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Intelligence failures: between theories and case studies

MAURO PASTORELLO¹, MARIANNA TESTA²

Abstract

The main objective of this paper is to understand why the Intelligence Community at time fails, taking in account several major intelligence failures starting from the most shocking one in the twentieth century – the 9/11 terrorist attack – to the most recent – France and Belgium multiple attacks.

Intelligence failures are not easy to study because there is not accepted single theory that explains why the intelligence community fails. This field of interest, which has his roots in the Pearl Harbor surprise attack, has always attracted interest. This interest is due because of the importance of the Intelligence Community role in the security field. The most studied intelligence failure episode was the attack on Pearl Harbor, but a major interest arose when one of the most shocking, for the western world, surprise attack took place within the United States. The 9/11 terrorist attacks. What went wrong? Although surprise attacks are not the only types of intelligence failures, we will focus on them because of the sadly recent events.

This paper is structured as follow:

Paragraph 1. Takes in account the different definitions of the word “intelligence” which can be an organization, information, a process, a product. To better understand the intelligence failures we decided that the best definitions to rely on are intelligence as information and as a process. Intelligence as information is defined as a tangible product to collected and analyzed; and intelligence as a process (the intelligence cycle) is composed of five important steps, which are: requirements, collection, analysis, production and dissemination.

Paragraph 2. The aim of this paragraph is to explore the different theories of the intelligence failures and try to understand which one can be applied for our case studies. The traditional school believes that the problem of the intelligence failure lies in faulty analysis of the available information: the failures lies in the analysis stage. While for the contrarian school the problem rises in the collection stage: intelligence officials need to rely more on the use of the intelligence means (HUMINT, TECHINT, SIGINT, IMINT) for a better information collection. The reformist school does not recognize the problem in the intelligence cycle but in the organizational structure of the intelligence agencies. Complex structures, hierarchies, specialization can limit the sharing of important information: the dots are not connected.

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²NSPA – Luxembourg, Master’s Degree in Political Science and International Relations at LUISS Guido Carli in Rome. **Every statement or theory expressed by the author does not represent NATO in any way.**

Paragraph 3. The third paragraph regards the 9/11 terrorist attacks. It is worth saying that intelligence as “information” matches perfectly for this specific case: the information regarding the attacks were present but the organizational structure of the American intelligence community failed to connect the dots. We can easily say that US intelligence community failed to prevent the 9/11 terrorist attacks because the American intelligence agencies did not share information due to their complex organizational structure. For the different nature, protocols, cultures, internal problems, and interest the FBI and CIA did not share several important information.

Paragraph 4. After analyzing the different theories and the first case study we agree in recognizing that the problem of the intelligence agencies in non-sharing information is due because of their organizational structure (of course, this is not valid for all the intelligence failure events as the intelligence can fail for other reasons also). This last paragraph simply describes and analyzes two tragic events that took place in Europe between 2015 and 2016: the Paris attacks and Brussels attacks. Just like the 9/11 case study we agree in addressing the failure of the intelligence community of both countries in not sharing information.

Keywords

Intelligence, Intelligence failure, Intelligence bias, Intelligence Community, Intelligence theories, Intelligence schools, terrorist attack.

1. Definitions of intelligence

When we perceive the word ‘intelligence’ our leading thoughts associate intelligence to spies stealing secrets, cover actions and other secretive activities. These actions are elements of intelligence but a more thorough definition is required.

There is no accepted definition of intelligence [14]. For Sherman Kent, historian and former CIA senior analyst, intelligence is “*knowledge but is surprising that there is not more general agreement and less confusion about the meaning of the basic term. The main difficulty seems to lie in the word intelligence itself, which has come to mean what people in the trade do and what they come up to. Is both a process and end-product*” [14]. However something seems to be missing, who is in charge of this process? Professor Walter Laqueur adds that information refers to an organization collecting information, the Intelligence Community (hereafter IC) of a nation. A complete definition, that unifies the previous two, is defined by Mark Lowenthal [1], National Intelligence Council officer, identifies intelligence as a process, product and an organization:

- as a process: intelligence is the process by which specific types of information, important for national security, are requested- collected- analyzed and provided to policymakers (the intelligence cycle);

- as a product: intelligence is the product of the process described above (reports, NIE, PDB);
- Organization: of people and organizations such as agencies, institutions that form the IC.

