

Countering Terrorist Acts against Christian Places of Worship

by Katalin Pethő-Kiss

Abstract

Christian places of worship have been recurring targets for violent non-state actors since at least the late 1990s. To reach a realistic understanding of this threat this Research Note has scrutinized a sample of 26 attacks, looking at nine parameters. Important lessons can be drawn from incidents by looking at mortality rates, weapons used, perpetrator motivations, preventative and reactive measures taken—including spontaneous defensive actions taken by victims or bystanders. The objective of this Research Note is to identify specific security challenges Christian communities face. Suggestions are made on how to enhance existing security arrangements and how to arrive at a more effective security regime.

Keywords: Christian places of worship, soft targets, target hardening, religion

Introduction

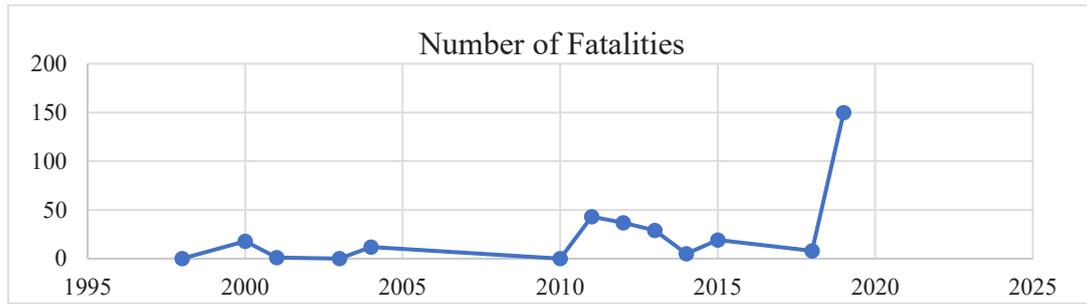
Places of worship long and widely considered sacrosanct, have become attractive targets for terrorists. Between 1998 and 2019 there were 30 terrorist attacks targeting synagogues,[1] 482 on Muslim mosques,[2] seven on Hindu temples[3] and 70 on Christian churches.[4] These acts of violence offer excellent opportunities to inflict fear and cause a number of civilian casualties. As soft targets[5] religious sites with their spacious layouts,[6] have vulnerabilities that can easily be exploited. As places with a large concentration of people but with limited protective measures in place,[7] houses of worship can provide significant chances to maximize casualties without the need for sophisticated planning and preparation. Additionally, attacks directed at houses of worship receive wide media coverage, which is often the main objective of terrorists. By examining the circumstances of violent acts on Christian churches, this Research Note aims to achieve a better understanding of the threat.

With this in mind, this Research Note quantitatively assesses a number of attacks on Christian places of worship that occurred between 1998 and 2019. Violent acts targeting individual religious leaders remain outside the scope of this exploration. Information from the Global Terrorism Database (University of Maryland) has been used to select cases. The main factor in selecting the examined 26 incidents was the availability of detailed-enough information. No geographic restrictions[8] have been set for this Research Note. In an effort to better understand the modus operandi of the perpetrators, the incidents were examined along nine dimensions, one of these being the number of people killed.

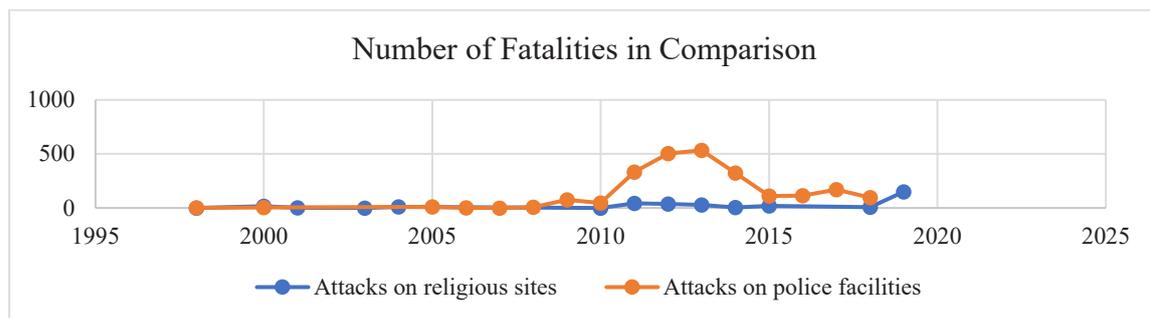
Number of Fatalities

The first graph represents the number of fatalities in attacks on Christian houses of worship. When examining the graph, the most apparent peak refers to the coordinated Islamic terrorist suicide bombings in Sri Lanka at Easter time in April 2019, whereby 150 persons died at two Christian churches.

