



Security of Explosives pan-European Specialists Network

D9.1

New threat and attack strategies

KEMEA



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Main Report Main Author(s)	
<i>Name</i>	<i>Organisation</i>
Ioannis Daniilidis	KEMEA
Symeon Andriotis	KEMEA
Contributors	
D9.3 Annex 1 to D9.1 (RESTREINT UE/EU RESTRICTED): Main Author(s)	
<i>Name</i>	<i>Organisation</i>
Ioannis Daniilidis	KEMEA
Symeon Andriotis	KEMEA

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Summary

Deliverable D9.1 is a report that engaged to the analysis and review of the evolution of the threats and attack strategies, the motives and vulnerabilities that are the root cause. The study enables the projection to the trends, patterns and future threats and attack strategies in terrorism, emphasising the use of explosives; these are reported in more detail in the RESTREINT UE/EU RESTRICTED annex: D9.3 New threat and attack strategies - Annex 1 to D9.1.

In the course of the preparation of the report, studies focused on the thorough review of past events, shading light on the evolution of the phenomena of terrorism, the motives that varied from political, religious etc, the enablers of the motive to actions such as the technological, legal etc. Interaction with the practitioners in the course of the EXERTER workshops provided another channel of input to this study. The identification of the aforementioned parameters that are forming the complex new landscape of terrorism and attack strategies is crucial for the prompt counter actions that will provide a safer environment.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Background

Almost two decades after the 9/11 terrorist attacks in the USA, the landscape of terrorist threats and attack strategies has been continuously evolving through time and space, thus constituting a major global security challenge for governments, but also a regional concern for decision-makers and the general public.

During the last years, attacks in the European territory conducted by al-Qaeda and Daesh-inspired or affiliated groups (i.e. Paris in 2015 and Brussels in 2016) increased concerns regarding the threat posed by violent jihadist individuals and groups. At the same time, Europe seems to be facing a significant threat by far-right groups, with right-wing motivated attacks comprising now a priority in most of the security portfolios of the EU Member States.

With these in mind, this report presents an overview of the level of the terrorist threat, based on online available information and expert knowledge. As such, this comprehensive summary of the key global trends and patterns in terrorism attempts to delineate current and emerging terrorist threats and relevant attack strategies, with emphasis put on explosives.

1.2. Objectives and scope

The overall purpose of this paper is to shed light upon the dynamic nature of terrorism over the past decades, concentrating on the threat raised by the use of explosives.

To this end, the report will provide an overview of the terrorist threat, by adopting a historical and legal perspective, as well as of the past and currently implemented terrorist attack strategies.

In addition, the last chapter will draw upon the main findings of the previous parts, so as to reach conclusions on emerging trends and patterns, which could further be the basis of plausible scenarios and predictions of future incidents.

2. Review of Terrorist Threats

Initially, a conceptual definition of terrorism attempts to delineate its evolutionary path until the current historical juncture. Subsequently, a series of contemporary developments in modern terrorism, encompassing the so-called FTFs threat as well as the terrorist landscape in the European territory, is illustrated.

2.1. Defining Terrorism

At EU level, the definition of the term terrorist offences is specified in the Directive 2017/541 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 15 March 2017 on combating terrorism¹, which all EU Member States have transposed in their respective national legislations.

In particular, based on this Directive, terrorist offences are defined as:

- Intentional acts which, given their nature or context, may seriously damage a country or an international organisation when committed;
- Having the aim of seriously intimidating a population, or unduly compelling a government or international organisation to perform or abstain from performing an act, or seriously destabilising or destroying the fundamental political, constitutional, economic or social structures of a country or an international organisation.

Nonetheless, despite the existence of working definitions, few terms and concepts in modern political discourse present such a plethora of conceptual approaches as in the case of terrorism. The lack of a commonly-accepted definition can be attributed to the fact that terrorism is a highly subjective term, with a strong political tone, depending on the subject's experiences and personal views, since *“the same kind of action [...] will be described differently by different observers, depending when and where it took place and whose side the observer is on”* (Teichman, 1996).

