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Danish Islamist circles with an impact on the terrorist threat to Denmark

Summary

There are Islamist circles in Denmark which disseminate a militant Islamist ideology. These circles are especially found in and around major cities, and particularly in Copenhagen, Aarhus and Odense. The radicalisation often includes an explicit justification for using violent means in the fight against perceived enemies of Islam. Centre for Terror Analysis (CTA) assesses that there are a few hundred people who actively support a militant Islamist ideology in Denmark, and that the number of sympathisers is much higher.

CTA assesses that these circles actively engage in recruitment and radicalisation of young people in a militant Islamist direction. This is done by giving classes in certain mosques, at private locations and through social media. Some of the radicalisers involved in the recruitment of young people to these circles are known to the Danish Security and Intelligence Service from previous Danish terror cases. Since 2010, the Islamist circles have especially used social media to disseminate militant Islamist propaganda.

Radicalisers within Islamist circles increasingly use Syria as a platform for recruitment and radicalisation of young people, including for the purpose of sending them to Syria. A growing number of young men and women with links to the Islamist circles travel to Syria to engage in the armed fighting.

CTA assesses that some individuals within the Islamist circles share a militant Islamist ideology and intend to commit acts of terrorism in Denmark. CTA further assesses that some individuals from Islamist circles have obtained specific military skills during their stay in Syria, which can be used for committing a terrorist attack in Denmark or against Danish interests abroad.

A number of Islamist circles in Denmark are in contact with criminal circles, and there is an increasing tendency for criminals with ethnic backgrounds other than Danish to move in Islamist circles. CTA assesses that the close contact with criminals may ease the access to weapons, which can ultimately affect the threat to Denmark.

Islamist circles in Denmark

The Islamist circles in Denmark have gradually been built up since the 1990s. The first groups and networks were mainly based on the geographical origins of the members. These often had close contact to militant Islamists in the Middle East, South Asia and North Africa. Their activities were mainly focused on raising support, primarily financial, for militant Islamist groups in their countries of origin. A few distributed militant Islamist propaganda in Denmark. Since the end of the 1990s, individuals from the Islamist circles in Denmark have left for various conflict zones to engage in training or combat for militant Islamist groups.

After the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the United States, several members of the early networks turned towards al-Qaida's global ideology. At the same time, several of these individuals were given key roles within Islamist circles in Denmark, where they often functioned as radicalisers. Some of them are known to the Danish Security and Intelligence Service from previous Danish terror cases.

During the 2000s, the Islamist circles have evolved, and today there are militant Islamist groups within Islamist circles which actively pursue a militant Islamist agenda in and around major cities, and particularly in Copenhagen, Aarhus and Odense. At the same time, these circles have become more locally embedded, more visible and ethnically mixed. In addition, these circles are often in contact with like-minded circles and networks in other European countries. CTA assesses that a growing number of people from criminal circles, including gang-related circles, join Islamist circles which sympathise with militant Islamism¹.

CTA assesses that a few hundred people actively support a militant Islamist ideology in Denmark. In addition, CTA assesses that the number of sympathisers is much higher.

Recruitment and radicalisation

CTA assesses that the groups within the Islamist circles in Denmark are actively engaged in, and often co-operate to, recruit and radicalise individuals in a militant Islamist direction, including by means of social media and by seeking out places frequented by young people as well as in connection with classes and conferences

¹ CTA defines militant Islamism as an interpretation of Islam, where Islamic terms are used to legitimise the use of violence to achieve political or ideological objectives. Militant Islamism can not in itself be defined as terrorism, but may serve to justify the use of violence and may lead to militant Islamists committing terrorism.

with a militant Islamist content. CTA assesses that the conflict in Syria has become the focus of the groups' activities and that the groups actively engage in facilitation for Syria.

