

Low Intensity Terrorist Threats – A Future Trend in Europe?

by Dr. Peter Roell and Maxim Worcester

Introduction

The new German Minister of the Interior, Dr. Thomas de Maizière, entered office on 28th October 2009. Under his predecessor, Dr. Wolfgang Schäuble, we had become used to frequent warnings of impending terrorist attacks, such warnings are now rare. We must assume that not much has changed with regard to the potential threat; the new low-key policy of Minister de Maizière is simply a reflection of his approach to the problem of terrorist threat.

In our analysis we have set ourselves the task of examining the potential impact of “Low Intensity Terrorism”. We have based our analysis on the EU Terrorism Situation and Trend Report (TE-SAT) 2010 and a range of publicly available sources. We have also looked at two definitions of Terrorism and a definition of Low Intensity Threats. Besides looking at the problems associated with this development we have also made some recommendations for decision makers in politics, the security sector, the defence sector, science, and the general population.

Definitions

The United Nations have so far not been able to find a binding definition for terrorism. The US Department of Defence describes terrorism as, “*unlawful use or threatened use or force of violence against people or property to coerce or intimidate governments or societies, often to achieve political, religious or ideological objectives*”.

The Member States of the European Union have agreed upon a wording which defines terrorist activities as follows: “*which aim to intimidate populations, compel states to comply with the perpetrators demand, and/or destabilise or destroy the fundamental political, constitutional, economic or social structures of a country or an international organisation*”.

The US Army defines Low Intensity Conflict, which includes terrorism, as “*a political-military confrontation between contending states or groups below conventional war and above the routine, peaceful competition amongst states. It frequently involves protracted struggles of competing principles and ideologies. Low intensity conflict ranges from subversion to the use of armed forces. It is waged by a combination of means, employing political, economic, informational and military instruments. Low intensity conflicts are often*

localised, generally in the Third World, but contain regional and global security implications”.

The Global Terrorist Threat

The global terrorist threat – or at least the perceived threat – is unlikely to abate in the near future. The 2006 Transatlantic Trends survey conducted in the US and 12 EU states recorded that concern about terrorism had risen by 7 % to 79 % of the US population. and from 58 % to 66 % among Europeans. Operationally, terrorists remain largely regionally focused, but the main global threat comes from Islamist extremists. Whereas more long-standing terrorist groups have had a narrow agenda that focuses on one specific state or geopolitical claim, al-Qaida holds a religious view of the world that rejects the state system. Examples of other terrorist groups with a regional focus are the still active elements of the IRA in Northern Ireland, the PKK in Turkey or the increasingly active Naxelites in India.

Al Qaida’s most enduring impact since 2001 has been to instil other groups with a sense of duty to fight both local enemies and a global jihad to further its objectives. The bombings in Madrid and London are examples of such attacks as are attacks through networked organisations in such places as the Philippines, Yemen, Kenya, Chechnya, Somalia, Egypt, Morocco, Turkey, and Algeria. In addition, Al Qaida has created havoc in Iraq and Afghanistan, both directly and through its allies and sympathisers.

Al Qaida has however not had it all its way in Europe and the US since 2001. Other than the attacks in Madrid and London its level of success has been marginal at best and a number of major attacks have been foiled by the security services. What has been achieved is a sense of insecurity amongst the population and a huge investment in both financial and manpower terms by the European Nations and the US. It is this investment and the ensuing vigilance of the security services which has led to a partial victory over Islamic terrorism.

Now almost 10 years after the attack on the Twin Towers and the Pentagon it is time to look at emerging trends in terrorist activities and what these mean to the security of Europe.

The Situation within the European Union

Islamist terrorism is still perceived as the biggest threat to most Member States. We will look at this finding which was reported by the European Union Terrorism Situation and Trend Report (TE-SAT) 2010. This conclusion has been arrived at, despite the fact, that only one Islamist terrorist attack – a bomb attack in Italy – took place in the EU in 2009.