Consequently, the adoption of differentiated approaches by institutions, organisations and governmental departments, based on their specific mission, role and preferences constitute an impediment in the search for a common conceptual place (Bruce, 2013). The problematic coexistence of diverse - and sometimes contradictory - visions is exemplified in the famous saying *“one man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter”* as well as in the fact that *“more former terrorists than US presidents have received a Nobel Peace Prize”* (Bloom, 2012).

In an interesting attempt to elucidate the term, the academic Alex Schmid approached the conceptual definition of terrorism based on the analysis of four “fields of discourse²” (Schmid, 1992), whilst he further examined the frequency of “definitional elements” in 109 definitions of terrorism (Schmid & Jogman, 1988).

Table 1: Frequencies of definitional elements in 109 definitions of terrorism

¹ It replaced the Council Framework Decision 2002/475/JHA and amended the Council Decision 2005/671/JHA.

² In specific, Schmid (1992) distinguishes four different arenas of discourse on terrorism: an academic one (where a consensus definition is offered); a state discourse (where definitions are generally wide and vague); a public one (as reflected in the media's usage of the term 'terrorism'); and, finally, that of the 'terrorists' and their sympathisers (where the focus is on political ends, while avoiding a discussion of means).

Element	frequency (%)
1. Violence, Force	83.5
2. Political	65
3. Fear, Terror emphasized	51
4. Threat	47
5. Psychological effects and (anticipated) reactions	41.5
6. Victim-Target differentiation	37.5
7. Purposive, Planned, Systematic, Organized action	32
8. Method of combat, strategy, tactic	30.5
9. Extranormality, in breach of accepted rules, without humanitarian constrains	30
10. Coercion, extortion, induction of compliance	28
11. Publicity aspect	21.5
12. Arbitrariness, impersonal, random character, indiscrimination	21
13. Civilians, noncombatants, neutrals, outsiders as victims	17.5
14. Intimidation	17
15. Innocence of victims emphasized	15.5
16. Group, movement, organization as perpetrator	14
17. Symbolic aspect, demonstration to others	13.5
18. Incalculability, unpredictability, unexpectedness of occurrence of violence	9
19. Clandestine, covert nature	9
20. Repetitiveness, serial or campaign character of violence	7
21. Criminal	6
22. Demands made on third parties	4

Source: Schmid & Jongman, 1988

2.2. Origins & Typologies of Terrorism

Terrorism seems to be as old as human history. However, modern terrorism is considered to be originated with the French Revolution, when the term “terror” was first coined (1795) to refer to a policy systemically used to protect the fledgling French republic government against counterrevolutionaries. Thenceforth, modern terrorism has become a very dynamic concept, dependent to some degree on the political and historical context within which it is employed (Cronin, 2010).

David Rapoport’s theoretical scheme of the “terrorist waves” attempts to shed light on the evolution of modern terrorism. According to the American academic, since the end of the 19th century there have been four “terrorist waves”, which he describes as “Anarchist”, “Anti-colonial”, “New Left”, and “Religious” (Rapoport, 2002). More specifically:

- Anarchism comprises the first of Rapoport’s waves. Between 1880 and 1905, anarchist terrorists assassinated the Austrian empress, the king of Italy, French and American Presidents, as well as dozens of citizens, accused as being part of the bourgeoisie. Although the pursued international revolution did not materialise, anarchists exerted a significant influence, most notably through introduction of the so-called “propaganda-by-the-deed” in which acts of individual heroism sought to elicit similar chains of reaction (Neumann, 2016).
- The Anti-colonial wave emerged in 1930 and reached its peak in 1950. The violent groups, which composed it, were integrated in the population, aiming at combating foreign domination, leading to the eventual withdrawal of colonial forces. This wave laid the foundations for the conversion of terrorism in the late 1960s from a mainly local phenomenon to a global security issue (Hoffman, 2006).

