

Arcanum in the news



FRANCE IS THREATENED 'LIKE NEVER BEFORE,' SHOULD STAY VIGILANT- EX-FRENCH SPY CHIEF

November 2, 2018

Interview with Bernard Squarcini



Soldiers patrol near the Eiffel Tower in Paris © Reuters / Gonzalo Fuentes

France is facing unprecedented menace - both internal and external - as it is struggling to battle terrorism, Bernard Squarcini, former head of the French Internal Security Bureau has warned speaking to RT's SophieCo show.

Sitting in with RT's Sophie Shevardnadze, the ex-spy chief underscored that France does not feel secure at all. He explained that threats exist both beyond and inside its borders, including people in the French territory using the Internet to serve their malign purposes.

"France is very much threatened, like never before," – he proclaimed adding that France is struggling to deal with those threats, especially in the wake of the terrorist attacks that bloodied the country in recent years.

Paris is part of a global intelligence approach, but this area faces its own challenges not to allow data mining to "attack [the] national sovereignty" of each state. The methods to battle terrorism still need to be improved, the ex-spy chief believes, as a terrorist cannot be spotted on a European level so far.

Squarcini revealed that the militants' plans to *"infiltrate via the massive clandestine immigration networks"* have challenged one of the core principles of the EU, freedom of movement. It further created *"a political problem for Europe"* forcing some countries like Italy to shut their borders due to perceived migration insecurity, he stressed.

However, Paris is not going to take to radical measures and close its borders as the US did. *"We cannot build a wall like Mr Trump!"*

Another problem is that a new type of terrorist has emerged. Now they do not need years of training but can be radicalized within their family in any other place, and it would take him *"only fifteen days"* to learn terrorist ways. Thus the security services face an even more complex task – literally to *"probe the consciousness"* to detect a person capable of committing an offense.

TRANSCRIPT OF INTERVIEW :

Sophie Shevardnadze: *France is believed to extend border controls with its neighbouring countries for another 6 months due to persistent terror threat. If this measure is so effective in combating terrorism, maybe the border controls, the return of the borders should be permanent?*

Bernard Squarcini: This question brings forward two problems: we are in the Schengen European zone, where there is freedom of movement. But when ISIS was around, there was a very strong terrorist threat against Europe, and notably our country, bloodied by terrorist attacks. ISIS planned to infiltrate via the massive clandestine immigration networks which destabilised the functioning of Europe, through dormant networks, to attack the states that were sending armed forces to fight in Syria. Today, massive clandestine immigration has created a political problem for Europe. Germany is directly affected, due to the stance of Angela Merkel, Italy too, but surprisingly their new Minister of the Interior has decided to slam their borders shut. It is true that we could occasionally close them – for a weekend, for instance, during big international protests. But right now there is insecurity linked to clandestine immigration, in the public opinion, even if it's not justified. There is also the terrorism risk, but there is above all a populist reflex that we can observe in Hungary, in Italy, among other countries.

Minister says, everything is fine. Do you believe that everything is fine?

BS: No, France is very much threatened, like never before. We participate in the Syrian coalition, but we also have a vast operation for re-establishing security in Africa. So we have a menace which comes from outside, that is one threat. Plus, a massive number of French citizens are in Syria, about 2,000, with their families, they are now in hiding because they know that we are waiting to prosecute them in France. Some have been locked away in prison in Syria, during the military campaign against ISIS. But ISIS is not defeated politically or socially. It is maybe defeated militarily, but they still keep their tools and services. They still have followers. But we do not know...

SS: *Like the propaganda on the Internet.. Do you think that now that ISIS is almost defeated, their internet propaganda is still as dangerous as before?*

BS: Yes, of course. Because you have to do something and you need people to know what you did. But the second threat that exists in France is the threat from the inside, the threat that exists on our territory. There are people who use this kind of Internet communication to fulfill their need for respect, for being useful. We also have cases, unfortunately, linked with mental illness troubles and stuff, which leaves us with 'low-cost' terrorism, the potential for action at any time. So we shouldn't bring our guard down.

SS: *But to go back to the question, do you think the French surveillance services are doing fine without the state of emergency?*

BS: Yes, in the sense that we also have a panoply of anti-terrorist legislation since the Toulouse and Montauban shootings, we have a new paths of action open for intelligence, we have the possibility to act now on the administrative level. For instance, arrests, which are under legislative control of course, decided by the administrative authority, we can search, call out, we can expel, put under house arrest... There are lots of tools for the prevention of radicalization.

SS: *We will talk about this in more detail, but I want to ask for the people - because you said that the terrorist threat was still high in France. Should people just get used to live like this - always watching out, living in the state of readiness? Because this was never a problem in France.*

BS: No, never. We live in a country of freedom, and this is why - in the past - the terrorists from the extreme left came to meet secretly in France. France is a country of freedoms, and this is due to its history - we are a democratic country. So today, yes, given the way in which the last terrorist attacks were programmed, structured, using European logistics, we can say that there is a certain desire to change the way of life, the society, of France. And this is the risk of destabilisation, on one hand by the terrorist attacks themselves, but also by the rise of rampant Salafism in everyday life: the issue of wearing headscarves, in society, in swimming pools, sports, etc. So today there is a reflection that has to be made regarding the organisation of Islam in France, which isn't in itself a problem. The Minister of the Interior is responsible for the questions of religious practices on national territory. This goes from the training of imams to talking about the Muslim world to the content of preaching. But the Muslim world in itself isn't a problem. There is a minority that is problematic.

