

Terrorist or Loser? Reactions to the Terror Attacks in Copenhagen, February 2015

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News:

On 14th and 15th February 2015, Copenhagen witnessed a terror attack in the shape of the shooting of two civilians: one outside a freedom of speech event and one outside the synagogue in central Copenhagen. The perpetrator was killed by the police in the early hours of the 15th February.

Summary:

This news analysis takes as its point of departure the terror attacks in Copenhagen on 14th and 15th February 2015. After describing the factual details of the attacks, we shall take a closer look at the debate which followed the attacks in printed, visual and social media. The debate developed along three partially overlapping paths: first, similarities with the recent terror attack at the Charlie Hebdo editorial offices in Paris on 7th January as well as possible connections to Islamic State (IS) activity and foreign fighters returning from Syria and Iraq (the government's launch of anti-radicalisation and anti-terror plans were part of this debate); second, the personal life and experiences of the perpetrator emphasising his criminal record and the degree of his religiosity; and finally, possible connections between the perpetrator and the Islamist organisation Hizb ut-Tahrir. While the first and second strands overlapped and eventually faded out, the third continued to dominate Danish public debate for weeks.

Key Words:

Terror, Copenhagen shootings, Islamism, Islamic State, Hizb ut-Tahrir

Analysis:

On 14th February 2015, Omar el-Hussein shot and killed two civilians in Copenhagen. The first, Finn Nørgaard, was shot outside the community hall, Krudttønden, in Østerbro, Copenhagen. The second shooting took place later that night: A private guard, Dan Uzan, was killed outside the Jewish Synagogue in Krystalgade in the heart of Copenhagen. After the first shooting, a manhunt was initiated and it ended in the early hours of 15th February when el-Hussein was shot and killed in the Nørrebro area by the police. He died on the pavement after two officers had fired around 30 bullets at him – el-Hussein was wearing a bullet proof vest and ignored calls to surrender as well as shots aimed at his extremities.¹

The shootings on 14th and 15th February in Copenhagen were quickly labelled acts of terrorism due to the seemingly political motivation behind them.² Minutes before the first shooting, Omar el-Hussein uploaded a pledge of allegiance to al-Baghdadi, the self-acclaimed Caliph of Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, to a Facebook profile carrying his name. Since the attacks, politicians, scholars, journalists and members of the public have debated many aspects of the attacks and the perpetrator behind them; this news analysis takes a closer look at this debate as they unfolded in various media outlets. One strand of the debate concerned similarities with the recent terror attack at the Charlie Hebdo editorial offices in Paris on 7th January as well as possible connections with IS activities and foreign fighters returning from Syria and Iraq to Europe. Another

¹ Please find a reconstruction of events here: Hjort, Anders, *Politiken*, 3rd March 2015: <http://politiken.dk/magasinet/feature/ECE2553780/rekonstruktion-13-timer-og-27-minutter/> Last accessed 12th April 2015, and details about the shooting of el-Hussein here: Jørgensen, Jakob Stig, *Politiken*, 18th February 2015: http://politiken.dk/indland/fokus_danmark/fokus_terror/ECE2551690/betjentes-advokat-politiet-affyrede-mindst-30-skud-da-omar-el-hussein-blev-draebt/ Last accessed 30th March 2015

² Former Director of PET, Hans Jørgen Bonnichsen on defining el-Hussein as a terrorist in Andersen, Thomas Nørgaard, *JydskeVestkysten*, 16th February 2015: <http://www.b.dk/nationalt/tidligere-pet-chef-gerningsmand-er-en-typisk-og-moderne-terrorist> Last Accessed 30th March 2015

strand focused on social deprivation and its role in radicalizing young Muslims. The final and eventually dominant strand of debate concerned the possible involvement of Islamist organisations such as Hizb ut-Tahrir in inspiring young Muslims to commit acts of terrorism.

1: International Terrorism and Foreign Fighters

On 7th January 2015, the editorial offices of the satirical magazine Charlie Hebdo were attacked by two brothers who gunned down 14 journalists. The same day, a lone gunman shot two people in Paris, and the following day, another individual attacked a Jewish supermarket and took hostages. Together, the four terrorists provided insight into the diffuse dynamics of contemporary politico-religious terrorism. One of the two brothers had been loosely affiliated with al-Qaeda in Yemen, the other had served a prison sentence. Of the other two perpetrators – friends of the brothers – one was killed at the scene and turned out to be a familiar face to the police and both were well-known member of extreme Salafi-Jihadi circles in Paris. The partner of the supermarket hostage taker managed to escape, fled France and joined IS in Syria.³

The group of the four had, then, links to al-Qaeda, sympathy towards IS and criminal records. In the Danish debate following the Paris attacks, the involved complexity was often reduced to questions about the security threat represented by European foreign fighters returning from combat in Syria and Iraq and about border controls that could keep terrorists out of Europe. An obvious point was missed here: The perpetrators were French citizens living in France when they committed their deeds. Passport control at French borders would not have made any difference. Moreover, none of the perpetrators had been involved in fighting abroad. They were terrorists, but they were not foreign fighters.

