

11 LESSONS OF BEATRICE DE GRAAF

AN ACADEMIC TO GUIDE THE NETHERLANDS AFTER PARIS

It was a question many people were seeking an answer to, right after the Paris attacks in November 2015: how to best tackle terrorism? In the fog of the aftermath, one expert was a beacon of clarity: Beatrice de Graaf. She shares a few lessons in an interview. 'What message really is written on these bombs?'

If anyone this past tumultuous week showed the way in the national terrorism debate, it was Beatrice de Graaf. The academic in international relations was queuing everywhere to clarify the Paris attacks. TV shows – and in between some newspapers – and radio-interviews.

De Graaf possesses the rare gift to maintain in control in fast talk shows, without concession. She doesn't scream nor open emotional registers. She separates fact from fiction, teaches in a clear-cut way and does not waver to take the floor for minutes in a row and to go deep.

'Is there actually already a Beatrice-de-Graaf-fanclub?', someone tweeted. It was one of the many digital praises of her presentations.

And yes, I too interviewed Beatrice de Graaf concerning the aftermath of the Paris attacks.

In her university study in Utrecht she tells me she is currently exploring the organizational structure of Islamic State. Even before the conversation really took off, she launched into what is best described as a combination between logical reasoning, thinking out loud and teaching.

What lessons does the expert on terrorism have for the Netherlands?

1. No battlefield in the combat against terrorism is alike

'The tough thing about the Paris attacks is they actually split into two fronts. There is a 'home grown' front in Europe, with youth from the suburbs – from Molenbeek for example. And ISIS has a front in the Middle East. On the one hand, as an fighter of terrorism, you have to work here in Europe, because it happened here. Here is where the safe houses are, here is where the networks are, the logistics; here you need the eyes and the ears on the ground and to invest enormously on de-radicalizing.

That part of the fight against terrorism we have mastered pretty well. But about the other front, in the Middle-East, we hardly understand anything.'

2. What you don't know, you cannot fight

'For what kind of regime is the Islamic State actually? Is Islamic State as an organization in

fact able to execute these kind of attacks in Europe? We know quite some on the ideology of ISIS, but not so much about the organization itself. Therefore we don't really understand why the group is successful in attracting new recruits, to generate resources and to stay viable. That is why we cannot fight against ISIS very well. I understand of course that you have to do something. But what? Bomb?'

'ISIS exists out of a number of battalions. If you bomb Raqqa, you eliminate the battalion in Raqqa. But ISIS can simply move itself elsewhere, to the Sinai desert, to Lebanon, to Yemen? It appears strong enough, and it has a large territory.'

3. For every generation of terrorists you eliminate, you get one more ruthless instead

'From theory about terrorism we know that every new generation of a terrorism group is more ruthless than the previous one. The newcomers are already trained in violence. You could see that with other terror groups as well: with the IRA in Ireland, with the German RAF, with the Columbian FARC. Each next generation worked more brutally. What will the effect be then when you go and bomb in Raqqa?'

I ask her whether there is time even to think this over? Raqqa is being bombed, France and Russia become an alliance, and multiple nations speak the language of war. The mayor of Rotterdam, Ahmed Aboutaleb, talks about wiping out 40 to 50 thousands of people who joined ISIS.

'Many things are still unclear, and one should not want to resolve things with such simplistic views: "we will bomb them, we will wipe them out". History shows this strategy hardly ever worked, and surely not in the short term. Such a strict military solution would only work with the effort of thousands of ground troops and with a commitment of years.'

'When Aboutaleb says you need to wipe out people, as an historian I hark back to similar situations throughout history, fought against groups who possessed territory and who were capable of finding support with the people – the so-called insurgents. The fight against ISIS looks in that way like Vietnam. Or on the one against Taliban. And we all know how these conflicts turned out for the West. Not so good.'

4. Terrorism and the fight against it is not just about attacks

That it is not only about the number of victims of attacks is recognised. Terroritsts also aspire to

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sowing fear, to social destabilization. De Graaf has added with her academic work a significant insight: the success of the struggle against terrorism well lies also in the social consequences of counter-terrorism policy.

'Terrorists want to create a 'theatre of fear'. The question is whether you as a fighter against terrorism will play along in this theatre. With the use of war rhetoric and extreme measures you take the risk of giving terrorists what they want. Just by neutralising fear in society, you give terrorism less chance to root.'

5. The fight against terrorism is all about representation

The battle with the terrorists becomes a battle about representation. In *Theatre of fear*, de Graaf analysed extensively different historical terrorists and counter-terrorists. Furthermore, she presented statistical proof for her most important statement. In short, this is what it comes down to: *the more thoughtful the response to terrorism—'measures focused on de-radicalizing, on prevention of recruitment and on as little as possible social mobilizing'—the fewer attacks and deaths.*

Her theory might be eight years old by now, but according to de Graaf, it is still accurate.

'The contra-terrorism policy of Sarkozy as of 2007 and the posturing of France have undermined the efficacy of the fight against terrorism on a local level. The actions of his successor Hollande can have an influence on the mind-set of the people, the mind-set in the banlieues (suburbs), on the way in which the ISIS propaganda works, also on the youth here in the Netherlands. As fighters against terrorism, you need to monitor this. Because it could be the ideological monition for the next wave of recruitment.'