The IC exists for carrying out three important missions:

1. Collecting and analyzing information: is the IC primary mission, in order to present the final product to the president and other policymakers. This enables them to take actions and make decisions.
2. Counterintelligence: includes a range of methods used to protect the nations against aggressive operations carried out by foreign intelligence agencies and terrorist groups. Counterintelligence employs two approaches: security and counterespionage. Security is physically guarding the nation's personnel, installations and operations against hostile forces [9]; counterespionage is when an agent penetrates (infiltrates) the inner councils of a foreign intelligence agencies or terrorist group;
3. Cover actions: the purpose is to secretly shape events overseas in support of a Nation policy. More specifically cover actions is carried out by one state to alter the political or economic development in another state, while preserving the source of influence [12].

The last, but not least important definition of intelligence is given by Michael Warner: "*Intelligence is a particular form of information that allows policymakers, operational commanders, to make more effective decisions*" [1]. Here information is perceived as exceptional data that allows policymakers to take crucial decisions.

To better understand why intelligence fails, we will rely on only two specific definitions: intelligence as information and as a process.

1.1 Intelligence as a process

The IC activity is carried out by following a specific process: the intelligence cycle.

- Requirements: means defining policy issues or areas in which intelligence is expected to make a contribution. Every issue is important, but for the intelligence community priorities need to be set: some issues require more attention: weapons of mass destruction, terrorism, foreign commitments etc;
- Collection: after setting the priorities, the IC needs to collect information (or better say raw data) about the priorities. The IC has several disciplines for collecting information: human intelligence (HUMNIT), technical

intelligence (TECHINT), signals intelligence (SIGINT), imagery intelligence (IMINT);

- Analysis: this stage of the cycle is seen as the most significant; in fact, most of the intelligence failures are made during this stage. Information collectors pass this particular data to the analysts, at this stage the information that needs to be analyzed: raw information is converted in actionable intelligence; later on the analyst places the data in a historical context, determines which data is meaningful and which is not;
- Production and dissemination: information is delivered to the consumers (policymakers) in form of an intelligence product;

Feedback: policymakers, after receiving the final intelligence product, can discuss with the IC if any adjustments are required.

1.2 Intelligence as information

While, intelligence as information, means that information is a tangible product collected and analyzed with the goal to achieve a deeper comprehension of subversive activities at home, political, social economic and military situations around the world [9].

The kind of information used by the IC is much different from the one of the open-sources. The most important information is that which the nations attempt to hide. The hidden information is brought to light by encoding communications and stealing activities. This kind of information gathering is called clandestine operations, core activity for the intelligence agencies. Governments for national security reasons, need to rely upon these types of operations because it's the only way to retrieve important data which is hidden by the potentially dangerous others. To emphasize the importance to have this type of information, Abram N. Shulsky has written “*intelligence often entails access to information some other party is to trying to deny*” [9].

2. Intelligence failure: definition and theories

Similar to the definition of intelligence it is not easy to define intelligence failure. The intelligence can fail for many reasons often despite the best work of the intelligence [6]. As the US Marine Corps intelligence director Lieutenant General Paul Van Riper lamented that “*the IC does a damn good job. It troubles me that people always speak in terms of operational success and intelligence failure*” [6]. This is due because intelligence failures are well documented. The post-failure commissions (as the 9/11 Commission) which

task was to understand what wrong, have access to secret and sensitive reports for addressing their task. On the other hand, when the IC succeeds nothing is said. This is due to the fact that the sensitive and secret reports remain inaccessible. Therefore, success is not documented. In fact, the lack of understanding when and how the IC succeeds makes it more difficult to address an intelligence theory.

Academics, security studies experts and intelligence officials have different views in understanding why the IC fails. For some intelligence officials and academics the IC is responsible “*an intelligence failure is the inability of one or more parts of the intelligence process to produce timely accurate intelligence on an issue or event of importance to national interest*” (cit. Mark Lowenthal). For others failures are committed from policymakers “*who either neglect or misuse the intelligence they are given*” [6] (cit. Abram N. Shulsky). However, as we said in the previous paragraphs the intelligence process involves both: the IC and policymakers. Said so, a better definition could be a failure of the IC to produce the intelligence needed by policymakers or a failure of these to act on the intelligence appropriately [6]. Before getting into the specific theories, it is necessary to understand what the conventional wisdom is.

2.1 Conventional wisdom

The surprise attack on Pearl Harbor is the leading case in the field of intelligence failures. Since this failure was studied by Roberta Wohlsteter a conventional wisdom arose. She argues that the failure to prevent the Pearl Harbor attacks was a failure that occurred in the analysis stage: “*we failed to anticipate Pearl Harbor not for the relevant materials, but because of a plethora of irrelevant ones*” [6]. This meant that an excess of noise had occulted the intelligence warnings that were present. This failure explanation is known as the ‘problem of signal-to-noise ratio’. In today’s world this problem has been replaced with the ‘connect the dots’ problem: **the intelligence agencies had the relevant warning but they failed to analyze them. Signal versus noise and connecting the dots are known as the conventional wisdom.**

Intelligence failure theories are diverse and at times opposite. The intelligence theories that I am going to define are the Traditional School, Reformist school and the Contrarian school.

