



THE KNIFE ATTACK IN HAMBURG: LONE ACTOR VIOLENCE AND MENTAL ILLNESS

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 Von Martin

 Kommentieren

by *Francis Patrick O'Connor*

 This is a [cross-post with PRIF-Blog](#), who kindly allowed us to publish this post with them.

On the 28th of July, a 26 year old man, Ahmad A. launched a knife attack in a supermarket in the Barmbek area of Hamburg, wounding four people and killing one. He fled the scene of the attack before being forcefully apprehended by some bystanders. The attacker, a rejected asylum seeker, was understood by the police to have been recently religiously radicalised. Hamburg's Interior Minister Andy Grote explained that he was known to the police as an "Islamist but

not a **jihadi**” and was suspected of having psychological problems. **Prosecutors** have asserted that he had no known connections with any organized radical network or group and that he had planned on dying as a **martyr**.



Ahmad A. was of Palestinian origin and born in the United Arab Emirates. He had previously lived in Spain and Scandinavia where he had intended to attend university. After having a request for asylum rejected in Norway, **according to a cousin**, he sought to chance his luck in Germany in 2015. He had thus not recently fled a conflict zone, distinguishing him from many of his Syrian and Afghani contemporaries in the German asylum system. His asylum application had been rejected and he was awaiting identity papers from the Palestinian Authority to enable his deportation. Unlike many others whose applications are rejected he seemed content to leave Germany and had fully co-operated with the process. In fact, the morning of the attack **he had once again contacted the authorities** to enquire if his documents had arrived. In a 2015 interview, he had **unambiguously criticized** the attacks on staff at the Charlie Hebdo magazine. Accordingly, it appears that Ahmad A. relatively recently underwent a form of radicalization. In September 2016, he was evaluated by **the authorities** regarding suspected intentions of travelling to Syria; however it is not clear if he was subjected to any professional psychological assessment and police classed him as an individual with **psychological difficulties** rather than

somebody with clear extremist motivations. Ahmad A's fellow residents in a hostel for refugees had noticed **pronounced changes in his behavior**; he had stopped drinking alcohol, had begun praying regularly and chastised his neighbours for listening to music. Some even claimed to have seen an ISIS flag in his room, but the hostel management dismissed their complaints. Heretofore, he has not declared his affiliation to any particular terrorist group nor has any group claimed his attack.

ATTACK PREPARATION: BETWEEN IMPROMPTU ATTACKS AND DETAILED PLANNING

Forthcoming empirical research conducted by the **PRIME consortium** on Lone Actor Extremism has shown that attack preparation by lone attackers can vary from **years of detailed planning** with explosives and sophisticated munitions, to more **impromptu attacks** with improvised weaponry. Ahmad's case lies at the extreme end of the unplanned spectrum. He reportedly entered and exited the supermarket, briefly got on a bus before re-entering the supermarket, removed a kitchen knife from its packaging and began stabbing shoppers. This immediate pre-attack behavior would suggest that either he had last minute doubts about carrying out the attack or that it was indeed, completely spontaneous. This is not uncharacteristic behavior, a lone attacker who shot a number of American soldiers at a transport hub in Germany in 2011, had brought a packed lunch with him as he was unsure if he

would actually go through with the attack or continue to do his afternoon shift in his part-time job. The timing of the attack is also curious; numerous lone actor attacks are carried out by individuals when their efforts to go abroad to engage in collective jihad are thwarted. **Adel Kermiche** who beheaded a priest in Normandy, France, in 2016 had been stopped twice going to Syria, **Martin Couture-Rouleau** who conducted a run-over attack in Canada had been prevented from travelling to Pakistan and Syria after his family had warned the authorities. On the other hand, Ahmad A. was soon to return to the Gaza Strip, an area where he could easily have joined forces with numerous radical Islamist and jihadist movements. Finally, his target selection is relatively unusual. Unlike other attacks which targeted symbolically salient targets, such as **cartoonists** who had depicted Muhammed, or came in the wake of **calls for specific attacks** by groups like ISIS, he simply attacked a local supermarket which had no political significance nor would have likely resulted in significant casualties.

MENTAL ILLNESS: A PLAUSIBLE EXPLANATION FOR ATTACKS?

