

Changes in modus operandi of Islamic State terrorist attacks

Review held by experts from Member States and Europol on 29 November and 1 December 2015

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

KEY JUDGMENTS	3
KEY FINDINGS	3
1. INTRODUCTION	4
1.1 BACKGROUND.....	4
1.2 AIMS AND PURPOSES	5
2.1 TERRORISTS INVOLVED.....	5
2.2 TERRORIST ATTACKS / TARGET SELECTION.....	7
2.3 FINANCING.....	7
2.4 SCENARIOS	8
3 CONCLUSIONS	8

Key Judgments

- There is every reason to expect that IS, IS inspired terrorists or another religiously inspired terrorist group will undertake a terrorist attack somewhere in Europe again, but particularly in France, intended to cause mass casualties amongst the civilian population. This is in addition to the threat of lone actor attacks, which has not diminished;
- Europol's involvement in the exchange of information following the November Paris attacks and earlier, has once again revealed that the exchange of information on CT matters between parties (Member States and between Member States and Europol) needs improving;
- There is no concrete evidence that terrorist travellers systematically use the flow of refugees to enter Europe unnoticed. A real and imminent danger, however, is the possibility of elements of the (Sunni Muslim) Syrian refugee diaspora becoming vulnerable to radicalisation once in Europe and being specifically targeted by Islamic extremist recruiters.

Key findings

- The Paris attacks, and subsequent investigation, appear to indicate a shift towards a broader strategy of IS going global, of them specifically attacking France, but also the possibility of attacks against other Member States of the EU in the near future.
- Intelligence suggests that IS has developed an external action command trained for special forces style attacks in the international environment;
- IS terrorist cells currently operating in the EU are largely domestic and/or locally based;
- For foreign fighters the religious component in recruitment and radicalisation is being replaced by more social elements such as peer pressure and role modelling. Additionally the romantic prospect of being part of an important and exciting development, apart from more private considerations, may play a role. Suicide bombers see themselves more as heroes than as religious martyrs;
- A significant portion of foreign fighters have been diagnosed with mental problems prior to joining IS. Also, a large proportion of recruits have criminal records varying from petty crimes to more serious offences;
- An increasing phenomenon is that of Islamist "brotherhood gatherings", analogous to other faction camps such as 'Bible camps'. This is a relatively new concept for Muslims;
- The nature and structure of IS training apparently enables its operatives to execute terrorist acts in an emotionally detached manner, as demonstrated in the shootings in Paris;
- In selecting what to attack, where, when and how, IS shows its capacity to strike at will, at any time and at almost any chosen target;
- IS is not the only religiously inspired terrorist organisation threatening Western countries. Al-Qaeda is still a factor to be considered and a reason for the EU to focus on a broader range of religiously inspired groups.

1. Introduction

1.1 Background

On 13 November 2015 a series of complex and well-coordinated attacks took place on carefully chosen targets in Paris that included a football stadium, a theatre, two cafes and two restaurants. The attacks were designed to kill and injure as many civilians as possible.

From the perspective of the development of the terrorist threat directed at EU Member States and France in particular, the 13 November attacks were significant in two aspects:

- a) The attacks resembled those in Mumbai of 2008 in terms of modus operandi, targets chosen, numbers of attackers and impact¹ ;
- b) There were three groups of attackers, among them those born and raised in France and returned foreign fighters.

The "Mumbai" style (albeit executed by local people) of attacking targets in a European country is a first for IS. In combination with the 31st October 2015 bombing of a Russian airliner in Egypt, also claimed by IS, and other attacks in Suruç and Ankara (Turkey), Beirut and Baghdad, and short of an obvious objective of immediate retaliation, the Paris attacks appear to be part of a broader strategy of IS going global, and specifically attacking France, but possibly more Member States of the EU in the near future.

This idea is reinforced by the fact that there have been strong indications of another series of attacks by IS that were planned to take place somewhere in the EU but most likely in France or in Belgium, that were however foiled through police activities following the Paris attacks.

