The threat from solo terrorism and lone wolf terrorism

5 April 2011

Summary

Terror attacks carried out by individuals is no new phenomenon; however, it is noteworthy that in the past years several significant attacks or attempts at attack in Western countries like the United States, Great Britain and Denmark have been committed by individual persons.

Solo terrorism is characterised by the fact that the individual carries out an act of terror on his own. The individual may act either under instructions from other people or on his own initiative. The decisive factor is that the individual is or has previously been related to a terror group, has participated in radical networks or has been in a conflict area, e.g. in a training camp.

On the contrary, “Lone wolf” terrorism is characterised by the fact that the individual has no contact to terror groups (nor has ever had) or any other radicalised person and this individual acts entirely alone.

When it comes to solo as well as lone wolf terrorism, the individuals are typically inspired by militant Islamist ideologies, for instance acquired through the Internet.

Statements from al-Qaida in Pakistan and al-Qaida on the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) underline the relatively new strategic focus on so-called “individual Jihad” or solo terrorism as demonstrated by militant Islamist terror groups. In this connection it is the assessment of the Centre for Terror Analysis (CTA) that such calls may also inspire individuals to attempt to carry out an act of terror in Denmark with simple means.

In Denmark there have been two suspected solo terrorist attacks or attempts to carry out similar attacks in 2010 – the attack against the cartoonist Kurt Vestergaard on 1 January 2010 and the bomb at Hotel Jørgensen in the centre of Copenhagen on 10 September 2010.

CTA assesses that there is a higher likelihood for individual terror attacks in the West being carried out by solo terrorists rather than isolated lone wolf terrorists.
1. Background of this analysis
The purpose of this analysis is to describe the threat from solo terrorism and lone wolf terrorism against the West, including against Denmark.

Attacks carried out by individuals is no new phenomenon, however, it is noteworthy that in the past two years several attacks or attempts at attack in Western countries like the United States, Great Britain and Denmark have been committed by individual persons.

The analysis seeks to clarify whether this is an increasing trend. Likewise, this analysis shall describe the factors characterising solo terrorism, including examining the focuses of al-Qaida and AQAP on this area.

2. Definition of solo terrorism and lone wolf terrorism
First of all, solo terrorism is characterised by the perpetrator, as indicated by the term, carrying out the act alone, however, that the planning and possibly training to a small or great extent has been made together with other persons.

Two types of solo terrorism can be distinguished, though there may be no hard-and-fast boundary between the two:

- The perpetrator carries out the terror act alone but under instruction from another person or terror group. The individual has in varying degree contact to terror groups and/or radical environments and he/she might have participated in training camps or been in areas of conflict. The individual is not necessarily a formal member of a group or organisation but is in contact with other militant individuals until the time of the crime.

- The perpetrator carries out the terror act on his/her own initiative but has previously been in contact to terror groups and or radical environments; the individual might have participated in training camps or been in areas of conflict. These individuals can be characterised as solo terrorists simply because they have previously been in contact with other terror-related or radicalised individuals who may have affected the perpetrator. There is no established contact to other individuals prior to the time of the crime.

Historically, the suicide terrorists related to e.g. the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, in Iraq and Afghanistan typically act in co-operation with other persons and consequently in this connection will be defined as solo terrorists.
Solo terrorism differs from so-called lone wolf terrorism where the perpetrator also acts on his/her own. The concept “lone wolf” was originally introduced by the American white supremacists as a kind of request for making individual racist assaults. The concept has been inspired from so-called “leaderless resistance” which is a notion the American rightwing has made use of to ensure itself against the police unraveling entire groups.

A lone wolf terrorist has no contact to terror groups (not even historically) or any other radicalised individuals and consequently the individual acts completely isolated and without instruction from any other militant individual.

In general, it is extremely difficult for the police and intelligence services to unravel lone wolf terrorism because the individual in question typically does not communicate with other persons about his/her plans, nor is the individual part of radical networks.

When it comes to solo as well as lone wolf terrorism, the individuals are typically inspired by militant Islamist ideologies, among other things acquired through the Internet.

Table 1: Examples of solo terrorism in co-operation with other persons

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Event and Details</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Umar Farouk Abdulmutallah</td>
<td>Suicide bomb attempt against flight NWA 253 in Detroit on 25 December 2009 (USA)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Prior to the act he was in contact with AQAP (al-Awlaki)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Had presumably participated in a training camp in Yemen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- According to open sources, he received the bomb etc. from AQAP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Acted under instruction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faisal Shahzad</td>
<td>Times Square bomb on 1 May 2010 (USA)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Prior to the act, he was in contact with Pakistan Taliban</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Prior to the act, he had been in a training camp in Pakistan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Was inspired by and had been in e-mail contact with al-Awlaki</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Acted presumably under instruction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taimour Abdulwahab al-Abdaly</td>
<td>Bomb in Stockholm on 11 December 2010 (S)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Had possibly received bomb training in Iraq</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Possibly had a co-perpetrator</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Note: Only information available through open sources is stated.
Table 2: Examples of solo terrorism on own initiative

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Event</th>
<th>Details</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Abdulhakim Mujahid Muhammad | Shooting against recruitment office in Little Rock on 1 June 2009 (USA) | - Possibly participated in training camp in Yemen  
- Has not received support for the planning |

Note: Only information available through open sources is stated.

