

New Orleans Incident Brings to fore the Issue of Online Radicalisation and Lone-Ranger Terrorist Attacks

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Introduction

The tragic pickup truck mayhem in New Orleans and the subsequent explosion of a Tesla Cybertruck in Las Vegas once again brought to the fore that terrorist threats remain a deadly reality. There is no doubt that the New Orleans attack was intended to cause high casualties and it did. Meanwhile, the attack in Las Vegas, which resulted in the death of the driver and injuries to bystanders, was meant to convey a message as the vehicle used was manufactured by Tesla, owned by Elon Musk, and the venue chosen was a Trump Hotel.

Both attacks were premeditated, as indicated by advanced preparations. The attacker in New Orleans rented a vehicle, acquired firearms, and built explosive devices.

The Las Vegas attack also involved the rental of a vehicle, packing it with some form of explosive or incendiary material and detonating it at a symbolic location. As per reports, both attacks were carried out by a single individual, but presently it is not known if others were involved. While the attacks are coincidental, there was an apprehension that they could also be coordinated.

The Attacks

In the early hours of New Year's Day, a man drove a Ford pickup truck through throngs of pedestrians on Bourbon Street in New Orleans, leaving 14 dead and injuring at least 30 others as 'Celebrations' turned into 'Carnage'.¹ After crashing the truck, he emerged wearing a body armour and was armed with a rifle, but died in an exchange of fire with the police. The driver, Shamsud-Din Jabbar, 42, had been interacting online with Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS)-linked influencers and sites. The United States (US) President Donald Trump described the incident as an 'Act of pure evil'.

While the specifics of Jabbar's online interactions are not clear yet, the presence of an ISIS flag in his rental truck, in addition to early reports of videos that he posted promoting extremist content, indicate that he was radicalised online.²

Prior to the last few years, Jabbar appeared to lead a relatively normal life; as his personal life fell apart, he became further radicalised. On paper, he ticked all the right boxes—a born and bred American, he had studied at Georgia State University, was an Army veteran who had served in Afghanistan, and had worked with Accenture, Ernst and Young, and Deloitte. His status as a veteran is reminiscent of the attack by Major Nidal

Hasan who was a harbinger for the slow but steady increase in lone-actor terrorist attacks in the US, which forced the intelligence and law enforcement communities to re-evaluate counterterrorism processes and long-held assumptions about radicalisation within the US.³

The driver and lone occupant of the vehicle that exploded in Las Vegas has been identified as 37-year-old Master Sergeant Matthew Livesberger from Colorado, who was on leave from his base in Germany. His body was charred, and he was carrying two firearms. A highly decorated Green Beret, he had served twice in Afghanistan. He was in the Army from 2006 to 2011 and was in the National Guard for a year before rejoining the Army in 2012. A decorated US Army veteran, he was suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder and called the US government leadership 'Weak' and had written that the country was 'Terminally ill and headed towards collapse'. As per reports, there are no known links with any terrorist organisation.⁴

Using a vehicle that is easily available and converting it into a weapon by driving it deliberately into a crowd at high speed requires no special skill sets other than a 'Demented Mind'.

Vehicle Ramming Incidents

Vehicle ramming became a terrorist tactic in the 1990s when Palestinian drivers began targeting off-duty Israeli soldiers waiting at bus stops. Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad called for vehicle ramming attacks, which began to increase in the 2000s. By 2016, it had become the second-most common and second-deadliest form of attack in Israel. Both Al-Qaeda and ISIS exhorted their followers to carry out vehicle ramming attacks.⁵

In 2010, an online magazine published by Al-Qaeda suggested using a vehicle as a 'Mowing Machine' to mow down enemies. The article advised attackers to choose a pick-up truck, preferably with four-wheel drive, select a pedestrian-only location, aim for the crowd, and accelerate. The article also described modifying the vehicle by attaching steel blades to the grill to slice through its victims. Fortunately, none of the ramming attacks have seen such a modification.⁶

ISIS published a similar article in 2016, stating that the 'Crusaders' would be demoralised by 'Vehicles that unexpectedly mount their busy sidewalks, smashing into crowds, crushing bones, and severing limbs'. The article by ISIS appeared four months after the jihadist vehicle ramming attack in Nice, France, when a driver plowed a heavy cargo truck through a crowd watching Bastille Day fireworks, killing 86 and injuring hundreds on 14 Jul 2016.⁷

The latest attack took place on 21 Dec in Magdeburg, Germany, which killed five. German authorities say that the driver in that case shows signs of mental illness.