- The New Left was largely composed of members of the upper middle class. Its central aim was the emergence of a new, socially just and anti-authoritarian society situated on socialist principles, but in a distance from the ongoing version of socialism in the Eastern coalition countries (Neumann, 2016). The basic strategy was to incite the sociopolitical overthrow from the urban areas by waging spectacular attacks against governmental targets and “systemic agents”.
- The onset of the Religious wave dates back to 1979, a year marked by the Iranian revolution, the USSR invasion of Afghanistan, and the capture of the great mosque in Mecca by Sunni Muslims, whilst, according to the Muslim calendar, 1979 was the beginning of a new century (Neumann, 2016). Murders and hostages comprised common practices of the third wave, but “suicide attacks” were the most impressive and innovative tactics, with Islamist terrorists being internationally networked. During this fourth wave, a terrorist organization appeared, with apparently “pioneering” methods of recruiting and operating in the history of terrorism, – al-Qaeda.

Additionally, these waves could be seen as a cycle of activities in a set period characterised by expansion and contraction phases, whilst, “*when a wave’s energy cannot inspire new organizations, the wave disappears*” (Rapoport, 2002).

On the other hand, focusing on their source of motivation and ideological background, Europol (2019) categorises terrorist organisations, as follows:

- Jihadist: “jihadist terrorist acts are those that are committed out of a mind-set that rejects democracy on religious grounds and uses the historical comparison with the crusades of the Middle Ages to describe current situations, in which it is believed that Sunni Islam is facing a crusader alliance composed of Shi’is, Christians and Jews”.
- Right-wing: “right-wing terrorist organisations seek to change the entire political, social and economic system on an extremist right-wing model. A core concept in right-wing extremism is supremacism or the idea that a certain group of people sharing a common element (nation, race, culture, etc.) is superior to all other people. Seeing themselves in a supreme position, the particular group considers it is their natural right to rule over the rest of the population. Racist behaviour, authoritarianism, xenophobia and hostility to immigration are commonly found attitudes in right-wing extremists. Right-wing terrorism refers to the use of terrorist violence by right-wing groups. Variants of rightwing extremist groups are the neo-Nazi, neo-fascist and ultra-nationalist formations”.
- Left-wing and anarchist terrorism: “left-wing terrorist groups seek to replace the entire political, social and economic system of a state by introducing a communist or socialist structure and a classless society. Their ideology is often Marxist-Leninist. A sub-category of left-wing extremism is anarchist terrorism which promotes a revolutionary, anti-capitalist and antiauthoritarian agenda. Examples of leftwing terrorist groups are the Italian Brigade Rosse (Red Brigades) and the Greek Revolutionary Organisation 17 November”.
- Ethno-nationalism and separatism: “ethno-nationalist and separatist terrorist groups are motivated by nationalism, ethnicity and/or religion. Separatist groups seek to carve out a state for themselves from a larger country or annex territory from one country to that of another. Left- or right-wing ideological elements are not uncommon in these types of groups. The Irish Republican Army (IRA), the Basque ETA and the Kurdish PKK organisations fall into this category”.
- Single-issue: “single-issue extremist groups aim to change a specific policy or practice, as opposed to replacing the whole political, social and economic system in a society. The groups within this category are usually concerned with animal rights, environmental protection, anti-abortion campaigns, etc. Examples of groups in this category are the Earth Liberation Front (ELF) and the Animal Liberation Front (ALF)”.

2.3. Key Developments in Modern Terrorism

The contemporary elements that compose the nature of terrorist activity are briefly addressed through the exploration of the notion of “new terrorism”, the depiction of the concerns associated with the FTFs threat, along with the overall impact of terrorism at European level during the past five decades.

