Assessment of the Terror Threat to Denmark

Summary

Centre for Terror Analysis (CTA) assesses that the terror threat to Denmark remains significant. However, the risk of falling victim to a terrorist attack in Denmark remains very limited.

CTA assesses that the active foreign and security policies pursued by Denmark, along with the Cartoon Case, form the key motivation for militant Islamists who wish to carry out a terrorist attack against Denmark.

The current threat picture is especially influenced by the conflict in Syria. CTA assesses that at least 90 individuals have left Denmark for Syria since 2012 and that a considerable number of these have acquired specific skills that can be used to carry out a terrorist attack. CTA further assesses that a considerable number of these individuals have links to militant Islamist groups that share the militant Islamist ideology of al-Qaeda and that this affiliation combined with the acquired skills may increase the terror threat to Denmark and Danish interests abroad.

Certain circles in Denmark pursue a militant Islamist ideology. CTA assesses that an increasing number of individuals are in contact with or join groups within such circles. CTA assesses that Danish Islamist circles are actively recruiting individuals to engage in the conflict in Syria.

Certain political extremist circles in Denmark are prepared to use violence. CTA assesses that there is a certain terror threat from individuals or groups who belong to such circles or who identify with their views and possibly create their own militant ideology.

A terrorist attack can take place without prior intelligence-based indications. CTA assesses that a terrorist attack in Denmark could be executed using easily accessible weapons such as stabbing weapons, small arms, incendiary bombs or small Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs). The increased presence of individuals with training, collaboration and combat experience from a conflict zone such as Syria increases the risk of swift and effective attack planning and execution.
Developments in the global threat picture

The global terror threat, and thus the terror threat to Denmark, is still primarily influenced by militant Islamist terrorist groups. The international counter-terrorism efforts have weakened the al-Qaida network in Pakistan/Afghanistan and put considerable pressure on al-Qaida-affiliated groups in Mali, Somalia and Yemen, where they have lost control over considerable areas of land. The ability of these groups to execute large-scale attacks against the West has been reduced. However, the ambition to strike against Western targets remains unchanged, also within the al-Qaida leadership. The affiliate groups are increasingly directing their focus towards local targets; with Western interests also in the line of sight. The September 2013 attack against the Westgate shopping centre in Nairobi, Kenya, serves as an example of this.

At the same time, militant Islamist groups have gained more latitude in parts of the Middle East and North Africa, where political turmoil has weakened the security authorities. New safe havens have emerged for training and terrorist planning, also against the West. In Libya, among other places, militant Islamists have been able to set up such safe havens.

The conflict in Syria is of particular relevance to the current threat picture in the West. The civil war in Syria is attracting a large number of individuals, also from the West. Al-Qaida-affiliated groups and other militant Islamist groups are actively involved in the conflict, and a large number of Westerners are joining their ranks. Many acquire skills which can be used to carry out terrorist attacks once they return from the conflict. The high number of foreign fighters from other countries in the region will also increase the terror threat to local and Western targets in those countries once the individuals go back.

The conflict in Syria has been conducive to a number of Islamist circles across Europe. The circles are recruiting individuals to engage in the conflict in Syria. In a few cases, members of such circles in Europe have been convicted of terrorist planning.

The Islamist circles are increasingly using social media as part of their activities and recruitment. Propaganda via social media is often more accessible and targeted than previous forms of propaganda used by militant Islamist groups, and therefore increasingly important to the dissemination of militant Islamist ideology, especially in the West.
Developments in the Middle East, including the conflict in Syria, may also increase the risk of attacks in the West, e.g. against Israeli or Jewish targets, by other groups and organisations that use terrorism as an instrument. There is also a risk that the sectarian elements of the Syria conflict will spill over into the region and to representatives of the affected groups in the West.

In both right- and left-wing extremist circles there have been examples of a continued will to use violence. In Europe, there have been several violent attacks against political opponents, people with differing views and state institutions. Right-wing extremist circles are increasingly focused on critique of Islam. Increased mobilisation among right-wing extremists could lead to counter reactions from left-wing extremist and militant Islamist circles. A mutual radicalisation process of this kind could increase the terror threat within Europe, including towards Denmark.