However, an analysis by RAND of the incidents, other than those in Israel, suggests that those involved in these attacks ranged from mentally disturbed individuals, extremists, to individuals inspired by jihadist ideologies, with attackers often displaying a mix of personal problems and ideological fervour. Unlike other forms of terrorist attack, most of which occur in conflict zones, most vehicle ramming attacks occur in Europe and the US.⁸

15 deaths (including the driver) in the New Orleans attack surpass the eight killed in the 2017 Bike Path attack in New York, which was also ISIS-inspired. Just about all of the elements of the New Orleans attack have been seen before—the use of a rental vehicle, an attack on pedestrians gathered for a public event, the additional use of firearms and explosives, and the driver being killed in a final confrontation with police. The vehicle explosion in Las Vegas also has ample precedents.

Analysis

Following their formal defeat by coalition forces in 2019, the Islamic State (IS) leveraged its technological expertise to establish a ‘Virtual Caliphate’, where disaffected individuals seeking community and purpose converge around the vision of a state governed by Sharia law under a Caliph. The virtual Caliphate has expanded rapidly, due to decades of border disputes, violent conflicts, and shifting refugee populations have left millions of Muslims without a clear national identity. IS’s virtual Caliphate offers them citizenship, free from terrestrial constraints, which can be accessed from anywhere in the world.⁹

The digital Caliphate signifies a new chapter in IS’s technological evolution, building on the virtual Caliphate by dissemination of ideas to the orchestration of action and violence through digital and technological means. In essence, the digital Caliphate bridges the proliferation of ideas with the execution of actions through digital tools.¹⁰

These kinds of attacks are the manifestation of Al-Qaeda strategist Abu Musab al-Suri’s concept of jihad through *Nizam la Tanzim* (system, not organisation) or ‘Leaderless Jihad’, where individuals throughout the world would take it upon themselves to conduct attacks against enemies near and far.

The New Orleans attack, like that earlier incident, underscores an important point: the IS’s ability to inspire acts of terror on the US soil through online propaganda and ideological influence remains alarmingly potent.

Conclusion

So far, the motives, funding, and details about collaborators are unknown but soon these will become clearer. However, the tendency to take comfort from the fact that the world has overcome such challenges in the past should not be a reason to be complacent and give in to the demands of terrorists and those behind them.

A lone wolf is far more worrisome and dangerous, as it is harder for security forces and the intelligence community to penetrate the operation itself. This is compounded further if the attacker is self-radicalised, receiving inspiration from and following a path laid out virtually.

It is almost impossible to protect every sidewalk and crowded place against a determined vehicle attack. That we have been here before and persevered is not a source of comfort to those fearful today.

The danger, however, is that there are many more who are susceptible to this kind of extremism. Hence, there is a need to remain vigilant against such forms of online influence operations. The flexibility of the internet is also being exploited to rewrite rules and narratives to suit the goals of those perpetrating violent terrorism. Unfortunately, for the world, terrorism is not fading away as a security concern and instead is continuing to spread in new ways.

Endnotes

¹ 'Death Toll Increases in New Orleans Truck Attack', 2025, Video, *NBC News* <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/new-orleans-killed-mass-casualty-bourbon-street-car-crowd-rcna185914>

² 'Experts React: What the New Orleans Attack Tells Us about Terrorism in 2025 - Atlantic Council', *Atlantic Council*, 2 Jan 2 <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/experts-react/experts-react-what-the-new-orleans-attack-tells-us-about-terrorism-in-2025/>

³ Ibid

⁴ Josh Margolin, Luke Barr, Matt Seyler, Aaron Katersky, and Ivan Pereira, 2025, 'What We Know about Cybertruck Explosion Suspect Matthew Livesberger', *ABC News*, 4 Jan <https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/cybertruck-explosion-suspect-matthew-livesberger/story?id=117271048#:~:text=The%20suspect%20who%20rented%20the,base%20in%20Germany%2C%20investigators%20said>

⁵ Jenkins, Brian Michael, Bruce R. Butterworth, Mineta Transportation Institute, and Transportation Security Administration, 2019, 'Smashing into Crowds – An Analysis of Vehicle Ramming Attacks', Technical Report SP 11-19, Mineta Transportation Institute <https://transweb.sjsu.edu/sites/default/files/SP-1119-Vehicle-Ramming-Attacks.pdf>

⁶ Jenkins, Brian, and Bruce Butterworth, 2025, 'Cold Comfort: The Latest Attacks on America Follow a Familiar Playbook', *RAND*, 3 Jan <https://www.rand.org/pubs/commentary/2025/01/cold-comfort-the-latest-attacks-on-america-follow-a.html>

⁷ Ibid

⁸ Ibid

⁹ Ibid, *Atlantic Council*

¹⁰ Ibid