

Selected Areas of Terrorism Threats with Relevance for Austria and the EU

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Policy Analysis

8 / October 2023



Österreichisches Institut für Internationale Politik
Austrian Institute for International Affairs

Selected Areas of Terrorism Threats with Relevance for Austria and the EU

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This policy analysis was produced as part of the cooperation between oiip and the Ministry of Defence.

Executive Summary

The policy analysis highlights the interconnectedness of right-wing extremist groups in the United States and Europe, the connection between populist parties and right-wing extremist organizations in Scandinavia and looks at terrorism in the Sahel region. It discusses the emergence of groups like Atomwaffen Division (AWD) and their affiliates in various countries, including Germany and Austria. Recent arrests and crackdowns reveal the presence of sympathizers and potential threats. The policy analysis emphasizes the need for vigilance, given the global nature of extremist ideologies and the potential for further incidents. Furthermore, the analysis explores the rise of right-wing populist parties in Scandinavian countries, highlighting their anti-immigration stances. It discusses instances where politicians have associated with neo-Nazi groups, raising concerns about extremist ties within these parties. The policy analysis underscores the implications of such connections for both politics and societal acceptance of right-wing extremist groups. In addition, the Sahel region is identified as a global epicenter of terrorism, marked by coups and increasing violence. The analysis highlights the challenges faced by governments in the region, including terrorism-related deaths, climate change, food insecurity, and population growth. It notes the shift of attacks from the Chad-Niger-Cameroon border to Mali-Burkina Faso-Niger, presenting a growing concern. The policy analysis also mentions recent activities of Boko Haram and other ISIS affiliates in the region. In conclusion, the analysis emphasizes that Austria must consider both domestic and global factors in addressing the evolving terrorism landscape. The interconnected nature of extremism requires a comprehensive approach.

- Transnational nature of right-wing extremism, with examples like the Atomwaffen Division (AWD) expanding to Europe. Through the internet and combined actions, such as training, right-wing terrorist groups in the US and German-speaking countries become more interconnected;
- Scandinavian countries, particularly the Nordic Resistance Movement (NRM), have close ties to right-wing groups in the US and Germany, fostering knowledge-sharing and raising concerns about the alignment of right-wing politicians with extremist groups;
- Attention needs to be shifted to the Sahel region as the growing epicenter of global terrorism. A high percentage of global terrorism deaths are now occurring in the Sahel region, marked by political instability and coup attempts. In addition, Geopolitical confrontation between Russia and the West takes place there.

Zusammenfassung:

Die Kurzanalyse beleuchtet die Verflechtung rechtsextremer Gruppen in den Vereinigten Staaten und Europa. Sie erörtert das Auftauchen von Gruppen wie der Atomwaffen Division (AWD) und ihrer Zweigstellen in verschiedenen Ländern, darunter Deutschland und Österreich. Die jüngsten Verhaftungen und Razzien zeigen, dass es Sympathisant:innen und potenzielle Bedrohungen gibt. Die Kurzanalyse unterstreicht die Notwendigkeit der Wachsamkeit angesichts des globalen Charakters extremistischer Ideologien und des Potenzials für weitere Vorfälle. Darüber hinaus untersucht die Analyse den Aufstieg rechtspopulistischer Parteien in den skandinavischen Ländern und hebt deren einwanderungsfeindliche Haltung hervor. Es werden Fälle erörtert, in denen Politiker:innen mit Neonazi-Gruppen in Verbindung gebracht werden, was Anlass zur Sorge über extremistische Verbindungen innerhalb dieser Parteien gibt. Die Kurzanalyse unterstreicht die Auswirkungen solcher Verbindungen sowohl auf die Politik als auch auf die gesellschaftliche Akzeptanz rechtsextremer Gruppen. Darüber hinaus wird die Sahelzone als ein globales Epizentrum des Terrorismus bezeichnet, das von Putschen und zunehmender Gewalt gekennzeichnet ist. Die Kurzanalyse hebt die Herausforderungen hervor, mit denen die Regierungen in der Region konfrontiert sind, darunter terrorismusbedingte Todesfälle, Klimawandel, Ernährungsunsicherheit und Bevölkerungswachstum. Sie stellt fest, dass sich die Anschläge von der Grenze zwischen Tschad, Niger und Kamerun nach Mali, Burkina Faso und Niger verlagert haben, was ein wachsendes Problem darstellt. Die Kurzanalyse geht auch auf die jüngsten Aktivitäten von Boko Haram und anderen ISIS-Organisationen in der Region ein. Abschließend unterstreicht die Analyse, dass Österreich bei der Auseinandersetzung mit der sich entwickelnden Terrorismuslandschaft sowohl nationale als auch globale Faktoren berücksichtigen muss, da der vernetzte Charakter des Extremismus einen umfassenden Ansatz erfordert.

