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France - Analysis

2016-2020: The 'low intensity' terrorism targeting France

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The attack on a church in the French Riviera city of Nice on Thursday, which left three people dead from knife wounds, was the third in the space of a month in a long series of terrorist attacks in France perpetrated by lone knifemen who have often escaped the attention of intelligence services. In the jargon of those services, they are called attacks of "low intensity", meaning of little means and organisation, but which have a major impact on public opinion. Matthieu Suc reports.

The attack on the Notre-Dame basilica church in the centre of the French riviera city of Nice on Thursday morning, when three people were murdered, has caused shock and outrage in France, occurring just two weeks after the beheading of a teacher by an Islamic extremist in a town close to Paris.

The city had already been the target of one of the most murderous terrorist attacks in France. On July 14th 2016, Mohamed Lahouaiej-Bouhlel, a Tunisian national, drove a large truck into Bastille Day crowds on the seafront boulevard, the Promenade des Anglais, killing 86 people and injuring more than 450 others. The so-called Islamic State group claimed responsibility for the massacre.

The perpetrator of the attack in Nice on Thursday is a 21-year-old Tunisian, Brahim Aouissaoui, who slit the throat of the church's warden, Vincent Loquès, 55, who fatally stabbed a woman of Brazilian origin, Simone Barreto Silva, 44, and "virtually beheaded", in the words of France's chief anti-terrorism prosecutor, a 60-year-old woman who has not been named.

The mayor of Nice, Christian Estrosi, told the media on Thursday that Aouissaoui, who was wounded by police, had "repeated several times 'Allahu Akbar' [God is greatest] in front of us as he was medicalised at the spot".

The attack by Aouissaoui, who remains in a critical condition in hospital, was the third in France in the space of little more than a month.

On October 16th, Abdullakh Anzorov, armed with a 35-centimetre knife, decapitated teacher Samuel Paty in a street and in broad daylight in the north-west Paris suburb of Conflans-Sainte-Honorine. The motive for the murder was that the teacher had shown pupils copies of cartoons depicting the Prophet Muhammad during a lesson about freedom of expression.

On September 25th, Zaheer Hassan Mahmoud carried out an attack with a meat cleaver near the former Paris offices of *Charlie Hebdo* magazine, seriously wounding a man and a woman from a TV production company who had stepped out on a cigarette break. After his arrest, Mahmoud said he thought his victims were *Charlie Hebdo* staff, apparently unaware that the satirical magazine had in

fact moved out of the offices on the rue Nicolas-Appert immediately after the January 2015 jihadist attack there which left 12 dead.

According to a public statement by France's chief anti-terrorism prosecutor, Jean-François Ricard, under questioning Mahmoud said he was "angry" after watching, in the days preceding the attack, "videos from Pakistan" concerning the re-publication by *Charlie Hebdo* of cartoons of Prophet Muhammad in its September 2nd edition. The weekly re-published the cartoons to mark the opening of the trial in Paris of 14 people accused of complicity in the January 7th 2015 attacks on its offices, and also the killings of four people that same week in a kosher store and another fatal attack against a policewoman.

The three separate attacks this past month have common characteristics. The first two - precise details are yet to emerge about the latest, in Nice - were claimed by their perpetrators but not by any terrorist organisation.

After murdering Samuel Paty, and before being shot dead by police, Abdullakh Anzorov posted a photo of the teacher's decapitated head on Twitter, along with the message, in French: "From Abdullah, Allah's servant, to Marcon [editor's note, a misspelling of 'Macron'], the leader of the infidels, I have executed one of your dogs of hell who had dared to belittle Muhammad. Calm those like him before we inflict upon you a hard punishment."

Zaheer Hassan Mahmoud admitted carrying out the meat cleaver attack outside the former offices of *Charlie Hebdo* as soon as he was arrested nearby. During his interrogation, he expressed no regrets - on the contrary, according to a source close to the case, he even expressed his intention to carry out further attacks. Prosecutor Jean-François Ricard underlined that "no allegiance to any particular group" was found on Mahmoud or during a search of his home.

All three attacks were individual acts perpetrated by young men of foreign nationality. Tunisian national Aouissaoui reached Europe from North Africa in late September via the Italian island of Lampedusa. From there he travelled to France, arriving in early October. Anzorov was an 18-year-old Russian of Chechen origin who was given refugee status in France and held a residence permit. Mahmoud is a 25-yearold Pakistani.

Many terrorist attacks in France over previous years have been carried out by French nationals or residents. Exceptions include the October 2017 knife attack at the Saint-Charles railway station in Marseille, when Ahmed Hanachi, a Tunisian living illegally in France, murdered two young women, and the suicide bombers at the Stade de France sports stadium near Paris during the November 13th 2015 terrorist shooting massacres in the French capital.

The operating mode of the three latest attacks confirms a trend observed since the fall of the so-called Islamic State (IS) group's self-declared caliphate of a swathe of territory in Iraq and Syria; the means employed are summary, principally knife attacks and requiring no significant funding, described in French intelligence jargon as "low intensity".

In 2017, a French intelligence analysis summarised these as "attacks of opportunity, carried out by local actors, using the means at their disposition and striking their country of residence". They have succeeded what were previously attacks planned by IS in the Middle East, and carried out by battle-hardened jihadist operatives (such as the November 2015 Paris attacks, and those of March 2016 in Brussels).

