

Europe and Islamic "lone wolves" attacks

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Europe is challenged by a “double threat” made up of a new wave of “lone wolf” Islamist terror attacks and the Covid-19 pandemic. French President Emmanuel Macron hosted an online summit a week after Kujtim Fejzulai a convicted ISIS supporter killed four people in a shooting rampage in the heart of Vienna, following last month's attacks in France on a church in the city of Nice and the beheading of a teacher in a Paris suburb two weeks before that.¹

Analysts traditionally define a "lone wolf" as a terrorist who is not part of a group or directed by an outside organization. In reality, few lone wolves truly act alone and they are at least inspired by an outside organization. When it comes to affiliation with a group, terrorists exist on a spectrum. At one end lie established organizations and at the other end of the spectrum lies someone who had no ties to any organized group.²

The Attack in Vienna

On November 2, 2020, a gunman killed four people in the Austrian capital's busy nightlife district hours before enhanced coronavirus restrictions came into force. The attack in Vienna followed a spate of Islamic “lone wolf” terror attacks in France in recent months.

The attacker in Vienna was dressed in white and armed with a Kalashnikov automatic rifle, a hand-gun and a machete and was wearing an explosive belt that turned out to be fake.

The shooting began shortly after 8pm near Vienna's main synagogue as many people were enjoying a last night of open restaurants and bars before a month-long coronavirus lockdown, which started at midnight. An elderly man and woman, a young passer-by and a waitress were killed and 22 people including a policeman were wounded in the attack. The gunman was killed by police minutes after he opened fire on crowded bars.

The Islamic state claimed responsibility for the attack. The group shared a video of the attacker identified as Kujtim Fejzulai swearing loyalty to its leader, Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi al-Qurashi, in Arabic.³

Austrian police have arrested 15 people in raids linked to the deadly terror attack in Vienna but have found no evidence that a second shooter was involved.⁴ All 15 people arrested in Austria in connection with the deadly rampage are part of the radical extremism scene, Austrian Interior Ministry officials have said.⁵

The head of the agency responsible for anti-terror operations in the Austrian capital Vienna has been suspended pending an investigation into the deadly extremist attack in the city, police said on November 6, 2020.⁶

Austria has closed two mosques frequented by Kujtim Fejzulai a gunman who killed four people in Vienna. Only one of the mosques was officially registered as such. The two mosques are in Vienna's western suburbs, one called the Melit Ibrahim mosque in the Ottakring district and the other being the Tewhid mosque in the Meidling area.⁷

Interior Minister Karl Nehammer said in a televised address: "This is not a conflict between Christians and Muslims or between Austrians and migrants. No, this is a fight between the many people who believe in peace and the few (who oppose it). It is a fight between civilization and barbarism."⁸ The Austrian government announced three days of national mourning, and held a minute's silence.

The "lone wolf" attacker

The attacker was identified as Kujtim Fejzulai, a 20-year-old Austrian-born son of immigrants from North Macedonia.

He had been sentenced to 22 months in jail in April 2019 for attempting to travel to Syria to join Islamic State. Fejzulai had attended a de-

radicalization program and managed to convince authorities that he was no longer a threat and was released from jail less than a year ago.⁹

Germany – German police said they were conducting searches in several German towns in connection with four people believed to have ties to Kujtim Fejzulai. Germany's BKA criminal police said on Twitter that they were searching homes and businesses in the German towns of Osnabrueck, Kassel and in the district of Pinneberg near Hamburg. The search warrants were obtained after the Austrian judiciary transferred information to German prosecutors, the BKA said.¹⁰

Switzerland - police have arrested two Swiss citizens in Winterthur, northeast of Zurich, in connection with the shooting in Vienna. Reports indicated that in coordination with Austrian authorities, the Zurich cantonal police arrested an 18- year old and a 24-year old, both of whom are Swiss citizens. The extent to which the connection between the two people arrested and the alleged gunmen is currently the subject of ongoing investigations.