- Transnationaler Charakter des Rechtsextremismus, mit Beispielen wie der Atomwaffen Division (AWD), die sich nach Europa ausbreitet. Durch das Internet und gemeinsame Aktionen wie z. B. Trainingsmaßnahmen, werden rechtsextreme Terrorgruppen in den USA und den deutschsprachigen Ländern immer enger miteinander verbunden;
- Skandinavische Länder, insbesondere die Nordic Resistance Movement (NRM), haben enge Verbindungen zu rechtsextremen Gruppen in den USA und in Deutschland, was den Wissensaustausch fördert und die Besorgnis über die Annäherung von rechtsgerichteten Politiker:innen an extremistische Gruppen verstärkt;
- Die Aufmerksamkeit muss auf die Sahelzone als wachsendes Epizentrum des weltweiten Terrorismus gelenkt werden. Ein hoher Prozentsatz der weltweiten terroristischen Todesfälle er-

eignet sich jetzt in der Sahelzone, die durch politische Instabilität und Putschversuche gekennzeichnet ist. Darüber hinaus findet dort die geopolitische Konfrontation zwischen Russland und dem Westen statt.

Keywords:

Terrorism Trends, Global Connections, United States, Sahel Region, Turkish elections

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Introduction

Nearly three years after the terror attack in Vienna in November 2020, terrorism of various ideological orientations remains relevant for Europe and indirectly also for Austria. At the oiiip, we maintain continuous updates on the actors and activities pertaining to right-wing terrorism and jihadism around the world, as part of the scenario monitoring for the Austrian Ministry of Defense. Out of the broader data collection looking at global terrorism trends and their implications for Europe and Austria, this short analysis focuses on two main trends identified in the areas of right-wing extremism and terrorism and jihadism. Those were chosen as they have a great threat potential for Austria and/or are often overlooked when engaging with current terrorism threats. We focus on the rise of right-wing terrorist groups in the US and their connections to groups in German-speaking countries, as well as evolutions in the political scene of Scandinavian countries and their connection to extremism. In the jihadi area of activities, the focus is on the political situation in the Sahel area and the impact of terrorist organizations on the ground, such as Boko Haram or other IS affiliates. All sections name specific implications and the threat potential for Austria and Europe.

Right-wing extremist groups in the US and Europe are increasingly connected

A phenomenon observed in recent years in the area of right-wing extremism has been its transnational nature: "In a globalized world linked by the internet, far-right extremism is not limited by geography. U.S.-based groups do not operate in a vacuum; many have varying degrees of interconnectedness with peer groups in other countries" (Stanford 2023a). An example of this phenomenon is the group Atomwaffen Division (AWD), founded in 2015 by Brandon Russel in Florida. As we will see below, this group did not just connect with others, but effectively franchised in Europe.

