



Terrorism: The present, the future and the unpredictability of the threat

European View
1–8
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DOI: 10.1177/17816858231204731
journals.sagepub.com/home/euv


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Abstract

The terrorist threat in 2023 has been characterised by new levels of unpredictability. This is due to two main factors that have unfolded only recently with unparalleled intensity. The first is the bipolarity of the threat. On the one hand, structured and semi-structured radical groups are operating in complex scenarios, such as the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine. On the other, in the West we have been witnessing a recrudescence of lone-actor attacks that, although characterised by low lethality, represent a cause for concern. There is a risk that this dichotomy could catch experts off guard. The second factor that makes the threat particularly unpredictable is the ideological fluidity that is pervading contemporary radical milieus and radicalisation trends: individuals with diverse ideological backgrounds borrow tropes, narratives and communication strategies from other ideologies and adapt them to match their worldviews through processes of reciprocal influencing and cross-pollination.

This article aims to analyse the bipolarity between the focus on international crises amid a rise in lone-actor attacks and the ideological fluidity of radical environments to assess how these two factors have generated unprecedented levels of unpredictability when it comes to terrorism and radicalisation.

Keywords

Terrorism, Radicalisation, Jihad, Far-right, Ideology, Akh-right, Hate-speech

Introduction

The primary purpose of terrorism is to instil fear, and, for this reason, its manifestations are obviously hardly predictable. When it comes to contemporary terrorism trends, however, we are witnessing unprecedented levels of uncertainty. Ideological patchworking

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and mixing, and reciprocal influencing, along with major conflicts in different regions and a recrudescence of lone-actor attacks are all features that suggest that the nature of today's threat pivots around chaos and unpredictability (Brzuszkiewicz 2023c).

Two main factors contribute to making contemporary terrorism and radicalisation dynamics particularly unpredictable. The first is the bipolarity of the threat. The world's attention is—understandably—focused on the Russian war of aggression in Ukraine, which started in 2022 and, at the time of writing, has caused more than 8,700 civilian deaths (Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights 2023).

More recently, in April 2023, clashes erupted in Sudan amid a power struggle between the two main factions of the military regime, the Sudanese armed forces of General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan—the country's *de facto* ruler—and the Rapid Support Forces, loyal to the former warlord General Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo, known as Hemedti. The Sudanese conflict is taking place within a broader framework of instability in the Sahel region, characterised by the increasing lethality of local and transnational jihadism. Within sub-Saharan Africa, the Sahel has become the centre of gravity for jihadist terrorism, accounting for more terrorism-related deaths in 2022 than both South Asia and the Middle East and North Africa combined (Clarke and Zenn 2023).

These two major crises, and especially the war in Ukraine, have captured the attention of experts, policymakers and commentators. Even in the realm of terrorism studies, it is argued that their consequences should not be underestimated. In fact, when it comes to terrorism and radicalisation studies, the current conflicts have two major consequences, which only appear to be contradictory. On the one hand, the wars have taken away a great deal of attention from the terrorist threat in Western countries. On the other, however, the conflicts themselves must be regarded as new breeding grounds for further radicalisation, as radicals all over the world are gathering around polarised, extreme and uncompromising positions and fitting the wars into their specific narratives.

As far as the war in Ukraine is concerned, the role of right-wing extremist fighters and foreign fighters in this conflict remains controversial. There are reports of individual fighters from a number of European countries having joined the volunteer battalions in Ukraine. They join groups with no official military status, which makes it difficult to assess the situation, since the only information available on these groups is what they themselves publish and propagate via social media (Wichmann 2023). Russian separatists, however, are also said to have foreign volunteers in their ranks. Often without any form of prior military training, and coming from a radical or radicalising background, these foreign fighters constitute a risk in many respects.

When it comes to Sudan, the danger to European stability is less direct but similarly concerning. The jihadist action in the Sahel has already spilt over into West Africa, and there is no reason to believe that Sudan is safe from new terror waves in the near future.

At the same time, in the first half of the year several European countries witnessed a number of lone-actor attacks. These attacks were usually poorly planned and low in lethality. Nevertheless, this spike in ideologically motivated violence—usually perpetrated in the form of stabbings—confirms the marked unpredictability of the threat and the need to strike the right balance between a focus on international crises and the monitoring of radicalisation processes in Europe.

Aside from the bipolarity of international conflicts versus domestic threats, the second factor that makes the terrorist threat particularly unpredictable is the ideological fluidity that pervades contemporary radical milieux and radicalisation trends. Individuals with diverse ideological backgrounds seize tropes, narratives, and communication and propaganda strategies from other ideologies and adapt them to match their worldviews through constant processes of reciprocal influencing and cross-pollination. This makes identification of the threat particularly difficult. Online users belonging to the extreme-right constellation openly praise the Taliban or jihadists for their victories and, in turn, radical young Islamists exploit far-right framing and messaging, thus becoming new echo-chambers in environments that are too often—mistakenly—perceived to be at opposite ends of the radical spectrum.