The number of victims varies according to several factors, including the level of sophistication of the attack and prior surveillance, which can lead to a substantial increase in the number of casualties. Sequencing bomb explosions, for instance, increases the level of fatalities. Ideology underpinning such violent acts also determines how fatal an attack can be. Certain extremist groups content themselves with setting churches on fire while others seek to kill worshippers.



The graph below provides a comparison between the number of fatalities in attacks on houses of worship and those on a better-hardened target, namely police stations.[9] As can be seen, in 2009 the mortality rate in plots against police stations increased dramatically. There may be various reasons for this. Firstly, this peak coincides with the operational surge of Boko Haram (BH) and Tehrik-i-Taliban (TiP) in Nigeria and Pakistan. Both groups were highly active between 2011 and 2015[10] and police stations were one of their primary targets. Secondly, in most of these attacks the blast happened outside the police facilities (in front of the building or targeting mobile police convoys), substantially diminishing the effect associated with the hardened nature of such places. And thirdly, plots against police personnel have become highly attractive for various terrorist groups that want to project an image of strength. In addition, undermining the capabilities of law enforcement agencies increases feelings of public insecurity.



Modus operandi, ideological background and the timing of incidents all play a role in determining the level of fatalities, with Easter and Christmas being times requiring enhanced preparedness.

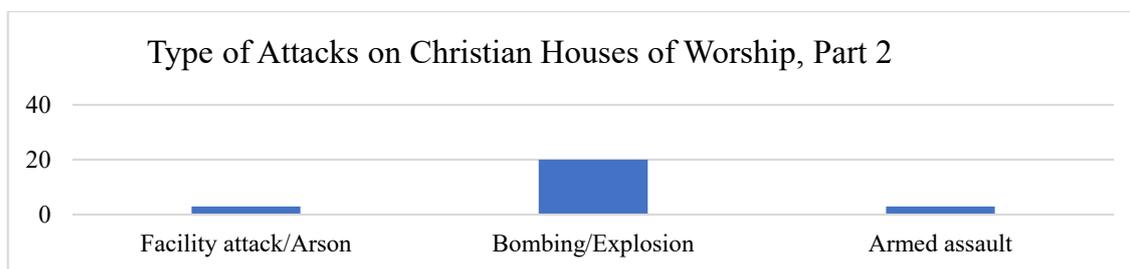
Typology of Attacks on Christian Sites

The first chart below distinguishes between attacks outside Christian religious sites (outdoor) and incidents where perpetrators managed to force their way into a church (indoor). As the bar chart illustrates, outdoor strikes make up the overwhelming majority of incidents. This indicates that most perpetrators tend to opt for safer ways to attack by staying outside the place of worship, reducing the risk of being caught. It is less common for an attacker to enter a church and confront the target audience at close quarters (e.g. with a bladed weapon). [11]



The next chart differentiates attacks on religious sites based on the perpetrators’ modus operandi. Bombing was the most common practice. Various operational benefits of explosive devices explain this trend. Firstly, it meets extremists’ operational objectives of drawing public attention, inducing fear and at the same time causing mass casualties. Secondly, when deploying an IED controlled from a distance, perpetrators can ignore the risks associated with entering the church. This does not apply for suicide bombings.[12] At the opposite end of lethality are arson attacks.[13] All three arson incidents in the sample occurred in Northern Ireland and were committed in pursuit of loyalist (Protestant) objectives.[14]