It has been well documented that there is a higher prevalence of mental illness among lone attackers than their group based terrorist **counterparts**. The process of movement recruitment usually serves to filter out potential militants suffering from conditions which could imperil collective plots. Lone attackers also have higher rates of mental illness than

the **general public**, notably so, regarding specific conditions such as schizophrenia and delusional disorders. But the presence of an underlying condition does not preclude lone actors having rational motivations – unpalatable or otherwise – and planning for an attack. However, correlation between mental illness and lone actor violence does of course not prove any form of casual relationship. Millions of people have an array of mental conditions, some combined with radical political views, and the overwhelming majority does not proceed to violence. Therefore, mental illness cannot be considered as a cause of political or religious radicalization, it can however play a role in the form that it takes, as part of a group or as a lone attacker, and in the type of attack and target selection. Additionally, there is a widespread tendency when analyzing Islamist attacks to emphasize the ideological motivation of the attack and to disregard the psychological condition of the attacker. On the other hand, more nuanced analyses of right wing lone actors, including their mental health are commonly advanced. With all the necessary caveats of not having access to their medical histories or in many cases even public declarations by investigating units regarding attackers' mental health, there have been a **few cases** where underlying psychiatric conditions seem to be the most plausible explanation for attacks. The shooting in Fort Lauderdale by a US army veteran in January 2017 seems a particularly strong example of this; the attacker **Esteban Santiago** claimed that the CIA was controlling his mind and making him join ISIS. On the basis of existing information, particularly his immediate pre-attack behavior, the case of

Ahmad's radicalization seems particularly intertwined with his deteriorating mental health.

PATHWAYS TO VIOLENT RADICALIZATION

The fact that Ahmad A.'s asylum claim had been rejected and he was due to be deported has led to much contentious debate in Germany, regarding the various responsible institutions' failings, especially as it followed the attack by **Anis Amri** in Berlin, who had been in a similar legal position. It would be foolhardy to draw any strong conclusions regarding the motivations of Ahmad until the police investigation has further progressed. The investigation will reveal if there was a degree of online radicalization and if he had any on- or offline ties with other radical actors. So far, **unlike the vast majority of lone attackers**, Ahmad A. does not seem to have had any ties with other radicalized individuals. However, the case does raise some interesting issues. Firstly, it draws into question, the authorities' categorization of suspects as either Islamist or jihadist as a means of calculating potential threat. This distinction seems to be based on the premise that radical behavior reflects radical political or religious beliefs. Yet, this has been refuted in much recent research on **ISIS militants** and the **Islamisation of radicalism** debate and other work which suggests that a **stable religious identity** can in fact, be a factor that inhibits violent radicalization. The assessment of suspected radicals' religious and political views and their relationships with

radical milieus should be considered in conjunction with their broader mental health as interrelated features of potential radicalization. Secondly, [articles on Ahmad A.'s background](#) have shed light on the difficult living conditions, faltering relationships with German authorities and poor mental health of many refugees and asylum seekers. Many have been psychologically traumatized by the environments they are fleeing, and have largely not received adequate support in Germany (and presumably also in other European countries). Initiatives such as the [collaboration](#) between the out-patient psychotherapy unit of the Braunschweig University of Technology, the state refugee reception center in Braunschweig and the City of Braunschweig should be encouraged elsewhere.

Lone actor radicalization is a deeply contextualized and relational process, incorporating the formation of ties (often weak or intermittent ones) with other politically radicalized actors in on and offline settings, cognitive processes whereby certain beliefs are internalized, non-political life crises, and of course individuals' psychological well-being. As a final comment, in order to avoid the further stigmatization of two relatively vulnerable populations (refugees and people suffering from mental illness), it is strongly recommended to make a considered use of language in public discourse when discussing the role of psychological illness and radicalization.



This blog post draws on the research (published and forthcoming) of my former colleagues in the [PRIME](#)

consortium. However, here I have presented my own views and they should not be considered as representative of the broader consortium. This project has received funding from the European Union's Seventh Framework Programme for research, technological development, and demonstration under grant agreement no 608354.



Francis O'Connor is a Senior Researcher at PRIF. He was a Post-Doctoral Fellow at the University of Aarhus (2016-2017), working on patterns of Lone Actor Extremist radicalization in the PRIME consortium. [[Twitter](#)]

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