The first section of the present article analyses the current tension between international crises, with their consequences for terrorism and radicalisation, and domestic threats. This tension represents the first factor generating the unprecedented unpredictability in today's terrorism scenarios. The second section of the work scrutinises the other major cause of this unpredictability, that is, the ideological hodgepodge, fluidity and cross-fertilisation that characterises contemporary radical milieux.

The bipolarity between international crises and domestic threats

Since the outbreak of the conflict in Ukraine, the eyes of the EU have been understandably focused on this crisis. Far-right movements and supporters express views ranging from open hostility to Russia and President Vladimir Putin to complete mistrust of NATO and the West. This makes it possible to find these groups on both sides of the battlefield (Brzuszkiewicz 2022).

In Ukraine, right-wing extremist and nationalist forces, as well as various groups linked to hooliganism and the Azov Movement, tend to flow into volunteer battalions and platoons.

Similarly, Russia has right-wing extremist forces fighting on the side of the separatists in eastern Ukraine. These aggregations are often—albeit not exclusively—related to the galaxy of the Wagner Group, also known as PMC Wagner, where PMC stands for private military company. PMC Wagner is the most powerful Russian paramilitary organisation, often described as a network of mercenaries. It receives equipment and training from the

Russian Ministry of Defence, and several components of Wagner have been linked to neo-Nazism and far-right extremism (Faulkner 2022, 28–37).

Given its murky paramilitary status, it is not hazardous to say that the Wagner Group represents the first resource used by Russia to allow for plausible deniability in certain conflicts (Reynolds 2019). Its involvement in operations in Africa, for instance, is now notorious. Wagner has cultivated exploitative relationships with multiple African governments, trading military and security services for mining concessions and political access. Yet, the group does not seem to be interested in any form of capacity building—on the contrary, it capitalises on and profits from insecurity (Faulkner 2022, 28). At the time of writing, Britain is set to classify PMC Wagner as a terrorist organisation, and the French Parliament has adopted a resolution calling on the EU to formally label it a terror group.

Along with the threat embodied by semi-structured and structured radical groups, there are also reports of the participation of individual fighters from other European countries in this war, including from France, Germany, Poland, Ireland, Spain, Italy and Sweden (Wichmann 2023).

These factors show how conflicts represent ideal breeding grounds for radicalisation. The potential consequences of the presence and actions of this diverse array of fighters will take time to be systematically assessed.

However, if international conflicts and contemporary wars are obviously a priority for policymakers and analysts, the same cannot be said for terrorism attacks within European borders. After the fall of the Islamic State (IS) as an entity capable of territorial control in 2019, and in the couple of years prior to that, when it was struggling to survive, attacks in Europe declined both quantitatively and qualitatively, thus leading experts and the general public to believe that jihadi terrorism belonged in the recent past. In the last few months, however, a number of European countries have witnessed knife attacks that can be considered terrorism offences.

Between 31 December 2022 and 25 January 2023, five attacks occurred in Europe, with similarly alarming characteristics (Brzuskiewicz 2023c). In just one day—on 25 January—two knife attacks took place. In Germany, a knife-wielding man of Palestinian origin fatally stabbed two people and injured seven others on a train, before being grabbed by passengers and arrested by police. The attack occurred shortly before the regional train, travelling from Kiel to Hamburg, arrived at Brokstedt station. Ibrahim K., the perpetrator, had arrived in Germany as a refugee from the Gaza Strip in 2014, committing his first criminal offence shortly after his arrival. There is evidence of drug use and mental health issues in his background (*Deutsche Welle* 2023).

If the German authorities were cautious when considering the terrorism hypothesis, the case in Spain seems to have been clearer. A man attacked several people with a

machete at two churches in the southern port city of Algeciras, killing at least one person. He attacked the clergymen at the two churches—San Isidro and Nuestra Senora de La Palma—and the incident was investigated as terrorism. Although police have not released details of the attacker’s name or nationality, local media have reported that he was a 25-year-old Moroccan man.

Since the end of 2017, the number of terrorist actions in Europe has dropped considerably and the more recent attacks have caused fewer deaths, due to the use of bladed weapons usually wielded by a single perpetrator. However, the threat still exists. For instance, in 2022 Spanish security forces carried out 27 anti-terror operations targeting jihadist cells, and arrested 46 people across the country. In April 2023, Belgian police arrested seven people suspected of supporting IS and plotting a terrorist attack. Almost all of the suspects are ethnic Chechens, and three are Belgian nationals (*The Guardian* 2023). In the same month, a Syrian man was arrested in Germany over a suspected jihadist bomb plot. The investigation focused on the 28-year-old suspect and his 24-year-old brother. Motivated by radical-Islamist and jihadist convictions, the two were suspected of planning an attack on a civilian target with a self-made explosive (*The Times of Israel* 2023).

