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Terrorism in Europe: A Very Different Kind of Threat

By Raffaello Pantucci

SYNOPSIS

For three weeks in a row this year, Europe has been hit by a highly public act of attempted mass murder. With the United States reeling from its latest bout of grim mass shootings, what exactly can be concluded from the fact that most terrorist incidents in the West are increasingly indistinguishable from apolitical mass murders?

COMMENTARY

THE ATTACK in Copenhagen on 3 July 2022 by a 22-year-old Danish man is the third time this year Europe has been struck by what looked like a terrorist incident.

The weekend before the violent attack in Copenhagen, a Norwegian-Iranian gunman opened fire on celebrants of Gay Pride in Oslo killing two. On 8 June 2022 in Berlin, a 29-year-old German-Armenian drove his car into crowds on a busy shopping street. The attack killed a teacher visiting the city with a group of children from Hesse, and injured 31.

Extremist Ideology or Mental Health Issues?

Of these three violent incidents, it is only authorities in Oslo that have made a direct link to terrorism. Norwegian police revealed the gunman was someone known to them since 2015 who also had a history of mental illness. This suggestion of mental illness being present is similar to both the German and Danish cases, where the individuals have subsequently been placed into psychiatric care while authorities determine how to ultimately handle the case.

As if to emphasise the importance of this juxtaposition, the attack came at the same time as a sentence of full-time psychiatric care was imposed on a Danish convert to

Islam who in October last year fatally attacked five people with a knife and bow and arrow in Norway.

But while mental health issues increasingly appear a constant, there is often also a suggestion that some ideological motivation might also be present. Highlighting this complicated balance which has become all-too-commonplace in Europe, Europol pointed out the terrorist threat as such in its last annual report:

“Some lone attackers in 2020 again displayed a combination of extremist ideology and mental health issues. This made it difficult at times to distinguish between terrorist attacks and violence caused by mental health problems.”

In the United States, there is an equally regular reference to both ideology and mental health issues in the wake of violent incidents, though the entire picture in America is complicated by the easy availability of high-powered guns. This makes acting on an impulse ever easier and more destructive, and subsequently understanding an individual's motive even more complicated.

The US Department of Homeland Security (DHS) was careful not to point to mental health issues in an advisory it issued in early June. It stated: “...the primary threat of mass casualty violence in the United States stems from lone offenders and small groups motivated by a range of ideological beliefs and/or personal grievances.”

The DHS later, however, provided contacts for those concerned about others suffering from mental health issues suggesting at least the recognition that the issue was one that often came up in cases the department was handling.

The Mental Health-Terror Balance

The combination is difficult for authorities to manage for a variety of reasons. In the first instance, the behaviour of such individuals is very hard to predict. Their sometimes inherently erratic lives, the nature of attacks they are undertaking that often require little immediate preparation and the highly random nature of their targets makes it an almost impossible task to ensure total security.

While there is evidence that in some cases they do actually telegraph their intent before acting – for example, in the Danish case, it seems as though he posted videos suggesting something was about to happen a day before he launched his attack. This can still be a bit of a needle in a haystack piece of data.

Furthermore, focusing on healthcare requires getting healthcare providers involved. Doctors and mental healthcare workers are by their nature focused on ensuring the well-being and care of their patients and society so are often welcome supporters. But it is difficult to get them to focus on concerns around extremism on top of their many other responsibilities. Some are also reticent about being pushed into roles that can appear to be that of security agents.

They are also often concerned about the criminalisation of what is an already very vulnerable community. The growing incidence of violent acts being committed by people with mental health issues can criminalise an entire community in the public

mind, the vast majority of whom are simply very sick people in need of help. The term mental health itself is also not very helpful, when one considers the huge range of issues that it can encompass.

The final aspect which is important to bear in mind is that there can also be a danger in overfocusing on the mental health aspect of any case. Defence attorneys have long sought to use the presence of such issues as mitigation in their cases.

People suffering from mental health issues can also perpetrate crimes. Understanding this balance is complicated and becomes even harder to strike when you incorporate an ideological crime like terrorism.

Is This Even Terrorism?

But the biggest challenge is trying to understand if any of this even classifies as terrorism any more. As highlighted earlier, of this recent spate of extremist violence, only authorities in Norway are pursuing terrorism motivation at the moment. But it seems likely that the other acts at the very least ape terrorist acts in their behaviour.

In the US, the phenomenon of mass shooting has become so common alongside a highly angry and polarised political environment that it is very difficult to separate it, or even appreciate the degree to which mental health might be salient in a particular case. In Europe this all comes as France seems to finally close the book on the ISIS attack on Paris of November 2015 though the lone actor playbook ISIS promulgated continues to resonate.

In a recent joint appearance in London after a week of meetings, the chiefs of MI5 (the UK's domestic intelligence agency) and the US Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), highlighted how the lone actor was the sharp end of the threat that their services saw in the terrorism space.

As MI5 head Ken McCallum put it, they were facing a "very difficult cocktail of risks". The increasing prevalence of mental health and related issues in the threat picture has only served to make it harder, adding a layer of unpredictability.

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