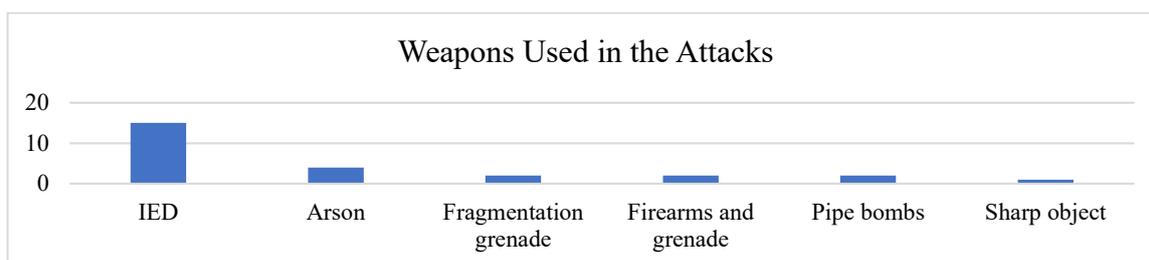
Attacks inside a church were driven by a range of presumed motives, including personal thirst for revenge, rage (a sudden wave of emotions) or mental disorder. The latter was the case in St. Lucia, where the sanity of the assailants were questioned in the subsequent criminal proceedings.[15] The assailant attacking churchgoers with a sword in Yogyakarta turned out to be a lone wolf, who was striving to prove his commitment to jihadist ideology after failing to become a member of ISIL.[16]



What emerges is that terrorists tend to prefer outdoor attacks. Therefore, the surrounding environment of places of worship need to be integrated as well in security plans for religious sites. Since bombing was predominantly chosen in the incidents analysed, it is highly advisable to raise the awareness of staff and congregations regarding suspicious objects placed in or near churches and develop protocols for handling such incidents.

Weapons Used in the Attacks

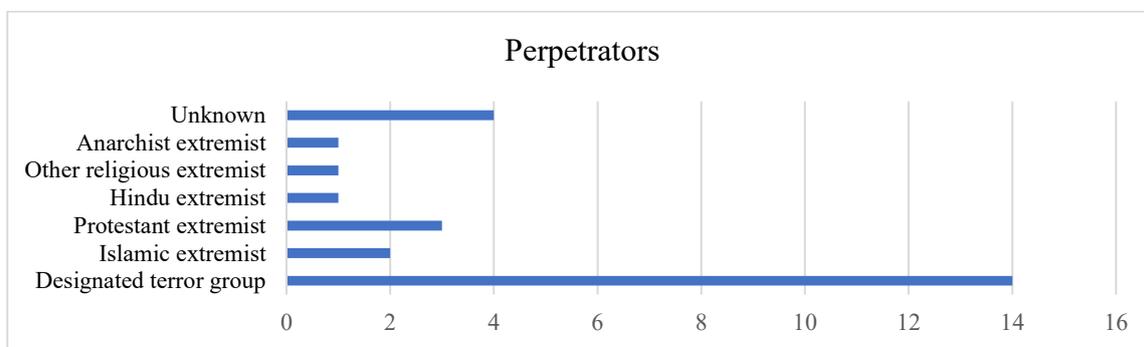
Explosive devices are designed to destroy or damage structures and incapacitate people.[17] Due to the difficulty to obtain military explosives, Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs) have become the weapon of choice for most terrorists. A wide variety of ingredients for the construction of IEDs are available. The commercial availability of dual-use products, together with practical instructions on the Internet on how to construct explosive devices substantially increase the prevalence of more or less primitive IEDs. Using an IED in an attack offers various operational advantages for the offenders, including staying at some distance from the target while having remote control of the device and its timing. In the following graph, a separate column has been created for pipe bombs, as it is much easier to construct this type of IED. It indicates also that the perpetrator has a low level of operational expertise. A fragmentation grenade is thrown by hand and therefore requires greater closeness to the target audience.[18] Assaults involving firearms and bladed weapons were committed only in three out of the 26 investigated incidents. As indicated above, Protestant extremists in Northern Ireland were responsible for all three church arson incidents.[19] Their targeting clearly reflected the focus of their wrath.[20]



The weapons used in incidents reflect on both their technical capabilities and their ideologies. A better understanding of arms acquisition constitutes an elemental factor in any risk assessment process. Taking into consideration that IEDs were deployed in the vast majority of the 26 incidents examined, there is an obvious need for training on detecting such devices. Signs left behind by the perpetrator can be identified with developed observation skills.[21] Advanced detection techniques can assist in the identification of offenders despite camouflage attempts. Pre-operational surveillance actions are usually crucial for perpetrators; at the same time, these can be noticeable for observant churches’ staff.