Britain - Britain's terrorism threat level has been raised to "severe" as a precaution following attacks in France and Austria. The change, which means an attack is now seen as highly likely, comes the day after the terror attack in Vienna.¹¹

Britain's threat level is assessed by the Joint Terrorism Analysis Centre which is accountable to the domestic intelligence agency MI5 and made up of representatives from 16 government departments and agencies.¹²

France has suffered three "lone wolf" attacks in recent months:

Nice - a knife-wielding attacker beheaded a woman and killed two other people at a church in the French city of Nice on October 28, 2020.¹³ The attacker had arrived in Nice the previous day by train.

The assailant was shot 14 times by armed police as he screamed 'God is greatest' in Arabic during the attack and 'while under medication' as he was taken to hospital.¹⁴

Following the attack, French President Emmanuel Macron visited Nice and called the incident a "terrorist attack", calling for firmness and unity in response and announcing that the number of police and army

personnel guarding schools and places of worship in France would be more than doubled from 3,000 to 7,000.¹⁵

The “lone wolf” attacker

The attacker is a 21-year-old Tunisian migrant, Brahim Aoussaoui who is thought to have arrived in France via Italy, after being smuggled across the Mediterranean.

Aoussaoui landed illegally on the Italian island of Lampedusa on September 20, 2020, before being transferred to coronavirus quarantine from where he was transferred to Bari in southern Italy on October 9, 2020. He was issued with instructions to leave Italy, but instead of returning to Tunisia he travelled to Nice on October 27, 2020, before carrying out the attacks.¹⁶

Saudi Arabia Jeddah - a Saudi man has been arrested on October 29, 2020, in the Saudi Arabian city of Jeddah after stabbing a guard at the French consulate. The man reportedly used a “sharp tool” to stab the guard. The security guard was taken to a hospital.¹⁷

The incidents took place less than two weeks after the beheading of middle school teacher Samuel Paty by a man of Chechen origin.

Paris - on October 16, 2020, history teacher Samuel Paty was decapitated in the Paris suburbs. He had previously shown cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad in a class on freedom of expression. Paty’s attacker, Abdoullakh Anzorov said he wanted to punish him for showing pupils cartoons of the Prophet Mohammad in a civics lesson.

Minutes after the killing, Anzorov then posted a photo of Paty’s decapitated head on his account. In the recording, which contained several references to the Quran as well as the ISIS armed group, Anzorov also said: “Brothers, pray that Allah accepts me as a martyr.” The message was published on social media in a video, accompanied by two tweets, one showing the victim’s severed head and another in which Anzorov confessed to the murder.¹⁸ Shortly after posting the image, French police confronted Anzorov, killing him after he shot at them with an air gun.¹⁹

Police have carried out dozens of raids since the crime, while the government has ordered the six-month closure of a mosque outside Paris

and dissolved the Sheikh Yassin Collective, a group they said supported Hamas.

The “lone wolf” attacker

Abdoullakh Anzorov was a young Chechen Russian born in Moscow in 2002. On March 4, 2020, he obtained a residence permit valid until March 2030. He had refugee status and lived in Evreux, in the Eure region. Abdoullakh Anzorov arrived in France at the age of 6 with all his family and they obtained the status of refugees.²⁰

Anti-terrorism investigators established that Anzorov, had been in contact with a Jihadist fighter in Syria. Le Parisien newspaper reported that Anzorov’s suspected contact had been located through an IP address traced back to Idlib, a rebel holdout in northwestern Syria.²¹

Paty’s beheading was the second knife attack in the name of avenging the Prophet Muhammad since a trial of alleged accomplices in the Charlie Hebdo attack started in September 2020.²²

Paris - two people were stabbed and wounded in Paris on September 25, 2020, near the former offices of the Charlie Hebdo satirical magazine, where Islamist militants carried out a deadly attack in 2015. A man originally from Pakistan was arrested over the attack.

Summary

In the last years, “lone wolf” terror attacks are on the rise and many Islamic terror organizations embraced the “lone wolf” tactic including Al Qaeda, ISIS and Hamas.

