



2019 Terrorism Review in Europe

With the rise of Islamist extremism Europe has been at the forefront of transnational terrorist targets.

Europe's proximity to volatile regions, such as the Middle East and North Africa and access to soft targets are all given as facilitators for the frequency of Islamist extremist attacks across Europe. However, the threat posed by far-right extremism is growing at an alarming rate, especially in countries with more prominent populist political movements.

This intelligence bulletin will detail terrorist incidents, both plotted and perpetrated, throughout Europe in 2019, breaking down incidents in each effected European country. Some European countries have remained unaffected by terrorism in 2019 and have therefore not been included in this bulletin. Additionally, a number of attacks initially reported to be of a terrorist nature were later retracted and investigated under a different charge(s)ⁱ. For UK based terror plots and attacks, please refer to the *2019 UK Terrorism Review* bulletin published in early January 2020.

Albania

- **October:** Albanian intelligence services discovered an Iranian proxy terrorist cell had planned to target members of the exiled *Mujahidin-e Khalq* (MEK) organisation. The MEK is a political group that became outlawed in Iran after the revolution in 1979 after calling for the removal of the current regime. No attack had been carried out.

Austria

- **December:** Austrian authorities arrested three individuals over a plot to target a market outside St. Stephen's Cathedral in central Vienna between Christmas and New Year. Authorities were handed a tip off concerning the ringleader, a 24-year-old male who was serving a prison sentence at the time for planning to travel to Syria to fight under the banner of the Islamic State (IS).

Belgium

- **June:** An individual who had planned to mount a terrorist attack against the US Embassy in Brussels was arrested by authorities. The suspect, named only through his initials of *MG*, was charged for preparing an act of terrorism and had been under surveillance for an unspecified amount of time before law enforcement acted.

Bulgaria

- **June:** A 16-year-old was arrested in Plovdiv, a popular tourist destination in southern Bulgaria, for planning a terrorist attack. The suspect had reportedly been radicalised by IS over social media. The group and suspect used Telegram, an encrypted instant messaging app, to plot a potential attack. The teenager had been given instructions to build a pipe bomb (see image). Bulgarian authorities were given a tip off and located the explosive devices and subsequently arrested the teenager.



Denmark

- **December:** Danish Police made over twenty arrests under the country's terrorism laws. The authorities have kept most of the details away from the public, however, reports indicate the security services thwarted a number of attacks involving firearms and homemade explosive devices. Other sources report the Israeli intelligence service, *Mossad*, playing a key role in assisting the Danish in this counter terrorism operation.

ⁱ For example, the case of the French Police intelligence officer who murdered four of his colleagues was initially linked to terrorism. However, no evidence of radicalisation was found ruling out terrorism. Another is example is the knife attack in The Hague, Netherlands where three teenagers were attacked in the Grote Marktstraat area (an outdoor shopping centre) in November was later ruled to have no links to terrorism. Throughout 2019, Sweden experienced a colossal increase in the number of explosions which were linked to organised crime rather than terrorism.

France

- **May:** Mohamed Hichem (pictured) a 24-year-old Algerian IT student based in Lyon, was charged with attempted murder and criminal terrorist conspiracy after injuring thirteen people using a homemade explosive device. Hichem allegedly created an acetone peroxide (APEX) based explosive device – the same explosive substances used in the Paris attacks in November 2015. Hichem deposited the device outside a busy bakery in central Lyon before fleeing the scene and detonating the device. Hichem was later charged under the country's terrorism laws.
- **October:** French intelligence services thwarted a '9/11 style' attack. The suspect, whose identity has not been revealed, allegedly planned an aircraft hijacking and attack. The suspect was apprehended whilst searching for a weapon to perform the hijacking. According to the French authorities, this became the sixtieth terrorist attack foiled by security services since 2013.



Germany

- **June:** Stephan Ernst, a far-right extremist, fatally shot Walter Lubke, a member of the *Christian Democratic Union of Germany* (CDU) party over Lubke's pro-immigration stance. Ernst possessed a string of convictions as a result of his anti-immigration and general far-right views, including the attempted murder of an asylum-seeking family using an improvised explosive device in 1993. Additionally, Ernst was known to have connections with far-right groups such as *Combat 18* and the *National Democratic Party* (NDP).
- **October:** On Yom Kippur, Judaism's holiest day, 27-year-old far-right extremist Stephan Balliet attempted to storm the Halle Synagogue to carry out a planned massacre of worshippers. Armed with homemade bombs and a homemade firearm (see image) Balliet was unable to gain access to the synagogue due its recently upgraded security features. As a result, Balliet indiscriminately targeted nearby bystanders – fatally shooting Kevin S. and Jana L. Balliet recorded the entire ordeal, capturing footage of the moments his homemade machine gun jammed three times. Balliet was able to construct a firearm using Philip Luty's (a British firearms enthusiast) manual for manufacturing firearms using relatively basic metalworking skills and everyday DIY components.
- **December:** Since the vehicle borne attack in Berlin's Breitscheidplatz in 2016, German intelligence services have prevented nine attacks of a similar nature. Additionally, following the death of Abu-Bakr Al Baghdadi, the former leader of the IS Germany increased its security measures out of fear of reprisal especially against US and Israeli targets.



