Patterns **of terror**

Terrorism awakens fear and anxiety. We feel particularly helpless because the perpetrators' actions seem so incomprehensible. But there is actually a certain logic behind the actions of terrorist groups. **Carolin Görzig** and her group at the **Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology** in Halle have set themselves the task of discovering the rules by which terrorists act. Their findings are shedding more light on the enigma of terrorist plots.

TEXT **MECHTHILD ZIMMERMANN**

In the aftermath of the crime: police officers secure the location where a woman was shot in front of the synagogue in Halle. The perpetrator had planned an attack on the Jewish community.

Photo: Filip Singer/shutterstock

Halle (Saale), October 9, 2019. Noon. An armed man tries to enter the synagogue where the Jewish community has gathered for Yom Kippur, the highest Jewish holiday. The locked door resists his efforts; it could easily have been otherwise. The murderer then shoots a passer-by on the street and, a bit further on, a customer at a kebab shop. This was an act of terror, as the Public Prosecutor General of the German Federal Court of Justice would later describe the incident.

That same afternoon, at the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology – just one and a half kilometers from the crime scene – we have an appointment with the terrorism researchers to talk about their work. The key questions are: what motivates terrorists? How do terrorist groups develop? What ways out of violence are there?

But the city is paralyzed and the perpetrator is still on the run. The interview will have to take place another day. For now, our questions, more urgent than ever, remain unanswered.

ATTACKS ARE NOT RANDOM OR INDISCRIMINATE

Two weeks later, on the way from Halle train station to the Institute, the tram passes the kebab shop that was the site of the shooting on October 9. An elderly woman points to the closed snack bar, in front of which the people of Halle have laid out a carpet of flowers and candles. The woman sitting next to her just shakes her head silently. The topic being studied by the Max Planck Research Group "How 'Terrorists' Learn" has come hauntingly close to home.

"This proximity does indeed make a difference," says Research Group Leader Carolin Görzig. She has been conducting research into terrorist groups for the past 15 years and has been working on the subject with her team at the Institute in Halle for four years. "For me, the topic has always been intriguing, something that can be analyzed in order to understand the connections. But having it suddenly happen practically on our doorstep is a shock." Görzig knows colleagues who eventually turned to other issues because they could no longer bear the constant examination of violence and terror. "I think the more involved you become with the subject, the more challenging

it becomes to conduct research in this field," says Görzig. She has empathy for her interviewees, but is careful to maintain a professional distance.

This is fortunate for us, because without researchers like Görzig, terrorism would remain as much a mystery as ever. Contrary to popular belief, terrorists do not engage in rampages of blind violence against everything and everyone. Rather, their actions follow certain patterns, and it is possible to identify the logic behind them. Terrorist organizations plan and set themselves objectives, but they also have things they will not do and lines they will not cross. Another important question for Görzig and her team concerns the dynamics that unfold within a group and its leaders – dynamics that can even result in a renunciation of violence.

ATTACKS SHOW MEMBERS: "WE ARE DOING SOMETHING"

However, it is not always possible to identify clear patterns in the behavior of terrorist groups. Both the groups and the contexts in which they operate can vary significantly, even within Europe. This becomes evident when one considers how terrorism develops in the first place. As Michael Fürstenberg, a political scientist in Görzig's group, explains, one commonality is generally a sense of injustice. "Many terrorists feel like victims and see themselves as fighting against oppressors." That is why they never refer to themselves as "terrorists". They often form part of a mass movement with popular support, or at least that's how they see themselves. Often, the decision to sympathize with or even join a terrorist organization is also influenced by an individual's personal circumstances and the wish to belong.

In West Africa, especially in Niger and Nigeria, where the Islamist terrorist group Boko Haram is active, there are additional contributing factors: the terrorists there benefit from bleak prospects for the future among the local population, and from the weakness of the state. For many years, Florian Köhler, an ethnologist at the Institute, has been observing the situation on the ground for many years. "Initially, one of Boko Haram's strategies was to fulfill functions that the state was failing to provide. The group presented itself as a social movement, issuing microloans for example, which won them a lot of support." However, sentiments turned against the group as they increasingly resorted to violence against civilians.