2.3.1. The Profile of “New Terrorism”

Notwithstanding the sometimes-broad use of the term, “new terrorism” consists an additional point of disagreement among researchers, with its origin dating back to the 1990s and 2000s (Simon & Benjamin, 2000). Adopted during the period of the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001 and at the heyday of al-Qaeda terrorist organisation, new terrorism bears a number of partially distinct characteristics:

- Religiously-motivated operational action is a constituent component;
- The attacks from the new terrorist organisations are more lethal, given the consolidation of methods of action, such as suicide attacks;
- The theatre of operations is characterised by international scope and impact, as a result of a globalised network of terrorist actors;
- New terrorism can be approached through the lenses of conducting asymmetric/non-conventional war operations between terrorist organisations and nation-states.

Table 2: Fundamental elements of New and Old Terrorism

	New Terrorism	Old Terrorism
Aims	Religiously-inspired, absence of ideological rigour	Predefined set of political, social and/or economic objectives
Methods	Mass civilian attacks; excessive violence	“Legitimate” targets; rules of engagement
Targets	Civilians, infrastructure, officials; soft and -less frequently- hard targets	Symbolic targets (e.g. embassies, banks) or persons representing authoritarianism; hard targets
Structure	Global network and agenda	Hierarchical structure

Following the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001 and the ensuing “War on Terror”, the structural identity of terrorism had acquired a significantly decentralised form. The decentralisation of terrorism can be interpreted as the result of the influence of factors that contributed to the formation and consolidation of terrorist organisations with an extremely high degree of “diffusion”.

Amongst others, this diffusion has a spatial dimension, with objectives and operational actors extending over a wide geographical area, as well as an organisational diversity, where numerous and complicated terrorist networks co-exist without explicit hierarchical structures. Thus, although the power of decision-making centres of major terrorist organisations may have weakened significantly, the terrorist movement appears to have broadened its operational base and, therefore, its range of potential targets (Pillar, 2011).

2.3.2. Foreign Terrorist Fighters

According to the UN Security Council and its Resolution 2178, Foreign Terrorist Fighters (FTFs) are defined as "... nationals who travel or attempt to travel to a State other than their States of residence or nationality, and other individuals who travel or attempt to travel from their territories to a State other than their States of residence or nationality, for the purpose of the perpetration, planning, or preparation of, or participation in, terrorist acts, or the providing or receiving of terrorist training, including in connection with armed conflict".

Since the Syrian conflict began in 2011, thousands of EU nationals have travelled or attempted to travel in conflict zones in Iraq and Syria to join insurgent terrorist groups, such as ISIS/Daesh. This influx of the so-called "Foreign Terrorist Fighters" (FTFs) to Syria and Iraq seems to have reached, in 2018, a number of more than 40,000 individuals originating from around 110 countries, of which it has been estimated that around 30 % have already returned to their place of origin (European Parliament, 2018).

In the case of the EU Member States, the threat raised by the FTFs phenomenon held four distinct dimensions (Van Ginkel & Entenmann, 2016):

- The first concerns those who have already travelled from Europe to the war zones, seeking to become foreign fighters.
- The second includes the security challenges posed to European countries, following the return of FTFs, taking into account that they have received military training in the Middle East.
- The third dimension is the impact of the phenomenon and the subsequently generated extremist action on EU social cohesion.
- Finally, another risk category is composed of the "would-be FTFs" that, after being detected, have been banned from travelling towards conflict areas.

Currently, the issue of the FTFs remains high on the political agenda at both Member State and EU level inasmuch as it touches upon a broad spectrum of policies, related to the prevention of radicalisation, information exchange at EU level, criminal justice responses to returnees, as well as disengagement/deradicalisation inside and outside prisons (European Parliament, 2018).

2.3.3. The Terrorist Landscape in Europe

The 9/11 attacks have been a key point in redefining the role of terrorism and helping to raise awareness in terms of international security issues. In fact, the global terror attacks have led to an intensive effort to exercise internal control and vigilance in the fight against terrorism. At the same time, new forms of "cross-border coalitions" were established between countries, with an emphasis on the use of military and civilian power and the overriding aim of ensuring world peace and security (Das, 2016).

