

German Intelligence Describes a “New Quality” in Jihadi Threats

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Germany fears that it may have moved toward the top of al-Qaeda’s list of targets. An increasing number of messages on jihadi websites call for an attack on German soil.

Simultaneously, there seems to be a “new quality” in the Islamic propaganda, in the words of Heinz Fromm, president of the Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz (Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution, or BfV), Germany’s domestic intelligence agency. Messages and videos, including specific instructions for the building of bombs, are now directly posted to websites in German and in Arabic with German subtitles. According to Fromm, this strengthening of al-Qaeda’s internet offensive has been observed for the last year (Die Welt, February 8).

There is a consensus among members of the government and the intelligence community that the domestic security situation has deteriorated. “There are indications that, apart from the Sauerland attackers’ plans (see Terrorism Monitor, November 8, 2007), the odds are high that terrorists are working on several other plans,” declared Bernhard Falk, vice-president of the Federal Criminal Police (Die Welt, February 8). Last July, Interior Minister Wolfgang Schäuble warned: “We could be struck at any time” (Spiegel Online, July 9, 2007).

The main reason behind Germany’s new importance in al-Qaeda’s agenda is the presence of German troops in Afghanistan. A message published in the German-language internet forum of the Global Islamic Media Front calls for Islamist militants in Germany to act against their government (Die Welt, February 8). As part of the International Security

Assistance Force (ISAF), Germany currently has 3,200 soldiers deployed in Afghanistan, mainly in the northern provinces and the capital city of Kabul. On February 6, Germany committed to sending an extra 200 soldiers to Afghanistan, remaining under the maximum threshold of 3,500 soldiers allowed by a parliamentary mandate (Reuters, February 6). Although Germany has been a part of the NATO coalition in Afghanistan since the beginning, the specific threat against Europe and Germany has been growing in the past few months—most notably since Osama bin Laden’s message “To the Nations of Europe,” which called for attacks against European countries (al-Jazeera, November 29, 2007).

At last week’s Munich Conference on Security Policy, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates connected efforts in Afghanistan with the terror threat in Europe: “What would happen if the false success [the terrorists] proclaim became real success—if they triumphed in Iraq or Afghanistan, or managed to topple the government of Pakistan? Or a major Middle Eastern government?” he asked. “With safe havens in the Middle East, and new tactics honed on the battlefield and transmitted via the Internet, violence and terrorism worldwide could surge” (Reuters, February 10).

German officials are well aware that a great part of their country’s security depends on the situation in the border region between Afghanistan and Pakistan. Authorities are concerned about an increasing number of German nationals travelling to Pakistan to receive jihadi training in al-Qaeda’s camps. In March 2007, for instance, Pakistan’s Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) seized 29-year-old Nihad C. from Pforzheim and 30-year-old Michael N. from Oberhausen, both German-born. German investigators are convinced that Nihad was looking for jihadi training (Spiegel Online, March 14, 2007). The number of people involved in such “jihadi trips” remains relatively low, although it is expected to grow (Deutsche Welle, July 23, 2007); therefore, it is hard to talk about a real jihadi “network” in Germany. At the moment, it is instead more accurate to talk about individual initiatives.

Concerns about terrorism—and more specifically home-grown terrorism—are even greater since the release of a new study commissioned by the German Interior Ministry last December [1]. Based on interviews with 1,750 German Muslims, the authors conclude that radical Islamism is a more important factor in Germany than previously thought. The study finds that 40 percent of the Muslim population has a “fundamentalist orientation,” defined as strongly religious worldviews and moral values. More worrisome is the authors’ discovery that 14 percent have “anti-democratic tendencies” and 6 percent have “violent tendencies,” which includes supporting violence in the name of Islam. There are approximately 3.5 million Muslims in Germany, mainly Sunnis from Turkey.

At first glance, this study appears to contradict the results of a previous report from the BfV, which found that there are approximately 32,000 Islamists in Germany—accounting for one percent of the Muslim population—who pose a potential security threat (see *Terrorism Monitor*, April 12, 2007). Given that there was one year between the two studies, the discrepancies could be partly explained by al-Qaeda’s internet offensive and the “new quality” in jihadist propaganda. However, it is more likely that the discrepancies are due to different methodologies and criteria.

In order to cope with growing radicalization and the threat of home-grown terrorism, Wolfgang Schäuble advocates for changes in the Constitution. The German Minister of the Interior suggests offering more freedom to the intelligence, law enforcement and military communities. Some of his ideas include preventive detentions of suspects, the possibility of deploying Bundeswehr (national armed forces) troops within the country when necessary, targeted assassinations and the clandestine seizure of private computer data via “Trojan Horse” programs (*Spiegel Online*, July 9, 2007). Most of the population is reluctant to accept these measures.

On January 24, the Federal Administrative Court in Leipzig ruled that Germany's foreign intelligence agency Bundesnachrichtendienst (BND) could bug the telephones of suspected terrorists even when there is no immediate threat to Germany (Deutsche Welle, January 25). This decision cited a previous case where a man was sentenced to jail in Düsseldorf in 2005, based on a telephone conversation in which he was heard offering his services as a suicide bomber.

Another recent success story proves how internet monitoring is a key aspect of counter-terrorism efforts in Germany. On February 13, Thaer Alhalah, a 33 year-old Jordanian, confessed to a German court that he had participated in online discussions about setting up a training camp for terrorists in Sudan (North German Broadcasting, February 14). Three weeks earlier, alleged ringleader Redouane El Habhab, a 38 year-old German-Moroccan, had been sentenced to five years of imprisonment for setting up a terrorist network in Sudan and aiding an Iraqi group with links to al-Qaeda (Reuters, January 24). It was the first time that evidence had been obtained from phone calls via the Internet and used to convict someone in a German court.

Germany has had several successes in countering Islamist terror in the past years. However, the threat is growing and the intelligence services are requesting more power. At the same time, politicians and the media alike have voiced their concerns about Schäuble's proposals to modify the Constitution. In Germany, the memory of a regime sliding toward dictatorship is still very alive. The population does not seem willing to accept sending more troops to Afghanistan—a recent poll shows that 85 percent oppose additional deployments (Reuters, February 6). Hence, the government is unlikely to meet U.S. demands for an expanded mission despite a recognition that the security of Germany depends greatly upon the evolution of the situation in Afghanistan.

Notes

1. Katrin Brettfeld and Peter Wetzels, *Muslimen in Deutschland: Integration, Integrationsbarrieren, Religion sowie Einstellungen zu Demokratie, Rechtsstaat und politisch-religiös motivierter Gewalt*, Bundesministerium des Innern, July 2007.