After its foundation, the AWD initially spread all over the United States in a decentralized structure, with local cells that have only a few members (Stanford 2023b). Since late 2019/beginning of 2020, AWD faced greater pressure from authorities in the United States and abroad. Eventually, in March 2020, the ideological leader and advisor of the group James Mason declared the disbanding of the group. However, in July 2020 members of AWD declared the reorganization of the group under the name National Socialist Order (NSO). It is still unclear who the current members of the terrorist organization are and if members such as Russel or Mason still play an important role (Stanford 2023b). In February 2023, Brandon Russel was arrested in connection with several attacks on electrical infrastructure in the US (Spiegel 2023). In Canada, in July 2023, an Ottawa man was charged with terrorist offences for his alleged involvement in the creation of propaganda videos for the Atomwaffen Division (Raycraft 2023). Between 2018 and 2020, following Russel's example, organizations emerged in Europe and Canada, adopted the AWD brand and started working as affiliates. Affiliated groups were the UK-based Sonnenkrieg Division, the Feuerkrieg Division with a presence in several European countries, the Northern Order operating in Canada, as well as AWD Germany and Russia (Stanford 2023b).

A number of terrorism-related incidents involving these actors in the US and Europe have been investigated. Back in 2019, an alleged member of a German branch of the AWD visited a training camp organized by AWD. The members of AWD that the German man visited and trained with were accused of planning the murder of a journalist (Geisler & Kamler 2022). In a high-level razzia in April 2022 in Germany, more than 60 flats belonging to more than 50 suspects were raided. The suspects are alleged members of right-wing organizations such as Atomwaffen Division, Combat 18, Knock-out 51 and Sonderkommando 1418 (Stark 2022). The investigation into the AWD group started in 2019 and all four groups are banned in Germany (Makuch & Lamoureux 2022). In 2023, a 21-year-old German received a juvenile sentence of three

years and ten months for attempting to found a terrorist organization and planning an attack under the cover of the Atomwaffendivision Germany. Since July 2021, he had been planning to set up an independent branch of the network in Hesse, following the US model (Lenze 2023). In Austria, in the course of a raid in May 2023, relevant evidence against a 20-year-old Viennese man was found. He allegedly belongs to the Feuerkrieg Division. The seized evidence consisted, among other things, of firearms, cutting and stabbing weapons as well as alarm firearms, objects with Nazi references and various data carriers. A weapons ban was imposed on the 20-year-old, but he is still at large (Chi 2023).

Another recent evolution in the right-wing extremist scene in the US has been the crackdown on the Proud Boys. The Proud Boys, deeply rooted in white nationalism, were founded during the 2016 US presidential election (Jensen, Yates & Kane 2022). In May 2023, former Proud Boys national chairman Henry “Enrique” Tarrío and members Ethan Nordean, Joseph Biggs, Zachary Rehl, and Dominic Pezzola were found guilty of seditious conspiracy. Tarrío was sentenced to 22 years in prison for his involvement in the January 6, 2021, storming of the US Capitol. He was found guilty of leading the failed plot. Ethan Nordean and Joseph Biggs, two of the far-right organization’s top lieutenants, received 18- and 17-year prison sentences, respectively. Zachary Rehl was sentenced to 15 years in prison and Pezzola to ten years. During the riot, Tarrío was not in DC but expressed his support for the attack online which was headed by Nordean and Biggs. Overall, members of the Proud Boys were at the front of the mob that entered the Capitol (Rabinowitz 2023).

The convictions of the Proud Boys’ members and the crackdown on organizations such as AWD always come with an intense media coverage in the US, which is then picked up internationally. The most worrying aspect in this case was the interconnection between the right-wing extremist groups, the average US citizens who joined the mob and politicians such as then-US president

Donald Trump who brought up the topic of the rigged/stolen election in the first place. The prison sentences the Proud Boys members received are relatively high, which might spark outrage in the right-wing extremist community in the next weeks. Even though these individuals will soon start their lengthy sentences, the support for these groups will not end with the incarceration of the leaders as there will soon be others either filling their ranks or imitating their actions. Considering this against the rise of right-wing extremism in Europe, such developments should serve as a wake-up call. Given the global media coverage of the storming of the US Capitol on 6 January 2021, it is particularly important to be vigilant as it can serve as an example for possible copycat acts in European countries.