2.2 Traditionalist school

This school can be explained in a simple word: pessimistic. This school of thought can be summarized in Richard Betts famous quotes “*the intelligence failures are not only inevitable but natural*” [2].

As I mentioned previously, Roberta Wohlstetter established the so called conventional wisdom but she's also convinced that the task of intelligence is intrinsically difficult and believes that intelligence performance is not likely to get much better in the future [6]. For Roberta Wohlstetter, the problem of the intelligence failure, lies in the faulty analysis of the available information and not in the collection of that information; her 'signal to noise' problems explains her view. Signal is a piece of evidence that points to the action of the adversaries, while for noise is to be intended "signs pointing in wrong directions that obscure the signs pointing the right way" [4]. Analysts fail to understand which signal to take in account.

Instead, because failures are natural traditionalist do not blame the responsibility on intelligence officials. If anyone is responsible of the intelligence failures, it must be the policymakers. This point of view is supported by the two most permanent traditionalists, Betts and Handel.

Betts argues that "*the principals cause of surprise is not the failure of the intelligence but the unwillingness of political leaders to believe intelligence or react to it with sufficient dispatch*" [6]. For Handel intelligence is a process (or cycle) in which "*historical experiences confirms that the intelligence failures are more often caused by a breakdown on the level of acceptance than on the acquisition or analysis levels*" [6]. Warning without responses is useless [3].

For others such as Richard Heuer, Robert Jervis (according to Betts and Handel as well) the intelligence failure occurs because of mental mindsets, assumption that are resistant to change and cognitive bias.

Beliefs, assumptions, concepts, form a mind-set that guides perception and processing of new information. Mind-set is unavoidable [9].

There are two factor that unconsciously influence the analysis of the information:

- Historical context: because analysts are usually working with incomplete, ambiguous and contradictory data they need to place them in a historical context. As the information is incomplete the analyst relies on one or more historical precedents that can shed light on the present [9].

However, if a historical precedent is vivid and powerful it can influence the analyst's thinking assessing the judgments. This happens when the analyst thinks that the two events are similar and the outcome is the same.

- Rejecting alternative hypothesis: it is almost natural to discount disconfirming intelligence; it is easier to accept information supporting a hypothesis that is believed to be valid.

Owever, Heuer tries to identify several ways to overcome this problem. Analysts should question their assumptions, try to identify and find alternatives to them and be cautious in questioning in mirror imagining and filling in the gaps. Mirror imaging is when an analyst assumes that the other side

will act the same as you, in the same circumstances. This leads to dangerous assumptions because people of other cultures do not act the same way we do.

While cognitive biases are inevitable “they effect honest, dedicated and intelligence men” [8]. Cognitive biases are more difficult to overcome because it is not caused by emotional predisposition towards a certain judgment but from subconscious mental procedures for processing information, it is a mental error [7]. As Betts noted, “*unlike organizational structure...cognition cannot be altered by legislation*” [2].

2.3 Reformist school

The reformist school is more optimistic than the traditionalist school. This theory focuses on the limits of the organizational and bureaucratic organizations of the intelligence community rather on analysis or psychological limits.

This school believes that the warnings are present before the failure, but the IC fails because it does not connect the dots. Connecting the dots problems here is not viewed as an analytical failure, but due to the complexity of the IC structure and organization. To clarify this point of view we need to just take into account how many intelligence agencies the United States has: 17 independent intelligence agencies, employing over 100,000 people with an annual budget of almost \$ 70 billion [5]. Amy Zegart is one of the most critical of the IC organization “deeply rooted organizational weakness” [16]. In her book, *Spying Blind*, she explains in simple words why the intelligence organizational and structure are the main cause of the intelligence failures. For Zegart the IC organization failed to adoption in dealing with new threats: the intelligence community did not change after the Cold War, however when the Cold War ended changes in the intelligence community was necessary. Micheal Hyden, former CIA director, argues that there are differences in the IC during the Cold War and today: during the cold war the enemy’s force were relatively easy to find but hard to kill. Today the situation is reversed. We are now in an age in which our primary adversary is easy to kill but hard to find [5]. The threats of the Cold War era are not the same of today’s: a new approach is necessary. As Charles Porrow contented “*most bad rules were once good, designated for a situation that no longer exists*” [5].

