

The Threat of Jihadist Terrorism in Germany

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Theme: German internal security is threatened by three distinct terrorist phenomena: organised Jihadists, independent Jihadists and the new Internationalists.

Summary: Although Germany has not yet become the victim of a major terrorist attack, the country has been on high alert several times since 2006. This ARI examines the three different terrorist phenomena threatening internal security in Germany and evaluates the factors impeding a more effective counter-terrorism campaign in the country. The German security services are ill prepared to tackle the threat posed by the Jihadists, especially those which are not closely affiliated to larger terrorist organisations abroad. A deeply divided public and political sphere –including the ruling grand coalition– have not agreed on a common diagnosis of the threat and possible counter-measures so that Germany remains extremely vulnerable to terrorist attacks.

Analysis: Germany has not yet become the victim of a major terrorist attack. This is not due to effective counter-measures but rather to the fact that until 2006 Germany had not been a target as important as, for instance, the UK, Spain and Italy and that the number of radicalised Muslims in Germany was lower than in Western European countries. Rather, Germany has preserved its role as a logistics base and a refuge for Jihadist terrorists. Nevertheless, there are numerous terrorist structures in Germany, which might be categorised as follows:

- The organised Jihadists: these are Jihadists who are affiliated to foreign organisations like al-Qaeda, al-Qaeda in Iraq or Ansar al-Islam and act on their behalf. These groups are in their majority nationally homogenous and consist of, for example, Palestinians or Iraqi Kurds. These mainly use Germany as a refuge and a support basis, but have in some instances hatched terrorist plots as well.
- The independent Jihadists: these are groups who act more independently than the organised Jihadists. In most cases, however, they either try to establish contacts with organisations abroad or there are hints that they might have relations with larger structures. The ‘suitcase bombers’ of 2006 were such a case.

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- The new Internationalists: these are members of German Jihadist groups who are mainly of Turkish and Kurdish origin, but have built a truly transnational network in conjunction with al-Qaeda and Uzbek groups in Pakistan and Turkey.

While the organised Jihadists have been most active in Germany in the first years after 2001, many of them were prosecuted and/or remain under surveillance. The independent Jihadists have been a new phenomenon which only emerged from 2005. The biggest threat, however, has emerged with the Turkish-Kurdish internationalists. These form a loosely connected group of several dozen activists, most of whom went to Pakistan to receive training in a camp of the Uzbek Islamic Jihad Union and planned to attack American targets in Germany in the autumn of 2007. The German security services have still not found the means to effectively control their activities.

The Organised Jihadists

For some five years after the 11 September attacks, Germany mainly remained a logistical base and a refuge for Jihadist terrorists. Due to various legal loopholes, Germany was an almost perfect haven for organisations like al-Qaeda to establish logistics and financing networks. Although it was a coincidence that the pilots of the 9/11 plot were studying at German universities when they first went to join al-Qaeda in Afghanistan, Germany proved well suited as a base of operations from which to organise the attacks on the US.

In the following years, other groups and cells affiliated to larger terrorist organisations were arrested and brought to trial. Although most focused on logistics, some were on the verge of plotting attacks, suggesting the potential threat emanating from these groups. Mirroring the internal structure of al-Qaeda and the Jihadist movement in general, these were often nationally or regionally homogenous, ie, the Iraqi Kurds, the Palestinians and the North Africans each had their own groups. The 'core al-Qaeda' –the organisation built by Osama bin Laden and Aiman al-Zawahiri around their Saudi-Arabian, Yemeni, and Egyptian supporters– has never had a presence in Germany.

When in late 2001 the German government decided to fight foreign terrorist organisations on German soil more aggressively, most of their structures were damaged. The most dangerous of these was called the 'Abu Ali' or 'Tawhid group'. It was named after its head, the Palestinian Muhammad Abu Dhess, or Abu Ali, and operated in the Ruhr region in the Western part of the country. The group of close to a dozen mainly Palestinian and Jordanian members was part of the larger Tawhid ('Monotheism') organisation, which was founded and led by the Jordanian Abu Musab al-Zarqawi (1966-2006) and was later renamed al-Qaeda in Mesopotamia. In Germany, the group mainly forged travel documents, collected money and facilitated travel movements for the wider organisation. However, its members were arrested in April 2002, shortly after Zarqawi had personally ordered an attack, which most likely would have targeted a discotheque in Düsseldorf and an unknown Jewish institution in Berlin.