Looking at other countries with close ties to right-wing groups in the US, it becomes clear that Scandinavian countries have to be mentioned. Neo-Nazi groups such as the Nordic Resistance Movement (NRM) (Sweden, Norway, Finland, Iceland and Denmark) also value their international outlook. Of particular interest to NRM are the US and Germany. They interacted physically with groups such as the NPD or the Third Path (III. Weg) in Germany. The connection to the US stays mostly online in form of airtime on podcasts such as the “Nordic Frontier” hosted by NRM which also features US right-wing individuals. This triangular interconnection makes all members “smarter” in their extremism (ADL 2022). Not only do extremists exchange information with each other, but another common feature is the shift to the right and the worrying closeness between right-wing politicians and neo-Nazi groups in the countries for which the Scandinavian case is now explained as an example. Since the 1970s, in all Nordic countries, apart from Iceland, Populist Right-Wing parties were formed and were even part of governments in Norway and Finland (Widfeldt 2023). The neo-Nazi group NRM made the headlines when the newly sworn-in Finnish economy minister from the right-wing populist party The Finns appeared in June as a keynote speaker at an event organized by the Nordic Resistance Movement

umbrella organization of the Coalition of Nationalists. The minister apologized for his presence after the appearance (Euronews 2023). In Sweden, after the election in the fall of 2022, the Sweden Democrats could for the first time influence the government through an agreement with center-right parties. Until the late 2010s, engaging in cooperation with the SD had still been refused by other parties due to their Nazi background and the extremist connections of the parties' founders (Widfeldt, 2023). Common to all Populist Right-Wing parties is their clear stance against immigration, which will become an even bigger problem in the next years, looking at the rising numbers of refugees and migrants. The clear connections that some politicians or the party as a whole have to right-wing extremist groups are therefore worrying. One recent example of the worrying growth in connection between populist parties and right-wing extremist organizations can be found in Austria. At the Identitarian movement's July 2023 demonstration in Vienna, the chairman of the Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ) youth organization and a member of the federal executive committee of the Alternative for Germany (AfD) Youth organization were present as speakers (Sulzbacher 2023).

The Sahel Zone is becoming the epicenter of global terrorism

In July 2023, Niger became the ninth country in West and Central Africa where a coup or attempted power grab has taken place in the last three years (Felix 2023). The affected countries are also the ones struggling most with terrorism. About 43% of the global terrorism deaths in 2022 took place in the Sahel region. In addition, the Sahel region is developing into a playing ground for geopolitical confrontation between Russia and the West (IEP 2023). Historically, two groups of terrorist actors were active in the Sahel region: local groups such as Ansar Dine or al-Mourabitoun who are today no longer active or were swallowed by transnational jihadist groups with links to IS or al-Qaida. The attacks of those groups mostly take

place in border regions where government control is weak and local leaders have a high level of autonomy and allegiances can shift quickly (IEP 2023).

The Sahel faces a number of other issues that are clear enabling factors for the growth of terrorist organizations, such as poor food security and water supply, and demographic pressures due to some of the fastest population growth rates worldwide. All of this is aggravated by climate change, but also the enormous resource wealth of the region, which attracts terrorist organizations and spurs intercommunal violence. Migration may be the solution for some, but it is also extremely dangerous due to the presence of terrorists and other criminal groups (IEP 2023).

Looking at the strategies and tactics that terrorist groups in the Sahel zone use, in 70% of the attacks, firearms are used as the primary weapons. This goes in line with the formation of several al-Qaida or IS franchises that started as local militias and later aligned themselves with these transnational terrorist groups (IEP 2023). In February 2023 the Nigerian military killed 133 Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) fighters in a raid in North-east Nigeria (Danmadami 2023). Due to the inflicted losses on ISWAP, a shift to using delivery drones for attacks in the Lake Chad Basin could take place in the future (Samuel 2023).