For these reasons, it could be argued that terrorist attacks had a further decisive impact in underscoring that modern security threats can arise not only from states but also from individuals operating around the world. Hence, the high degree of state interconnectivity became apparent along with the risks emanating from the pervasiveness of borders (Bauman, 2002).

Focusing on the last five decades of terrorist activities, fatalities in terrorist attacks in Europe have declined since the end of the Cold War, when Europeans suffered terrorist attacks by ethno-nationalist groups (i.e. IRA and ETA) and by left-wing groups (i.e. the Red Brigades and the Greek Revolutionary Organization 17 November).

The attacks of September 11, 2001 signalled the shift toward religiously inspired terrorism and jihadism. Since then, Europe has witnessed by large-scale attacks, such as in Madrid on March 11, 2004, when 191 people were killed and 1,755 injured, as well as in London on July 7, 2005, when 50 were killed and 700 injured.

From 2014 onwards, Daesh joined al-Qaeda as a new salafi-jihadist terrorist group. Between 2014 and 2016, Europe was the place of several major and massive terrorist attacks, like:

- The January 2015 attack against the satirical newspaper Charlie Hebdo and other targets in Paris.
- The November 2015 massacre in the Bataclan theatre and other targets in Paris.
- The 2016 attacks at the Brussels Airport and Maalbeek metro station in Belgium.
- The 2016 Nice vehicle attack, as well as the similar attack on a Christmas market in Berlin the same year.