Perpetrators and Their Motivations

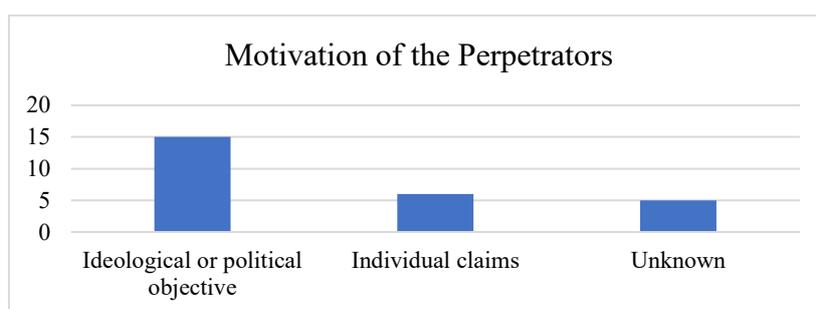
Religious extremist ideologies motivated the majority of cases in our sample. In 14 out of the 26 incidents, a designated Islamic terrorist group claimed responsibility for the attack. Islamic extremists not belonging to a proscribed terrorist organization were the perpetrators in two other plots.[22] Other religious extremist ideologies inspired only a very small number of attacks. While Protestants[23] used intentional violence in three incidents, Hindu extremists and Rastas were responsible for one each.



It is notable here that in roughly 15% of the incidents perpetrators remain unknown. In these four cases there were no fatalities and the damage to the churches caused by the blasts was minor.[24]

In the vast majority of the examined cases, the cause that motivated the terrorists was related to their ideological and/or political objectives. Targeting Christian places of worship reflected sectarian violence,[25] Irish nationalism,[26] Hindu extremism[27] and Islamic terrorism[28] as well as extremist ideologists of sects.[29]

There were, however, four cases when an individual claim—outside, or only partly related to a terrorist organization’s political or ideological objective—provided the rationale for a plot. In these instances, special claims (a demand for the release of jailed comrades,[30] perpetrators’ beliefs,[31] a search for a hiding suspect[32] or an extortion demand[33]) constituted the reason for the acts. In the remaining two cases, lone actors’ idiosyncratic claims[34] explain their motivation.

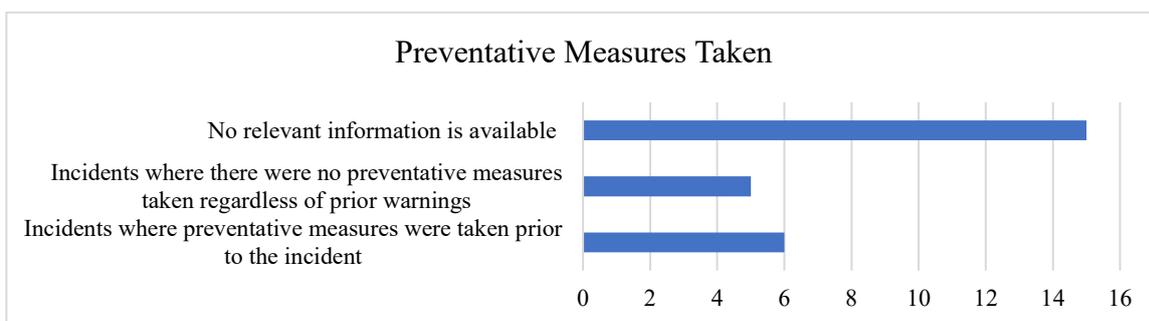


To better understand the risk posed by violent extremist groups, it is of great importance to know more about the ideological objectives used to justify their actions. Exploring their ideological perspectives can help to better evaluate certain rogue entities and determine the associated risk. Risk is contextual[35] and ideological doctrines are essential components of this context. At the same time, scrutinizing prior attacks allows for a