The year 2022 saw geographical changes in the location of the attacks which moved more across the Sahel zone and closer to coastal West Africa. While the previous hotspots were in the bordering region between Chad, Niger and Cameroon, deaths have intensified rapidly in the border region between Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger (IEP 2023).

Some of the extremist activities that were reported on in the last year were perpetrated by Boko Haram and other IS affiliates. Boko Haram attacks were reported from Borno and Yobe State (Nigeria) in March and April 2023 (Kola 2023, Maishanu 2023). Since March 2023, there has

been an increased use of improvised explosive devices (IEDs) by Boko Haram in the border region with Cameroon. Reasons cited include counterinsurgency operations conducted by the Nigerian Army and the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF), the recent elections in Nigeria, and clashes between the various factions of Boko Haram (Delanga 2023). Troops were deployed to Cameroon's northern border to stop Boko Haram attacks that have killed at least 12 people (Kinzeka 2023). In the area controlled by ISWAP (Nigeria, Niger Mali, and Burkina Faso), the population is estimated to be between 800,000 and 3 million (International Crisis Group 2022). In January 2023, 35 ISWAP fighters were killed by Boko Haram in a battle between the two rival terror groups that resulted in the dislodgement of ISWAP from two of its Lake Chad region enclaves (Abubakar 2023). Outside of the Sahel region, the Islamic State in Central Africa (Mozambique/DRC) claimed responsibility for an attack on an evangelical church in Kasindi, Democratic Republic of Congo in January 2023 (VOA 2023). In July 2023, ISCA claimed three attacks in the DRC and is suspected of being the mastermind behind a school massacre in Uganda (Zenn 2023). In an attack on a Christian village in Northern Mozambique, several people were killed and wounded in December 2022, it was later claimed by ISIS-Mozambique (Agenzia Fides 2023). While counter-terrorism operations in Cabo Delgado continue and high rates of defection are reported, IS celebrates a territorial expansion of the Wilayat Mozambique (Janes 2023).

As the countries in the Sahel zone are fighting ecological degradation and coup d'états at the same time, a hotbed for terrorist activities is created. Due to this political instability barely any active counter-terrorist action can be taken. As climate change will only aggravate the problematic situation further, action by Western countries, especially in light of Russia's influence in the region is very important. Conversely, if no actions are taken, people fleeing the Sahel zone will end up on

the shores of the EU in higher numbers than they have ever been seen before.

Conclusion

In conclusion, as Austria grapples with the evolving landscape of terrorism, it is essential to consider not only domestic factors but also global trends that can have a profound impact on its security. Right-wing extremist groups in the United States can indirectly affect the European Union in several ways. These groups can spread extremist ideologies internationally, potentially influencing like-minded individuals in the EU. Transnational networking and online communication allow for the sharing of tactics and propaganda between US and EU extremists. The rise of right-wing extremism in the US can inspire similar movements in Europe, leading to increased activity. Additionally, the impact extends to policy responses, security cooperation, and even policies related to immigration and refugees. The Sahel zone, marked by instability and terrorism, poses a significant concern, as the spread of extremist ideologies and illicit activities across this region can potentially have repercussions in Europe, including Austria. Terrorism in the Sahel region poses multifaceted challenges to the European Union. It represents a direct security threat due to the potential for attacks in Europe and contributes to irregular migration and refugee flows. The interconnected nature of extremism in today's world means that actions in one region can have repercussions beyond its borders, making it a global concern. Terrorist attacks can never be predicted with absolute certainty, which makes them difficult to combat. In addition to monitoring potential terrorists, it is therefore important to address the underlying causes of terrorism, understand and counteract the strategies of terrorist organisations.

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