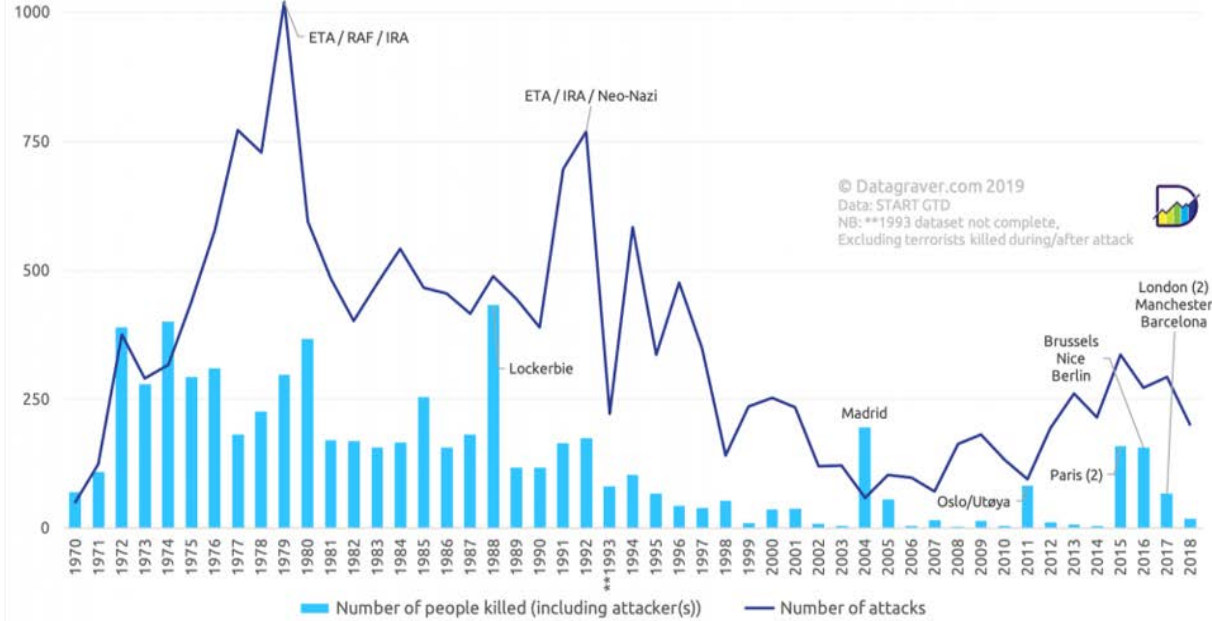


Figure 1: Terrorism in Europe (1970-2018), Source: START GTD, 2018

Nevertheless, alongside the salafist-jihadist terrorist threat, Europe faces a significant rise of the extreme right-wing ideology and extremist action. In particular, extreme right-wing attacks fluctuated from 9 in 2013 to 21 in 2016 and 30 in 2017, namely the highest number of right-wing attacks in Europe since 1994 (Jones, Toucas and Markusen, 2018).

3. Review of Terrorist Attack Strategies

The inherently fluid nature of terrorism contributes substantially to the upgrade of several terrorist organisations into “lifelong learning entities” (Ganor, 2015). In order to ensure the survival of the organisation, this “learning process” requires the gradual alteration of key elements and tactics of action. The formulation and efficiency of the latter are considerably underpinned by technological innovations, along with the ability to manipulate democratic institutions and values.

3.1. Lone Actors and Organisational Structure

A key element in the structural transformation of modern terrorism is the emergence of a variety of operational actors. Amongst them, the salient role of the “lone wolves” can be identified, along with their implemented strategy – the so-called “leaderless resistance”.

A lone wolf³ – terrorist can be considered as a lone actor, namely an autonomous perpetrator, who aims to have an impact on the wider community, acting without direct support during the planning, preparation and execution phase of the attack, and whose decision to act is based on inspiration rather than direct guidance from peers (Ellis et al., 2016).

In other words, a lone wolf comprises an autonomous operational actor, often integrated into the community and capable of “self-activation” at any time. Usually, there is no direct link to a terrorist organisation (training, funding, etc.), while a lone wolf is usually driven by political and/or religious motives.

In addition, of particular interest is the typology introduced by Pantucci (2011). Concentrating on the adoption of radical Islamist ideology as a justification for autonomous action, he distinguishes between four different categories of actors: a) the aforementioned lone wolves, b) the loners, who use extreme Islamist ideology as a cover for their actions, c) the lone attackers, namely individuals acting independently but, to some extent, guided by a terrorist organisation and d) the sleeper operatives, who remain “in sleep” - sometimes for a long time - until finally being activated.

On the other hand, another fundamental element concerning individualised terrorist activities is the notion of “leaderless resistance”. Leaderless resistance could be seen as a “confrontational strategy” that encourages involvement in acts of political violence, which are independent of any hierarchical structure or support network (Joose, 2007). In this way, individuals or small cells can fight against an established power through independent acts of violence, without being centrally coordinated and with limited or non-existent communication between them.

³ Alternatively, the terms “freelancers”, “stray dogs” and “self-starters” are frequently used by the relevant literature as well as media references.

