



Tomek Grząślewicz



Karolina Wojtasik, PhD
Institute of Sociology
Faculty of Social Sciences
University of Silesia
karolina.wojtasik@us.edu.pl

HOMEMADE TERRORISM

The driver of a bus on route 145 could not get through to the switchboard. When the vehicle stopped at a traffic light, he checked the contents of the bag and removed the suspicious package at the nearest stop. A moment later, the bomb, constructed and planted by a 22-year-old Pole, a student at the Wrocław University of Technology, exploded. Had it not been for the alertness of one of the passengers and the effective, though non-regulation, actions of the driver, many people could have been killed inside the bus in Wrocław on 19 May 2016. The research on terrorism conducted by Karolina Wojtasik, PhD, shows that danger may be much closer to us than we think.



'We often associate danger with something that comes from outside, in the form of a bearded man who speaks a language we don't understand', says Karolina Wojtasik, PhD. 'We forget that terrorism is a method of action, and that the radicalisation which may lead to violence is not necessarily linked to Islam or its ideology'. And while Islamist terrorist organisations such as Al-Qa'ida or ISIS are responsible for most of the attacks we hear about in the media, the 2011 attacks in Norway were carried out by a right-wing extremist Anders Breivik, a blond-haired and blue-eyed man.

One of Karolina Wojtasik's main areas of research is the analysis of the motivations and behaviours of the perpetrators of terrorist attacks.

'Breivik chose the youth of the Norwegian Labour Party – the children of politicians and entrepreneurs who

would be meeting in the hallways of major companies and ministries in a dozen years' time – as the main target of his attack in a very deliberate way. He shot not so much at the youth but at a symbol of Norway's future', the researcher believes.

Similar thoughts were shared by the perpetrators of the 9/11 attacks, who chose as their targets the symbols of US financial, political, and military power. This was an event that not only changed the course of modern history, but it was also a turning point for the history of terrorism. Passenger aircraft and hostages were used as tools in the attack, and the scale and number of casualties were shocking.

Terrorists most often strike in crowded places. Explosives at the finish line of the Boston Marathon (2013), a series of explosions and shootings in Paris (2015), coordinated bombings in Brus-

sels (2016), and pedestrians rammed by a truck in Nice (2016) are just a few examples. The last case shows that the attackers' methods are subject to trends. 'Terrorist organisations encouraged the use of large, heavy vehicles in attacks on civilians from around 2010. It was only a matter of time before such a tool would be used in Europe. The Nice attack was soon followed by similar incidents in Berlin and Barcelona', the researcher points out.

It is easy to notice that most of the above-mentioned attacks happened in the mid-2010s, when ISIS entered the international arena. The organisation is well aware of the importance of propaganda spread using new technologies and social media.

'Between 2014 and 2015, the internet was quite literally flooded with their creations, including music, videos, films, and jihadist press', lists Karolina Wojtasik, PhD, who researches Islamist publications. 'Until around 2018, they could be found online in gigantic quantities; nowadays, they tend to be rather in the areas of the internet which an ordinary person would not normally visit. Accessing these materials is more difficult now, as they are subject to censorship, and ISIS has far fewer resources to produce them than it once did'.

In jihadist newspapers, a militant can find tips on how to organise attacks.

'A few years ago, a newspaper for terrorists advertised its instructions for making improvised explosive devices under the following title: *Make a bomb in your mother's kitchen*', says Wojtasik, PhD.



According to ISIS guidelines, a jihadist should hold the hostages until the television crew arrives and shows what is happening to the entire world. They are also expected to be visible: write a manifesto and send it to the media. If they ram people with a car, then it would be good to have an ISIS flag on it. *We'll admit to it, we'll offer you the franchise, we'll spread the word, there won't be a slightest doubt about who did it* – this is the Islamic State's mindset. The approach to dealing with hostages has also changed, with the terrorists once treating them as an exchange currency and presenting their list of demands. Nowadays, they often pretend to negotiate, stalling for time until the media arrives. The attackers did engage in negotiations at the Bataclan theatre and at the club in Orlando, but their demands, such as stopping coalition airstrikes on ISIS positions in Syria, were impossible to meet. Their only goal was to extend the duration of the attack and increase its reach.