In addition to this single attack in 2009, arrests relating to islamist terrorism (110) decreased by 41 % compared to 2008, which continues the trend we have observed since 2006. It should be noted that these figures do not include the UK.

This does not mean that the threat of terrorism has decreased in its significance to security within the Union. In 2009 six Member States reported a total of 294 failed, foiled or successfully perpetrated terrorist attacks, while an additional 124 attacks in Northern Ireland were reported by the UK. These figures include all forms of terrorist activity including Islamist, ethno-nationalist and separatist, as well as left-wing, right-wing and anarchist terrorism and animal rights extremism.

The majority of the 125 court decisions related to terrorist offences within the EU were related to separatist terrorism in 2009. This in contrast to 2008 where the majority of court decisions were related to Islamist terrorism.

Islamic Terrorism – The Wrong Focus?

One of the more misleading catch-phrases which came out of the 9/11 attacks and former President Bush's War on Terror was the statement "not all Muslims are terrorists but all terrorists are Muslims." This is both insulting and wrong. Terrorist organisations such as the IRA and ETA are hardly Islamic Terrorist Organisations. Radical animal rights groups and Anti Globalisation activists are European, non Islamist organisations who have targeted international Institutions, Governments and Corporations. Left and Right Wing political extremists can also hardly be termed Islamist. What such organisations do have in common with Islamist Terrorist Groups is that they appeal to the socially alienated, unmarried young men or widowed women who were not gainfully employed prior to joining them. They join an armed struggle or embrace unlawful methods of protest not only because of their personal attachment to a political ideal, but also to develop or maintain social relations with other terrorist members. Studies of Islamist Terrorist Groups, published in *Terrorism and Violence* (Vol .15, March 2003) have found that the key scope condition for joining the terrorist organisation was having a friend or relative in it – a finding consistent with prior research on ETA, IRA and both Italian and German Right – Wing and Marxist Terrorist Groups.

In the Spring of 2010 a radical German group published a eighty-page handbook entitled "Prisma-Lunatics for System Change". This disturbing and highly professional booklet contains detailed descriptions of how to damage property such as vehicles, rail track, and power pylons. It is a collection of material from a wide range of available sources which have been circulating in extremist circles for some time; some of the methods described go back to publications written by Government organisations during the days of the Cold War which were intended for resistance organisations in the event of a Soviet occupation of Europe.

The publishing of this handbook represents an escalation of the conflict between the State and radical organisations. Besides going into great detail how to sabotage infrastructure and attack institutions, organisations and companies, the authors encourage their readers to leave the path of peaceful demonstration and resort to violent means of protest. The authors emphasise that they do not want to punish or harm innocent bystanders, reading between the lines, however, they accept collateral damage in order to achieve their aims . The handbook further describes what measures activists should take in order not to get caught by the Police and Security Services and emphasises that reputational damage to a company or to the State is as effective as is physical damage. The handbook is also a pointer to the future. It emphasises that there is not enough know-how in their own circles both to combat electronic observation by the Security Services, nor is their enough knowledge on how to use new technologies and cyber space for their own purposes.

The number of radical left-wing activists in Germany is on the increase. In 2005 the Security Services identified 5500 such individuals; this figure today stands at 6600. In 2009 the number of radical and violent left wing attacks increased by 50 % compared to 2008 and now stands at 1822. It must be expected that the publication of such material will result in an increase in the numbers of left wing activists willing to resort to violence.

One of the conclusions is that terrorist organisations are not the exclusive domain of Islamist extremists; in Europe we face a clear threat from both Islamist extremism and home grown groupings which have nothing to do with al Qaida. A further development is the emergence of home grown terrorist groups both in the US and Europe and the growing importance of so called “lone wolf” terrorists.