The Terror Threat to Denmark
CTA assesses that the terror threat to Denmark remains significant. This means that it is probable that there are individuals and groups with the intent and capacity to carry out a terrorist attack against Denmark. A terrorist attack can take place without prior intelligence-based indications. The ability to carry out a terrorist attack does not least depend on the national counter measures. The risk of falling victim to a terrorist attack in Denmark therefore remains very limited.

CTA assesses that the active foreign and security policies pursued by Denmark, along with the Cartoon Case, form the key motivation for militant Islamists who wish to carry out a terrorist attack against Denmark.

The conflict in Syria has attracted a considerable number of people from Denmark. CTA assesses that at least 90 people have departed Denmark for Syria since the summer of 2012. There is a certain degree of uncertainty surrounding this number and it may be higher. CTA assesses that the vast majority have been engaged in combat. The individuals are predominantly young men from Islamist circles in Denmark. There have also been examples of foreign fighters from criminal circles.

The fact that foreign fighters go to Syria or other conflict zones is not in itself an expression of intent to commit terrorism. However, a number of factors warrant the particular level of focus on travellers to Syria:
Never before have so many individuals from Denmark travelled to a conflict zone over such short time. The individuals who join this conflict are different from participants in other conflicts as they have a higher degree of ethnic variety, including Danish converts, and are younger and, thus, potentially more impressionable. CTA assesses that a considerable number of the foreign fighters have engaged in combat and acquired specific military skills that can be used to carry out a terrorist attack. CTA further assesses that the group of foreign fighters comprises a considerable number of individuals affiliated with militant Islamist groups that share the global militant Islamist ideology of al-Qaida. CTA assesses that this could bring about increased radicalisation, which, in combination with the acquired skills, could increase the terror threat to Denmark and Danish interests abroad.

Returnees from conflict zones, including Syria, who wish to commit terrorism may act on instruction from foreign terrorist groups, according to plans made in Denmark or at their own initiative. CTA assesses that the threat to Denmark may also come from foreign fighters from other European countries. A number of previous terror-related cases targeting Denmark have been planned abroad.

Certain circles in Denmark pursue a militant Islamist ideology. CTA assesses that an increasing number of individuals are in contact with or join groups within such circles. Recruitment for these circles is done actively, especially in places frequented by socially marginalised youths. Furthermore, the groups increasingly use social media such as Facebook and YouTube to recruit and to disseminate their ideology. While the Islamist circles are dominated by men, CTA assesses that women also play a role on social media.

Propaganda on social media rarely contains direct calls for terrorism. However, in publicised videos filmed in Syria in 2013, individuals associated with Islamist circles in Denmark have called for attacks "against the infidel systems" and for the killing of several Danes, identified by name. CTA assesses that the videos express the intent to conduct attacks against targets in Denmark.

CTA assesses that Danish militant Islamist circles actively recruit individuals to engage in the conflict in Syria. CTA assesses that individuals who have left Denmark for a conflict zone and return to circles with a militant Islamist agenda could pose a particular terror threat, especially if they have links to criminal circles.
Returnees from Syria with combat experience and links to militant Islamist groups in Syria may obtain a special status within militant Islamist circles in Denmark, through which they can help to promote radicalisation and retention within these circles.

CTA assesses that the conflict in Syria will maintain its appeal to individuals in Denmark. The development of the conflict – especially the possibility of continued rivalry between the militant Islamist groups – increases the risk that foreign fighters from Denmark will end up fighting other opposition groups and, in consequence, potentially other foreign fighters from Denmark, rather than the Assad regime. This could help dampen the interest in joining the fight in Syria.