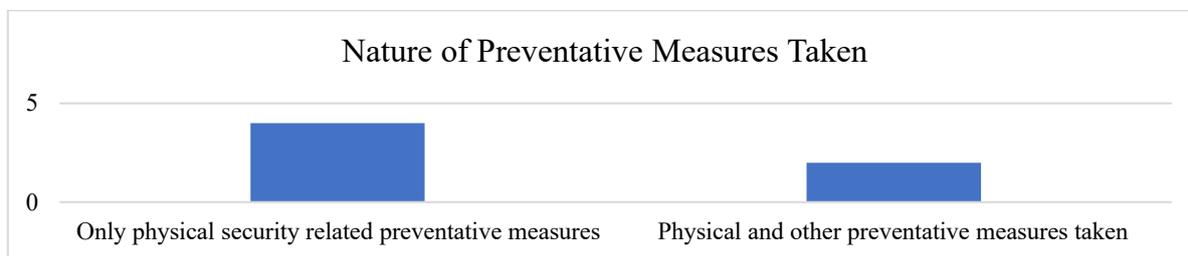
more accurate prediction of likely future violence, for a better identification of plausible attack scenarios as well as for the development of more effective countermeasures.

Preventative Measures Taken

In the cases under consideration here, preventative actions were given particular attention only when there had been prior attacks on the same church or when there was a warning of an impending threat that had been communicated in advance. It is also notable, however, that in a considerable number of cases—regardless of a prior warning signal or of advance intelligence—no preventative measures were taken to tighten security.



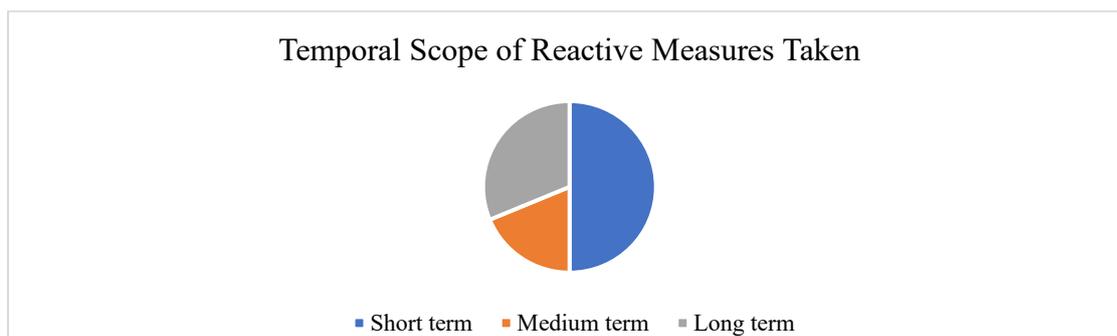
As the information in the chart below demonstrates, two-thirds of preventative measures put in place were physical security-related actions (installed grilles, padlocks, reinforced glasses,[36] barriers,[37] having police patrolling at the entrance of the church.[38]) There were only two incidents when the immediate threat of an attack induced preparatory acts by the targeted congregation. In one of these cases priests took up 24/7 watch positions so that they could immediately alarm authorities in case of an impending attack[39] and in the other case, church services were rescheduled to outmanoeuvre the potential assailants.[40]



Preventative measures serve to deter, detect or delay potential attacks. A proactive security concept should not only involve physical security arrangements but also human vigilance. Preventative instruments and mechanisms should be integrated into the security system around religious sites.

Reactive Measures Taken

Reactive actions can be examined with an eye on two aspects: temporal scope and personal scope. Half of the response measures taken were meant to have only a short-term impact. Evacuating target churches,[41] intensifying security with targeted patrols[42] and imposing 24-hour curfews and bag searches[43] were the most common initiatives taken after an attack. Their aim was to reduce the chance of a second blast, manage the crisis situation and thereby diminish other, potential harmful consequences; but they were not intended to involve new security arrangements.