Lone Wolf – Low Intensity Terrorism

The classic example of the lone wolf is Timothy McVeigh who was convicted and executed for the 19th April 1995 Oklahoma City bombing which killed 168 people. Further examples of lone wolf extremist attacks were the assassination of Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin on 4th April 1995, the Austrian parcel bomber Franz Fuchs who killed 4 people and injured a further 15 between 1993 and 1997. The London nail bomber, David Copeland killed 3 persons and injured a further 129 persons in a 13 day bombing campaign in April 1999 which was aimed at blacks, Asians and gays. More recently in Europe, the animal rights activist Volker von Graaf shot and killed the Dutch politician Pim Fortuyn in Hilversum on 6th May 2002 and, also in Holland, a lone wolf attack by Karst Tate on the Dutch Royal Family killed 8 and injured 12 persons on 30th April 2009. Finally, the 1st May 2010 failed bomb attack in Times Square, New York, which caused no casualties but resulted in the evacuation of thousands of bystanders, was committed by the lone wolf terrorist Faisal Shahzad.

Compared to the large scale of attacks such as on the Twin Towers, the Pentagon, Madrid, Bali or London these attacks did not result in large scale loss of life or infrastructural damage, the exception being the bombing in Oklahoma City. We can speak of such attacks being of “low intensity”. In the case of low intensity terrorist attacks not only is the direct damage caused lesser than in the case of high intensity attacks, it would also seem that the perpetrators either belong to no formal organisation, or, if they do, that such organisations no longer have clearly identifiable chains of command and hierarchy. Clearly identifiable leaderships are being overtaken by loosely held together trans-national agreements between franchises. This low intensity conflict is being waged as much by terrorists as it is by ethno - nationalist extremists, animal rights activists, anti globalisation organisations and criminal factions of society for financial gain.

The impact of a low intensity terrorist campaign can however have a high impact upon the population. A series of low intensity attacks resulting in low casualty figures over a protracted period of time on the rail network of a city or even country would result in huge policing costs and a high level of Angst in the population. A series of false warnings followed by a single attack would compound the pressure and disrupt normal life . The ultimate result could even be the introduction of airport-style controls for all those wishing to use public transport in cities.

The trend towards such low intensity campaigns waged by lone wolves is also the result of the success of the Security Services in the wake of the large-scale and high intensity attacks in New York, Washington, Madrid, Bali and London. While the attacks could not be prevented, modern technological investigation methods rapidly led to the identification of the perpetrators. Similar electronic monitoring led to the timely arrest of terrorists, thus preventing attacks. In all such cases, the terrorists needed to communicate with each other in order to organise the attacks, this need to communicate gave the security services the chance to intercept and localise communications and arrest the suspects. The Sauerland bombers, who had planned to bomb US installations in Germany, were arrested in the autumn of 2007 following an NSA intercept of suspicious e mails between Germany and Pakistan.

Small cells of terrorists acting independently and lone wolves who simply don't have a need to communicate are much more difficult to localise and neutralise. Electronic measures will not prevent such attacks; potential terrorist attacks can only be prevented by physical controls, extensive profiling, and infiltration of organisations and human intelligence, all of which requires an increase in manpower. It also requires the willingness of the population to accept a higher degree of policing and controls, a political decision which would divide many European nations used to a high degree of freedom to move and travel and few non-intrusive controls.

Cyber War – A New Terrorist Threat?

A new threat to the West has arisen since the attacks by al Qaida in the US and Europe, that of Cyber Warfare. Whilst most would associate Cyber Attacks with the Russian attempts to interfere in the Baltic States or Georgia, or with Chinese attacks on Tibetan dissidents, the Cyber threat posed by terrorists should not be ignored. Militants in Afghanistan were able to intercept the video feeds from Predator drones. They will not be content with simply being able to see what the US Air Force can see, it must be assumed that they will attempt to persuade the system to do what they want to do. The next step might be a “man in the middle” attack, allowing the insurgents to inject fabricated feeds into the system. This could, for example, lead to an attack on a hospital rather than an insurgent safe – house, with disastrous results. Cyber Warfare could be the terrorist threat of the future. Rather than blowing up a power station or sewage farm, Cyber Terrorists would simply hack the relevant computers and cause systems to crash. No large and traceable organisation would be required for such an attack; a single, highly qualified lone wolf in the right job position would suffice.

