Terror wave now targeting Europe ‘has not reached its peak,’ Ganor warns

Calls for EU body, though lone wolves hard to stop

By YAAKOV LAPPIN

The wave of terrorist attacks striking Europe is set to intensify, Palestinian expert Boaz Ganor warns. The growing number of jihadist atrocities in Europe has “unfortunately not yet reached its peak,” said Ganor, founder and director of the International Institute for Counter-Terrorism in Herzliya.

“Terrorist societies are not used to it. They will require resilience and skillful security forces,” he added.

At least 84 civilians were reportedly killed when a Franco-Tunisian terrorist rammed a truck into crowds, and opened fire in the French city of Nice on Thursday night. (Reuters)

The mass-casualty attack appears to be the work of a lone wolf, or a localized cell operating without outside support from ISIS, Ganor said.

“Such attackers are inspired by ISIS, but they are not necessarily activated operationally or directly supported by ISIS. If I had to make a calculated guess, I would say that this appears to be the situation here,” he said.

Ganor, who has been holding meetings with senior European and Middle Eastern security officials in recent weeks, said that the European Union’s ability to thwart terrorism is “only as strong as its weakest link. If one link is not strong enough, the entire chain of prevention is vulnerable. Europe is a chain, and weak link states endanger themselves and other states’ security.”

The European Union would be better equipped to deal with the threat by establishing an international counter-terrorism organization, Ganor said. This would enable the entire bloc to tackle terrorism in a unified manner, and carry out essential tasks, such as intelligence gathering, in the most efficient way.

“I am not talking about international cooperation, which is improving,” Ganor said. “But rather, about unified bodies that manage counter-terrorism,” he said.

Such an organization could gather open source intelligence on social media, and provide early alerts to all EU members on lone-wolf suspects, instead of EU member states gathering intelligence separately.

Alternatively, the EU would need to restructure national border controls, and conclude that “the current structure has failed,” Ganor said. Based on the Schengen Area [where border controls have been lifted] is unsuitable to the current threat,” Ganor said. That would constitute a fundamental change to a core EU principle, and Ganor said he does not envisage this happening any time soon.

In addition to lone wolf terrorists or local cells that are influenced by ISIS’s ideology, the threat of organized cells, sent directly by ISIS on jihadist killing missions – such as the attacks in Paris on November 13, 2015, which left 130 people dead – remains very much in place, Ganor said.

The terrorist organization has an interest in pulling off spectacular attacks in the West to divert attention from its losses in the Middle East.

“When ISIS activates sleeper cells, its members usually infiltrate the target country by moving in with waves of migration. Western ISIS members return to their countries to carry out attacks,” Ganor said.

ISIS is losing ground in Syria and Iraq, and it is still able to generate terrorism far from its caliphate, Ganor pointed out.

ISIS was once seen as a Middle Eastern regional problem, yet today, “the genie is out of the bottle. ISIS has outer rings of attacks... They have regional franchises, and in the Middle East, it is still able to direct attention away from its defeats, and replace them with success stories about distant terrorist rings, to prove that it is still a force to be reckoned with,” Ganor said.

Yoram Schweitzer, who heads the program on Terrorism and Low Intensity Conflict at the Institute for National Security Studies in Tel Aviv, said ISIS took a decision to strike European targets as far back as 2014.

“This is not necessarily linked to their current circumstances. It has been their basic strategy, to train Western operatives for attacks on the West, including in Europe,” he said. Schweitzer said the preliminary information presented by media reports from Nice did not provide a full enough picture that could answer the question of whether the terrorist was “directly activated by ISIS. If he was a lone wolf, it means he was not linked to ISIS’s campaign,” he said. “If we find signs of an activation, it becomes a different matter,” he added.

Should the latest attack spark civil conflict in Europe between the far Right and the Muslim community, as the head of France’s domestic agency warned might happen recently, such a development would play into the hands of ISIS, Schweitzer cautioned.

“The lone wolves and cells who carry out these acts have a goal of turning the whole of society against the Muslim community in France and in Europe... this is a response that will play into the hands of the Islamic State. The response should take the form of focused action against those who committed these acts, and not target the whole Muslim community, which would lead to more ISIS recruits,” he argued. Schweitzer said security and intelligence services are learning how to fight the war against terrorism, Schweitzer added.

Although the headlines, many terrorist plots in Europe have been thwarted, and many suspects are being arrested, Schweitzer notes. “The key word here,” Schweitzer added, “is training intelligence investigators, carrying out arrests, and launching investigations. The number of potential suspects there is very big. ISIS, like al-Qa’ida before it, is determined to wear out the security forces. France is shaking off the rust and going into this challenge,” Schweitzer said.

The large numbers of casualties in the Nice attack can be explained by the element of surprise, which was caused by the “monstrous size” of the truck used in the attack, Schweitzer added.

“This is a tourist area, and it was not prepared. It is hard to prepare for such a surprise. I am credited police were able to fire on the terrorist when they did,” he said.

Maj.-Gen. (res.) Yaakov Amidror, Israel’s former chief security adviser to Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and a senior fellow at the Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies, noted: “It is not too soon to draw conclusions on whether the attack was organized or not.”

“The only answer is to place weapons in the hands of good people who can respond. That is our solution in Israel,” Amidror said. “Lone attackers do not create a security problem. If a person wakes up and decides to kill, there is no intelligence on this. The only rapid response can be on the ground, by armed people.”

If an organized cell is behind the attack, and it took its time to prepare, “then they are dealing with a different kind of problem,” Amidror said.

**FRENCH SOLDIERS patrol a boulevard in Nice on Thursday night, following the terrorist truck attack that killed at least 84 holidaymakers. (Reuters)***

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