The possible shift in strategy of IS led Europol to organise a meeting with members of the First Response Network (FRN)² of Member States that are currently believed to run an elevated risk of being targeted by IS, to discuss changes in this modus operandi. This meeting took place at Europol on 30 November and 1 December 2015.

Although the meeting was triggered by the recent IS attacks, discussions covered the threat of all religiously inspired terrorism. Al-Qaeda continues to threaten western countries, and may even be triggered to put words into action by competing with IS, an organisation that is now attacking targets that were previously considered to be out of their reach³.

¹ The modus operandi were similar where it comes to the use of AK 47 automatic weapons throughout both attacks. The chosen targets in Paris and Mumbai both included restaurants and cafes and centres of entertainment, guaranteeing high impact in numbers of fatalities and in the level of attention generated. In Mumbai there were ten attackers, in Paris at least the same number. The Mumbai attacks resulted in 164 deaths. The Paris attacks resulted in 130 deaths and 352 wounded. The death rate could even have been much higher if one of the three suicide bombers outside "Stade de France", the national football stadium where France was playing an exhibition game against Germany, would not have been stopped entering by a security guard on duty, and would have been able to detonate his vest inside the stadium, and the other two in the panicking crowd attempting to flee the stadium directly after.

² The First Response Network (FRN) is a network of more than 56 counter terrorism officers from all European Union Member States, combined with counter terrorism officers from the European Counter Terrorism Centre (ECTC) at Europol. This network is available for activation in the event of a major terrorist incident (attack or threat) in the EU or against EU interests. In the meeting also CT experts who are not part of the FRN, but are involved in investigating IS related activities contributed their expertise.

³ Al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri said in a video message released on 1 December 2015: "(...) therefore we must move the battle to the enemy's own home, especially Europe and America, because they are the leaders of the contemporary crusader campaign. They must be killed, just like they kill, and be wounded, just like they wound, and be bombarded, just like they bombard, and be made to weep, be orphans and widows, just like they make others sob and be orphans and widows". (SITE Intelligence Group)

1.2 Aims and purposes

Assessing changes in modus operandi of IS and other religiously inspired terrorist groups provides a better understanding of the threat these groups pose to Member States of the EU. It supports the development of likely future scenarios, based on which Member States can be better prepared for future attacks. It also stimulates the early exchange of information and intelligence between CT units.

2. Outcomes of the FRN Meeting

The FRN meeting was aimed at generating ideas about possible developments in the threat posed by IS to the EU, in terms of relevant changes in modus operandi and strategy, following the November 2015 Paris attacks. The discussions centred around the following general questions:

- Do the November 2015 Paris attacks indicate a departure from the strategy of employing or stimulating lone actor attacks in the EU, and is that a trend expected to further develop? Would that put an end to IS induced lone actor attacks?
- Is causing indiscriminate mass- killings a goal to be further expected from future IS attacks?
- Is acting in a series of coordinated attacks a modus operandi to be further expected from future IS attacks, and;
- Are the November 2015 Paris attacks an indication of a wish of IS to (further) expand its activities into Western countries?

In two small groups the discussions centred on specific elements related to any notable change in regard to terrorists, terrorist attacks, targets and resources.

2.1 Terrorists involved

1. Intelligence suggests that IS has developed an external actions command trained for 'special forces style' operations abroad, to include the EU and France in particular. This could mean, that more attacks such as those that took place in Paris in November are currently being planned and prepared.

2. Terrorist cells ready to perpetrate a terrorist attack are largely domestic and/or locally based. Members could have been trained in Syria, as was the case in the November Paris attacks, but that is not imperative.

3. Before the November Paris attacks the main threat of IS inspired terrorism to EU societies came from locally radicalised individuals, despite the fact that a number of foreign fighters had returned from the conflict areas in Syria and Iraq. Considering the involvement of returnees in the Paris attacks, this assessment needs to be revisited.

4. There is no concrete evidence that terrorist travellers systematically use the flow of refugees to enter Europe unnoticed. It is possible that elements of the (Sunni Muslim) Syrian refugee diaspora in Europe may be vulnerable to radicalisation. Indeed there are reports that refugee centres are being specifically targeted by Islamic extremist recruiters.