France seems to not yet apply this knowledge. *'I understand the French government wants to do something. But with every attack you execute, you don't only need to measure the direct results as well as the message it brings. Terrorist groups can turn your actions into persuasive power of their own campaigns to enforce them.'*

'And I also wonder how surgical these attacks really are. Was the efficacy really thought through? Or was it purely an act of revenge? The French president Hollande has made an alliance with Russia. With that, he does exactly what ISIS keeps on saying: we are being attacked by a front of western and eastern crusades. That story has

an enormous legitimate function for them to commit new attacks and to recruit new guys. That is what really concerns me.'

6. Counter-terrorists must tell an alternative story

'The way in which ISIS uses propaganda – and to which consequently media, civilians and other groups respond – makes the control of the authorities on the communication very difficult. The government has no information monopoly anymore. As government you must absolutely not try to dim things or to restrain, because that is no

longer possible. It means that you yourself need to fight back with words and monitor the expressiveness of your own actions. How do they come across with vulnerable groups? Where does controversy, panic or radicalizing threaten to exist?

'The fact that communication in the phase after the attack matters shows from a recent example. You could see that after the attacks of Tristan van der Vlis in Alphen aan de Rijn in 2011. Immediately,

everyone wondered whether he was a jihadi. Brave officials and policemen then went on twittering that it was just one culprit, a white male. That was very important to silence the panic. First and foremost, it is about providing information fast and adequately.'

'An emerging field within the science of terrorism is called 'counter narratives'. It is about the idea that you also can and should fight the content of terrorism, with alternative information and messages. The last word has not been said about this. Does it work? We do have some experience with this kind of counter messages – think of the fight against smoking and drugs. But how does it work then in the psyche of the young? In the banlieues for example, the spread of declarations and written appeals are less efficient. A large part of the residents don't read that anyway.'

'According to mayor Beaudet of the suburb of Courcouronnes, it is far more effective to stand on a little crate at night and address the people directly. To make verbal announcements and appeals, just as the town crier used to do. Better even would be if it would come out of the communities themselves. In Syria, 49 opposition parties so far have denounced the Paris attacks. Among them were parties who are on our list of terrorists. Also that is counter narrative. Or the

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hash tags who were popular among the Parisians last week: je suis en terrasse.'

7. Actions are words also

Whoever thinks in this instance that 'counter narratives' is a nice word for promotion for fighters against terrorism is mistaken. 'It is much more strategic. Bombing Raqqa is also a message. Afterwards you might say it wasn't meant that way, but that doesn't make a lot of sense. Every action you take is a message. If you send helicopters somewhere, if you have a lot of blue on the streets, the subtext of the message would be for example: it is very dangerous here.'

'Sometimes there is no other way. But we need to realise: you can come up with smart promotion messages and tweets, but your actions as well speak a language. That point from my book still stands. Now that as a counter-terrorist you have even less control over representation and the public opinion than before, it becomes even more important to be very conscientious with that which you can control. What message really is written on your bomb?'

8. Terrorism comes but always disappears as well. Always.

'I teach the course 'history of terrorism'. There, we go out from the so-called wave theory. This is a very sobering, scary but also a reassuring theory that says that terrorism has developed parallel to the rise of the modern state since the 19th century. According to this theory, since then there have been four waves of terrorism. Today we find ourselves amidst of the fourth wave, the wave of religious violence. The reassuring aspect of this theory is that every wave until now has followed the same process: it comes, it consolidates, it leads to gruesome deeds – to deaths and wounded – and then it weakens.'

'How long these waves last and how intense they are depends on the measure in which the terrorists are capable of generating new recruits and of the way in which the society and the authorities respond. Does terrorism arouse controversy, or is it possible to silence it early on? To what extent is the surrounding sensitive for their message?'

9. In the Netherlands it is not an easy thing to become a violent jihadi

'In the Netherlands jihadi have enough ways to spread their message without violence. You can set up a party here. Organizing demonstrations, open an Islamic teahouse, organizing your way of life as you want to. When those alternatives are

not there, it becomes hard to be found in the right in other ways. There is a very strong correlation between the repression of minorities and the persuasion of terrorists on their constituency. But there are always exceptions that will seek the way of violence. Those exceptions are impossible to fully understand.'

10. You will never fully get to know terrorists

'It is not possible to foretell which individual will turn into a terrorist. Nobody ever succeeded in making a terrorist profile. They are not always unhappy, they are not always poor, and they are not always from the same region. Although, they very often are criminals and have little brothers or sisters who are terrorists. To really understand a terrorist, you probably should knock on the door of a novelist instead of a scientist.'

11. The best fighter against terrorism is a ward police officer

In a recent TV show, Beatrice de Graaf already explained that counter-terrorism is the work of human beings. Most terrorist attacks are prevented not by advanced technology of secret services but by information that came to the attention through parole officers, policemen or social workers.

In France, exactly there is where it went wrong, explains the professor. As of 2007, the French president Sarkozy conducted a policy of 'zero tolerance'. Sarkozy created new entities and gave the counter-terrorists a whole new range of responsibilities. The problem: they were not at all effective, they were mostly meant 'for the spectator'.

To be able to finance these new projects, Sarkozy cut immensely in the budget for communities. Ward police officers disappeared and de-radicalizing programs were shut down. By now, mayors of the banlieues complain they don't have enough resources to tackle the problems with the young Muslims. Instead of focussing only on Syria, de Graaf explains, president Hollande should focus on the banlieues as well, 'where the wave of violence presents itself again'.

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