These are just a few examples of what could be regarded as the democratisation of the terror threat. An individual with an Internet connection, a smartphone and access to weapons, either knives or ‘ghost guns’—unserialised and untraceable firearms that can be bought online and assembled at home—can now take action. This trend is not new, however, and echoes the words of former IS spokesman Abu Mohammad al-Adnany: ‘If you are not able to find an [improvised explosive device] or a bullet, then single out the disbelieving American, Frenchman, or any of their allies. Smash his head with a rock, or slaughter him with a knife, or run him over with your car, or throw him down from a high place, or choke him, or poison him’ (Brzuszkiewicz 2023b). Today the democratisation of the threat is likely to intensify thanks to the simplification of the terrorist modus operandi, reciprocal influencing between different ideologies, and the chaotic doctrinal hodgepodge that is becoming more and more common in the various radical environments.

The dynamics of terrorism and radicalisation are evolving, and the fact that this evolution is taking place during a time of high international instability—which is now the undisputed focus of attention—risks further jeopardising the effort to rethink terrorism and counterterrorism. The latest attacks in Europe seem to be numerically minimal, but they should be interpreted as a warning sign, revealing the new challenges that await us in the near future. This is especially the case when they result from the ideological fluidity of contemporary radicalisation, which represents the second reason why today’s threat is strikingly unpredictable.

The ideological fluidity of the contemporary radical milieux

In the last few years, attacks have often been characterised as being motivated by ideological crossovers and a chaotic mishmash of radical influences. FBI Director Christopher

Wray has said that the recent terrorist events perpetrated by so-called lone actors can be ascribed to a ‘weird hodgepodge’ of ideas that have replaced the consistent, deep loyalty to doctrinal principles and worldviews (Johnson 2022). This trend is particularly apparent when it comes to attacks carried out by and groups active in the US, but there is no reason to believe that Europe is immune to it.

Last year in Minneapolis, a member of the Boogaloo Bois was sentenced to prison for conspiring to provide material support to Hamas, a designated foreign terrorist organisation in the US (US Department of Justice 2022). The boogaloo movement, whose members are usually referred to as ‘boogaloo boys’ or ‘boogaloo bois’, is an anti-government extremist movement born in the US in 2019. Its supporters aim to achieve a second American Civil War or second American Revolution, known as ‘the boogaloo’ or ‘the boog’.

Such ideological cross-pollination is often reflected in radical discourse, narratives and tropes, and it is not by chance that the defendant was member of a sub-group called the ‘Boojahideen’ (Brzuszkiewicz 2023c), a play on the words *boogaloo* and *mujahidin*. This reciprocal influencing also works in the opposite direction, that is, from white supremacist and alt-right ideologies to jihadism: the al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula Inspire ‘Praise & Guide’ series, for instance, reviewed attacks such as the 2021 Boulder supermarket mass shooting to assess what had been done well by the attacker and what could have been done better to increase the action’s lethality and impact. Online, far-right radicals distribute IS videos because they value the tactical advice and the jihadists’ passion and ruthlessness, while jihadists laud the lone-wolf nature and execution of school shooters (Brzuszkiewicz 2023c).

These cross-fertilisation processes are increasingly dynamic and might broaden the scope of the copycat mechanism. Indeed, not only does such imitation require zero interaction between the perpetrators and potential attackers, but it also no longer needs them to fully share the same ideology.

In this respect, a particularly interesting phenomenon is the so-called *akh-right*. A play on the Arabic word for ‘brother’ and the diverse phenomenon of the alt-right, the term describes contemporary online communities and individuals who appropriate features, tropes and often ideological content traditionally belonging to the alt-right and use it to support and disseminate values and opinions that range from reactionary and conservative to radical jihadist. A big part of the *akh-right* is interested in hate speech practices; its members do not normally post explicitly violent content. However, in a minority of cases the violent stance is much more apparent and includes open support for radical movements (Brzuszkiewicz 2023d). The common ground between the alt-right and young disenfranchised Islamists and Islamist sympathisers who contribute to creating the *akh-right* milieu pivots around hate for political correctness and mainstream values, mockery of the alleged feminisation of the West and Western men, and placing continuous blame on feminism.

These features reveal the proximity of akh-right tropes to another evolving online eco-system, the so-called manosphere—a diverse array of websites, blogs and online communities gathering to express varying degrees of misogynistic views.

Conclusions

When it comes to the radical threat, the first half of 2023 has been characterised by unprecedented unpredictability. Today the threat risks catching decision-makers and experts off guard because of its bipolarity. Indeed, attention has inevitably been focused on crises such as the war in Ukraine and—to a lesser extent—the instability in the Sahel and the clashes in Sudan.

Back in Europe, however, we have been witnessing a recrudescence of lone-actor attacks that, although characterised by low lethality, should not be ignored or underestimated. In addition to this, a second factor making the terrorist threat particularly unpredictable is the ideological fluidity of contemporary radical milieux, especially online. Individuals with diverse ideological backgrounds borrow tropes, narratives and communication strategies from other ideologies and adapt them to match their worldviews, with the result that doctrinal consistency is no longer a priority.

This makes identification of the threat particularly challenging. However, it is not impossible. Because lethal attacks have decreased in number and ideological cross-pollination has been contained, Europe enjoys certain advantages over the US. These should allow us to act rapidly, reviewing our notions of radicalisation and radicalism, and designing strategies to monitor the complex trends of reciprocal influencing, inspiration and cross-pollination between different ideologies.

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