Boko Haram's objective is to introduce Sharia law, the Islamic legal doctrine based on the Koran. The group also rejects democracy and Western-style education. In this respect, it resembles al-Qaida, the "Islamic State" (ISIS), the Taliban and many smaller groups of the jihadist movement, which operate in numerous countries around the world. These groups are so named because of the central importance they ascribe to jihad, which they interpret as the spread of Islam through armed struggle.

Thus, terrorist violence is generally not arbitrary. Fürstenberg emphasizes the great importance of political objectives. "In the case of ISIS, one could see how important the concept of the Caliphate was – also in terms of the group's 'branding'." But another central priority is often ensuring the continued existence of the organization. "The group must survive, spread and grow. Thus, the violence initially serves to legitimize the unit and, as it were, to bomb it into the public consciousness. An attack also demonstrates to its own members: we are doing something."

Thus, at the lower levels of these organizations, violence can become an objective in itself. The management level usually has more of an instrumental understanding of violence, notes Fürstenberg based on his observations of the al-Qaida terrorist network: "They have espoused a set of guidelines by legitimizing certain types of violence whilst clearly rejecting others. It was quite interesting that the leader of al-Qaida spoke out following the murders in Christchurch, when a right-wing extremist caused a bloodbath in two mosques. He demanded revenge for the deed in an audio recording, but explicitly refused to attack churches, suggesting that they don't do things like that; it's completely beyond the pale."

QUESTIONING THE NEED FOR VIOLENCE

In order to promote their mission, terrorist groups deliberately seek publicity. It's easy enough to find out what their objectives are. Fürstenberg explains: "There are a surprisingly large number of documents from terrorist groups, including books, pamphlets and letters. Or there are semi-public forums on the Internet in which terrorists exchange information." The research group uses sources such as these to gain insights into the inner workings of various organizations.

Research Group Leader Carolin Görzig has conducted extensive research into the Egyptian Islamist movement Gamaa Islamija, among others. The group actively engaged in terroristic activities from the 1970s to the 1990s. Members of the Gamaa Islamija carried out a massacre in an ancient Egyptian temple complex in Luxor in 1997, as a result of which the Egyptian state undertook a major crackdown against the group. Numerous leaders and thousands of followers were arrested, and many were killed.

While in prison, the leaders began to question their violent actions. "They came to realize that their means had become an end in themselves," Görzig explains. "And that this ran counter to their actual objective, which was to lead people in accordance with Islam." This self-reflection in prison was stimulated by experiences such as conversations with liberal and secular fellow prisoners.

Görzig analyzes this process of reflection using a concept developed by organizational researchers Chris Argyris and Donald A. Schön. According to this theory, if a company wants to develop further, it is not sufficient to look at individual decisions. Instead, it is also necessary to question the underlying routines and unwritten rules. In many companies, for example, mistakes are covered up rather than being addressed – thus making problems even worse. Managers therefore need to try to question and shake up such routine practices.

Görzig's findings suggest that the leaders of the Gamaa Islamija engaged in similar reflection processes, the results of which they recorded in several books. As she notes, their self-criticism is surprisingly far reaching: "They realized, for example, that as a leader, one can easily become reluctant to correct one's course for fear of losing followers or losing ground to competing organizations. And nevertheless, they reflected on their views and made a decision to renounce violence."

COMPETITION BETWEEN TERRORIST GROUPS

This is an important insight, Carolin Görzig thinks, with particular relevance for how negotiations with terrorists are conducted. "Anyone who demands that a terrorist group first completely abandon its objectives is essentially asking

Photo: Mohammed Elshamy/picture alliance/AA

Traces of terror: the Islamist group Boko Haram is known for its brutal actions in Nigeria. The group benefits from the weakness of the state. In its more peaceful early years, it even assumed functions that the state was not fulfilling.

Politics rather than violence: it is no coincidence that Nelson Mandela's picture adorns a wall in Belfast, Northern Ireland. The South African freedom fighter served as a role model for the IRA, an Irish Republican terrorist organization, when it abandoned violence in the early 2000s.

for complete surrender. Instead, negotiations should aim to encourage terrorists to reflect upon their means."