Others like Charles F.Parker and Eric K. Stern highlighted that the intelligence organizations have difficulty to share information and coordinate the analysis because the agencies tend to be divided by organizational culture, procedural differences, organizational goals and bureaucratic rivalries which does not permit information sharing [11].

Amy Zegart is one of the best academic experts in believing that those differences are the main cause of failures. In addition there is a sense of rival-

ry between the intelligence agencies. This sense of rivalry is best explained through social categorization, that is the human tendency to make “us vs.them” and cognitive categorization “*in which a group accentuates the perceived differences of other agencies in situations where groups must cooperate to achieve larger goals*” [11]. The IC lacks of corporateness [15]. Addressing the reformist school, it is important to mention Glenn Hastedt, who noticed that **intelligence failure occurs because the nature of the organization leads to hierarchies, specialization, centralization which can limit the sharing of information** [6].

2.4 The Contrarian school

The contrarian school believes that intelligence fails because it fails to collect information. They perceived the failure in the collection stage. A permanent contrarian is David Khan, a historian and journalist, who studied the Pearl Harbor intelligence failure challenging Roberta Wohlstetter conventional wisdom. In his article, “*The Intelligence failure of Pearl Harbor*”, he clearly stated “*there was a dearth of intelligence materials. The intelligence officers could perhaps have foreseen the attack if the US, year before, had insinuated spies into high-level Japanese military, flown regular aerial reconnaissance of the Japanese navy and put intercept units aboard ships*” [10]. The intelligence officials need to rely on the use of the intelligence means for a better information collection. Another challenger of the traditionalist school is Ariel Levite who argues that no credible warning was available before the attack, but he supports the idea that if sufficient intelligent is available reliable and effective warning can be given [6].

3. The 9/11 terrorist attacks, which theory is more appropriate?

3.1 CIA: Central Intelligence Agency

The Central Intelligence Agency was established for gathering information on foreign countries without jurisdictional authority to collect information on United States citizens.

CIA was at the front line of the IC during the Cold War performing a significant role. However, as the Cold War ended the agency had to face several complications specifically the adaptation-changes problem to dealing with unfamiliar threats. With the end of the Cold War the agency had to face several uncertainties: who’s the enemy now?

During the Cold War era the main objective of the CIA was the Soviet Union while from the early nineties the main national /international threat was transnational terrorism. The shift from a state actor-enemy to a non-state actor enemy was the main challenge. CIA officials stated that “*we were dealing with a rapidly changing world; we have been exclusively focused on the Soviet Union...every morning we woke up and it was there. Terrorism is something very different, understanding the power of small groups of individuals that moved across borders and hidden from view was the major challenge*” [16]. The CIA’s weakness and failure to change is due to three organizational deficiencies: structure, culture and incentives.

The agency turned to be a decentralized structure. The activities within the agency were divided between headquarters and fields, which covered a specific geographic area with their own priorities [16]. This decentralized structure was not able to face terrorism. Cold War security demands enhanced the culture of secrecy between agencies. In the CIA a sense of agency parochialism [16] had contributed to develop one of the agency’s main problem: information sharing with the other intelligence agencies. Incentives were counterproductive as the work of analyst were considered a ‘good job’ because of the number of final reports produced, rather than the quality of them. Incentives and culture brought up a us vs. them attitude between the agencies and the CIA [16].

The CIA missed several occasions to at least comprehend what was happening between 2000-2001, the first bad performance dates back to the Kuala Lumpur meeting. From January 5th 2000 to January 8th 2000 an Al-Qaeda meeting was taking place in Kaula Lumpur, the purpose of these meetings was the planning of the USS Cole attack and the 9/11 attacks. The Kaula Lumpur meetings were under CIA surveillance, but at the end of the meeting they lost track of the three men suspected when they moved to Bangkok. On 8 January, the CIA knew the name of Khalid al-Mindhar and that he held a US visa, although they didn’t consider the possibility that he would probably travel to the United States (in fact a few days later he settled in California) and a few more days later they identified a second man, Nawafa-al Hazmi.

The CIA internal organization was so disjointed that an agent of the CIA’s Bin Laden Unit believed that the two suspected were still under surveillance in Malaysia [16]. The CIA information sharing problem is quiet evident: the CIA failed to prevent Nawafa al-Hazmi travelling to the United States because they never requested any information about him to both the National Security Agency and the State Department, therefore the CIA did not know that he held a US visa.

The CIA did not inform the FBI about the two men holding a US visa and the possibility to travel in the US, indeed they were never signaled on the

watch listing with the attempt to daring them to enter the United States. Focusing strictly on the information that a single agency possesses is erroneous because that data could be incomplete, but the CIA culture-secrecy prevents the agents to share information. This problem is best explained in the words of an agent “we approach each case as if it’s me,my,mine” [16].