SS: *I wanted to talk to you about different types of terrorism. Because we see more and more that the terror acts in*

Europe are increasingly committed by lone wolves...

BS: In the execution, of course.

SS: *So the anti-terror efforts are efficient against big organizations, but how do we deal with someone who is not attached to a big organization?*

BS: So, today, it is necessary to make the distinction between – and I said that at the Mohammed Merah trial - the methods. Before, people would go to Afghanistan, stay there for two years, for theory and practical exercises, and come back to commit terror attacks in France. Now, for the first time, we have a type of terrorist in our hands - someone who, for instance, in fifteen days, after having been radicalised within a family, a neighborhood, an environment, a prison, a community, was trained in only fifteen days, and we know the person who was giving the classes - he was killed in a drone strike by Americans much later - he taught all the operational commanders who went back to Europe. Fifteen days was something we had never seen before. Today the question to the interior intelligence is posed like this: which person out of a hundred people is capable of taking action? Without having executed the act, which is obviously a punishable offense. Without having done any preparations, for instance, buying nitrogen and fertilizer which can be used for preparing explosives. The task is to probe the consciousness, to find out who has an intention to commit a terrorist act in their head. And this is where we asked – after the Merah affair – to legalise special operations which are particularly useful in the domain of counter-espionage. Like Internet surveillance, e-mail surveillance, everything with regards to social networks and all. The problem is no longer only that of the police. The threat analysis must be much more refined, it must bring together sociologists, academics, people from surveillance, lawyers, psychiatrists, priests. How can we prevent extreme radicalisation working as a group?

SS: *Should France be operating some kind of advance warning intelligence network outside the country that enables it to stay ahead of terror plans? I talked to Israeli counter-terrorism specialists, and they all told me that having a good intelligence network embedded among the terrorists abroad is what saves most of the lives in the end of the day...*

BS: Both internal and external the intelligence services benefit from a multilateral exchange base between the European intel bureaus. And we have national experts attached to the CISEN, the Centre de Situation Europeen, which permits us to make common analyses, using the practical experiences of each country. Then we have the bilateral exchange. From service to service, by country. Finally, we have a friendly club of directors of the services, where we discuss freely what should happen. Today, the issue is: are we able to spot a terrorist on a European level? Not yet. See what I mean? The Americans weren't able to do that either. So today this anticipation – because you need to anticipate the threat – it exists thanks to sharing, an exchange of trust between people who are competent and professional, who respect each other and who above all protect their human sources. Because in the intelligence services, the key is human sources and operational intelligence as well, surveillance. And you cannot come up with a solution to a problem if your human sources are compromised. And this is the difficulty, and the reason why exchanging information is important.

SS: *You said that we yet have to establish a profile of a terrorist. And this is why Americans, and everyone who is facing this terrorist problem, are trying different techniques of how to fight against terrorism. For instance, for Americans it's collecting data. Is this something that France could or would do?*

BS: I perfectly understand your question and I will be very direct.

SS: *Because on one hand, you control people, but on the other, it is a fine line..*

BS: Ok. Say you collect intelligence. To do what with it? It is like a library, you use it when you need it. So, being threatened by terrorism, and it is the number one threat, we collect a lot of metadata, like we call it, on a global level. But – let’s not kid ourselves – economic espionage is a dominant part of all services. So besides dealing with terrorism, we can collect a large amount of intelligence which will serve our country, information on economic competition, military market, arms supply, among others. Or we can outright bring an advantage to one company over another. So this is where we must find the limits of the system. For terrorism - yes, but for other purposes, data mining is an attack on the national sovereignty of each country.

SS: *So you do not think that collecting personal data is something that’s efficient in terms of fight against terrorism?*

BS: It can be efficient, if we use it in an intelligent way and if we find the exact piece of the conversation that is necessary to prove an offense. But managing metadata implies collection, massive storage, and above all software to go find the small needle that is in the haystack. So it is very delicate. It is not simple. The technical side - that’s only one aspect of the fight against terrorism. The human side is very important. It is the one that is the most relevant and the one that can have remarkable efficiency. The human side is: recruiting informers from within terrorist organizations, who will explain to you what’s going on. They have different motives, of course, but they are the best source, because you are at the heart of the organization.

SS: *If I’m not mistaken, pan-European anti-terror measures were lobbied by Paris in the wake of the attacks in France and Belgium, including a law that allows a broad collection of air passenger data and EU-wide sharing of it to identify suspicious patterns...*

BS: So this is an old issue with this program, the “Passenger Name Record”. Today, while fighting against terrorism, it is good to anticipate and to know, if you are following certain targets that you think could be taking action, where they are going, with who, etc.