Table 3: Examples of lone wolf terrorism

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Event</th>
<th>Details</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nidal Hassan</td>
<td>Terror attack against Fort Hood on 5 November 2010 (USA)</td>
<td>- Presumably, he had no contact to other militant individuals (however, he was in contact with al-Awlaki, presumably only of an spiritual nature)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Andrew Ibrahim   | Terror plan against shopping centre (using a suicide vest) in April 2008 (UK) | - No indications of support  
- Presumably radicalised online |
| Roshonara Choudhry | Knife assault on British MP, 2010 (UK)                              | - No indications that Choudhry has received support for the assault  
- Was inspired by al-Awlaki's sermons |
| Arid Uka         | Shooting of American soldiers in Frankfurt Airport on 2 March 2011    | - No indications that Arid Uka had connections to terror groups  
- Was likely radicalised/inspired by the internet |

Note: Only information available through open sources is stated.

Furthermore, CTA assesses that there is a trend that primarily solo terrorists (and not lone wolf terrorists) are prepared to travel to other countries to carry out terror attacks and doing so by virtue of previous training, contacts in radical circles, etc.

3. The strategic focus on solo terrorism by al-Qaida and related groups

It is the assessment of CTA that within the past 12 months, al-Qaida has expanded its strategy to cover and also now to focus on small attacks carried out by solo terrorists.

Traditionally, al-Qaida, associated groups and terror groups like Lashkar-e-Tayyiba etc. have been focusing on large and spectacular attacks against the West. Among other things, the attacks have been characterised by the fact that several perpetrators
have been involved in preparing simultaneous attacks against various targets. Classical examples are: the terror attack in the United States on 11 September 2011 (19 perpetrators), Lashkar-e-Tayyiba’s terror attack in Mumbai in 2008 (10 perpetrators), the bombs against the American embassies in Nairobi and Dar Es-Salaam in 1998 (up to 20 perpetrators) and Lashkar-e-Tayyiba’s plans of attack against the Danish newspaper Jyllands-Posten in 2009 (multiple perpetrators).

However, in the course of 2010, it seems that al-Qaida has shifted focus. For example in March 2010, the American Adam Gadahn who is related to al-Qaida, specifically appealed to carry out solo or lone wolf terrorism. Inspired by Nidal Hassan’s attack on Fort Hood, Gadahn called for Muslims to carry out similar acts. Gadahn described Nidal Hassan as a “role model who had opened a door”.

In another statement from 22 October 2010, Gadahn talks about the “duty to carry out individual Jihad” and mentions “heroes” like Nidal Hassan, Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab and Faisal Shahzad.

Al-Qaida thus seems to supplement its traditional focus on complex operations with focus on individual attacks. The new sub-strategy can be considered an attempt to make the organisation more to the point and effective after having for a long period of time had limited possibilities for central planning as a result of the international efforts against terrorism.

4. AQAP and solo terrorism

It is the assessment of CTA that particularly the thoughts of Abu Musab al-Suri as well as his book “The Military Theory of the Global Islamic Resistance Call” from 2004 have contributed to the AQAP focusing on solo terrorism. Al-Suri is considered one of the most prominent ideologists in terms of the global “Jihadist” movement.

So far four quarterly issues of the English-language Internet magazine Inspire (with the exception of a special edition regarding the printer bombs from the autumn 2010) have reprinted several parts of al-Suri’s book regarding “the School of individual Jihad and small cells”.

Among other things, al-Suri lists a strategy for a global conflict in the form of resistance from small cells or individual persons (individual Jihad) compared to traditional guerrilla war. According to al-Suri, individual Jihad refers to operations carried out (sometimes spontaneously) by individual persons. The purpose is, among
other things, to confuse and overburden “hostile” intelligence services in order to avoid being unravelled by the security forces.

Besides the references to al-Suri, the AQAP Inspire magazines also include a related theme titled “Open Source Jihad”. This theme includes a number of practical guidelines for how as an individual without contact to established terror groups it is possible to contribute to the fight.

Consequently, it seems that Inspire focuses particularly on “individual Jihad” and encourages the individual to take action. If a person does not have the means or the contacts to established terror groups, he can, according to Inspire, easily choose to stay at home and contribute to the fight. Particularly Muslims in the United States and Europe are encouraged to carry out individual operations. AQAP even considers failed operations successful:

\[\text{With a few “failed” operations – as they claim – the director of national intelligence was forced to resign. With a few more “failed” operations, we may have the resignation of the President of the United States (The Inspire magazine, July 2010, page 33).}\]

In the spring of 2010, already before Inspire was launched, al-Awlaki praised the terror acts that were carried out by Nidal Hassan and Umar Farouk Abdulmutallap, respectively, in 2009. Al-Awlaki also specifically stressed the perpetrator behind the suspected terror attempt against the cartoonist Kurt Vestergaard on 1 January 2010.
Whether it is the heroic attempt of our Somali brother who broke into the residence of the cartoonist in Denmark, or the other attempts that followed or preceded him, the West will come to realize that when the honor of the Messenger of Allah is at stake, the dust will never settle down (19 March 2010).

5. Assessment
Within the past two years, there have been a number of solo terror attempts in the West. Most often, the attacks have been carried out by simple means like hand weapons, however, bombs have also been used. The targets have primarily been easy-accessible and unprotected places.

CTA assesses that there is a higher likelihood for individual terror attacks in the West being carried out by solo terrorists rather than isolated lone wolf terrorists.

Furthermore, CTA assesses that there is a trend towards it primarily being solo terrorists (and not lone wolf terrorists) who on the basis of their previous training, their contacts in radical circles, etc. are prepared to travel to other countries to carry out terror acts.

Statements from al-Qaida and particularly AQAP underline the militant Islamist terror groups’ increased strategic focuses on so-called “individual Jihad” or solo terrorism.

This relatively new strategy can be considered an attempt at making al-Qaida more to the point after a long period of time during which the organisation has been under pressure without having been able to carry out any major successful attacks.

In this connection, CTA assesses that the calls will also inspire individual persons – travelling to or residing in Denmark – with simple means to carry out a terror act in e.g. Denmark.