5. IS training of recruits consists of imported warfare techniques in the use of weapons, explosives and specific killing techniques, which include beheading. Operatives are also trained in clandestine actions and counter-surveillance. The nature and structure of the training apparently enables IS operatives to execute terrorist acts in an emotionally detached manner, as demonstrated in the shootings in Paris. Acceptance of death is also seen as a facilitator for recruitment and for the execution of IS terrorist attacks. To date there is no conclusive evidence of drugs use playing a significant role in reaching such a mental state.

6. Apart from training facilities in Syria, there exist also smaller scale training camps in the EU and in Balkan countries. Survival training enables IS recruiters to test fitness and determination of aspiring IS members. Sports activities have been used for combat and interrogation resistance training. An increasing phenomenon is that of Islamist "brotherhood gatherings", analogous to other faction camps that have existed for decades with other religious movements. This is a relatively new concept for Muslims, which first surfaced only a couple of years ago.

7. Information on foreigners joining the ranks of IS suggests that recruitment can take place very quickly, without necessarily requiring a long radicalisation process. Age plays a role: younger people are found to be more impressionable and radicalise quicker than older candidates. Important elements in recruitment and the development of group structures are social bonds (common background, ethnic and geographical commonalities and language) and not exclusively religious or ideological beliefs or motives. Less than half of all persons arrested for joining IS or expressing/displaying and intention to do so have relevant knowledge about their religion and are thus vulnerable to interpretations of the Koran that fit IS logic.

8. In view of this shift away from the religious component in the radicalisation of, especially, young recruits, it may be more accurate to speak of a 'violent extremist social trend' rather than using the term 'radicalisation'.

9. A significant proportion of foreign fighters (20 per cent according to one source, even more according to another) have been diagnosed with mental problems prior to joining IS. A large proportion of recruits (estimates are as high as 80 per cent) have criminal records varying from petty crimes to more serious offences. Rates and types of offences seem to differ between countries. It may be that recruiters specifically target criminals with an inclination for violence, or that some criminals find that, in joining IS, it provides the opportunity to give free rein to their violent impulses. One Member State reported that most of the returnees they had detected had resumed their criminal activities on returning home.

10. Potential suicide bombers are indistinguishable among potential foreign fighters. They do not share common characteristics other than a certain vulnerability, picked-up by recruiters, to be used as such. Suicide bombers used to make wills and write testimonies, which have now become rare. This could be from realising that such actions could be used as indicators and even evidence in investigations. The mind-sets of suicide bombers, either before or after being selected as such, used to be geared towards dying as martyrs. Currently they are believed to primarily be willing to die as heroes.

11. The internet and social media are used for communication and the acquisition of goods (weapons, fake IDs) and services, made relatively safe for terrorists with the availability of secure and inherently encrypted appliances, such as WhatsApp, Skype and Viber. In Facebook, VKA and Twitter they join closed and hidden groups that can be accessed by invitation only, and use coded language. Use is also made of anonymising tools, such as ToR ("The Onion Router") networks and VPN's (Virtual Private Networks). The use of encryption and anonymising tools prevent conventional observation by security authorities. There is evidence of a level of technical knowledge available to religiously inspired terrorist

groups, allowing them to make their use of the internet and social media invisible to intelligence and law enforcement agencies.

2.2 Terrorist attacks / Target selection

12. IS incited attacks do not necessarily have to be coordinated from Syria. Central command in Syria is believed to map out a general strategy, but leaves tactical freedom to local leaders to adapt their actions to circumstances on the spot. This then leads to the choice of targets based on group capability, size and resources, and leaves room for spontaneous choices versus executions as planned beforehand.

13. In selecting their targets IS has shown its capability to strike at will, at any time, and at almost any chosen target. In its target selection it shows a preference for soft targets with a potential to cause mass casualties.

14. This preference for soft targets means that attacking critical infrastructure such as power grids, nuclear facilities and transportation hubs is currently not a priority. The same applies to cyber attacks, because of the low impact on the general public such attacks would generate. This is regardless of the level of damage that could be caused and the impact a successfully executed cyber-attack might have on the security of a state, the economy and society as a whole.