Self-critique by terrorist organizations is not as rare as one might think, as Görzig's findings have shown. The Irish Republican Army (IRA), a terror organization which fought for decades for the unification of the Republic of Ireland with the British-ruled Northern Ireland, similarly renounced violence at the turn of the millennium. In doing so, they in turn drew inspiration and guidance from the African National Congress (ANC). During the 1970s, this organization, whose most prominent leader was Nelson Mandela, also used violence to fight discrimination against the black population in South Africa. After the end of apartheid, however, the ANC transformed itself into a political organization. The IRA learned from the ANC that change can be achieved peacefully and that it is also possible to accomplish victories through political means. For example, the ANC representatives taught IRA members how they could implement a change of direction without losing their base.

DRONE ATTACKS HAVE FUELED VIOLENCE

As Florian Köhler reports, the Islamist terror group Boko Haram in West Africa has also engaged in internal discussions about the use of violence. "The comparison shows that the level at which such debates are initiated is of central importance. In the case of Boko Haram, it was resistance to leadership that resulted in the formulation of such ideas. The result was that the movement split and the core group became more radical."

Generally speaking, when a terrorist group becomes more moderate, this often results in an escalation elsewhere. A split into multiple groups is one possible outcome. Alternatively, some members may migrate to other organizations, Görzig reports. "There is always competition between groups striving for similar objectives. And they refine their profiles through their actions, as it were. They want to show their followers that they are on the right side."

For example, some Gamaa Islamija members switched to al-Qaida following Gamaa Islamija's deradicalization. And al-Qaida in turn expanded their activities by directing violence against their "distant enemy", the U.S., which eventually culminated in the series of attacks on September 11, 2001.

Violence can also escalate when a state responds to terrorist activities with massive countermeasures. According to the researchers' findings, the "War on Terror" declared by U.S. President George W. Bush following the September 11 attacks, and the numerous

Photo: alamy

civilian victims of U.S. drone attacks, especially in Pakistan, have been responsible for driving many young people into the arms of terrorists.

Thus, there is reason to believe that the spiral of violence will continue and that the Islamists will carry on their struggle. The research group sees one of the main problem areas as being the unresolved issue of how terrorists captured in Syria and Iraq can be reintegrated into society. There is no functioning state in Syria, and certainly not a situation of law and order that is capable of addressing the crimes in fair trials, punishing the perpetrators, and ultimately rehabilitating them. In Iraq, too, thousands are being held in camps and the state is overwhelmed. One thing that the researchers see as particularly problematic is the fact that European states are not prepared to take back any of their own nationals who have supported ISIS. "The next generation of jihadists is growing up right there," says Michael Fürstenberg.

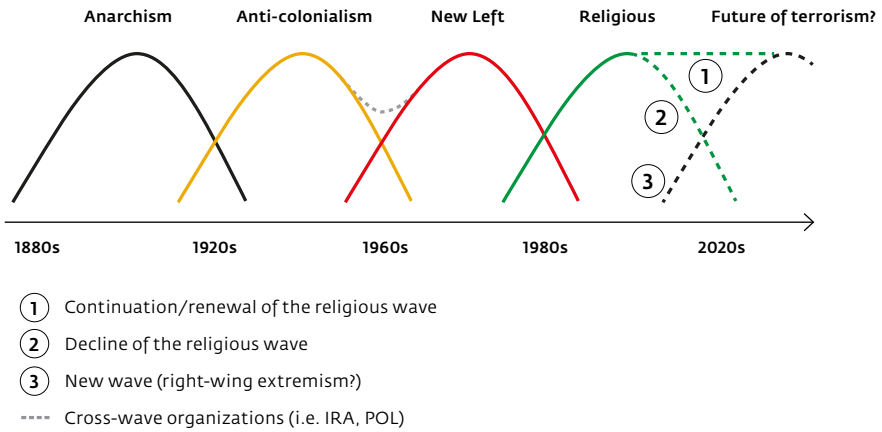
In July 2019, Carolin Görzig and Michael Fürstenberg published an article, based on a model by U.S. political scientist David Rapoport, in which they discuss how terrorism will likely develop in the future. Terrorism, according to Rapoport's model, has taken the form of four overlapping waves since 1880. The anarchist wave, which lasted until about the 1920s, was followed by an anti-colonial wave between the 1920s and 1960s. Then came the New Left wave from the 1960s to the 1990s, whilst the current, religiously motivated wave began in the early 1980s. According to Rapoport, the fact that each of these waves last around 40 years is due to a generational effect: terror waves peter out because their energy is not enough to inspire the younger generation to pursue their objectives. According to this thesis, Islamist terror should soon gradually begin to lose steam.

