

A short commentary on the Manchester terrorist attack

Dr Dimitrios Anagnostakis, May 2017

Shortly after the terrorist attack in Manchester on Monday, the Islamic State claimed responsibility for it in its official channels "Nashir" and "Amaq" in the Telegram app. The group claimed that the terrorist operation was a retaliation for the attacks against "the lands of the Muslims", possibly referring to the anti-ISIS operations in Mosul. The emerging evidence suggests that the perpetrator travelled in Libya before the attack and possibly to Syria according to some sources. Though one cannot reach definite conclusions at this early stage there is a possibility that during these travels the attacker met with members and operatives or supporters of ISIS or the "al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb" group.

First, if the links with ISIS are proven to be true, then we can place the Manchester attack in a broader pattern in which the organisation tries to compensate for the territorial losses it suffers in Iraq and Syria by focusing its efforts on regional operations against "soft" targets in Western Europe. This is part of an effort of the group to maintain its legitimacy among its supporters, to sustain a flow of sympathisers, to compete with other similar groups (e.g., al-Nusra and Tahrir al-Sham), and in general to keep the caliphate movement alive. In other words, terrorist organisations have not only an external audience (Western societies in the case of ISIS) which they try to influence but also an internal audience which includes their followers and potential sympathisers. Therefore, this tactic of shifting the battleground and claiming responsibility for attacks and operations against the West can be seen as an attempt by ISIS to maintain its internal interests and its *raison d'être*.

Second, a question that emerged immediately after the Manchester attack was whether this plot was a "lone wolf" incident or a complex plot directed and supported from abroad. In practice, the boundaries between centrally orchestrated plots and attacks that are conducted by inspired sympathisers are not always clear. While these sympathisers may not cooperate and communicate directly with the ISIS leadership in Syria or Iraq they are often radicalised by propaganda material that is posted online by the terrorist group. In other words, the Islamic State has started to rely on a more networked mode of operations based on global franchises and affiliates (for example, Boko Haram in Nigeria) which openly pledge their allegiance to the cause of ISIS, on networked cells in Europe and elsewhere, and on radicalised individuals who conduct attacks in the name of the group. This networked mode has many advantages for the organisation: it is more difficult for law enforcement authorities to trace and detect terrorist cells which are loosely connected as contrasted with more hierarchical types of organisation. At the same time, this mode allows ISIS to promote its "brand name" more effectively relying on inspired attacks for which it is quick to take responsibility.

Third, the partially networked character of ISIS as well as its successful use of social media and various messaging applications place huge challenges for the law enforcement authorities. Preventing radicalisation and monitoring or controlling the cyberspace and online activities inevitably raise questions related to human rights and the balance between security and freedom. These challenges are compounded by the fact that many of the perpetrators of recent terrorist attacks in Europe are European citizens which makes their detection more difficult.

Fourth, the information that suggests that the perpetrator of the Manchester attack travelled in Libya highlights the external aspects of state's internal security: instability in the periphery of Europe can create a fertile ground for the establishment of safe havens by terrorist groups as in the case of ISIS and Libya. The civil war between the rival governments of Tobruk and Tripoli gave the chance to ISIS to establish bases, training camps, and a network of operatives in the area.

Finally, given the tactical aim of terrorists to sow fear among the targeted population and undermine the confidence of a society, counterterrorist strategies and tactics should be placed under the umbrella of the broader concept of societal security and resilience which Dr. Esther Brimmer has suggested. This holistic approach of societal security includes not only measures to prevent terrorist attacks, to reduce vulnerabilities, and to minimise the consequences if attacks occur but also the respect for and the protection of societal values. In other words, the fight against terrorism should be ultimately linked with and guided by the values that promote social cohesion and bind a society: democracy, rule of law and civil liberties, education, welfare, and pluralism.