On August 15, 2001 an official at the flight school in Minneapolis was suspicious about Zacarias Moussaoui, a man with no aviation background but willing to pay between \$ 8.000 to \$ 9.000, with the only interest to learn how to take off and land. The FBI field office in Minneapolis took the case and arrested him. On August 23, 2001 George Tenet was briefed about the arrest, in a briefing titled “Islamic Extremist learns to fly” but because he thought that this case was an FBI case he didn’t take action and he did not inform the White House³.

3.2 FBI: Federal Bureau of Investigation

The Federal Bureau of Investigation was established with the purpose to investigate possible violations of US federal law on the United States soil. The FBI failed in the 9/11 attacks for the same reasons of the CIA, organizational deficiencies: structure, culture and incentives.

The agency’s internal structure is decentralized: power is concentrated in 56 local offices called field offices, each of them covers different specific geographical areas headed by a special- agent in charge that decides the office priorities, its own cases to solve and guarding its own information. Because of this type of organization each field office persecutes their own cases, much of them were local cases rather than national, are reluctant to spend energy on cases which they had no control and for which they received no credit. Counterterrorism was not one of the FBI priorities and this type of structure demonstrated it: it’s a kind of organization that can work for law enforcement but not with dealing with terrorism, which needs national efforts. Law enforcement culture is what made the FBI weaker in facing terrorism. With the rising of terrorism threat a new approach was needed; counterterrorism is much different from old crime mission. In addition, sense of loyalty makes it more difficult for the FBI to share information between the different field offices and between the entire IC. Traditional incentives within the agency are another reason why FBI failed to implement organizational changes facing terrorism.

³ The 9/11 Commission Report. Available at: <https://9-11commission.gov/report/911Report.pdf>, p. 276.

Performance within the agency were evaluated on the numbers of arrests, prosecutions, convictions; counterintelligence and counterterrorism were considered a no enhancing career activities because these types of activities do not have quantifiable results⁴. As described above after the Kaula Lampur meeting the CIA did not notify the FBI about Al-Mihdhar and Hazmi and the possible intention to travel in the US. The two suspected terrorists arrived in the US on January 15, 2000 and settled in San Diego. Only by the summer of 2001 the FBI started to collect information on Mihdhar. Yet, they discovered that he held a US visa and that he was already in the United States, but because his original visa application had listed his destination as New York, the message was sent to the NY field office on August 28. A New York agent started to check local database and noted that Mihdhar had entered the US through Los Angeles [6]. The Los Angeles field office received the request to look for him only on September 11th. The FBI's decentralized structure explains even more two other important events: the Phoenix memo and Zacarias Moussoui's arrest.

By spring 2001 FBI special agent, Kenneth Williams, by July 10 he sent a memo to the FBI headquarters and to two agents of the international terrorism squad in NY of the "possibility of a coordinated effort by Osama Bin Laden to send students to the US to attend civil aviation schools"⁵. The memo was sent only at the FBI field office of Portland because one of the men suspected had a connection to a local case. This kind of misunderstanding can be explained partially because of the bureau's fragmented structure and partially because the FBI failed to dedicate and devote themselves to 'national cases' preferring local cases.⁶ Zacarias Moussaoui's arrest has been defined as the best, failed, chance to hinder the 9/11 attacks. On August 15, 2001 a Pan American International Flight School employee was suspicious about a foreign student, Zacarias Moussaoui, who paid between \$8,000 to \$9,000 in cash for training on a Boeing 747 without any qualifications and most important he was just interested to learn to take off and to land. The Minneapolis FBI field office started an intelligence investigation finding that Moussaoui possessed jihadist beliefs "an Islamic extremist preparing for some future act"⁷. The suspected terrorist was then imprisoned because he had overstayed his visa. The FBI's mistake in the case happened after the arrest: the Minneapolis field office

⁴ *Ibidem*, p.76.

⁵ *Ibidem*, p.272.

⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 273.

⁷ *Ibidem*, p.275.

had disputes with the headquarters over whether or not sufficient ground existed to obtain a criminal or a FISA⁸ warrant to search his belongings.

3.3 CIA and FBI sharing information problem

As a result of the difference in nature of the mission of the US intelligence agencies, a problem of negligence exists, and restricts the flow of information to where it is most needed [13]. The US Intelligence Community is composed of 16 independent agencies; they have their own missions and priorities. The 9/11 Commission Report confirmed that the two agencies failed to connect the dots because: they did not share information as a consequence of their internal organizations and cultural differences.