RIGHT-WING EXTREMISTS AS "LONE WOLVES"

Görzig notes, however: "Rapoport himself is skeptical as to whether the same rules apply to the end of the religious wave as to the ideologically motivated waves." One reason is that political developments usually contributed to the end of the previous waves. The objectives of the anarchists were at least partially realized by political upheavals in the wake of the First World War. The anti-colonial groups achieved their goals when the colonized states were given their independence. And the New Left became obsolete with the end of the Soviet Union. However, the Islamists have made little progress in achieving their objectives. "There is some evidence to suggest that the jihadist movement could succeed in maintaining the energy of the wave or transforming it into a new one," says Fürstenberg.

But both he and Görzig see another scenario as quite probable: a completely new wave of terror by right-wing extremists. There are already signs of growing violence from the right around the world, beginning with the series of attacks by the German terrorist group National Socialist Underground (NSU) between 2000 and 2007 and continuing with the attack on a synagogue in Pittsburg, U.S., in October 2018 and the terrorist attack on two mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand, in March 2019 – and, most recently, the attack in Halle.

However, in certain respects, the right-wing extremists differ substantially from the previous waves. For them,



The ebb and flow of violence: according to political scientist David Rapoport, terrorism has developed in a series of waves, each lasting some 40 years. It remains to be seen how the pattern will continue.

Graphic: Michael Fürstenberg based on Rapoport, D. C.; The four waves of modern terrorism; In: Attacking terrorism: elements of a grand strategy (Eds. Cronin, A. K.; Ludes, J. M.). Georgetown University Press, Washington, D.C. (2004)

Right at their doorstep: people bring flowers and candles to the synagogue following the right-wing extremist attack in Halle. For the researchers at the Max Planck Institute in Halle, it is a shock to suddenly be confronted with the subject of their topic so close to home.

violence is not only a means to an end, but an essential part of their ideology, says Fürstenberg: "They want to bring about a kind of civil war of whites against everybody else, a race war." The fact that many attacks are committed by lone perpetrators is also striking. In the early 1990s, the American neo-Nazi Louis Beam, a former member of the Ku Klux Klan, spread the concept of "leaderless resistance" among right-wing extremists, calling upon individual perpetrators or small groups to carry out attacks as "lone wolves".

A concept such as this is problematic for ensuring rule of law in Germany, because the legal definition of terror in this country requires a terrorist attack to be backed by an association comprising at least three people. The relevance of this definition is questionable in the Internet era, says Fürstenberg: "The traditional distinction between group and individual perpetrators cannot really be maintained, because the 'lone wolves' form part of a digital pack. Their ideological and tactical equipment is drawn from the online community."

Görzig also sees a clear connection between the increasingly aggressive language used by right-wing politicians and terrorist activities. "For example, rhetoric such as that used over and over by the AfD gives people the feeling that hostility against religious groups, migrants or political dissidents is acceptable, and in such a climate a few feel called upon to resort to violence."

The research group members are anything but happy to receive corroboration of their prognosis so quickly and almost right on their own doorstep. "We weren't trying to tempt fate with our prediction," says Görzig, "but the attack in Halle does make us think." The researchers are revisiting many ethical questions that they had already dealt with in workshops and training sessions in previous years. Are we focusing too much on the perpetrators and ignoring the victims? How much understanding can and should we show for the terrorists we are dealing with? Are we at risk of allowing ourselves to be used as propaganda tools?

However, the group does not want to simply sit by and watch as the new developments unfold. "We're planning to intensify our research into right-wing terrorism," says Görzig. Some of the group's findings on Islamist terror can be applied to right-wing extremists. Thus, insight into these patterns could perhaps also help to counteract right-wing terror. ◂

SUMMARY

- **Terrorists do not view themselves as perpetrators of violence, but instead see themselves as resisting oppression and pursuing political objectives.**
- **They see violence as a means to achieve these objectives. But violence also helps maintain the cohesion and public visibility of the group.**
- **In the past, terrorist groups have renounced violence when the leaders realized that these means were not appropriate for achieving their actual political goals.**
- **There are currently signs that a new wave of right-wing extremist terrorism is beginning.**

Photo: Hannibal Hanschke/Reuters