

United Kingdom: Knife attack against a soldier in South London highlights the threat of home-grown terrorism

On Wednesday afternoon in John Wilson Street, in Woolwich, South London, a British soldier, whose identity has not been disclosed yet and aged around 20, was hacked to death by two black men shouting Islamist slogans. Authorities believe the incident was a terrorist attack.

The circumstances of the incident are not clear so far. It seems that the soldier was wearing a T-shirt saying "Help for Heroes", the name of a charity whose aim is to help wounded British veterans. Witnesses said that the victim was knocked over by a blue car and then the two attackers began stabbing him with knives and axes shouting "God is greatest" and tried to beheading him. The attack took place in broad daylight, few meters from the Royal Artillery Barracks in Woolwich. Local MP Nick Raynsford said the dead man was a soldier serving there.

The two attackers remained on the scene until armed police arrived up to 20 minutes later. It seems that not only the two men didn't attempt to escape but they even encouraged people to take pictures and videos of them. One of them in a video recorded immediately after the attack said, in a British accent, that they had killed the British soldier because "Muslims are dying every day" and urged British citizens to remove their politicians and to bring troops back otherwise "you people will never be safe".

When police came the two men were shot and wounded as they apparently tried to attack the police officers. Their identities have not been disclosed but The Guardian reported that one of the two suspects is a British-born and the other was born in Nigeria and naturalized as a British citizen. Both of them have Nigerian heritage. The Independent reported that Anjem Choudary, the former leader of the banned Islamist group, Al Muhajiroun, said he had known the man appeared on the video soon after the murder. He said that the attacker, known by the name of Mujahid, converted to Islam in 2003 and was a British-born Nigerian.

The Cobra, the government's emergency response committee in Whitehall, met twice, on Wednesday evening and on Thursday morning to assess the incident. Among the participants there were the Home Secretary, the Defence Secretary, the Mayor of London, the Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police, the Minister for faith and communities and the heads of the Intelligence agencies. It was agreed in the meetings to increase security measures at barracks across London. The Muslim Council of Britain condemned the attack saying that it was barbaric and had no basis in Islam.

Separately, on Wednesday night a 43-year-old man was arrested on suspicion of having attempted an arson attack against a mosque in Braintree, Essex. Another man was arrested for racially-aggravated criminal damage at a mosque in Gillingham, in Kent. Around 250 supporters of the far-right English Defence League gathered in Woolwich and clashed with police.

On Thursday police announced that a property was searched in Lincolnshire as part of the investigation into the murder of the man in Woolwich.

The main question security officers are going to answer is whether the two murderers of the British soldier are part of a wider Islamist terror cell or if they acted alone, as so-called “lone wolves terrorists”. The fact that they did not escape the scene of the murder seems to indicate they wanted to publicize their message.

The attack has not been claimed so far. Meanwhile, as we mentioned before, radical Islamist cleric Anjem Choudary, the former leader of Al Muhajiroun, stated that one of the attackers, had attended some of the meetings of the group.

Here it should be mentioned that there is a series of Islamist groups, set in the UK by radical Islamist clerics Omar Bakri Muhammad and Anjem Choudary:

- **Al-Muhajiroun.** Founded in 1983 by Syrian-born Islamist Omar Bakri Muhammad, Al Muhajiroun became notorious for attempting to justify the 9/11 attacks and fomenting Islamist rhetoric in Britain. In 2004 the group was disbanded by order of its leader. In 2005 Bakri Muhammad fled UK.
- **Muslims against Crusaders (MAC)** The group is believed to be reformed version of Al-Muhajiroun or its offspring. Banned in 2011
- **The Saved Sect (al-Firqat un-Naajiyah)** Formed in November 2005 and banned by the UK government in July 2006. It is also considered as a reformed version of Al-Muhajiroun.
- **Hizb ut-Tahrir** Since 1986 the group was actively promoted by Omar Bakri Mohammed and his followers in the UK. Following the 7 July 2005 London bombings, the British government announced its intention to ban the organization but the plan was later abandoned. Over the last years the group intensified its propaganda activities across the country via numerous Islamic cultural and religious centers. The group advocates for the formation of a Pan-Islamic state, governed by Sharia Law.
- **Sharia4UK** (also referred as **Islam4UK**), headed by Omar Bakri Mohammed and Anjem Choudary, was created in 2008 and banned by UK authorities on January 14, 2010. According to British terrorism experts, the group is a splinter of al-Muhajiroun and Hizb ut-Tahrir.

It is also worth mentioning that Al-Qaeda and Al-Shabaab have threatened several times to carry out attacks against targets in the United Kingdom and against UK nationals.

Al-Qaeda claimed responsibility for London bomb attacks on July 7, 2005, that left 52 civilians killed and hundreds injured.

Authorities reported about a series of arrests of Somalian nationals in the UK, allegedly linked to Al-Shabaab. In October 2012, Al Shabaab threatened to carry out attacks against targets in the United Kingdom and against UK nationals as a revenge for extradition of radical cleric Abu Qatada from the UK.

At least two major plots, in which Islamist terrorists planned to kill members of the military, were foiled by British security agencies. Last month four radical Islamists

were convicted at Woolwich Crown Court for having planned a car bomb attack against an army barracks in Luton, north of London. In 2007 another terrorist plan was thwarted involving the kidnapping and beheading of a British soldier with Pakistani heritage.

As highlighted by the CEO of ESISC, Claude Moniquet, in his latest book, “Nèò Djihadistes”ⁱ, Western societies have to deal with a new category of enemies, the “neo-jihadists”. They are educated and raised inside the Western societies, but become Islamist terrorists after a conversion to radical Islam, in most of the cases due to a perceived social marginalization. Many “Neo-jihadists” join the Islamist terror organizations but some of them become “lone wolves”, a particular insidious kind of terrorists. The danger of the “lone wolves” consists in the extreme difficulty for the security services to infiltrate them and to thwart their plans. The attacks carried out by this kind of terrorists are more volatile and less predictable even if less sophisticated than the ones carried out by terrorist groups such as Al-Qaeda.

The language used in the video by the murderer of the British soldier, soon after the attack, is classic Al-Qaeda rhetoric which could have been learned by the two attackers through the internet or attending meetings with British radical Islamist organizations. At the same time the modus operandi of the attack may indicate that the attack was not a plot planned and masterminded by a terrorist cell, but rather a ‘lone wolf’ attack, carried out by neo-jihadists not directly affiliated to any terrorist networks.

The Boston Marathon bombing carried out on April 13, 2013, by two students of Chechen origin in which 3 people were killed and 264 were injured, and the French-Algerian gunman Mohammed Merah who killed three off-duty French soldiers and four Jewish civilians in southern France in 2012, highlight the fact that western societies have to be accustomed to deal with the home-grown “neo-jihadists” menace, “lone-wolves” or members of terrorist networks, for many years to come.

ⁱ Moniquet C., « Nèò Djihadistes. Ils sont parmi nous. Qui sont-ils ? Comment les combattre ? », Les Editions Jourdan, Bruxelles-Paris, 2013.