While links to militant Islamist groups in Syria or other countries may influence people to commit terrorist attacks in Denmark, the terror threat to Denmark could also come from individuals and groups who are planning a terrorist attack at their own initiative and with no contact to international terrorist groups. Such individuals and groups could become motivated to carry out a terrorist attack as a result of social relations within militant circles or perceived injustices abroad or in Denmark. An individual will rarely commit acts of terrorism without prior radicalisation through social or internet-based contact.

International militant Islamist groups continue to call for planning and execution of solo terrorism with easily accessible means against unprotected targets. The 2013 terrorist attacks in Boston, London and Paris exemplify this approach. Such calls have the ability to influence people in Denmark and abroad to commit terrorism against targets in Denmark or Danish interests abroad.

The terror threat in Denmark is mainly directed against individuals and locations with affiliation to the Cartoon Case. It seems likely, however, that militant Islamists will increasingly take the initiative to identify other terrorist targets. This may include targets deemed to be of symbolic value, including military or other public institutions. It might also include easily accessible and unprotected targets. Experience from other Western countries shows that attacks against public transport systems or crowded places, e.g. major events with public access, have a significant psychological effect on the population. Islamist circles are increasingly directing threats towards individuals in Denmark whom they look upon as infidels, apostates or violators of Islam.
There are political extremist circles in Denmark which are prepared to use violence to promote their political agenda. The violence can be directed against political opponents and certain minority groups, state institutions, including the police and foreign embassies, as well as against private organisations and companies deemed to be of symbolic value.

CTA assesses that there is a certain terror threat from individuals or groups who belong to such circles or who identify with their views and possibly create their own militant ideology. Such individuals could become motivated by perceived injustices and/or inspired by terrorist attacks abroad. Left- as well as right-wing extremist circles have contacts with extremist circles abroad.

In terms of capacity to carry out a terrorist attack in Denmark, CTA assesses that:

- the capacity exists to carry out terrorist attacks using easily accessible weapons, including stabbing weapons, small arms, incendiary bombs or small IEDs that can be manufactured using commercially available products, and
- the capacity to use simple chemical substances for terrorist purposes can be acquired.

CTA assesses that the capacity to carry out complex terrorist attacks in Denmark, which require lengthy planning, large material expenses and multiple perpetrators, is limited. It is noted, however, that the increased presence of individuals with training, collaboration and combat experience from a conflict zone such as Syria increases the risk that an attack may be planned and executed quickly and with greater effect.. This risk increases if the individuals in question have access to weapons or explosives, e.g. as a result of their links to criminal groups.

CTA assesses that terrorist groups do not have the capacity to carry out targeted and destructive cyber attacks against IT and telecommunications infrastructure at a level where it would seriously affect Danish society, but that militant Islamist terrorist groups seek to acquire cyber capacity.

CTA assesses that terrorist groups do not have the capacity to carry out terrorist attacks using biological, radiological or nuclear material in Denmark.
The Terror Threat to Danes and Danish interests abroad

CTA assesses that there is a terror threat to Danish interests in countries where militant Islamist groups regard Westerners and Western interests as attractive terrorist targets. This is especially true for Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq, Mali, Niger, Libya, Syria, Somalia and Yemen and, to a certain extent, countries bordering these countries, such as Kenya. There is also a threat in countries where there is a high number of militant Islamists with experience from the conflict in Syria or other conflict zones.

As a result of the continued militant Islamist focus on Denmark, there is a particular risk that Danes and Danish interests may become targets of terrorist attacks or kidnapping in such countries if they are immediately identifiable as Danish. Information on country-specific risks is provided via the online travel guide of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Denmark (www.um.dk).

Danish diplomatic representations are symbolic targets which enable a direct strike against Denmark without attacking in Denmark itself. Although security has been tightened significantly in many locations, Danish diplomatic representations may also become targets of terrorism in the future as terrorists may perceive them as less secure and thereby more accessible targets than the diplomatic representations of other larger Western countries.

CTA assesses that there are still intentions among terrorists to strike against international airline traffic.

As a Dane, however, the primary risk of falling victim to terrorism abroad is being in a location that might be a local terrorist target, including places where many Westerners congregate, large crowds or large demonstrations.