



ALARMING RISE OF ASYMMETRICAL **TERRORISM** IN THE WEST

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On New Year's Day, a devastating attack shattered celebrations in the French Quarter of New Orleans, claiming 15 lives and injuring 35 others. The assailant, a 42-year-old U.S. citizen and former U.S. Army member, executed a vehicle-ramming attack that bore the chilling hallmarks of Islamic State (IS)-inspired tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTPs). This attack, coupled with the discovery of improvised explosive devices (IEDs) and the perpetrator's use of full body armour, exemplifies the alarming trend of asymmetrical terrorism gripping the West.

ASYMMETRICAL TERROR TACTICS

The incident in New Orleans is part of a broader, disturbing shift in terrorist operations, where attackers employ readily available tools—vehicles, knives, and basic explosives—to inflict mass casualties. These low-cost, high-impact methods have emerged as a preferred approach for jihadist groups like IS, particularly as their territorial control dwindles. Vehicle-ramming attacks, in particular, have become a hallmark of asymmetrical terrorism, exemplified by past incidents in Nice (2016), Berlin (2016), Stockholm (2017), and New York City (2017).

In New Orleans, the attacker utilised a vehicle-sharing application to rent the car, highlighting the exploitation of modern conveniences to facilitate terror. The tactical use of IEDs and operational security measures, such as wearing body armour, underscores the technical sophistication of such attacks. These elements also suggest the possibility of virtual coordination with IS recruiters or other extremist entities, a trend increasingly observed in IS-inspired plots.



A RISING TIDE OF JIHADIST ATTACKS

The New Orleans attack is not an isolated event. In 2024 alone, the United States witnessed a spate of thwarted IS-inspired attacks:

- September: A Pakistani citizen attempting to cross into the U.S. from Canada was arrested for plotting to attack a Jewish center in Brooklyn.
- October: An Afghan national collaborated with IS-Khorasan (IS-K) recruiters to plan a mass attack on Election Day.
- October: In Arizona, a teenager was apprehended for plotting to use an improvised drone to target the Phoenix Pride parade.
- November: A Houston resident was detained for planning attacks on military recruiting centers and offering material support to IS.



Pakistani citizen Muhammad Shahzeb Khan



These incidents underscore the persistent threat posed by jihadist groups, which continue to inspire lone actors and small cells to carry out devastating acts of violence. The celebration of such attacks on Islamic State-affiliated platforms further fuels the cycle of radicalisation and violence.



Arizona teenager, Marvin Aneer Jalo



Houston Resident, Anas Said

DIGITAL RADICALISATION

The role of online platforms in enabling asymmetrical terrorism cannot be overstated. IS and its affiliates have mastered the use of encrypted messaging apps and social media to radicalise individuals, disseminate propaganda, and share operational guidance. The digital footprint of the New Orleans attacker—who likely leveraged online resources for IED construction and tactical planning—is indicative of this trend.

During the 2023 holiday season, IS-affiliated Telegram and Rocket Chat accounts actively called

for attacks during Christmas and New Year's celebrations. This strategic timing aims to exploit public gatherings for maximum impact, a tactic employed in the New Orleans attack. By leveraging digital platforms, jihadist groups have effectively lowered the barriers to entry for terrorism, enabling individuals with limited resources to execute sophisticated attacks.



THE EUROPEAN CONTEXT

In December 2024, Taleb Al Abdulmohsen carried out an attack at a Christmas market in Germany, leaving multiple people injured and reigniting fears of terrorism across Europe. The attack followed a disturbingly familiar pattern: the use of a vehicle to target a densely populated area. The suspect, reportedly inspired by jihadist ideology, later reported to be of unstable mind exploited the festive season to maximise casualties and psychological impact. This incident echoes previous attacks in Europe and exemplifies the ongoing threat posed by asymmetrical terrorism.

Europe has long been a focal point for asymmetrical terrorist attacks. The continent's open borders, dense urban centers, and symbolic targets make it a prime arena for jihadist violence. Landmark incidents include:

- Nice, France (2016): A cargo truck was used to plow through a Bastille Day crowd, killing 86 people.
- Berlin, Germany (2016): A hijacked truck rammed into a Christmas market, resulting in 12 fatalities.
- Stockholm, Sweden (2017): A stolen truck was driven into a busy shopping district, claiming five lives.

These attacks highlight a consistent pattern: the use of everyday objects—trucks, knives, and homemade explosives—to bypass conventional security measures and cause mass casualties. The attackers often supported or inspired, act alone or in small groups, reducing the likelihood of detection while amplifying their psychological impact.



ROLE OF IDEOLOGY

At the heart of these attacks lies an extremist ideology that seeks to destabilise societies and exploit vulnerabilities in open, democratic systems. Jihadist groups like IS and Al-Qaeda propagate a narrative of perpetual conflict, portraying their actions as a divine struggle against perceived Western oppression. This ideological framework not only justifies violence but also provides a powerful recruitment tool, drawing disaffected individuals into their ranks.

The ideological underpinnings of jihadist terrorism are often obfuscated or downplayed in public discourse. Far-left rationalisations, for instance, sometimes frame such acts as reactions to socioeconomic inequalities or foreign policy grievances. While these factors may play a role in individual radicalisation, they fail to account for the explicit religious and political motivations articulated by terrorist groups themselves. Addressing this ideological component is crucial for any effective counterterrorism strategy.