A second example of Jihadists closely affiliated to an organisation are the Iraqi Kurds of Ansar al-Islam ('Helpers of Islam'). This group was founded in the late 1990s in the Kurdish autonomous zone in northern Iraq and changed its name several times. It initially fought the Kurdish parties ruling in the region, but broadened its strategy from 2003. After the US-British invasion, the organisation increasingly recruited Arab Iraqis and spread its activities to central Iraq, where it fought the invaders and the new Iraqi state. While it

became one of the most important elements of the Iraqi insurgency, it relied heavily on support from the Iraqi-Kurdish diaspora and Arab sympathisers in Europe. It maintained a large network in Scandinavia, Germany and northern Italy, which provided the organisation with recruits, finances and equipment. Some of the group's media activity – especially the production of its Internet magazine – seems to have been supported from Europe as well.

In Germany, the security services began clamping down on the support structures of Ansar al-Islam from late 2003, when a leading member of the organisation, Luqman Amin Muhammad, was arrested in Munich. In the following years, the German police dismantled the group's leadership, which was based in southern Germany, and jailed several supporters in an effort to impede their activities. In November 2004, however, three members of Ansar al-Islam were arrested because they had allegedly planned to perpetrate an attack on the Iraqi Interim Prime Minister Iyad Allawi during his visit to Berlin. While the evidence presented in the case was not totally convincing, the events again hinted at the possibility of logistic cells deciding to take action if circumstances convinced or forced them to do so.

Although the Ansar al-Islam have lost some of their importance in Iraq, they still command considerable support among the Iraqi-Kurdish diaspora in Germany. This is especially worrying because Turkish Kurds have joined Jihadist groups in greater numbers in recent years. The same holds true for Palestinians. There is a sizeable community of Palestinians in Germany and they might well be influenced by the radicalisation of the Palestinian diaspora that countries like Jordan, Egypt, Syria and Lebanon have experienced in recent years. The organised Jihadis are a threat to be reckoned with.

The Independent Jihadists

From 2005-06, a growing trend towards independent terrorist action became evident in Germany. Its protagonists are often young Muslims who have been born or have grown up in Germany and lack the sophisticated support networks of the larger organisations. Nevertheless, most of these cells or groups are not leaderless. Although concrete evidence is scant, there are hints as to contacts with larger organisations in the Middle East and South Asia. Most importantly, those who want to strike against their enemies effectively still have to gain access to the terrorist training and logistics of larger organisations.

Perhaps the most striking example of a truly independent 'leaderless' Jihadist is the Pakistani student Amer Cheema. In March 2006 he tried to stab the editor of the conservative daily *Die Welt*, Roger Köppel, in Berlin. He claimed that he was motivated by the fact that *Die Welt* had reprinted some of the Danish cartoons of the prophet Muhammad which not only the Jihadists saw as provocative and which triggered a severe crisis in Muslim-Western relations in early 2006.

With the plot of the two 'suitcase bombers' motivated by the same events, the cartoon crisis might have resulted in Germany's first major attack in July 2006. The Lebanese university students, who had only arrived in Germany a year-and-a-half before the attacks, planted home-made bombs in two regional trains in North Rhine-Westphalia. Due to a technical mistake, however, the bombs failed to detonate. One of the plotters, Yusuf al-Hajj Dib, was arrested in Germany, while his accomplice, Jihad Hamad, fled to his native Lebanon and was jailed there. And while the plot was generally depicted as being hatched by two independent individuals, it later became clear that at least Yusuf Dib had

contacts with the Jihadist scene in Lebanon with ties to Syria and Iraq. His brother Saddam was a prominent member of the Lebanese organisation Fath al-Islam. He died in a clash with the Lebanese army in Tripoli in May 2007.

