



# Jihadist terrorism in the EU: Past the tipping point point for vehicular attacks?

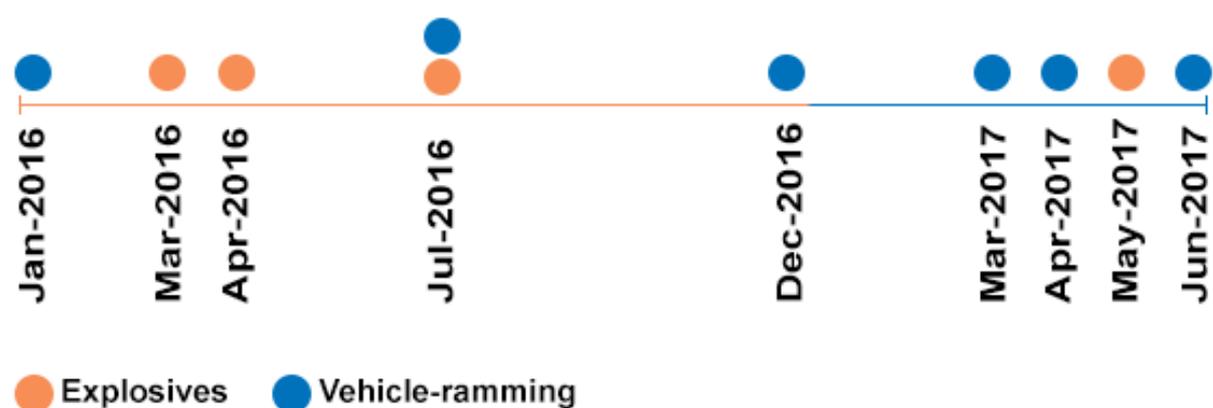
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## Jihadist terrorism in the EU: Past the tipping point for vehicular attacks?

Halfway through 2017, we have already witnessed several terrorist attacks across the European Union suggesting that despite ISIL’s heavy territorial losses throughout 2016 the threat has not diminished. Unfortunately, the predicted ‘possibility of more attacks against Member States of the EU in the near future’ (Europol, 2016, p. 6) is proving to be true.

Last year experts have concluded that ‘Islamic State introduced tactics of carrying suicide belts in mass-casualty attacks in the EU’ (Europol, 2016, p. 10). The events of the past six months, however, suggest yet another tactic has been introduced in the European Union as the transition from explosives towards vehicular attacks is becoming increasingly obvious.

Since January 2016, vehicle ramming attacks and attacks using explosives have occurred in France, Belgium, Germany, Sweden and the United Kingdom. The following chart depicts bombing and vehicle ramming attacks in the European Union from 1st January 2016 until 5th June 2017 that have been either directly or indirectly associated with jihadist terrorism. For the purposes of this article, direct association means that ISIL claimed responsibility for the attack or the attacker pledged alliance to ISIL (Singman, 2017; Troianovski and Buell, 2016), whereas indirect association means that despite no terrorism charges for the individual(s) who carried out the attack, links connecting them to jihadist terrorism were identified<sup>1</sup> (Grange, 2016; Worley, 2016).



A chart of vehicle ramming attacks in the EU from 1<sup>st</sup> January 2016 until 5<sup>th</sup> June 2017 that were directly or indirectly associated with jihadist terrorism.

<sup>1</sup> The list excludes the attempted vehicle ramming attack in Antwerp, Belgium on 23 March 2017 due to insufficient evidence linking the individual to jihadist terrorism (Bartunek, 2017).

It seems that using explosives is becoming the less preferred choice to vehicle ramming. There is a combination of several factors behind the rising popularity of vehicular attacks in the EU:

1. They are deadly. As demonstrated by recent events, ramming attacks have a very high chance of resulting in multiple casualties and injuries;
2. They require no expertise. Unlike employing cyber-attacks or using explosives, vehicular attacks require no special knowledge or skills;
3. They can be carried out single-handedly. Vehicle ramming attacks do not require a network of suppliers, enablers or coordinators, thus lowering the chance of alerting the authorities;
4. They are difficult to prevent. Due to their simplicity, they are likely to remain under intelligence services' radars;
5. They are affordable. Rental services provide quick and easy access to the necessary tools to anyone and the attackers do take advantage of this;
6. They allow for follow-up attacks. Both vehicle ramming attacks in London in 2017 have been followed up by stabbings. Furthermore, after the London Bridge attack, Molotov cocktails were found in the van<sup>2</sup>, clearly intended for a follow-up attack;
7. They have been promoted by ISIL on several occasions. Israel's experience from the past 21 months suggests that there is a direct correlation between incitement and terrorist activity (Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2017).

Vehicle ramming attacks, albeit relatively new to the EU, have been around for years. Between 13th September 2016 and 7th May 2017 there have been 58 ramming attacks carried out in Israel. They are currently the third most popular after stabbings and shootings and significantly more popular than using explosives (Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2017).

As the EU is witnessing the transition from explosives towards vehicular attacks, it would be wise to draw on Israel's experience in this regard. Undoubtedly, Israel's situation is very different from that of the EU. However, as far as the evolution of modus operandi and ratio of bombings to vehicle ramming attacks, EU Member States should prepare for the high likelihood of experiencing a similar scenario. The ever increasing focus of member states' intelligence services on terrorism related activities, as well as the recently established European Counter Terrorism Centre (Europol, 2017) will likely accelerate this transition from the 'resource heavy' explosives attacks towards less noticeable alternatives.

The obvious question presents itself - what can be done? Protective measures in form of physical barriers are often suggested. Such measures should primarily be employed to protect government buildings, strategic infrastructure and any other places

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<sup>2</sup> This should be a warning sign for the EU as Molotov cocktails (i.e. firebombing) satisfy most of the criteria listed above and are popular weapons often used in Israel (Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2017).

necessary for the proper functioning of a state, followed by protecting large gathering points and popular tourist destinations. London has recently addressed this by ram-proofing the Buckingham Palace as well as several bridges. Israel's experience, however, proves that while such measures are necessary, they are not a sufficient answer. Despite significant investments in protective barriers in vulnerable places (Sommer, 2017), the city of Jerusalem is still subject to ramming attacks (Lazaroff and Ahronheim, 2017).

As ram-proofing entire cities is unfeasible and soft targets seem to be ISIL's preferred choice (Europol, 2016, p. 6), it is clear that a dual approach is needed. In addition to barriers in key locations, interrupting and countering the process of radicalization will be vital in preventing vehicle ramming attacks in the coming years. The European Union is very likely to see an even more evident transition from using explosives towards vehicular attacks in the near future. In fact, the past several months suggest that we are already past the tipping point.

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