Greece

- **November:** Greek authorities arrested two members of the *Revolutionary Self Defense* (RSD) organisation for an attack on the French and Mexican embassies in Athens in 2016. The RSD were a far-left urban guerrilla organisation - one of several defunct Marxist/Leninist terrorist groups in Greece. Greece has a long history with far-left extremism stemming from the Greek civil war in 1946 with one of the key belligerents being largely communist.

Italy

- **September:** A 23-year-old Yemeni migrant, Mahamad Fathe, was prevented from attacking a patrolling Italian soldier in front of Milan's central train station. Fathe allegedly made Islamic references prior and during the attempted attack prompting Italian authorities to launch a terrorism investigation.

Netherlands

- **March:** Gokmen Tanis, a 37-year-old Turkish born Dutch national, opened fire on a busy tram in Utrecht in central Netherlands. Tanis murdered three individuals and wounded a further five. Schools, public offices and mosques were placed on lockdown in Utrecht during the short manhunt which finally saw Tanis captured later that day. Tanis has been charged with murder or manslaughter with terrorist intent as the trial continues.

Poland

- **November:** Polish intelligence services discovered a far-right extremist plot inspired by the one committed by Anders Breivik in 2011 in Norway. The two suspects arrested were accused of targeting and intimidating the Muslim population of Poland. Poland has been facing a far-right crisis with extremist ideologies merging with traditional Polish values, forcing authorities to crack down on far-right movements and activities. However, the populist movement remains a heavyweight in Polish politics and the threat of the far-right endures.

Spain

- **January:** Spanish authorities arrested a total of seventeen individuals under the country's terrorism laws. The group had allegedly been under surveillance for eighteen months prior to the arrest. The group are thought have planned a terrorist attack in Barcelona.
- **September:** Police arrested nine in Barcelona, accusing them of being in possession of materials commonly used for terrorist purposes. Specifically, the group were allegedly found in possession of explosive components. The nine belonged to a Catalan separatist movement that engaged in terrorist actions geared towards distancing the Catalan region from Spain and its government consequently becoming independent.

Sweden

- **January:** A terrorism trial began which involved six suspects with some accused of financing terrorism and the remainder of planning a terrorist attack. With regards to the financing of terrorism, the case involved transferring funds to a contact in Turkey with connections to IS members in Syria. As for the planned terror attack, Swedish authorities located chemicals and equipment associated with bomb-making in an abandoned property north of Stockholm.

Switzerland

- **January:** The Swiss media reported a possible IS plot to target a fuel depot in Basel. Plans had allegedly been discovered by Western intelligence services on a hard-drive recovered in Syria. The Swiss intelligence services were unable to comment any further on the contents of the hard-drive.

Conclusion

Terrorist plots and attacks proved to be sporadic and less frequent in 2019 compared to previous years, however, the threat posed by terrorism, be it from Islamist and/or far-right extremists, in Europe shows no sign of abetting. The surge in populist movements in countries like Germany, Poland, France, Italy, the UK and much of eastern Europe is straining the relationships between their respective Muslim and non-Muslim communities. This growing divide only serves to fuel Islamist and far-right extremist ideologies against each other, creating ideal conditions for radicalising vulnerable individuals. As discussed in the previous terrorism intelligence bulletin, the need to drive our understanding of what types of character traits, criminal history, social/family interactions and religious affiliations lead an individual to becoming radicalised is greater than ever. By implementing effective counter-radicalisation strategies, the risks of both group organised and/or lone wolf attacks could be significantly lowered. Lone wolf plots are notoriously difficult to prevent as their preparations often circumvent law enforcement and intelligence 'trip-wires' in place to detect such preparations. This is partially due to the limited and sometimes absent interaction between lone wolves and terror organisation. This then raises the risk of the 'copycat effect'. The copy cat effect is a theory borrowed from a concept explaining the high frequency of mass shooting cases in the US, where it has been argued that media coverage and attention play a key but indirect role in inspiring other individuals to commit similar actions. In terms of terrorism, having observed the destruction and chaos caused by a terrorist attack through media attention, a vulnerable individual on the cusp of being radicalised (or having already been radicalised) is able to weaponize motivation into action in order to gain the same levels of notoriety as his/her predecessor. Taking the example of Stephan Balliet, the Halle Synagogue attacker, who was able to download instructions from the internet on how to build homemade firearms and bombs displays the ease in obtaining such potentially destructive information. Balliet published a far-right manifesto and purchased military equipment prior to the attack – something Anders Breivik had also done before his attack in 2011, which resulted in seventy-seven fatalities. Balliet's trial is yet to confirm whether he is a member of a far-right organisation, possibly explaining the reasons why he was unknown to Police and intelligence services before carrying out the attack. Lone wolf terrorist attacks, from both Islamist and far-right extremists, are extremely likely to continue effecting target countries in Europe in 2020. It is important to remain vigilant whilst visiting European countries and to pay specific attention to travel recommendations offered by the likes of the Foreign Office who offer excellent advice concerning areas and locations at risk and how best to react in the event of a terrorist attack.

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