Independent Jihadists are deeply aware of the need for organisational support in order to build effectively functioning groups. This became clear in the case of the Moroccan student Radwan al-Habhab, who was arrested in Hamburg in July 2006. As the owner of an Internet café in the northern city of Kiel, he started his career as a Jihadi web activist before he began organising the trips of young Moroccan volunteers to Iraq via Syria. However, in order to work effectively, he realised that he needed to win the trust of his contacts in Syria and meet them personally. Therefore, al-Habhab travelled to Syria and later to Algeria, allegedly in order to receive terrorist training in a camp of the local Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC). Together with some friends he had decided that in order to build a terrorist cell he needed specialised training. And this –the same as trust– was not available on the Internet. Habhab's development, perhaps more than any other, shows the continuing importance of the organisational element in terrorist activity in Europe.

Nevertheless, there is a clearly discernible trend towards more independent forms of activity which have rendered Jihadist terrorism in Germany as in other countries more unpredictable than in the past.

The New Internationalists

There is a third and distinctly German phenomenon which combines characteristics of the cases mentioned above. Its protagonists might be called the new internationalists, since they have transcended some of the hitherto important dividing lines between national and ethnic affiliations which are still typical of the organised and mainly independent Jihadists. In essence, Germany has witnessed the emergence of a large group of Turkish, Turkish Kurd and some German converts and Arabs, many of whom have gone to the Pakistani tribal areas in order to receive terrorist training in camps there. In Waziristan they made contact with al-Qaeda, the Taliban and an Uzbek organisation called the Islamic Jihad Union (IJU) and have thereby built a truly transnational and multinational network.

Three members of this group, two converts and a Turk, were arrested in a small town in the Sauerland region in the western state of North-Rhine Westphalia in early September 2007. They had assembled bomb-making materials and planned to attack American and possibly Uzbek targets in Germany. The orders seem to have been given from the IJU headquarters in North Waziristan. The IJU is a small organisation which seems to have splintered from the larger Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) because the latter refused to follow an internationalist line, ie, a strategy of global jihad alongside the Taliban and al-Qaeda in Afghanistan. The IMU has remained focused on its native country, Uzbekistan, and has hardly ever joined in the fight against Western troops in Afghanistan. In contrast to the IMU, the IJU, by plotting attacks in Germany aimed at exploiting the growing criticism of the campaign in Afghanistan by German public opinion and influencing the German debate about the parliamentary extension of the Afghanistan mandates which was due in October and November 2007. Germany was considered the weakest link in the chain of major troop providers and the planners aimed at forcing a withdrawal of the German contingent.

After the plot was thwarted, it became clear that the arrested were part of a larger group of at least 20 to 30 people, most of which were of either Turkish or Turkish-Kurdish origin.

It appears that they had become radicalised in Germany and formed a group of like-minded young men around a Muslim cultural centre in Ulm in southern Germany. They then established contact with support networks of the Taliban and al-Qaeda in Pakistan. Once in Pakistan, they had been sent to Uzbek camps because they did not speak Arabic or Pashto, which made training with al-Qaeda and/or the Taliban difficult. Uzbek, however, is a Turkic language and communication between Uzbek and Turkish-speakers is relatively easy. Therefore, the camps established by Uzbek fighters were an ideal training location for the volunteers from Germany. In fact, the IJU's propaganda material continues to appear on a website located in Turkey in Turkish (www.sehadetzamani.com).

From 2006 or earlier, the IJU and the new recruits built a network from Pakistan via Turkey to Germany, which seems to function until today. While the German media focused on converts within the group, its Turkish-Kurdish character is a lot more problematic. Germany is home to more than 2 million Turks, among them 500,000 Turkish Kurds. Until 2006, Turks had not embraced Jihadist terrorism in large numbers and Germany had been safer than other countries partly because of the dominance of the Turkish element among the German migrant population. If the events of September 2007 and the dismantling of their network does indeed indicate a trend, then the terrorist threat to Germany might be growing. There is some evidence that this is the case. Specialists in the German security services see a growing trend towards the radicalisation of young Turks. Jihadist websites in Turkish seem to enjoy a growing popularity in Turkey just as in Germany.

