
US SECURITY INSTITUTIONS WARN OF POSSIBLE LONE WOLF ATTACKS IN EUROPE DURING HOLIDAY SEASON

***By Kieran Doyle
Research intern***

On November 21, the United States Department of State published a travel alert, warning US citizens of the heightened risk of terror attacks throughout Europe during the upcoming holiday season. This alert, set to expire in February 2017, was not unique in and of itself; in recent years, State Department has published numerous travel alerts for its citizens wishing to travel to Europe. However, one small but significant difference in this latest warning demonstrates a shift in the paradigm of how security institutions are thinking about terror attacks.

The alert is nearly identical to those that preceded it, including one published in March of 2016. However, unlike older warnings, it cautions specifically against the possibility that “self-radicalized extremists” may conduct attacks. The inclusion of this phrase is significant. It demonstrates that the intelligence and security community has become more concerned about lone wolf terror attacks.

Though large-scale terror events like the ones in Paris and Brussels in recent years are still possible, they are increasingly unlikely. This is thanks to two important factors: first, the increasingly successful military campaign against Islamic State strongholds in Iraq and Syria has stifled the group responsible for almost all large-scale attacks in recent years, making it harder for IS to plan and coordinate outside of its “borders”; second, heightened counterterrorism efforts, especially in Western Europe and the United States, have been effective in dismantling terror cells and preventing the creation of many terror networks.

It is as a result of these developments that recent Islamic State and Al-Qaeda propaganda pieces spend considerable effort on encouraging lone wolf attacks, prompting additional concern from US security institutions. By relying less on large coordinated groups, and more on the support of individuals, these terror groups can suggest a variety of low-skill methods for carrying out terror attacks. This is not to say that lone-wolf attacks are new territory for these organizations. Al-Qaeda Advocated for these kinds of attacks in 2010 as part of the so-called “strategy of a thousand cuts.” The general idea is to carry out smaller but more frequent attacks, forcing counterterrorism expenses up and creating fear and distrust. It is also important to remember that large-scale coordinated attacks are not a thing of the past. Recent developments merely represent a shift in the emphasis on and the prominence of lone-wolf attacks.

The Islamic State publishes a high production-quality magazine called “Rumiyah,” which released its second edition on October 5. This publication contained an article that gave detailed instructions for carrying out stabbing attacks, suggesting what kinds of knives to use and giving advice on how to psychologically prepare for a stabbing. It called such attacks “just terror operations.” A little over a month later, on November 11, IS released the third issue of “Rumiyah,” featuring an article detailing “military and covert operations” carried out since the October 5 edition. The article called special attention to two lone wolf attacks, one in Hamburg, Germany and one in Nairobi, Kenya. Though the Hamburg attacker has not yet been caught and the Nairobi attacker was shot immediately after he attempted to stab a security guard, IS claimed to be responsible for both attacks. In “Rumiyah,” it notes that each assailant carried out their attacks, “In response to the Islamic State’s call to target the citizens of nations participating the Crusader coalition.” There is no independent evidence that these attacks were actually coordinated by IS, but by glorifying them, the group clearly hopes to inspire similar undertakings in the future.

Similarly, on November 12, Al-Qaeda published the 16th issue of its magazine “Inspire,” which spent a full 8 pages analyzing the pressure-cooker bombs that exploded in New York and New Jersey on September 17, causing 29 injuries with shrapnel. It also mentioned the Minnesota mall stabbings that injured 8 people, carried out the same day. Speaking about the planning for these operations, Al-Qaeda heaped mounds of praise on these attackers, clearly pointing out the importance of choosing symbolic targets and dates for attacks. Like “Rumiyah,” “Inspire” gave detailed instructions for would-be copycats, referring back to previous issues for instructions on making pressure-cooker bombs. It also explained how to properly select targets, hide a bomb, and time an explosion.

This edition of “Inspire” also posed a theological argument that sought to justify ‘lone Jihad,’ in a 5-page article entitled “Rulings of Lone Jihad.” The article attempted to reassure would-be jihadists that solo attacks can be carried out while avoiding any kind of ‘sin.’ It named “every single male, adult, mindful, and able to fight, irrespective of whether he has fought or not” as legitimate targets. Though their language and presentation is different, like the Islamic State, Al-Qaeda certainly aims to invite radicalized Muslims to carry out further lone wolf attacks.

Of particular importance during the upcoming holiday season is one of the first articles in the current edition of “Rumiyah,” a three-page piece called “Just Terror Tactics,” inspired by the recent attack in Nice that left 86 dead and 434 others injured. The article gives detailed instructions for carrying out vehicular attacks against large crowds of people. It is highly specific, describing the sorts of vehicles that would provide the most utility for a terror attack, the locations that would allow for the most carnage, and detailing closely the necessary preparations, evening reminding would-be attackers to properly fill their vehicle with fuel. Though not explicitly mentioned by name, the article contains two photos of the November 24 Macy’s Thanksgiving Day Parade with the caption, “An Excellent Target.”

On November 18, CBS news reported that a source had informed them about additional precautions taken by the FBI in response to this barely-veiled threat on the parade, warning law enforcement officials around the country about the heightened potential for terror attacks on Thanksgiving. On November 14, the NYPD said that they were aware of the threats, noting that the previous year’s parade had used blocker cars that

would prevent a Nice-style attack. Nevertheless, on November 23, local media reported the addition 81 sanitation trucks filled with sand that would block intersections along the parade's route, adding to the already high-security event, which has previously featured sniffer dogs, police sniper squads, metal barricades, security camera, and limited pedestrian entry points.

Other US security institutions like the Department of Homeland Security also published security warnings about a possible attack, noting that the holiday season in particular provides targets for would-be terrorists. These statement are similar to ones published last year, warning of homegrown copycats using similar tactics to the 2014 Paris attacks. However, US security institutions emphasized that they have no knowledge of any specific and credible threats. Therefore, save for some extra behind-the-scenes preparations, the US has not heightened security efforts in response to the intimidation in terror propaganda. Clearly, these institutions have taken notice of this newly emphasized propaganda direction, but so far their security strategies remain the same.

With their own ability to carry out attacks in foreign nations crippled, the newly prominent strategy of convincing individuals to carry out more frequent smaller-scale attacks is the most effective remaining option for terror groups. More attacks of this nature would cause people to be fearful and suspicious of Muslims, in turn creating marginalized extremist fringes and leaving few people in the middle. This polarization of society in turn would aid in radicalization and recruitment efforts, both within and without the territory that terror groups try to hold. It is currently unclear whether attempts to encourage lone wolf attacks will be successful or not, but the value of such attacks to both Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State should not be understated.

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