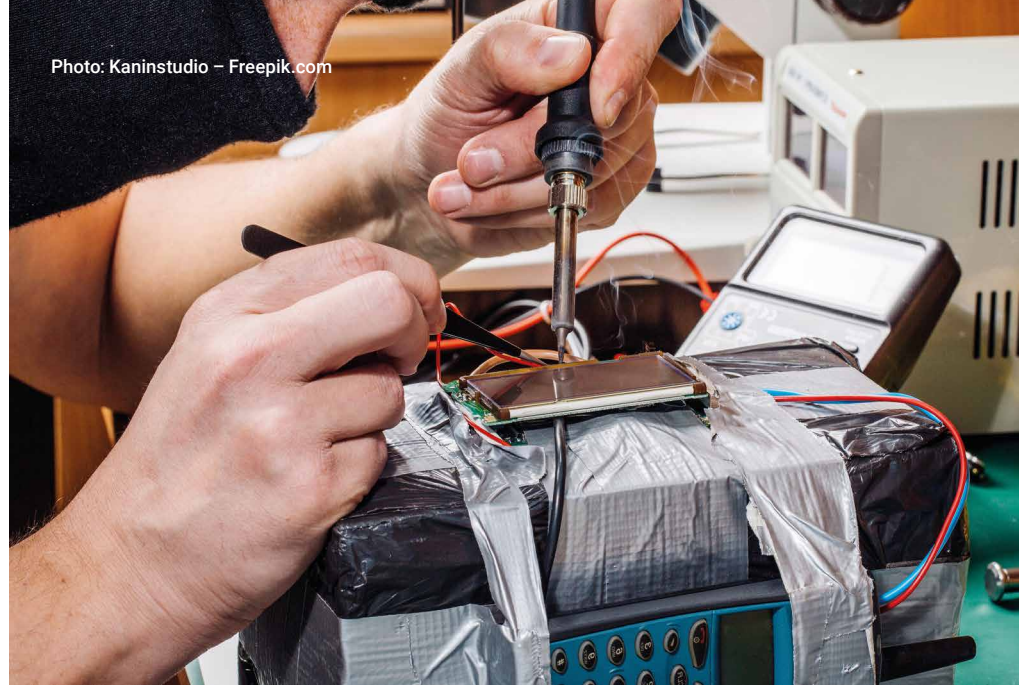
ISIS thoroughly analyses attacks carried out by its members or on its behalf. After the 2016 attack in Orlando, in which the attacker killed 50 and injured 53 people during a Latino night at a gay club, they concluded that the target chosen by the attacker was not great, because he could be accused of carrying out the attack due to his hatred of the LGBT and Latino communities instead of jihad.

What is the security situation in Poland? Following Russia's attack on Ukraine, in February 2022, the second-level BRAVO alert was introduced due to the increased threat of a terrorist-type incident and an even higher, third-level CHARLIE-CRP alert, addressing the high probability of a terrorist attack in cyberspace. What should we do?

'Live as usual, only pay more attention to what is happening around us, especially in public spaces', advises Karolina Wojtasik, PhD.

She also emphasises that too little attention in discussions on terrorism is paid to critical infrastructure.

'We rarely associate security with the fact that we have electricity, water, and



gas. Meanwhile, all it takes is a successful attack on a local power station, sewage treatment plant, or waterworks. Just imagine the chaos that would ensue in Kraków or Warsaw if a hacker broke into the systems in water treatment plants and prevented them from operating properly', says the researcher, who is trying to raise public awareness of terrorist threats, among others, through her YouTube channel called *Anatomia zamachu* [Anatomy of a terrorist attack].

In fact, it isn't even necessary to pollute or poison the water at all – a rumour is all it takes. Skilful disinformation on social media that the water in our taps is toxic posted by a thousand trolls on local media forums will momentarily cause panic: shops stormed and looted, people trampled. Those with somatic illnesses, nervous system disorders, cardiac diseases would be affected immediately. Ambulances, hospitals, and clinics wouldn't keep up. Confidence in the authorities would drop. Telephone lines would be jammed. The direct and indirect consequences of such an action could be severe.

Fortunately, not all incidents go as the attackers intended. The researcher analyses the mistakes and unforeseen issues capable of thwarting the most precisely planned attacks. In Brussels, five assailants were supposed to carry out the attacks at the same time, but the taxi company made a mistake and provided a vehicle that was too small,

with enough room for only three of them. This mistake most likely saved many lives. Anders Breivik, after nine years of preparation, simply overslept. In addition, he had problems with his internet connection, whereas part of his plan was to post a 1,000-plus page manifesto on the internet and send it to several people. The attack took place on a Friday: when Breivik arrived outside the government buildings to detonate the bomb placed in a truck, many people had already finished their week's work, thanks to which there were fewer casualties.

'Sometimes one event or another is decided by chance, but our security is not just a matter of blind chance', emphasises the researcher. 'Most bombings that occurred in Europe and the US involved someone leaving a package with an improvised explosive device in public space. When such an item was spotted in time and the relevant services were notified, the attack was usually prevented.'

In the Wrocław incident described at the beginning, the key factor was the intervention of a passenger who noticed that the bag might contain something dangerous. So if you see a piece of abandoned luggage in public space, call 112. Although in 99% of cases it will probably be nothing serious, in some situations you might just save someone's life.