RATIONALISING TERROR: DANGER OF MISGUIDED PERCEPTIONS

Tendency to rationalise terrorism through the lens of victimhood narratives or systemic injustices creates a dangerous precedent. It shifts focus away from the perpetrators agency and the ideological infrastructure that sustains their actions. For example, attempts to frame the New Orleans and Germany attacks as isolated incidents driven by mental health issues or personal grievances ignore the broader patterns of radicalisation and ideological indoctrination.

Moreover, the labelling of certain political factions, particularly right-wing groups, as inherently dangerous amplifies societal paranoia without addressing the root causes of violence. While far-right extremism is a legitimate concern, equating ideological opposition with violent intent undermines the nuanced understanding required to combat asymmetrical terrorism. This blanket vilification risks alienating segments of the population and distracting from the immediate threat posed by jihadist actors.

Mourners gather for a vigil on Bourbon Street to remember the 14 victims of the truck-ramming attack that occurred on January 1, 2025, in New Orleans, Louisiana. © Emily KASK / AFP



OPERATIONAL SECURITY: A GROWING CHALLENGE

The New Orleans attacker's meticulous operational security further underscores the evolving sophistication of asymmetrical terrorism. By using a rental car, donning body armour, and planting IEDs, the perpetrator demonstrated a calculated approach designed to maximise destruction and complicate investigations. Such measures suggest either prior training or external guidance, likely facilitated through online networks.

Similarly, the Germany Christmas market attacker exploited gaps in local security measures to execute their plan. The absence of physical barriers and limited surveillance in certain areas created an environment conducive to such attacks. These incidents highlight the importance of robust and adaptive security protocols, including the deployment of anti-ramming barriers and enhanced surveillance systems.

GLOBAL IMPLICATIONS

The resurgence of IS and its affiliates poses a global challenge. While the group has been territorially diminished, its ideological reach remains potent. Recent attacks in Somalia and the fall of the Assad regime in Syria have provided IS with renewed momentum, enabling it to inspire violence across continents.

counterterrorism efforts. Law enforcement agencies face the dual challenge of monitoring physical threats while combating digital radicalisation. The celebration of the New Orleans and Germany attacks in IS-affiliated chatrooms underscores the group's ability to galvanise support and encourage future attacks.

In the West, the decentralised nature of IS operations—characterised by online recruitment and remote coordination—complicates traditional



RECOMMENDATIONS

1. CONFRONTING IDEOLOGY

A comprehensive counterterrorism strategy must address the ideological dimensions of jihadist terrorism. This involves:

- **Exposing Extremist Narratives:** Highlighting the contradictions and hypocrisies within jihadist ideology to undermine its appeal.
- **Promoting Counter-Narratives:** Amplifying voices within Muslim communities that reject extremism and advocate for peace and coexistence.
- **Educating the Public:** Providing fact-based analysis of terrorism that avoids sensationalism and emphasises the ideological drivers behind such acts.

2. ENHANCING DIGITAL SURVEILLANCE

Strengthening capabilities to monitor and disrupt online extremist networks is critical. This includes:

- **Investing in AI Tools:** Leveraging artificial intelligence to identify and track extremist content across multiple platforms.
- **International Cooperation:** Collaborating with global tech companies to remove extremist content and block radicalisation channels.
- **Community Reporting Mechanisms:** Encouraging individuals to report suspicious online activity while safeguarding privacy and civil liberties.

3. STRENGTHENING INFRASTRUCTURE SECURITY

Robust physical security measures are essential to mitigating the threat of asymmetrical terrorism. Recommendations include:

- **Anti-Ramming Barriers:** Installing bollards and other physical barriers in high-risk areas such as markets and pedestrian zones.
- **Comprehensive Risk Assessments:** Conducting regular evaluations of public spaces to identify and address vulnerabilities.
- **Integrated Security Systems:** Deploying advanced surveillance technologies and real-time communication networks to enhance situational awareness.

4. RATIONALISING COUNTERTERRORISM POLICY

Policies must be based on empirical evidence rather than perceptions or political expediency. This involves:

- **Data-Driven Analysis:** Collecting and analysing data on terrorist incidents to identify trends and inform decision-making.
- **Transparent Communication:** Providing clear, fact-based information to the public about the nature and extent of terrorist threats.
- **Balancing Security and Civil Liberties:** Ensuring that counterterrorism measures respect individual rights and do not disproportionately target specific communities.

5. BUILDING COMMUNITY RESILIENCE

Engaging with local communities is vital to preventing radicalisation and fostering societal resilience. Key initiatives include:

- **Grassroots Programs:** Supporting initiatives that address the socioeconomic and psychological factors contributing to radicalisation.
- **Interfaith Dialogues:** Promoting understanding and collaboration among diverse religious and cultural groups.
- **Youth Engagement:** Empowering young people to resist extremist influences and become advocates for peace and inclusion.

CONCLUSION

The New Orleans and Germany Christmas market attacks serve as stark reminders of the evolving tactics employed by terrorist groups and the urgency of addressing these threats. As asymmetrical terrorism continues to rise, the West must adapt its counterterrorism strategies to safeguard its citizens and uphold the values of freedom and resilience. By confronting extremist ideologies, enhancing digital and physical security, and fostering community resilience, societies can effectively counter the growing threat of jihadist terrorism and preserve the principles of freedom, justice and democracy.

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