

Krudttønden

Trends in recent attacks in the West

UNDERSTANDING AND PREVENTION AFTER THE COPENHAGEN SHOOTINGS

In many ways the attacks in Copenhagen on 14 and 15 February 2015 resemble other attacks in Western countries in recent years: simple attacks against symbolica targets carried out by one or few individuals with criminal pasts. Increased cooperation between the authorities is essential to prevent new attacks.

The 14 attacks in Europe, the United States, Canada and Australia, which since 2012 have been defined as acts of terrorism, are characterized by trends other than the major attacks in the 00s on random civilians with explosives, which required organisation, coordination and training. The attacks in recent years have generally been simple; carried out by one or few

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Authorities must maintain a broad approach to the prevention of new attacks – not just focus on the latest trends, threats or targets.
- Cooperation between authorities should be a priority and the coordinating responsibility should be centralised.
- Individuals suspected or convicted of terrorism-related crimes should neither be isolated nor placed randomly. They should be placed among individuals who they can neither influence nor learn from.
- Concrete guidelines for handling terror suspects and convicts as well as radicalisation should be integrated into the supplementary training of prison staff and police and basic training of future staff.

Efforts should be incorporated in a broader context ensuring the involvement of all relevant players

Procedures should be established for smooth transferrals from one institution or authority to another, so that there are no gaps, for example upon release or when moving, where cases might be lost. It is essential for such cooperation between authorities that the coordinating responsibility be clearly and centrally placed.

individuals with small arms and directed towards easily identifiable symbolic targets.

Of the 19 suspected perpetrators, nearly half were previously involved in criminality, nearly all of them were known to the authorities and more than one-third had served time in prison. Quite surprisingly, considering the strong focus on people who travel to Syria and Iraq, which has characterised this period in time, only one had been in Syria. Three others have been in Yemen, Afghanistan/Pakistan and Kenya, and at least two had their passports confiscated, while one person could not have one issued because the

authorities feared that they would join IS. This gives rise to considerations regarding the possible risks associated with confiscating passports as a preventive measure and illustrates how important it is not to focus solely on the latest or newest threat. Therefore it is also important to emphasise that the present recommendations are proposed as supplements to the existing activities, not replacements.

The current trends regarding choice of targets, methods and perpetrators are very much connected with a strategic adaptation that has taken place in the global jihadist movement as a reaction to the increased efforts to prevent attacks. Both al-Qaeda and IS have explicitly encouraged sympathisers to carry out attacks in their home countries instead of travelling to conflict areas or contacting organisations, and that these attacks be carried out by single individuals with easily accessible tools against symbolic targets. All of this minimises the preparation time, communication and other activities that may attract the attention of the authorities and lead to disclosure.

The significance of these requests on trends characterizing methods and choice of targets is obvious, but they also play a role with regard to which people carry out the attacks. Together with this strategic adaptation, socio-psychological mechanisms and individual preferences also play a role.

Targets and methods

All 14 attacks were simple, and ten were carried out by a single individual, while three of the attacks involved two and one attack involved three. Except for the Boston bombings, all others involved small arms, and two involved vehicles. In eight cases, the attacks lasted for a long time, and in four of these cases, a series of attacks was carried out. Experience shows

ATTACKS IN THE WEST 2012-2015

1. The attacks in Toulouse and Montauban, March 2012
2. The attempt to assassinate Lars Hedegaard, Copenhagen, February 2013
3. The Boston bombings, April 2013
4. The Woolwich attack in London, May 2013
5. The copy-cat attack in Paris, May 2013
6. The attack on the Jewish Museum in Brussels, May 2014
7. The Melbourne attack, September 2014
8. The attacks in Saint Jean sur Richelieu, Canada, October 2014
9. The attacks on the Parliament of Canada, October 2014
10. The axe attack in New York, October 2014
11. The hostage-taking in Sydney, December 2014
12. The attacks in Paris, January 2015
13. The attacks in Copenhagen, February 2015
14. The attack in Garland, Texas, May 2015

that attacks that last for a long time attract more attention, and thus the perpetrators can potentially reach a broader audience with their message. Therefore, there is reason to expect that this method will be further developed, for example, to involve subsequent attacks directed against the people who gather around the site of the first attack.

Except for the Boston bombings in April 2013 and the hostage-taking in Sydney in December 2014, all of the attacks were directed against symbolic and easily recognisable targets in the form of representatives of the power of state, such as the police and soldiers, exponents of freedom of speech or Jews. This is far from being coincidental.

In order for terrorism to be effective, it is crucial that the surrounding world understands that it is terrorism and understands the message that is being communicated. When attacks are carried out by individuals or groups with not direct contact to organisations, they can be interpreted as being something other than terrorism, for example, insanity, revenge or suicide, and therefore it is necessary to leave a recognisable fingerprint that the surrounding world associates with terrorism. This is why symbolic targets are valuable. The debate about the extent to which many of the attacks in recent years were terrorist attacks illustrates this dilemma.