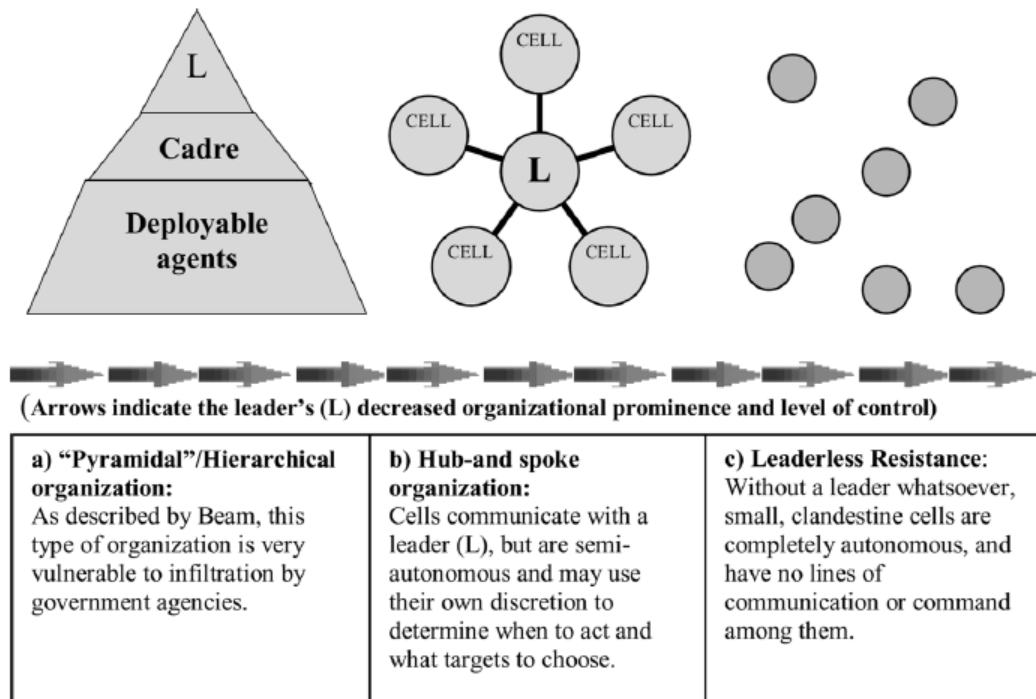


Figure 2: Leaderless resistance and other organisational forms, Source: Joosse, 2007

The term became quite popular by the proponent of the “white supremacy” theory, Louis Beam, who viewed the traditional pyramidal model of organisation as problematic, recommending the formation of a model of independent cells that would commit acts of sabotage and terrorism, lacking vertical coordination and minimising communication. On the other hand, the first, perhaps, to introduce the idea of leaderless resistance into the “jihadist sphere” was Abu Musab al-Suri - a member of al-Qaeda and one of Osama bin Laden's primary collaborators. In his book “The Call to Global Islamic Resistance”, which he posted online in 2005, al-Suri formulated the theory of “leaderless jihad”, thus proposing the transition to the impersonalised jihad (Gilsinan, 2015).

Moreover, further to the before-mentioned operational transformation of terrorist groups, the emergence of the concept of “hybrid terrorist organisation” is apparently based on two contemporary characteristics (Ganor, 2015):

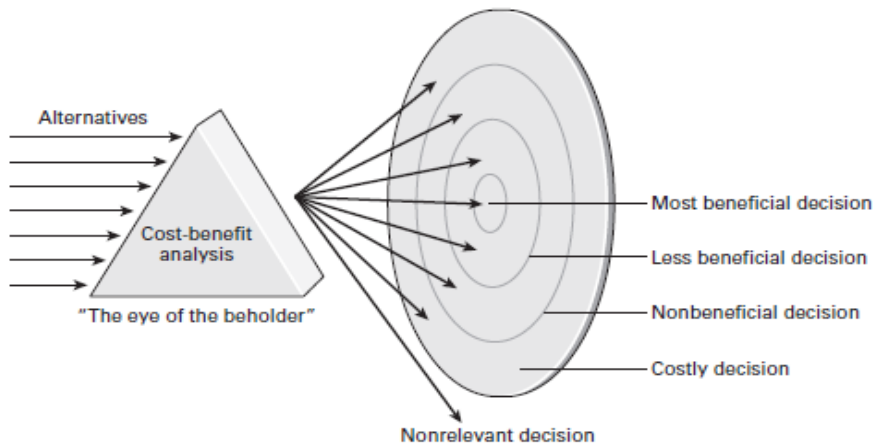
- The fact that major terrorist groups seem to be involved in pseudo-voluntary activities, such as provision of charity, education and religious services, as well as in the political scene.
- At the same time, they are planning and carrying out criminal activities of organised crime and terrorism.

