

## KANTOR CENTER POSITION PAPERS

PAPER N. 4: 23 SEPTEMBER 2020

### **DEVELOPMENTS ON TERRORISM DURING THE COVID-19 CRISIS**

Rozy Fis

While the world's attention appropriately focuses on the health and economic impacts of Covid-19, it is important to remember that other threats have not gone away. Religious extremists, radical left-wing groups and white supremacists continue to seek opportunities to promote their ideologies and narratives. Both Jihadi terrorist groups and neo-Nazis have called for attacks, exploiting the pandemic and building entire propaganda campaigns around it.

Islamic fundamentalists, for instance, are known to have used social media to characterize coronavirus as God's wrath against the West and called for adherents to launch attacks while governments are preoccupied with the public health emergency. On the other hand, Neo-Nazis have exploited the global crisis to increase tension and advocate violence. The pandemic breathed new life into centuries-old rhetoric that blames Jews for the spread of disease and economic downturns fuelling antisemitism around the world.

Extremism, hate crimes and terrorism have all been increasing challenges for our communities and society as a whole. Although there were no large-scale attacks recorded in Europe over the past year, a series of small-scale attacks have been noted; knife attacks in the UK, car ramming in France and a drive-by shooting in Hanau Germany in February 2020. **However, across the globe, violence has emerged as a major and persistent side effect of the pandemic.** Even as it overwhelms hospitals, Covid-19 is also straining security forces in scores of countries, exacerbating long-standing conflicts while fuelling grievances and spurring the growth of extremist groups. Extremists need instability to sell their ideas—and validate their existence. Every shooter, regardless of what “side” they are on, contributes to creating a suitably chaotic, violent environment.<sup>1</sup>

Jewish communities across Europe have experienced a rise in antisemitic hate speech and violence. Harassment and violent assaults on European streets worry and intimidate the Jewish population, challenge community security and the already strained local police. Criminality is also on the rise and the multiple anti-government protests of people opposing

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.thedailybeast.com/violent-protests-are-a-neo-nazi-fever-dream-come-true>.

## KANTOR CENTER POSITION PAPERS

coronavirus containment measures - in many cases infiltrated by extreme right-wing sentiments - pose an increasingly serious threat.

The Islamic State (IS) continues to be the most visible jihadist terrorist group in Europe and has claimed responsibility for a number of attacks over the past couple of years. Al Qaeda (AQ) also remains present, but not as visible. AQ has, however, demonstrated an intent to carry out attacks in Europe. Additionally, the past few years have seen a growing concern over the threat posed by far-right extremism and terrorism — particularly in the West. The rise in far-right attacks has led some observers to state that far-right domestic terrorism has not been taken seriously enough by the West, and that security and intelligence services should be paying closer attention to this threat. Far-right terrorism in the last ten years has become increasingly associated with individuals with broad ideological allegiances rather than specific terrorist groups.

Covid-19 has exacerbated underlying threats to national security and created an atmosphere conducive to the spread of extremism, thus increasing the risk of future terrorist attacks. Scotland Yard's counter-terrorism chief stated that the "real threat had not gone away" during the pandemic and that the danger came from both lone Jihadists and terrorists radicalised here, as well as others directed or inspired by Islamic State supporters overseas. He said officers were also concerned about the risk of vulnerable people being radicalised online during the coronavirus lockdown, out of sight of teachers, health workers or others who might normally raise the alarm.<sup>2</sup> Similarly the French Interior Minister Gerald Darmanin warned that the threat of terrorist attacks "remains extremely high in the country". The minister said, "The risk of terror of Sunni origin is the main threat our country is facing", stating that 32 planned terrorist attacks had been foiled since 2017. He added that there were troubling signs of far-right activity in the country as well.<sup>3</sup>

Iran and Hezbollah have global operational capabilities and continue to target Jewish communities in Europe, and worldwide. Iran remains the primary state sponsor of terrorism in the world today. Tehran continues to fund, train, and equip a number of proxy groups with varying degrees of capabilities and objectives. In the future, it is possible that Iran will use its growing networks of proxy fighters to launch sophisticated attacks across the globe.

In August 2020 Lithuania joined the list of countries which designated Hezbollah as a terrorist organisation. In the last couple of years, the Netherlands, Germany and the UK also recognised Hezbollah in its entirety as a terrorist organization. In 1997, Hezbollah was

---

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.lbc.co.uk/news/uk/counter-terror-commander-london-attack-likely-post-lockdown/>.

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.dw.com/en/frances-terrorism-risk-remains-extremely-high-says-minister/a-54774142>.

## KANTOR CENTER POSITION PAPERS

designated a foreign terrorist organization by the U.S. State Department. However, intelligence specialists believe that even though this move was necessary others argue that it has had little impact on Hezbollah's terrorist activities as the terror group remains strong and maintains its global footprint.

The tactics utilised by terrorists in Europe are likely to remain similar to those seen in previous years. Jihadists are more prone to make use of 'homemade' weapons such as knives, vehicles or explosives to perpetrate bomb attacks. In contrast, right-wing terrorists are more likely to employ the use of firearms.

Targets such as bars, transportation hubs, busy markets, shopping centres and tourist attractions will continue to be viewed as primary targets for terrorists – especially as these establishments have resumed their operations following the lockdown. Places of worship (synagogues, mosques, churches) are also likely to continue to remain attractive targets, especially for right-wing terrorists. In August 2020 an Iraqi-born man was apprehended after, it is alleged, that he deliberately crashed his car into multiple vehicles on the A100 motorway in Berlin. Though the use of a vehicle in the attack is in line with the usual tactics of jihadist extremist assailants, the incident on the motorway marks a shift from the usual targets such as crowded markets. Nevertheless, at the moment, the incident is unlikely to indicate a change in targets or strategies used by lone actors.

During the first months of the Covid-19 outbreak, terrorist propaganda encouraged the use of biological weapons as a means of furthering their agenda. For example, in the United States, right-wing extremists have encouraged their followers that were sick to actively attempt to infect members of the Jewish community as well as the police.

The persistent threat of terrorism has also been underlined by multiple counter-terrorism operations in recent months across Europe. However, the 'new normal' of the mandatory use of masks may provide extremists with a way to disguise their identity and avoid detection without immediately raising suspicion. Last April Spanish police arrested Abdel-Majed Abdel Bary (one of the best-known European ISIS members) and his two associates in Almeria, a port city in Spain. The suspects used the coronavirus outbreak to sneak into Spain wearing surgical masks to disguise their appearance. Similarly, a neo-Nazi Telegram channel urged the exploitations of conditions brought about by the pandemic to "offer salvageable people a real alternative to Jewish globalism". The channel celebrated the resource scarcity, "tribalism", and the normalization of wearing of masks which have emerged in response to the pandemic. The use of masks may possibly further challenge Jewish community security and law enforcement resources as it would make it more

## KANTOR CENTER POSITION PAPERS

difficult to identify both known and unknown hostile elements or even identify perpetrators in the aftermath of an attack.

In conclusion: the traditional negative depiction of Jews continues to feature prominently in extremist propaganda; it is possible that terror groups and their followers will continue to seek opportunities to carry out attacks that cause physical harm to Jews and Jewish communities across the world. Whilst authorities work hard to reduce the risks, the key factor to improving community security remains the awareness of civilians and their adoption of adequate behaviour towards possible dangers. Security professionals and the general public are advised to report suspicious activity, including behaviour indicative of pre-operational surveillance, and to maintain vigilance in areas known to draw crowds, places of worship, including popular tourist sites, bars and restaurants, shopping centres, and transportation hubs.