SS: *How many terrorists have been caught thanks to this law so far?*

BS: We were not able to do it before because we didn’t have the tool. We only found out later that they were going around certain countries and making connections. I will explain: today, given that the pan-European decision about the data collection was not taken, even though other countries had this plan in place, when you take the plane, you present your boarding pass at the counter, and you put it in the electronic terminal. The plane leaves, the flight attendant takes all the stubs – in general, this should correspond to the number of passengers – and then the company will give these elements to the police. And there, the passengers are checked. It is a bit late, because the flight is already in the middle of the Atlantic. And sometimes, with patronymic names that are not very well identified, it can create problems. What we wanted was to have personal information at the reservation time, one month before the flight: how the ticket was paid for, with whom he is traveling. This data would permit us to react and to say: hold on, this person is going to this country, so we will call our ‘brother’ service so that they take that into account, because he surely has an important

meeting in an area that is very important to us. This is what we wanted. The anticipation of the event and the follow-up of the potentially problematic people. Making this pan-European was always difficult because of the opposition from German politicians. When Spain took its place as the head of the EU, a country who paid a very high price with regards to terrorism, especially military, we made major progress in obtaining more tools to fight against terrorism. It was the Spanish who obtained the European arrest warrant. And common investigation teams, meaning someone from Spain can join a French team on a terrorist project, or on surveillance, or procedure. A French judge can use a record of a Spanish officer in their procedure: this is the progress that was made. But in Europe, not everyone has the same story with terrorism. Certain countries have never been affected, and will never be - all the better for them - but others paid a high price. But the presidency of the EU changes, so there are moments when we explain what we need in the toolbox, which isn't taken into account, and we wait for the presidency to change in hopes of getting this extra tool.

SS: *You've said before the interview, when talking about immigration, that Estonia will never be as concerned as France, but for anti-terrorism, it's the same. There are countries that are 'targeted' more than others. I understand that. But at the end of the day, the European Union is one home, so you need to fight this all together...*

BS: That's what we call solidarity.

SS: *Exactly. It doesn't help fight terrorism, while you have open borders like this. So I am wondering if it is possible to elaborate a common plan of fighting against terrorism?*

BS: Of course, yes, on the level of the mindset, but the fight against terrorism relies on a tool that I would qualify as classic: surveillance from the intelligence services. But intelligence - and the Lisbon treaty reminded us of this - raises the issue of the sovereignty of each state. What does this mean? That there will never be a European intelligence service? Or it will be empty? Or else the treaties must be changed. In the domain of intelligence, it is based on bilateralism. This doesn't mean that we do not give operational or analytical information at a European level - yes, of course. We meet, we come together, the Club de Berne, the exterior services have that too. We try to bring forward all this. But an intelligence service cannot give out of its family jewels within a European palace so simply.

SS: *Don't you think that since this is such a major issue, that it is time to change - in the treaties and in the approach?*

BS: The structural and legal base may, of course, evolve, but you must also have European diplomatic action. Because the problem is not only a police problem, but is also about security and diplomacy. Evolution: yes, but there must be a stability and a common vision. Look at today's problems regarding illegal immigration: there is no unanimity of visions. However, illegal immigration is starting to destabilise political regimes in certain European countries, be it Hungary, Italy, and many other countries, France included, of course. So there is an impulse to change the approach to the problem. And that reflection is far from unanimous. Between Salvini and Emmanuel Macron, the current does not flow freely. Angela Merkel had the lead on a European level. Today, this problem of illegal immigration has blown a hole in her ship. So these are subjects that are, of course, external, common in Europe, but which have a direct impact on the electoral stability of each country. So we will see how things will unfold.

SS: *Apart from Europe, there is also America, there's Russia, everyone is faced this problem.*

We cannot build a wall like Mr Trump!

SS: *But nevertheless, when the Washington-Moscow relationship was already in tatters, sanctions were flung around and everything, heads of Russian security and intelligence services - top brass - went to the United States to meet with their American counterparts (despite the personal sanctions). It showed that if need be, two conflicting sides can still benefit from talking to each other.*

BS: This is where I'm telling you that on one hand, it is a necessity, and on the other hand, if we don't want to show it, it is done in a fairly confidential way, via the intelligence services, who are trusted by the heads of state.

SS: *The intelligence services are actually right after the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 'cause their are kind of doing what the Ministry of Foreign Affairs couldn't do?*

But we work together with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, we transmit all the tidbits of information that are brought forth that might be of concern to them, and even better, and it happened to me personally, often when I went to see my foreign counterparts, I would always go visit our ambassador in that country and would transmit fresh analysis to the embassy.

SS: *So when diplomacy fails, that's for secret services to come into play.*

BS: Which is very good! Especially useful when two countries no longer talk... Like in a married couple...

SS: *Do you work well with the Russians? Is there trust?...*

BS: Yes, we have a good relation on the terrorist part. France has a lot of Chechens who had historically requested political asylum here, and we also have people who, within the community, can create problems, and who we found attempting terrorism acts in Moscow, and we were able to exchange, we were able to carry out procedures, and through international commissions, who are able to help the Russians solve this type of problem.

SS: *Mr. Squarcini, thank you very much for this interview, and good luck.*

BS: Thank you! Goodbye.