

Lone actor attacks – Recent developments

The four terrorist incidents that occurred over the past month (Orlando, USA; Magnaville, FR; Nice, FR; Würzburg, DE) highlight the operational difficulties in detecting and disrupting lone actor attacks. In the TE-SAT 2016, Europol stresses that such attacks remain a favoured tactic by Islamic State (IS) and al-Qaeda (AQ). Both groups have repeatedly called on Muslims living in Western countries to perpetrate lone actor attacks in their countries of residence. This was done via numerous publications and messages posted online. IS leadership has defined that there are two options for Muslims living in the West: either migrate to Islamic State territory or carry out a terrorist attack in their places of residence. For its part, AQ considers lone actor attacks a strategic tool at its disposal, condoning individual attacks as long as they fit the goal of its global jihad.

Although IS has claimed responsibility for the latest attacks, none of the four attacks seem to have been planned, logistically supported, or executed directly by IS, according to the information available at Europol. The allegiance pledge by the perpetrators of the Orlando, Magnaville and Würzburg attacks indicates they were IS supporters but their actual involvement in the group cannot be established. Moreover, there is currently no evidence to suggest that the Nice attacker considered himself a member of IS. He is reported to have radicalised in a very short time frame and to have consumed jihadist propaganda in the days preceding the attack. In the case of Würzburg, media report that a handmade IS flag has been found in the perpetrator's room.

IS has endorsed the attacks but the perpetrators' affiliation with the group has not been clear. The wording used in the messages claiming responsibility is notable. A'maq Agency purports to have received information from an unidentified "source", stating the attacks were carried out by "soldiers of the Caliphate" or an "IS fighter". This is in contrast to IS's clear claims of responsibility for the attacks in November 2015 in Paris and in March 2016 in Brussels, by saying the attackers were its members sent to perpetrate the attack. This differentiation may indicate that IS would like to maintain a level of "reliability", should information contradicting its claim of responsibility emerge.

Despite the fact that a number of lone actors attach religion and ideology to their acts, the role of potential mental health issues should not be overlooked. The Nice attacker reportedly suffered from a serious psychiatric disorder and was receiving treatment. In December 2014, two attacks with similar modus operandi occurred in France (TE-SAT 2015). In both cases the perpetrators appeared to suffer from mental illness. On 21 December 2014 in Dijon, police

arrested a man after he ran over 11 people in five different areas of the city. The suspect was known to the police for criminal activities not related to terrorism and was eventually confirmed as suffering from schizophrenia. On 22 December 2014 in Nantes, a man drove a van into a crowd of people attending a Christmas market, and then attempted suicide by stabbing himself. One person died, and nine were injured. The perpetrator was reportedly "unbalanced".

Recent academic research has shown that around 35% of the perpetrators of lone actor attacks that occurred between 2000 and 2015 suffered from some sort of mental health disorder. Europol's report on the Changes in the Modus Operandi of the IS also mentions that a significant portion of foreign fighters have been diagnosed with mental health problems prior to joining IS.

Even though ideology may be used by terrorist perpetrators to cast a shadow over the deeper individual/psychological motives of their acts, one should not disregard the motivating power of the jihadist discourse to certain audiences. The idea of giving back confidence to the "Muslim nation" to respond to perceived or real foreign intervention in Muslim affairs emerged as the core theme in the videotaped messages of the perpetrators of the Magnaville and Würzburg attacks. Ideology's function is to diagnose the problem in a particular situation and prescribe measures to solving it. Current jihadist ideology in Europe identifies any "unbeliever" as a supporter of a global campaign against Islam, legitimising the targeting of both military and civilian targets in the name of the defence of the jihadist idea.

In cases where there the perpetrator has a mental disorder, ideology might have an aggravating effect, leading to different target choices and scaling of the attack.