³ See *BBC* and *DR* overviews for details of the Charlie Hebdo terror attacks:
<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-30708237>,
<http://www.dr.dk/Nyheder/Udland/2015/01/08/074837.htm> Last accessed 12th April 2015

When Copenhagen witnessed terror attacks in February 2015 – attacks that were motivated by a familiar mix of political and religious attitudes – speculations regarding possible links to international terrorism and foreign fighters were immediately aired.⁴ However, the Copenhagen shooter was born and raised in Denmark, he had a criminal record and he swore allegiance to the IS Caliph literally minutes before the first shooting. Thus, his organisational ties were very loose, his religious orientation uncertain and he was not a foreign fighter.⁵

As a response to possible spill-over from international terrorism, the government quickly launched two initiatives aimed at accommodating the threats posed from radicalised individuals and terrorism: On 27th January 2015, Minister of Justice Mette Frederiksen introduced the “radicalisation package” and in February, the “terrorism plan” saw the light of day. The plan targeting radicalisation consists of four overall measures and 12 specific initiatives addressing local authorities, prevent and exit tools, and mobilisation of civil society.

The dominant feature of the terror plan is increased funding for the intelligence services, both domestic and foreign, and protection of threatened individuals – totalling almost 800 mill. DKK (40/60 for domestic and foreign intelligence, respectively). Apart from this, the plan proposes to withhold passports of radicalised individuals and liberalise laws concerning surveillance of individuals considered to be either radicalised to the extent of taking up arms or involved in terrorism. There are some overlaps between anti-radicalisation and anti-terror initiatives, for example the targeting of radicalisation factors abroad and inside state institutions; prisons especially.

⁴ Ole Thyssen discusses the characterisation of the el-Husseini in *Politiken*, 18th February 2015: <http://politiken.dk/debat/ECE2550666/var-omar-el-husseini-blot-morder-eller-var-han-terrorist/> Last accessed 12th April 2015 On definitions of “terrorist” in Andersen, *JydskeVestkysten*, 16th February 2015: <http://www.jv.dk/artikel/1944778:Krimi--Bonnichsen--Gerningsmand-er-entypisk-og-moderne-terrorist> Last accessed 12th April 2015

⁵ Sheikh, Jakob portrays el-Husseini in *Politiken*, 16th February 2015: http://politiken.dk/indland/fokus_danmark/fokus_terror/ECE2548342/portraet-den-kvikke-og-antaendelige-mand-endte-som-terroristaenkt/ Last accessed 9th April 2015

Criticism of the terror-plan from civil rights movements focused on legislation jeopardizing civil liberties and increased surveillance, but the size of the budget as well as the distribution of sums to specific activities were never discussed. Criticism of the anti-radicalisation plan focused on the fact that the role of imams and the interplay and cooperation between faith community representatives and institutions was left out due to last minute political disagreement.

2: The Perpetrator

A second strand of public debate concerned Omar el-Hussein, his background and whether or not it made sense to label him a terrorist. Perhaps he was more of a looney with anger management problems? Perhaps his misconduct and previous violent excursions could be explained by boredom and a developing substance abuse? Perhaps he was merely unlucky to end up in prison? Perhaps he was subjected to radicalisation in prison? Initiated by experts, this debate was informed by journalistic work portraying el-Hussein, sociological analyses of previous terror cases and more general research on political extremist activism. It quickly became focused on two questions: the role of prisons in radicalisation processes and whether it was fair to blame “society” (i.e. failure of state institutions and social authorities) for facilitating radicalisation.⁶

Omar el-Hussein was born in Denmark to Muslim Arab parents from Jordan. He was a bright pupil and a talented Thai-boxer. Yet, he dropped out of school prematurely and engaged in gang related crime activities and substance abuse. In 2014, he was imprisoned for stabbing a young man. After his release from prison in January 2015, he approached social authorities asking for help regard-

⁶ Interview with Prime Minister Helle Thorning-Schmidt in Heinskov, Nilas and Klarskov, Kristian, Politiken, 21st February 2015:
http://politiken.dk/indland/fokus_danmark/fokus_terror/ECE2557128/thorning-om-terrorangrebet-jeg-blev-ti-aar-aeldre-den-nat/ Last accessed 12th April 2015

ing housing and finding a job. This was a week before the shootings. His request was rejected.⁷