Germany's Reaction

Germany has not yet found its way in order to counter the threat of Jihadist terrorism. Right after the attacks of 11 September 2001, the government gave up its former policy towards foreign terrorists, which had bordered on appeasement. Until August 2002, only membership in a German –not in a foreign terrorist organisation– was punishable according to German law. The German government reformed parts of its security architecture, trying to centralise at least the information flow in the 38 federal and state institutions responsible for counter-terrorism. The security services, especially the federal police (*Bundeskriminalamt*, BKA) received ample funding and new personnel in order to counter the new threat.

By a combination of determination and luck, the police and the intelligence services were able to thwart the activities of those groups which were affiliated to larger organisations. Traditional measures, like the interception of communications, proved to be an important instrument in following the tracks of the Tawhid group and the logistics cells of Ansar al-Islam. However, with the emergence of more independent groups and individuals these measures soon became insufficient. The suitcase bombers' plot failed, so that it was due to pure luck that the first big attack in Germany did not take place. The information about the plot of the Sauerland cell was passed on to Germany by the US government, which had intercepted Internet communications between the Pakistani tribal areas and Germany. Countering these terrorist phenomena will require different approaches by the German security services. German police and intelligence will need to monitor radicalisation and recruitment among young German Muslims and among students in German universities much more closely. This will require a return to classical forms of human intelligence, which are not popular in Germany –neither East nor West–. For the time being, the German government still focuses on technical solutions.

The German public is split on the subject and the debate about how to counter Jihadist terrorism is highly ideologised. On the one hand, there are many Germans who do not believe in the threat. This is partly due to a deep-rooted parochialism, which has led many Germans to ignore the larger picture of a nomadic Jihadist activity moving from one country to another –whether in the Middle East, North Africa, South and South-East Asia or Europe– after 2001. Those who doubt that there is a danger often suspect the German government of exaggerating the concrete threat to Germany in order to push through repressive legislation. In many instances, these views are combined with a very critical view of US policies, the German alliance with the US and German engagement in Afghanistan.

On the other hand, there are many Germans –primarily within the conservative spectrum– who would rather state that it is only a matter of time until a terrorist attack hits Germany. For this camp, Jihadist terrorism poses the biggest single threat to German national security and harsh counter-measures are needed in order to counter it.

As both camps are influential among the German public, and because they are both represented in the ruling grand coalition, they have hampered a more sober debate about the shortcomings of Germany's security architecture and counter-terrorism. For instance, the government has been unable to decide whether to outlaw training in a terrorist camp, which leaves many returnees from the Pakistani tribal areas immune from criminal prosecution.

Germans will have to understand that Jihadist terrorism is a grave threat, but that it is not existential. An attack is not necessarily imminent, but it might take place at any time. Jihadist terrorism will one day disappear, but until then Germany will have to make a more decisive effort to protect Germans and German troops abroad from terrorist attacks.

Conclusions: Seven years after the 11 September attacks, which were partly organised from German soil, Germany remains ill-prepared to counter the threat of Jihadist terrorism. This is especially dangerous because al-Qaeda and its allies have identified Germany as an increasingly attractive target after 2005. Since then, al-Qaeda has renewed its former alliance with the Taliban and has focused its activities on the fight against the multinational coalition in Afghanistan. Here, Germany provides the largest troop contingent after the US and the UK. However, public support for the presence of German troops is waning. Therefore, high profile attacks on German targets in Afghanistan and Germany might intensify the internal debate in Germany and perhaps force a withdrawal of its troops from Afghanistan –comparable to the Spanish withdrawal from Iraq after the Madrid bombings in 2004–. There are indications that Germany is considered the weakest link in the chain of the more important troop providers. In order to tackle the threat, Germany will need to rethink its counter-terrorism concepts and reorganise its security structure. Writing in late 2008, it appears that this will only happen after a large-scale attack has been perpetrated on German soil.

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