NATO Heads of State and Government approved the Alliance's new strategic concept (NATO, 1999). The strategic concept focused mainly on the consolidation of the gains made after the cold war. Apart from a brief statement stating that the forces and infrastructures of the members of the alliance should be protected, terrorism was not high on the agenda of NATO at this time. In recent times, however, countering terrorist operations in member States form some of the most important issues facing NATO and UK plays a crucial role in these operations. Since NATO and the EU share 22 member States, UK's continued commitment to the NATO project is an indication that the UK will not relinquish its position in playing a strategic role in the defence of the European continent. However, the rise in far right groups and the increase in Euroscepticism are likely to raise further questions on the importance of organizations like NATO to the security of individual countries

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when considering the amount of resources contributed by individual states into this alliance (Torreblanca and Leonard, 2013).

Control of Borders

Some EU countries such as France and Belgium have seen a rise in the infiltration of weapons which have been used in recent terror attacks in both countries with Belgium being labelled Europe's 'Favourite gun shop' (Duquet, 2015). Belgium has one of the largest illegal weapons market in Europe and some of the weapons have been used in terrorist attacks. Duquet explains that after the Balkans war in the 1990s, thousands of weapons ended up in the hands of civilians and were transported across Western Europe through the weak borders in the Schengen zone with many ending up in Belgium (Duquet and Alstein, 2016). Many of the recent terror attacks have been linked to weapons acquired in Belgium. On August 21 2015, Ayoub el-Khazzani stepped out of the toilet on a train from Amsterdam to Paris, he was brandishing a Kalashnikov rifle and a 9mm pistol but a brutal attack was averted when he was wrestled to the ground and knocked unconscious by other passengers including an off duty US serviceman (Bolton, 2015). It was eventually established that the weapons he was carrying were acquired in Belgium (BBC, 2015). Furthermore, most of the terrorist attacks carried out in France have been linked to the infiltration of weapons from Belgium with the former French President François Hollande stating that "These acts of war have been decided and planned in Syria, they have been organised in Belgium and perpetrated on our soil with French accomplices" (Oliver and Robinson, 2015).

In contrast, the UK has been able to prevent such attacks and infiltration of weapons whilst in the EU due to its strict border security and the exit of the country will give it a more stringent control of its borders. The exit of the UK from the EU will put the country in a better position to protect its borders and keep out people that are of potential threats to the country. The UK has one of the most efficient gun control regimes in the EU (Alpers et al., 2016). This is due to two main reasons: First, the country has stringent regulations and procedures for gun ownership under any circumstance. For instance, in 2016, a former SAS veteran who had served 22 years in the military was sentenced to 15 months in prison for keeping a souvenir weapon from the Falklands War (Brown, 2016). Second, the location of the UK whereby it does not share land border with any other country apart from the Republic of Ireland is of great advantage in policing the borders, keeping weapons out of the country and controlling the ones within the country. The strict control of ownership and importation of weapons has helped the country prevent potential terrorist attacks even whilst in the EU. The exit of the UK from the EU is likely to result in more control of its borders and this would reduce the threats of terrorism even further.

Deportation of Terrorism suspects

One other way the exit of the UK will strengthen its fight against terrorism will be its increased ability to deport people that are deemed to be threats to the country without recourse to the European legislation. Current EU laws make it exceptionally difficult for any country to deport people that are potential threats based on European Court of Justice Legislations. A notable case in the inability of the UK government to deport foreign terrorist suspects was the long battle by the government to deport a convicted terrorist, Abu Qatada. Abu Qatada, a Jordanian citizen with the real name Omar Mahmoud Mohammed Othman arrived in the UK in September 1993 and immediately claimed asylum on a forged passport (BBC, 2013). Abu Qatada, often referred to as Osama Bin Laden's right-hand man in Europe was convicted in his absence of terror related charges in his home country- Jordan and sentenced to life imprisonment in 1999 (The Telegraph, 2013). It took the UK almost a decade to deport him following the judgement by the European courts blocking the deportation based on the fact that evidence obtained from torture might be used to try him in Jordan (Travis and Nicholas, 2012). Despite committing several acts of terrorism while living in the UK such as raising money for Jihad, advocating the killing of Jews and praising attacks on Americans in several speeches made in London, the judgement of the European courts made it difficult to deport him while the UK government did not find enough evidence to try him in the UK (BBC, 2013).

In May 2016, shortly before the EU referendum in the UK, the EU advocate general stated that the court was considering whether the European Court of Justice should adopt powers to rule on all cases of extradition of terrorists, a move described by analysts as 'European Union power grab' and rejected by most member States

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(Slack, 2016). The plan played into the hands of Brexit campaigners who used it to campaign against UK remaining in the EU with the former shadow home secretary David Davis (Now BREXIT minister) stating 'The argument that Europe is somehow improving our security is falling apart in the Government's hands' (Slack, 2016). Thus, exit of the UK from the EU will make it easier for the country to deport foreign nationals, both EU and non-EU citizens, that could be of potential threats to the country.

Conclusion

Contrary to the notion that the UK will have difficulty in protecting its borders and fight terrorism outside of the EU, this article argues that following the exit of the UK from the EU, the country will be in a much better position to fight the rising scourge of terrorism in Europe and protect its citizens. Ranging from issues such as the recent commitment of the UK to NATO to the perceived ability of the country to make its own laws and decide how to deal with threats within its borders, it is evident that the UK will be in a better position outside of the EU to fight terrorism and protect its citizens.

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