Encouraging sympathisers to act on their own also means that the individual perpetrator's pre-existing images of enemies may be allowed to play a role in the choice of a symbolic target. Seen in this light, it is not surprising that people with a criminal past direct their attacks against the police.

If the protection of groups that are currently identified as being targets increases, it must be expected that attention will shift to new easily recognisable symbolic targets. This will probably mean representatives of professions, interests or population groups, which have already been identified as targets by al-Qaeda or IS and match the existing images of enemies envisaged by these groups' sympathisers in the West.

Perpetrators

Of the 19 suspected perpetrators, nine had a criminal past, seven had served prison sentences and at least 16 were already known by the authorities. The fact that people who commit terrorist acts have been involved in other types of criminality in the past, or are

TRENDS IN RECENT ATTACKS

Targets: Easily recognisable, symbolic targets

Method: Simple attacks carried out by one person or a few people using small arms, which last a long time

Perpetrators: Often people with problematic backgrounds, who have been involved in other criminality (so-called crossovers), are known by the police or other authorities and have served prison sentences. Only one had previously participated in the conflict in Syria and Iraq.

involved in both at the same time, is nothing new. In Denmark alone, there are several examples of this among people who have thus far been sentenced for terrorism-related crimes. However, there are indications that this trend is on the rise, which makes the need for attention topical. The strategic adaptation in the global jihadist movement also plays a role in this connection: When organisations encourage sympathisers to carry out attacks in their own countries instead of trying to travel to areas of conflict or establish contact with known organisations, they attract new target groups, which would not necessarily want to join professional organisations with strict membership requirements and demanding training – people who are not just motivated by the organisations' agenda, but also by their own.

Yet another aspect may play a role in this connection, particularly with regard to people who have a past in organised criminality: Gangs offer many of the same things as jihadist groups, including a strong group to identify with, strong social bonds, clear rules and access to action, and the two may therefore appeal to some of the same people. There are, however, important differences. Gangs are often hierarchical, and the individual's opportunities for mobility and influence are limited. At the same time, the tone of communication is harsh, and life is stressful and hard to combine with having a family. In contrast to this, jihadist groups often have a more collective structure where the individual, to a greater extent, can expect to be heard and involved. The tone of communication is more polite and, at least in a Danish context, life is less stressful, just as more emphasis is placed on the value of family life and having children. In gangs, members are more likely to have access to money and material goods, but on the other hand, jihadist groups offer a greater purpose in life.

This means that for some people jihadism can be an attractive alternative to gangs.

Therefore, it is not a good idea to place prison inmates or individuals remanded in custody sentenced or suspected of having committed terrorism-related crimes, with gang members or other vulnerable people who they can influence. It is also a bad idea to place them with people who can qualify them, for example, people with access to weapons. On the other hand, it is also a bad idea to isolate them with each other. Experience from Great Britain, among other places, indicates this creates a space where people convicted of minor infringements can learn from more experienced capacities. The solution to this dilemma could be to place them strategically among inmates or individuals in custody, who can neither qualify nor be influenced by them; for example, people who have been sentenced or are suspected of committing certain types of white collar crime.

Better cooperation and qualification of professionals

Although the fact that seven in 19 suspected perpetrators have served prison sentences indicates that there may be opportunities to prevent or stop radicalisation in prisons, such efforts should be incorporated into broader efforts ensuring the involvement of all relevant role players, including local jails, secure institutions, the ordinary police and social authorities.

Procedures should be established for smooth transferrals from one institution or authority to another, so that there are no gaps, for example upon release or when moving, where cases might be lost. It is essential for such cooperation between authorities

that the coordinating responsibility be clearly and centrally placed. This might require more resources and changes of the rules regarding the exchange of information.

It is also necessary to give the staff at prisons, local jails, etc. concrete tools for recognising, understanding and dealing with the challenges related to individuals sentenced for or suspected of terrorism-related crimes and with radicalisation, just as the ordinary police need tools that are tailor-made for their areas of work. In this connection, priority should be given to supplementary training of existing staff and integration of the themes in the basic training of new personnel. Inspiration for the training can be found in the training programmes that have already been developed, but in order to ensure specific usability, the content should be adjusted for the individual professional groups in close cooperation with them. The importance of this is illustrated by a survey carried out by the Danish association of uniformed prison officers among shop stewards at Danish prisons and local jails after the attacks in Copenhagen. A total of 70% of those asked did not feel sufficiently prepared to deal with radicalisation, even though the Danish Prison and Probation Service have held courses on the subject since 2012.

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Cover photo: Police cordon after the attack on the cafe Krudttønden in Copenhagen 14 February 2015. Photo: Jacob Fræmohs © DIIS