3.4 Organization structure problem

As mentioned in the previous paragraphs both agencies internal structures were so decentralized that even within the agencies sharing information was impossible.

3.5 Cultural bias

The 9/11 Commission Report highlighted the legal barrier that had prevented the information sharing between the FBI and CIA. This legal barrier is known by intelligence agency as “the wall” which prevents criminal investigations from using intelligence sources to gain warrants. Specifically, the wall refers to cultural biases within each organization as well as limited legally approved methods of data transfer between them creating barrier to information sharing because it takes too much time and efforts to share information [13]. Furthermore, FBI and CIA are well known for having an aversion to sharing information: a turf war is at the heart of CIA-FBI lack of cooperation.

3.6 Adoption failure

When the FBI and CIA were established they had to face diverse enemies than today's: their primary attention was devoted to foreign countries (most at the Soviet Union). It is easier to deal with a state actor because you know who is the threat, his capabilities, intentions, and there is a clear distinction

⁸ Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act of 1978: regulates the intelligence collection directed at foreign powers and agent for foreign powers in the U.S. To require court review of proposed surveillance this act was interpreted by the courts to require that a search be approved only if its ‘primary purpose’ was to obtain foreign intelligence information (Definition in The 9/11 Commission Report, Chapter 3).

between domestic and international threats. While facing threats like groups of terrorists in the era of globalization, a thoroughly unprecedented and challenging issue: it is easier today for groups of people/terrorists to exercise trans-nationally as a consequence of the use of information and communications technology.

4. France and Belgium terrorist attacks: cooperation difficulties

The 9/11 case study shows up that the intelligence is a like a puzzle: if you miss a piece you will never have the full picture. The information (pieces) are present but the actors (the agencies) did not share those pieces: connecting the dots is impossible. Yet, if is so hard to share information between agencies of the same country, do we imagine how hard is between agencies of two or more countries? France and Belgium attacks are certainly the case.

But before proceeding our analysis a clarification is needed.

Sharing information doesn't mean that if the agencies share information is sure that they can prevent or foresee an attacks. Sharing information is useful when the information are valid and on time. Having a high quantity of information doesn't mean that there is less chance to fail.

As Roberta Wohlstetter clears out, intelligence failures can occurs because the 'signal to noise ratio' problem: the intelligence can fail not because they don't have information but because of a plethora of irrelevant one. As explained in the first paragraph "signal is a piece of evidence that points to the action of the adversaries, while the noise are signs pointing in wrong directions that obscure the signs pointing the right way" [4]. The analysis stage is the most delicate one.

Similar to the 9/11 attacks, Belgium and France were aware of some important information, but they failed to share because of their internal and external organizational structures.

Compered to the 9/11 case study, the terrorist attacks that shocked the two European cities, seems even more 'easy to study'. As France and Belgium are two sovereignty states organized with their own structures, organizations, legal structures and law enforcement, sharing information with other countries is not that easy. Protocols, different laws, reluctance in sharing information because of rivalry or power can make cooperation between two States almost impossible.

The terrorist attacks that occurred in Paris (November 2015) and Brussels (March 2016) could be seen as two separate events, on the contrary they are

linked because of the information and terrorists involved. France and Belgium secret services failed together in preventing these two events.

4.1 Paris multiple attacks

On the 13th of November 2015, in only 33 minutes, the bloodiest attack on French soil since World War II took place.

Six coordinated attacks between Stade de France and I, X, XI arrondissement were carried out by at least 10 terrorists killing 130 people and wounding circa 368. Few hours later the Islamic State claimed the attacks.

Everything was planned in several steps:

- a first kamikaze blew himself on the street long the way to the State de France killing one person;
- few minutes later a Seat black car, carrying some of the terrorists, stopped in several cafe and restaurant between I, X, XI arrondissement shooting with kalashnikov on people;
- another terrorist blew himself on Boulevard Voltaire;
- black Polo stopped in front of the theatre Bataclan, where a concert was held, three terrorists were able to get in the theatre and started to shoot on the crowd before killing themselves.

Six attacks in 33 minutes, are not easy to prevent but what if some of the terrorists were already known by the French or others intelligence agencies?

Some of the attackers were already known to the authorities but France failed to surveil them. Because France has 11,000 radicalized individual which 1,200 are foreign fighters⁹ a traditional surveillance systems is impossible to take place: to monitor a suspect 24/7 are needed circa 15-20 man. The intelligence agency DGSJ has more or less 3,300 officers, which means that all the suspected are impossible to control.

Ismael Omar Mostefai and Samy Amimour, the Bataclan suicide bombers, were known to the French authorities, but still they had the possibilities to fly to Syria and return back to Europe.