3.2. Rationalism & Decision-Making Model

In many instances, an overall decision-making model for terrorist action is centred on the theory of “rational choice”, which seems to partially interpret the behavioural patterns of terrorist organisations, especially when lone actors are deployed.

In general, rationalism in terrorist activities resembles a process whereby the decision-maker performs a cost-benefit analysis, in order to select the most beneficial course of action by effectively offsetting the risk and the costs inherently involved, while achieving its goal and objectives.

Figure 3: Rational process in decision-making



Source: Ganor, 2015

As such, although in many cases jihadist terrorists are portrayed by the media as maniacs and mentally disturbed killers, they are in fact “disturbingly normal” persons, as they make careful calculations before committing heinous crimes, as well as evaluation of their effectiveness and impact (Hoffman, 2006).

3.3. Modern Technology and Digital Environments

The structural changes observed in modern terrorism would not have been so evident without the contribution of a “technological revolution”, in particular through the usage of the so-called “new media”. New media and their multiple applications facilitated the transformation of the pyramidal organisational structures into horizontal networks, in which numerous members are linked by advanced means of communication (Tucker, 2001).

By using state-of-the-art communication tools, terrorist organisations succeeded in developed beyond a narrowly structured network of terrorist organisations. On the contrary, the current diversity of terrorist actors with a common ideological background tends to be described as a “network of networks”, paving the way for a global interconnection of heterogeneous entities (Mockaitis, 2007).

Hence, an important parameter for modern terrorist organisations is their involvement in the digital world, especially using the internet. Indeed, since the early period of al-Qaeda, its online presence was seen as a significant mechanism for the transition to an era of terrorism, characterised by the active role of digital extremist communities with a high degree of resilience.

This widespread manipulation of the new media and the Internet contributes to the emergence of several advantages for terrorist groups, such as:

- In the absence of restrictions on the digital environment, a degree of coherence and proximity is easily established between terrorist cells, groups and organisations.
- The improvement in the methods of communication between terrorist actors and their sympathisers/supporters, along with the existence of extremist online fora, have inaugurated new tactics of “digital recruitment” and “self-radicalisation”.
- The ability for online training of new members on terrorist planning issues through appropriate digital material (videos, video games, etc.) (Seib & Janbek, 2011).
- The use of the Internet as a means of gaining finance for terrorist organisations (mainly through donations from wealthy supporters).
- The possibility to disseminate web messages and material without previous “filtering”, as it was usually the case with “conventional” media (i.e. TV).

Furthermore, over the past few years, individuals and groups involved in terrorist and extremist activities appear to have revised their overall communication strategies, as a counter-measure to the efforts by social media platforms and authorities to contain their online activities.

In particular, terrorist and violent extremist actors use encryption methods in order to conceal their communications by intelligence agencies, encouraging their followers to cover their traces with such software. As a result, the latter appear to regularly switch between or use parallel platforms to obfuscate their exchanges, such as in the case of Telegram, Instagram and Twitter, along with secret accounts on Facebook and the use of the Deep Web (Europol, 2016).

4. Conclusion

The thorough review and analysis of past events, the interaction with the work packages and associated workshops that address the annual scenarios for the EXERTER project have enabled this study to highlight the crucial parameters that define the frame of threats and attack strategies. It is clear that in the landscape of explosives and terrorism, the threats and attack strategies are evolving and become multiparametric. The motives and enablers, being technological advancements, policy and ethics are adding variables to the complex equation of countering threats and attacks, involving multiple actors, such as law enforcement agencies (LEAs), policy makers, government bodies, private sector industries, the public, including the attackers.

It is imperative that efforts and collaborations at international level have and must continue to provided gap analyses that enable a systematic evaluation of the trends of the threats and attack strategies, as presented in this document.

Monitoring, review and analysis of the evolving new threats as well as the attack strategies will continue in the context of the EXERTER project, benefiting and complementing in a mutual and bidirectional way the WPs that are dedicated in the annual scenario definition and analysis, including the workshop.

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