15. The escalation of violence and the employment of massive attacks could represent a new phase in IS strategy in the EU. The intended randomness in target selection urges Member States to 'expect the unexpected'. Unexpected events however are not by definition events that have never happened before. They could very well include repeats of earlier attacks. The November Paris attacks demonstrate the intentions and capabilities of IS to strike outside the areas under their control, and employ a modus operandi already observed in Iraq, Pakistan and other countries. In that sense these attacks have set a new standard. This does not mean however, that the tactic of stimulating local individuals to carry out lone-actor attacks has been abandoned. This type of attack still poses a real and acute threat.

16. IS is innovative in its selection of targets in the EU, but conservative in its choice of weapons. The long-time truism "real terrorists use bombs – crazies use weapons" proves no longer to be valid. The weapon of choice is the AK 47, which has iconic value as demonstrated on various logos of the organisation and its affiliates. The AK 47 is easy to buy and can usually be acquired in the country where an attack is planned, or in a neighbouring country from where they can be easily transported. In the future more use could be made of cyber-attacks targeting critical infrastructures and state security, hitting western countries where they are vulnerable. There is no evidence of IS or other religiously inspired terrorist groups aspiring to use CBRN weaponry in the EU.

17. New in the EU is the use of explosive belts, such as those used in the November Paris attacks.

2.3 Financing

18. The financing of terrorist operations has not undergone any marked changes in the recent past. The sources of funding of the operatives in the EU are largely unknown. It is obvious that the costs of travel, the renting of cars and safe houses and the acquisition of means of communication and of weapons and explosives may involve considerable sums of money. There is no evidence however of IS-financing networks in existence. Despite third party reporting suggesting the use of anonymous currencies like Bitcoin by terrorists to finance their activities, this has not been confirmed by law enforcement.

19. The travel of foreign fighters to the conflict zones is likely to be funded by the travellers themselves with both legal means and criminal activities, such as frauds. This also has not changed recently.

2.4 Scenarios

To explore the risks of EU Member States being confronted with violent jihadist terrorist attacks in the near future, consideration was given to possible future terrorist attacks, along two sets of extremes: sophisticated vs. unsophisticated attacks, and hard targets vs. soft targets. Sophisticated attacks are violent terrorist attacks that are carefully planned, directed against specific targets and professionally executed by focused, well trained and fully prepared operatives. In other words: attacks that are not committed by impulse without any relevant prior preparation. Soft targets are targets that have no defence against violent attacks. The entire civilian population is a soft target. The military or the police, or heavily protected people and places are hard targets. A combination of the two sorts of attacks and the two sorts of targets produces four scenarios.

For all four scenarios a small sample of possible attacks were identified.

3 Conclusions

The discussions led to the conclusion that IS is preparing more terrorist attacks, including more 'Mumbai style' attacks, to be executed in Member States of the EU, and in France in particular. The attacks will be primarily directed at soft targets, because of the impact it generates. Both the November Paris attacks and the October 2015 bombing of a Russian airliner suggest a shift in IS strategy towards going global. In selecting their targets, local IS commanders are believed to enjoy tactical freedom to adapt their plans to specific local circumstances, adding to the difficulty for law enforcement to detect such plans and identifying the people involved at an early stage.

The observed changes in modus operandi do not mean that other tactics are abandoned. Lone actor attacks by IS inspired or directed individuals still pose a serious threat.

Without reliable intelligence on the intentions, activities, contacts and travels of known terrorists it is nearly impossible to exactly predict when and where the next terrorist attack will take place, and what form it will take. The role of judgment precedes in assessments over the role of facts and hard information, both of which are in short supply.

The wide range of possible targets in combination with an opportunistic approach of locally based groups creates a huge variety of possible scenarios for future terrorist events. Attacks organised or inspired by IS or other religiously inspired groups such as Al-Qaeda can both be sophisticated and well prepared, or spontaneous without any preparation. A regular exchange of strategic intelligence is essential to any up to date assessment of the situation to be shared amongst Member States.