But the more emblematic episode took place the day after the Paris attacks: Salah Abdeslam, the mastermind of the attacks, while escaping to Belgium was stopped at the French boarder but released; Belgian authorities passed Salah's information to the French just 15 minutes later he was released.

The Belgium authorities did not share with French a important information: Salah Abdeslam and his bother Ibrahim, who died during the attacks,

⁹ *The Paris attacks: A case of intelligence failures?* Available at <http://www.nato.int/docu/review/2015/ISIL/Paris-attacks-terrorism-intelligence-ISIS/EN/index.htm> p.3.

were known to be radicals. A no-sharing information problem in the this case raises between two countries.

As Salah Abdeslam, born in Belgium and neutralized French with Moroccan origin, entered the Belgium borders the Belgium authorities started a manhunt. Because Belgium laws do not permit house raids by the police after 9 p.m and before 5.a.m.: two days after Salah went back to Belgium his house could not be searched. He was captured 4 months later on the 18th of March, in his family apartment in Molenbeek.

Molenbeek, a Brussels neighborhood home of almost 100.00 Moroccans¹⁰ notorious for radicalism, is known to be a difficult neighborhood almost a “parallel world¹¹” with youth not feeling part of the community and easily switching from common crime to violent extremism¹². Salah, like many others youth of this Belgian neighborhood, was already been arrested for ‘little’ crime as drug puddling and while in prison he was recruited like most of others jihadists.

4.2 Belgium attacks

On the 22nd of March 2016 Brussels was under terrorist attacks: Najim Laachraoui and Ibrahim el Bakraoui blew themselves at Zaventem airport while a second suicide bomber, Khalid el Bakraoui blew himself in the underground train station near the European Institutions. The Brussels attacks took place just after 4 days Salah’s capture.

Yet, like the French attacks, all of the three terrorists were known to the Belgium authorities:

- Belgium intelligence service were already been alerted by Turkey of Ibrahim el Bakraoui intention to reach Syria. When he was stopped on the Turkish borders he was asked to be deported in the Netherlands where he was than free to travel in Belgium. The Belgium authorities did not arrested Ibrahim because they did not have formal accuses;
- while his brother, Khalid, was on Interpol blacklist after the Paris attacks, but the Belgium federal police did not noticed the warning even if he was already suspected by the Belgian police of the Paris terrorist attacks;
- Naihmlaachraoui was known to be the one who made the suicide vests for the Paris attacks;

¹⁰ *Belgium’s Security Failures Made the Brussels Attacks All But Inevitable*. Available at <http://time.com/4269505/brussels-attacks-security-failure-belgium/>, 3.

¹¹ *Ibidem*, p.4.

¹² *Ivi*.

- Salah Abdeslam was known to one of the intelligence agencies in Belgium at least from 2014, while others only by January 2015.

In addition, when Salah Abdeslam was captured, he was questioned only for one hour on the Paris attack, but founding of heavy weapons could have been a warning of the two Brussels attacks.

The intelligence failures of the Brussels attacks lies on the organizational structure problems of the Belgian territory. Belgium is indicated as a country created artificially because of the ethnic fractures: French speaking and flamish speaking which makes cooperation even more harder¹³. Belgium has a weak federal government with powerful local municipalities; in addition Brussels counts circa 1 million of people with 19 municipalities and 6 different police forces which most of the time the don't communicate with each other. This might explain why all of the intelligence agencies in the country did not have same information at the same time. As Belgium is known to be Europe hub of Islamist radicals, such errors are even more incomprehensible to understand.

If sharing information within the same country seems impossible, sharing information between different countries can be defined an utopia. We must always take in account that both countries are member of the Schengen Treaty which means: freedom of movement.

If freedom of movement is possible between some European countries, why they don't share information if suspected people are in the Schengen zone? Yet, European intelligence agencies and several database do exist, but sharing information with others is not mandatory. For example, the Schengen Information System is update only by some of the European States within the Schengen treaty. **It has been estimated that Europe has 5 thousands of European citizens that turned to be radicalize but the database contains only 2.786 names of these foreign fighters**¹⁴.

Organizational structure of a country IC is what can make impossible sharing information. In addition we need to keep always in mind that the intelligence game has his on rules which the most important one is explained by Sir John Sovers, head of the British M16, *“the service who first obtains the intelligence has the right to control how is used, who else it can be shared with, and what action can be taken on it. It's rule number 1 of intelligence sharing.*

¹³ *Brussels Attacks: What the Belgians Missed*. Available at <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2016/03/belgium-terror-attack-intelligence/475464/>

¹⁴ *Da Parigi a Bruxelles, il disastro dell'intelligence*. Available at http://www.ilmessaggero.it/primopiano/esteri/bruxelles_parigi_disastro_intelligence-1627055.html

There are good reasons for these rules: no intelligence service risk compromising its sources. Because whenever intelligence is revealed, others try to hunt down the source. Agents can get identified, arrested, tortured and killed¹⁵. Terrorism, as a borderless phenomenon, needs to be fought with a common strategies based on shared information within a well-organized structure.