It was on the same morning before committing his attack outside the former offices of *Charlie Hebdo* on September 25th that Zaheer Hassan Mahmoud bought the meat cleaver, along with a hammer and

bottles of white spirit. His plan, as he has described it to investigators, was to use the hammer if needed to enter what he thought were the offices of the weekly, and set fire to them with the white spirit.

On October 15th, Abdullakh Anzorov was accompanied by two Chechen friends, aged 18 and 19, when he went to buy a knife in the northern town of Rouen, in Normandy, after which the youngest of the friends drove Anzorov south to Osny, close to Conflans-Sainte-Honorine, where he bought two airsoft guns. The following day, one of the two Chechen friends drove Anzorov from the Normandy town of Evreux to Conflans-Sainte-Honorine, where he beheaded Samuel Paty after paying two school pupils 350 euros to point out the teacher to him.



La couverture d'“Inspire”, un magazine de propagande djihadiste, illustre le dossier qu'il consacre à la manière de réussir les assassinats à domicile... © DR

Relatively easy for the perpetrators to carry out, these “low intensity” attacks are extremely hard for intelligence services to detect beforehand.

Speaking shortly after the murder of Samuel Paty, a source close to French intelligence services spoke of how it had caused a collective deep concern and frustration. “One finds oneself confronted with an absolutely unknown terrorist, unconnected with a team,” he said. “That causes enormous frustration. We are drowning by that type of low-spectre profile [which] we’re not equipped for. We don’t have the legal tools to detect and impede them. It would be really reassuring to discover that Anzorov was in contact with an imam, a constituted cell. That would mean we missed him but for reasons we know, which can be remediated. If not, we don’t have the capability.”

One of the most striking examples of perpetrators of terrorist attacks who escape the intelligence service radar was the case of Mickaël Harpon, a computer specialist with the Paris police who had clearance to access highly confidential information. On October 3rd 2019, after buying a ceramic kitchen knife and another for opening oysters during his lunch break, Harpon embarked on a stabbing rampage within the Paris police prefecture buildings when he murdered four of his colleagues before he was shot dead.

Prosecutor Jean-François Ricard later announced that Harpon, originally from the French Caribbean island of La Martinique, had converted to Islam a decade earlier and had been drawn to Salafism.

But even before its military defeat, the Islamic State group already employed the strategy of lone knife attacks alongside the mass killings it organised like those of Paris in 2015 and Brussels in 2016 and planned from its base in the Syrian city of Raqqa.

On the evening of June 13th 2016, Larossi Abballa, 25, acting in the name of the Islamic State group,

stabbed to death a police officer outside his home in Magnanville, west of Paris, before entering the house and cutting the throat of the officer's wife, who also worked for the police, in front of the couple's three-year-old son. Abballa, who remained inside the house with the infant, was finally shot dead by police. The trauma that the attack caused within the French police is still felt by many today.

One month later, on the morning of July 26th 2016, Adel Kermiche and Abdel-Malik Petitjean, both aged 19, stormed a church in the Normandy town of Saint-Etienne-du-Rouvray. Inside, five people were attending a mass led by priest Jacques Hamel, 85. The assailants murdered Hamel by cutting his throat, and wounded another person, before they were both shot dead by police. The attack was claimed by Islamic State.

In May 2018, a 20-year-old man of Chechen origin killed one person and wounded four others in a knife attack on the streets of central Paris, close to the capital's Palais Garnier opera house, in an attack claimed by Islamic State, which was by then losing ground in the Middle East and with it the ability to organise its terrorist campaign in Europe.

Meanwhile, this year began with yet another so-called "low intensity" attack, on January 3rd. That was when Nathan Chiasson, 22, who converted to Islam and who had been receiving treatment for psychiatric disorders since the age of 5, launched a knife attack on passers-by in a park in the southern Paris suburb of Villejuif, reportedly shouting "Allahu Akbar", when he fatally stabbed a man and wounded two women. His first intended victim escaped attack after announcing he was a Muslim and reportedly cited a prayer. Chiasson was shot dead by police.

On April 4th, during the national lockdown on public movement to contain the Covid-19 epidemic, Sudanese refugee Abdallah Ahmed-Osman, 33, went on a knifing rampage in the southern town of Romans-sur-Isère, killing two people and wounding five others. He is the subject of an ongoing investigation into "muders committed in relation to a terrorist enterprise".

On February 3rd 2015, one month after the attacks in Paris that claimed a total of 17 lives, Nice was also the scene of an attack by a lone knifeman. Moussa Coulibaly, a French national who had recently been returned to France from Turkey, attacked three soldiers on guard duty outside a Jewish community centre and radio station. He wounded two of them, before he was overpowered. During questioning Coulibaly described himself as a "combatant for Allah". At his trial on terrorism charges in December 2019, when Coulibaly was sentenced to 30 years in prison, the public prosecutor described him as "a pioneer" of such lone, often off-the-cuff terrorist attacks in France which, he added, had become a "daily" threat.

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P.S.

• Mediapart. October 31, 2020:
<https://www.mediapart.fr/en/journal/france/311020/low-intensity-terrorism-targeting-france>

The original French version of this report can be found here: [Depuis quatre ans, en France, des attentats de « faible intensité » à très fortes répercussions](#)

English version, with some added reporting, by Graham Tearse