Radicalisation is carried out gradually by recruiting young Muslims, who are subsequently indoctrinated with a militant Islamist interpretation of Islam. The Islamist circles in Copenhagen, Aarhus and Odense use social activities, lectures and classes, sometimes at mosques, as a platform for attracting young people, whom they will subsequently radicalise further. The recruitment activities are sometimes – but not only – carried out in places frequented by at-risk youngsters.

CTA assesses that radicalisation is widely carried out by experienced individuals with authority within the Islamist circles. These main radicalisers are continuously supplemented by core members of the groups, including individuals who have returned from the conflict in Syria.

Radicalisation includes the use of militant Islamist rhetoric, including with a focus on perceived injustices and assaults to Islam, assaults on individuals who are seen as infidels or apostates and differences set up between Islamic and Western/Danish values. Radicalisation often includes an explicit justification for using violent means in the fight against perceived enemies of Islam.

The use of social media

Since 2010, the groups within the Islamist circles have increasingly used social media as a platform for disseminating militant Islamist propaganda.

The use of social media has helped accelerate the spread of militant Islamist propaganda as it has allowed for a quick distribution of more targeted, simple and dramatic messages. Local messages in Danish are combined with – often violent – videos from foreign militant Islamist groups. There has in the period been an increase in the number of sympathisers within Islamist circles and new, young members to the groups.

CTA assesses that these instruments – along with the other radicalisation activities – can add to the radicalisation of individuals in a militant Islamist direction and thus increase the risk that they may become ready to commit acts of violence, including terrorism.

Danish foreign fighters in Syria

CTA assesses that the groups within the militant Islamist circles carry out active recruitment and facilitation of individuals to the conflict in Syria. CTA assesses that at least 100 people have departed Denmark to engage in the conflict in Syria and that the vast majority of them are taking part in the fighting or staying with groups that are fighting, including militant Islamist groups. CTA assesses that the majority of the Danish foreign fighters in Syria are affiliated with Islamist circles in Copenhagen, Aarhus and Odense. At least 10 have been killed, including a few key members from the groups in Denmark.

CTA assesses that returnees from Syria use their special status to recruit new members to Islamist circles new foreign fighters to Syria.. CTA assesses that lengthy engagements in combat in Syria can make individuals increasingly prone to violence. Returnees who have taken part in the fighting or stayed with militant Islamist groups in Syria can also contribute to the further radicalisation of Danish militant Islamist groups and circles.

While the majority of those who have left Denmark for Syria are young men, CTA assesses that women within Islamist circles are increasingly actively seeking to support the conflict in Syria. They do so by distributing militant Islamist rhetoric on the internet and by encouraging others to travel to conflict zones such as Syria.

The threat to Denmark

CTA assesses that there are individuals and groups within the militant Islamist circles in Denmark who support a militant Islamist ideology which means that they could be ready to commit acts of terrorism in Denmark. Within the Islamist circles, and especially in the groups, a tough militant Islamist rhetoric is used, which focuses on the fight against the infidels and apostates in Denmark and abroad. These messages could be perceived as calls to commit acts of terrorism.

CTA further assesses that a significant number of individuals from Islamist circles have left Denmark for Syria, where they have gained specific military skills as a result of their training and fighting experience. These skills could be used to commit acts of terrorism in Denmark or against Danish interests abroad.

The large number of people who have left for Syria and the fact that a few key members have been killed in Syria have, at times, challenged some of the militant Islamist groups, including in their propaganda activities. However, CTA assesses that,

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overall, the groups are still able to carry out recruitment and radicalisation activities in Denmark, and that the capacity of the groups in this regard is continuously strengthened by returnees from Syria, who have often been further radicalised.

CTA assesses that there is an increasing tendency for criminals to move in or join Islamist circles which sympathise with militant Islamism. CTA assesses that returnees from Syria who have been in contact with militant Islamist circles in Denmark and who are also linked with criminal circles potentially have easier access to funds, weapons and explosives and may therefore pose a particular threat.