The terror visited on European cities by supporters of the so-called Islamic State for the last three years has seen terrorists bringing the tactics of urbanized insurgency to Western cities, where they exploit the openness and mobility of everyday life to perpetrate attacks that subscribe to the idea of violence for the sake of violence. The crude and predatory surprise tactics they adopt randomly target innocent civilians and figures of state authority such as police officers, in an attempt to instill daily life with fear and worry and challenge the traditional state monopoly of violence.

Civilization is once again embroiled in a war of nerves with the forces of barbarism. France and Belgium have responded to the threat with military protection since the attacks by Daesh sympathizers of 2015 and 2016. After having deployed the Belgian Army in early 2015 to guard high-profile locations, of which there are many in Brussels, the government expanded the operation to include more soft targets in the public space because of the attacks of 22 March 2016 on the national airport and the Maalbeek metro station in Brussels.

The operation, codenamed VIGILANT GUARDIAN, is based on a protocol between the Belgian Defense Ministry and the Interior Ministry that provides for the military assistance to the Federal Police in guarding sensitive targets. The objective is to prevent, deter and defeat terror threats or aggression and provide assistance to the police including consequence management, by guarding and protecting targets in order to buy time for the police to intervene. The soldiers have no authority to act as a police force, but are governed by rules of conduct and effective rules of engagement. They are an essential addition to law enforcement since Daesh seeks to unleash murderous foes with a combative mentality on unsuspecting civilians. While the police is trained in conflict management and restraint towards disobedient civilians, the military on the other hand is trained in the escalating use of force against force by a hostile element. The heavily armed OVG shield platoon consists of a mixed team of specialists who each have their specific role were an incident to occur.

These team members have had extensive military and medical training since the requirements for homeland security stemming from this elevated threat level are also capabilities trained for and perfected during overseas operations. Battle-hardened Belgian Army infantry units are well prepared for a counterterrorism mission since they are also deployed in volatile areas abroad where they have to deal with insurgents all the time. The infantry platoons in the Belgian streets and public places are attuned to complex warfare in crisis situations. They are well trained in basic force protection which can be extrapolated towards protecting civilians, and are specialists in searching for dangerous items, defusing explosives, and mobility, countermobility and survivability, with the invaluable assistance of canine units. Extensive medical training has them prepared for the worst, which was clearly demonstrated when the soldiers at the national airport saved lives on 22/3 with their first aid kits. While imbued with restraint they won’t take nonsense from anyone and are well within their brief to act forcefully in close range combat and even lethally if so required. As the sum of their parts, they are a formidable obstacle to any hostile and the best response to the strategic advantage of attack the terrorists have.

However, this additional homeland defense requirement poses challenges for the army. A great deal of issues involves human and material resources, operational and organizational constraints, and sustainability, have risen with this counterterror mission. The sheer number of soldiers marshalled to comprise the teams of adequate numbers to protect the sensitive points on a 24-hour watch posed great challenges, as well as providing the logistics and a daily supply chain that is just as complex at home as it is doing so for an operation abroad. The risk of the drainage of human resources and valuable experience for which there is no substitute could seriously impact the effectiveness and credibility of the Belgian armed forces in terms of manpower and international commitments.

But there are opportunities as well. Fighting terrorism abroad and at home are pieces of the same puzzle. The Belgian Army and police have been doing a lot of thinking about optimization and rationalization of the mission to cope with the challenges of defending the home territory for an indeterminate time with maximum efficiency and effect. There are many opportunities to come at a different, creative, approach to the homeland security mission, that puts the experience and techniques of the soldiers to maximum effect, and leaves the operational initiative for the most part with the defender. A more pragmatic defense plan would also allow a more efficient commitment of resources so that they and other means can be put to better use and with greater effect.

With its caliphate on the verge of collapse, Daesh will continue to attempt having its last convulsions in the West. Mere vigilance by static protection will not suffice to safeguard daily life. The current threat and the threat of tomorrow require a re-engineering of security and intelligence with reinforced cooperation mechanisms at the regional and international levels. This is a new reality that means living with an asymmetric foe, one that must be stopped by homeland security as an intricate and specific phase of joint intelligence/police/military planning; but the planning should go beyond guarding and put the soldiers where they want to be: the front line. Therefore, rather than addressing a particular threat by having permanent static protection, strategy should be recalibrated towards arming society against what the threat can do with comprehensive, layered defence, while engaging the threat directly with what we can do to the threat actors. By innovation and improvisation can the fight be taken to the terrorists instead of waiting for them in the trenches. Taking the initiative by offensive and psychological operations will change the threat-response dynamic with a role-reversal that will turn those who torment us into the tormented.