It was exceptional for medium-term impact measures to be introduced. In the three cases where this occurred, the ultimate goal of the initiatives was to control the tense local situation, but not to address the root causes of the phenomenon. Cancelling religious events[44] served to diminish the short-term risk of a confrontation. Importantly, these measures did not intend to strategically address the threat of a similar attack occurring in the future.

Another observation is that only the most recent incidents (2015–2019) induced national-level strategic responses to attacks against Christian communities. Efforts aiming to tighten the security of churches,[45] exploring ways to increase public safety during services,[46] articulating the need to address radicalization,[47] programs for firearm control[48] and imposing immigration restrictions to prevent the entry of foreign terrorist elements[49]—all these intended to address the threat from a broader perspective.

Reactive measures were imposed in 15 out of the 26 examined incidents. As the table below indicates, most frequently local security agencies were the addressees of these responsive actions.

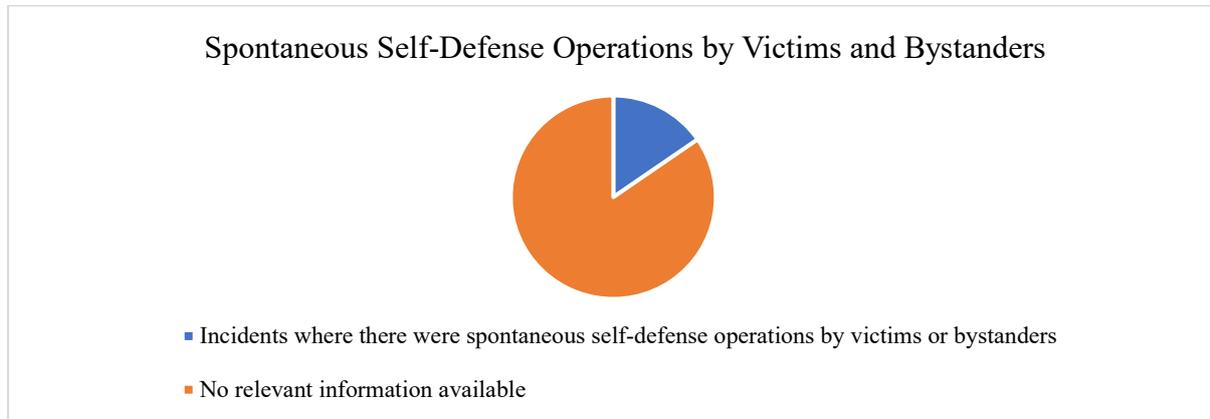
Entities Processing the Reactive Measures Taken															
<i>Incident number</i>	1	6	11	13	14	15	16	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26
Local security agencies		X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X		X			X
National-level security agencies					X						X		X	X	X
Local Christian community	X	X		X			X	X		X					

From the above it follows that not only preventive measures, but also the response to acts of violence should be addressed in emergency security plans. Such arrangements ought to be determined in accordance with the outcome of periodic risk assessments. The effectiveness of crisis management operations can be enhanced by having protocols for communication with emergency services in place. These should be refreshed and updated by regular joint exercises with local law enforcement entities to reduce the reaction time.

Spontaneous Self-Defence by Victims and Bystanders

Spontaneous self-defence actions by victims or bystanders were noted in only four out of the 26 incidents. Obviously, an attacker’s modus operandi substantially determines whether there is any chance for such reactions. In case of a remotely controlled explosion, for instance, it is highly unlikely that the injured victim or bystander can intervene in a meaningful way. In two of the cases investigated, people at the crime scene attempted to

bring the set fires under control.[50] In another incident, victims took actions to defend themselves and their family members when an assailant equipped with a sword was attacking people in the St. Lidwina Catholic Church, in Yogyakarta, Indonesia.[51] Only in one case did bystanders confront attackers to restrain them.[52]



Community outreach programs can increase situational awareness among the public. Once members of a congregation or other local residents have received training on applicable protocols in case of a terrorist attack, the fear and panic that such incidents aim to induce will be arguably less.

Conclusion

This Research Note has sought to bring a better understanding to the threat posed by violent non-state actors to Christian houses of worship. By analysing 26 incidents, some countermeasures can be suggested.