The prison related debate was diffuse as no research has been done on Danish prisons since 2008. Journalists turned to prison staff and inmates for answers: Prison staff expressed feelings of inadequacies facing radicalisation issues, politicians suggested extended segregation of inmates secluding Muslim inmates at risk of being at either the sending or receiving end of radicalisation, while current inmates familiar with terror-convicted prisoners stated that segregation of prisoners according to type of crime or ethnicity would only worsen matters. The fact is that knowledge about individuals, social interaction and factors facilitating radicalisation in Danish prisons is limited. Looking to research and experiences from a British context, however, we know that prisons can facilitate exchange and development of extremist thought due to the given societal isolation. We also know that resourceful individuals – be they mentors, imams and teachers – play a significant role when former radicalised individuals explain what made them re-assess their politico-religious persuasions.⁸

3: The Islamism Link

The third strand of public debate in the wake of the attacks is by far the most familiar but also the least interesting. When it became known that the perpetrator had visited Hizb ut-Tahrir's al-Faruk mosque in Heimdalsgade the night before the attack, the Minister of Justice asked the State Prosecutor to investigate the possibility of banning Hizb ut-Tahrir. Similar investigations were con-

⁷ Jung, Eva and Dahlgaard, Mette reveal in *Berlingske* that el-Hussein sought help:

<http://www.b.dk/nationalt/omar-el-hussein-bad-kommunen-om-hjaelp-kort-foer-terrorangreb>

Last accessed 12th April 2015

⁸ Christmann, Kris: *Preventing Religious Radicalisation and Violent Extremism: A Systematic Review of Research Evidence*, Youth Justice Board, UK:

https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/396030/preventing-violent-extremism-systematic-review.pdf Last accessed 12th April 2015

Neumann, Peter: *Prisons and Terrorism: Radicalisation and De-radicalisation in 15 Countries*, International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation, King's College:

<http://icsr.info/wpcontent/uploads/2012/10/1277699166PrisonsandTerrorismRadicalisationandDeradicalisationin15Countries.pdf> Last accessed 12th April 2015

ducted in 2004 and 2008 did not result in a ban. In order to ban an association or movement according to the Danish constitution, it must be established that the given enterprise has violent means or aims. Authorities have not been able to prove this in the case of Hizb ut-Tahrir.⁹

So, why discuss a ban once again? One possible answer is: Because it was easier for politicians to fall back into a debate with well-known positions; a debate where it is relatively easy to sound critical, resolute and powerful in a constructive manner. Considering the complexity of the other debates regarding unknown enemies from within and without, it makes a lot of sense to bring the Hizb ut-Tahrir discussion to the fore. Predictably, Hizb ut-Tahrir willingly played their part. Already the day after the Copenhagen shootings, Hizb ut-Tahrir distributed a press release encouraging fellow Muslims in Denmark not to make a stance against terrorism and el-Hussein's deeds. They argued: 1) terrorism is not part of Islam, so Muslims should not feel obliged to defend their religion; 2) Danish society produced el-Hussein due to failed integration and general moral decadence and is therefore responsible – not Islam; 3) Muslims are always discriminated against – this is just another example. Furthermore, the organisation hosted several public meetings and organised a demonstration in Rådhuspladsen (city hall square in Copenhagen). During the period, the organisation's Media Representative Junes Koch featured in a portrait interview in the Danish daily *Politiken* and on TV in *Deadline* on 24th March. If anyone benefited from this debate, it was Hizb ut-Tahrir.

Conclusion: Missed Opportunities

These three strands of Danish public debate all contain interesting and important questions that the Danish society as whole could have benefitted from discussing. Had the first debate regarding international terrorism and legisla-

⁹ Please find the result of the two investigations by the State Prosecutor from 2004 and 2008 here: <http://www.justitsministeriet.dk/nyt-og-presse/pressemeddelelser/2004/rigsadvokatens-unders%C3%B8gelse-vedr%C3%B8rende-hizb-ut-tahrir>
<http://www.justitsministeriet.dk/nyt-og-presse/pressemeddelelser/2008/redeg%C3%B8relse-om-eventuel-opl%C3%B8sning-af-hizb-ut-tahrir> Both last accessed 15th April 2015.

tive responses led to discussions of the budgetary priorities, the skills and the mandates of the intelligence services, we would have learned something. Similarly, had the second debate about Omar el-Hussein's life and motivations involved discussions of information flows and communication between social authorities existing practices may have been improved. For instance: How was it possible that an individual that prison staff and social authorities recognised as a security risk was on in his own following his release? Did the police intelligence service (PET) fail to act on this information? What can the public reasonably expect in return for increased intelligence budgets? Any one of these questions would have fallen under the jurisdiction of the Minister of Justice. But rather than address just one – any one – of these questions Mette Frederiksen chose to re-open the discussion about banning Hizb ut-Tahrir.

El-Hussein was a terrorist and a loser. But in the end, we all lost: we missed an opportunity to discuss the gaps in an otherwise well-functioning social system and we failed to learn about the divisions in our society from the tragic events connected to the Copenhagen shooting.

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