"Lone wolf " attacks are " cost effective" for the terror organizations: "Lone wolves "are cheap, they are usually untrained, and they finance themselves, so a group can take the credit for free. The wider a group spreads its ideology, the larger the supply of cheap attacks. "Lone wolves" frighten people because they can strike anytime and anywhere.²³

Terrorists who act without direct external guidance pose a different threat, and call for a different response, than do those who are directed by a terror group.

Europe and the rest of the world are joining forces to fight the corona virus but didn't do enough to fight the terror pandemic. Although "lone-

wolf" attacks are hard to prevent, governments in Europe can do several things to make them less likely, less lethal and to prepare for those that do occur.

French President Emmanuel Macron made an important step by hosting a video conference with fellow EU leaders to seek an EU-wide response to Islamic extremist attacks.

President Macron urged a "rapid and coordinated" European response to terror attacks. Such a response should focus on "the development of common databases, the exchange of information or the strengthening of criminal policies."

In other measures to combat terrorism, Macron announced a doubling of the number of French border guards, and called for a "deep" revision in the rules for the Schengen area that guarantees the free movement of people across borders. German Chancellor Merkel also said it was urgently necessary for Europe to reform the open-border Schengen area in light of recent terrorist attacks.²⁴

Notes:

¹ Macron says terrorism threat needs quick European answer, Merkel urges Schengen border reform, Arab news, November 10, 2020.

² Daniel L. Byman, How to hunt a lone wolf: Countering terrorists who act on their own, Brookings, February 14, 2017.

³ Austria police detain 14, give new details on Vienna killer, Arab news, November 3, 2020.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ German police search homes of suspects in Vienna gun attack with ISIS links, Al Arabiya, November 6, 2020.

⁶ Vienna's anti-terror chief suspended after deadly attack: Police, Al Arabiya, November 6, 2020.

⁷ Austria closes 'radical' mosque, association over links to Vienna attacker, Al Arabiya, November 6, 2020.

⁸ Austrian police arrest 14 in dragnet after gunman kills four on rampage, Ahram online, November 3, 2020.

⁹ 'No evidence of second attacker' in Vienna shooting, Al Jazeera, November 3, 2020.

¹⁰ German police search homes of suspects in Vienna gun attack with ISIS links, Al Arabiya, November 6, 2020.

¹¹ UK raises terror threat level to 'severe' following France, Austria attacks, the new Arab, November 3, 2020.

¹² Terrorism Threat Level in Britain Raised to 'Severe', Asharq Al Awsat, November 3, 2020.

¹³ Beheading in Nice church the latest in France's recent history of attacks, Al Arabiya, October 29, 2020.

¹⁴ Pictured: Terror victim beheaded by Tunisian migrant who killed two other worshippers in church rampage + Macron says 'France is under attack' + Two more attacks stopped + candlelit vigils held, Mail online, October 29, 2020.

¹⁵ France hit again by Islamist extremism, Ahram online, November 5, 2020.

¹⁶ Pictured: Terror victim beheaded by Tunisian migrant who killed two other worshippers in church rampage + Macron says 'France is under attack' + Two more attacks stopped + candlelit vigils held, Mail online, October 29, 2020.

¹⁷ Man arrested in Saudi Arabia's Jeddah after stabbing guard at French consulate: SPA, Al Arabiya, October 29, 2020.

¹⁸ France: Teacher's killer in 'contact' with fighter in Syria, Al Jazeera, October 22, 2020.

¹⁹ Paris attack: Chechen who beheaded teacher Samuel Paty tweeted against Saudi Arabia, Al Arabiya, October 19, 2020.

²⁰ What we know about Abdullakh Anzorov, the author of the attack, EN 24, October 18, 2020.

²¹ France: Teacher's killer in 'contact' with fighter in Syria, Al Jazeera, October 22, 2020.

²² France: Teacher's killer in 'contact' with fighter in Syria, Al Jazeera, October 22, 2020.

²³ Daniel L. Byman, How to hunt a lone wolf: Countering terrorists who act on their own, Brookings, February 14, 2017.

²⁴ Macron says terrorism threat needs quick European answer, Merkel urges Schengen border reform, Arab news, November 10, 2020.