In an effort to harden the soft-target nature of religious sites, a first step is to develop and cultivate a security-oriented mindset.[53] To be able to develop a sound security plan, a risk-based approach is needed.[54] The development of a comprehensive threat landscape exploration[55] is a prerequisite for the identification and prioritization of risks. To do so, information and intelligence from various sources should be brought together. Stakeholder partnerships and lessons learned from past incidents are of paramount importance. Any threat analysis should keep pace with the evolving nature of threats and with new risks linked to emerging technologies. [56] Therefore, risks should be reassessed periodically, especially with regard to high-profile religious events (Easter, Christmas). Ultimately, risk management must be based on the results of consecutive rounds of risk assessments.

Idiosyncrasies of a place of worship need to be taken into account when designing a security system. In line with this, concentric circles of defence[57] are to be created to find a delicate balance between the inherently open nature of such places and the need for an enhanced level of security.[58] Applying a combination of multiple security measures in a defence-in-depth model[59] ensures that an attacker who manages to penetrate one layer of defence may still be intercepted by a subsequent layer. Gathering intelligence from all sources is a first step. Engaging in proactive security measures such as installing surveillance cameras and having security officers in place constitutes a second defensive layer. Bearing in mind that most of the attacks on Christian places of worship occurred outside the churches, the direct environment of places of worship must be given particular attention.

Identifying and locating suspicious activities and objects through detection forms the third defensive layer. Taking into account that bombing has been the most common mode of operation, teaching personnel how to recognize and handle a suspected explosive device is vital. In the same vein, it is important to establish appropriate physical security measures to prevent the planting of an explosive device. For instance, trash bins on the premises should be kept locked, parked cars should be kept at a safe distance, and plants and trees should be trimmed to make the placing of explosives more difficult.[60] Similarly, assuming that perpetrators

engage in preoperational surveillance operations, an efficient CCTV system ought to be in place.

Defensive layers ought to make an intruder's entry more difficult and, to the extent that these are visible, also act as a deterrent since these give the appearance of a secured facility. Since in a traditional religious service all worshippers face the altar, it is necessary to ensure that the entrance in their back is always under surveillance. Innovations provided by new and emerging technologies[61] should be applied in target-hardening efforts. It is, however, not enough to install an integrated security system; its operation should be regularly maintained and fine-tuned in line with changing threat levels. It must also be kept in mind that physical security measures require well-trained staff who are able to operate technical defence mechanisms professionally.[62] Implementing extensive security measures, however, presumes the availability of a corresponding financial budget. To reduce budgetary constraints,[63] there is a need to find appropriate funding for maintaining and upgrading security measures.[64] This can be addressed, at least in part, with the mobilization of volunteers as in the 'Church Watch Programs'[65] designed to improve a congregation's safety and security.[66]

Additional active security measures need to be in place should the first layers of defence fail to prevent or deter attacks on a church. Security plans should entail actions not only to thwart a plot but also to minimize the potential consequences of a completed attack. In line with this, action plans should define the role of the emergency response team, and involve procedures for evacuating the building as well as for crisis communication with the respective authorities. And lastly, a well-structured training program should raise security personnel's and churchgoers' awareness on the features of any newly adopted security strategy.[67]

Unfortunately, in many cases perpetrators are unlikely to encounter much resistance. This is because, on one hand, places of worship generally do not have the capacity to strike back on attackers[68] and, on the other hand, government agencies will rarely have the capacity to ensure the constant security for all places of worship.[69] With this in mind, the protection of Christian places of worship is a "shared responsibility".[70] Developing strong, collaborative working relationships among all stakeholders can reduce the risk of an attack.[71]

Regular consulting between operators of religious sites and local police will enhance security.[72] Organizing joint training sessions and engaging in scenario-based exercises (including red teaming)[73] can equip the security personnel of religious sites with relevant skills, gauge their crisis readiness and help identify existing operational gaps in their security systems. To resolve budgetary constraints for upgrading existing security arrangements, building liaisons with law enforcement agencies can also provide information for religious sites on grants they might be eligible for. Establishing communication channels with emergency services can considerably improve timely reporting of an attack. Local police can improve crisis management capabilities by gaining familiarity with the in-house security arrangements of local religious communities.[74] It is, however, of great importance to emphasize that measures taken by private entities to tighten the security of soft targets should complement and never substitute official security arrangements by law enforcement agencies.[75]