In addition to using cyber space as a possible weapon, extremist organisations are using the new technologies, which are closely related to those used in cyber warfare, as a method of communication. Wireless modems, portable computers, internet-equipped mobile phones and the full range of the internet provide terrorists with new ways of collecting intelligence. This development is both worrying and at the same time it offers the security services the possibility of interception and data manipulation. A further use of the Internet for terrorist organisations is that of spreading their propaganda and anonymous transfer of funds.

Conclusions

Given the success with which the Security Services have countered the threats posed by Islamist Terrorism we believe that the future threat to security in Europe will increasingly come from lone wolf attacks or attacks from small and independently operating groups of Islamist terrorists. We have observed this trend recently in the United States in the cases of the Fort Hood attack and the attempt to car bomb Times Square. We also see the potential threat of increasing left wing violent attacks on symbols of capitalism which is fuelled by the current economic situation in many European countries and by the perceived perception that lawful protest has been unsuccessful in bringing about change.

This development presents a new situation for the Security Services as such individuals and groups are difficult to identify in advance thus making the prevention of violent attacks challenging. Multinational companies, Government offices and other symbols of capitalism are in the focus of such groups. In future organisations which are under threat will have to rely more on their own risk mitigation than depend upon the State to provide protection.

The Security Services will continue to invest in sophisticated measures to both counter the threat of Cyber attacks by all forms of terrorist organisations and utilise Cyberspace for intelligence gathering.

Governments clearly also have to balance increasingly liberal Data Protection laws with the overall security situation posed by technological sophistication of terrorist groups and an increase in the number of individuals willing to resort to violence. At the same time HUMINT activities need to be stepped up in order to combat those groups which do not use electronic methods of communication.

Paranoia is unhelpful. If the authorities cry wolf too often, warnings will not be heeded until too late. Rather than alerting the population as a whole it makes sense to issue warnings only to those organisations which are under threat and who can then respond in a professional manner. Intelligence is the key to this approach.

Recommendations

- In spite of recent successes and a decline in successful terrorist attacks by Islamist groups the Security Services need to continue to keep up the pressure and further improve international cooperation to counter this global threat.
- The Security Services need to concentrate both on infiltrating the non-Islamist terrorist groups in their relevant countries (HUMINT) and also step-up Open Source Information (OSINT) Research. This precludes the relevant linguistic and intercultural skills.
- Governments should consider establishing a National Security Council in their countries, if they have not done so, in order to further improve inter-ministerial cooperation and provide a comprehensive security approach.
- Governments should also consider the harmonised use of Armed Forces within the European Union in the event of major terrorist attacks.
- Governments should carefully consider their communications policy with the public. Frequent warnings of impending terrorist attacks which do not materialise are not helpful in sensitising the public.
- Academia can contribute significantly to the activities of the Security Services by helping to analyse the motivation behind fringe terrorist groups and separatist organisations. Such information would be helpful in building up profiles and identifying potential targets of such groups.
- Businesses should realise that certain terrorist groups such as anti-globalisation or single-issue terrorist organisations present a threat to their business continuity. They should also realise that the State cannot provide adequate levels of security at all times. Reliable Private Security Organisations are in a position to provide businesses with Risk Assessment and Business Continuity Plans.

Remarks: Opinions expressed in this contribution are those of the authors.



*Dr. Peter Roell
President ISPSW*

Peter Roell is President of the Institute for Strategic, Political, Security and Economic Consultancy (Berlin) and Doctor of Philosophy. He served as Senior Advisor on Foreign and Security Policy at the Permanent Representation of the Federal Republic of Germany to the European Union (Brussels). Author of publications: *India's 9/11, Is Terrorism War?, Maritime Terrorism – A Threat to World Trade?* and others.



*Maxim Worcester
Senior Advisor ISPSW*

Maxim Worcester is Senior Advisor at ISPSW, Berlin. Before, he was Senior Manager for Advisory Forensic at KPMG International. In the past he was Managing Director of Control Risks Germany, and held senior positions at the Economist Intelligence Unit, the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung and Deutsche Börse AG.