5. Conclusion

Intelligence failures are not easy to evaluate, considering the many reasons and events that can lead the IC to fail. An accurate intelligence failure theory is possible to define only if, as Erik Dahl and Robert Jervis noted, intelligence failures and intelligence successes can be compared. However, this comparison is often difficult to accomplish because intelligence successes are studied less, because reports and other types of information are not released outside the intelligence environment.

Despite the fact that the comparison difficulty exists, the theories in paragraph 2 attempted to give a better understanding on why and how the intelligence can fail. The traditional school believes that failures are natural because of human psychology. They placed their attention on the analysis stage assuming that analysts tend to fail because of human cognitive bias. Yet, that same cognitive bias can be overcome: the analyst can be trained to take in account more than one hypothesis, confronting his/her assumptions with other contrasting and at times opposed in respect to its own. We truly recognize that intelligence failures are at best explained by taking into account the reformist and the contrarian school. For the reformist school failures are due because of the IC organizational structure, whereas for the contrarian school the IC does not collect a sufficient amount of information.

The 9/11 terrorist attacks demonstrated that the US IC organization and structure are the real weakness that led the IC to fail. The Twin Tower and Pentagon terrorist surprise attacks represented the classic intelligence failure where the IC missed to connect the dots because of poor information sharing due to its organization and structure. At a first glance, one may think that the huge American IC apparatus, which is composed by 16 independent agencies, is the main problem that can lead the intelligence to fail. However, the US IC huge structure is necessary because of the United States role in world politics, especially regarding the security field. The real problem of the organization and structure of the agencies is how the several agencies are interconnected amongst them. There are no effective mechanisms to ensure information sharing throughout the agencies. Information

¹⁵*Europe, Stop Trying To Make 'Intelligence Sharing' Happen*. Available at <http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/04/14/europe-stop-trying-to-mak-brussels-paris-bombings/>

sharing is crucial because the intelligence mission is like a puzzle: if just one piece is missing, you cannot see the whole picture. If information is spread amongst the agencies and sharing is not possible, the IC has a high probability to fail in preventing or predicting a possible plot.

Monopoly of information within the agencies has always been the motive to blame this behavior of each agency toward each other – yes, this is true – but the technical / organizational differences are the core obstacle. Considering today's environment, which includes non-state-actors and new threats that are hard to combat, the centralization and hierarchal structure must be challenged. Centralization of the information and hierarchy structure within the agencies slows down the information sharing process. Hierarchy impedes information sharing between different levels in the agencies: information sharing is only possible after the higher level in the hierarchal structure gives his authorization. This process is too slow; it does not enable the gathering of all information that is spread between the agencies. Decentralization can result more effective: delegating more decisions to frontline employees because they have more information can speed the process of information sharing between the agencies, without waiting for the higher-level officials consent. Despite all it is still not adequate enough. Secrecy, even if it is one of the most significant features of the intelligence, can create obstacles amongst the agencies. Each agency has different codes due to secrecy issues; therefore communication amongst them is almost impossible. Identifying a common code can help to speed up the process of information sharing. These adjustments are needed within the IC of a Nation.

Even more difficult to adjust is the non- information sharing between the Intelligence agencies of different nations. France and Belgium terrorist attacks had underlined the tragic importance of information sharing even between countries. As terrorism is a borderless phenomenon, a borderless strategy is highly needed. However, as we noted in paragraph 4, as every country has its own organizations, legal structures and law enforcement, sharing information with other countries is almost impossible. In addition, we must always take into account the concept of sovereignty: because States are sovereign entities they are reluctant to limit their power in favor of others. Because information is power, sharing information with others means undermining their sovereignty. As information is important to elaborate security and economic strategies of a country, at which extent are states willing to share information? Would they ever develop a solid organization that mandates sharing information when it comes to terrorism and other security issues?

Although and most importantly keeping information for themselves means hoping to intervene through a blitz and other measures, are states ready to give up this possible moment of glory?

There are no simple answers to these questions. Rationally, if we think that the main objective of the IC of a Nation is to protect its citizens and soil from security

issues such as terrorism, the answer is obvious: there is no doubt, they need to share the information. On the other hand, is sharing information part of the intelligence game?

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