Involving the public in efforts to enhance security is another building block to enhance security. For this, the observational skills and the security consciousness of the public in general and the churchgoers in particular need to be developed.[76] Community outreach programs and initiatives encouraging greater engagement of churchgoers can ensure a better situational awareness as well as inform individuals on protocols on how to promptly report noticed suspicious activities.[77] Accordingly, besides staying vigilant it is also important to embed the habit of "say something if you see something." [78] It is important to stress that enhancing a culture of security awareness[79] should not make people fearful and paranoid, but should make them resilient. Being prepared and trained to handle a terrorist attack on a religious institution should in the end decrease the panic an attack can trigger.

In addition, one should broaden the scope of public-private partnerships with other religious communities. Inter-faith dialogue between the top of religious hierarchies can also contribute to building trust between Christians, Jews, Muslims, Hindus and other religions, thereby reducing polarization at the bottom. The necessity of strengthening the security features of places of worship has already been stressed by leaders of various faith communities. Several public safety programs[80] seek to prevent violent attacks on places of worship. Therefore, it is highly advisable to consult with other religious communities and learn about their

protection efforts and the challenges they face.

About the Author: **Katalin Pethő-Kiss** is former deputy head of the Central European CBRNE-Training Centre in Budapest. Previously, she worked at the law desk of the Hungarian Europol National Unit, being responsible for terrorism and violent extremism-related tasks, with a special focus on explosives and CBRN. She has completed her Master of Research Studies in Policing, Intelligence and Countering Terrorism at Macquarie University (Australia), being a recipient of an Endeavour Scholarship. While in Sydney, she was assessing risks of CBRN terrorism and comparing Australian and EU legislation in this area. Currently she works as a Senior Analyst at the Hungarian Counter Terrorism Information and Criminal Analysis Centre.

Notes

[1] Attacks occurred in Latvia, Russia, Iraq, South Africa, Germany, France, Tunisia, Turkey, United States, Australia, Norway, Belgium, Israel, Denmark and Brazil. Sources for this information: The Global Terrorism Database (START, University of Maryland), Daniel Koehler (2019) 'The Halle, Germany, Synagogue Attack and the Evolution of the Far-Right Terror Threat', *CTC Sentinel*, Volume 12, Issue 11, pp. 14-21, URL: <https://ctc.usma.edu/halle-germany-synagogue-attack-evolution-far-right-terror-threat/> and Chas Danner (2019) 'What WE Know About the Southern California Synagogue Shooting', *Intelligencer*, 28 April, 2019, URL: <https://nymag.com/intelligencer/2019/04/what-we-know-about-the-california-synagogue-shooting.html>

[2] Attack occurred in Algeria, West Bank and Gaza Strip, Pakistan, Indonesia, Bangladesh, India, Iran, Sudan, Argentina, Afghanistan, Macedonia, United Kingdom, Australia, Fiji, South Africa, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Netherlands, Philippines, Iraq, Thailand, Sri Lanka, United States, Somalia, Germany, Yemen, Nepal, France, Yemen, Lebanon, Azerbaijan, Nigeria, Libya, Kenya, Syria, Bahrain, Egypt, Central African Republic, Turkey, South Sudan, Ukraine, Bulgaria, Netherlands, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Canada, Ethiopia, Cyprus, Russia, Spain, Tanzania, Cameroon, Central African Republic, New Zealand, and Norway. Sources for this information: The Global Terrorism Database (START, University of Maryland), 'Christchurch shootings: Mosque attacker charged with terrorism,' *BBC*, 21 May 2019, URL: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-48346786> and Henrik Pryser Libell (2019) 'Norway Police Investigate Mosque Attack as Attempted "Act of Terrorism"', *The New York Times*, 11 August 2019, URL: <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/11/world/europe/norway-mosque-attack-terrorism.html>

[3] Attack occurred in Sri Lanka and India. Sources for this information: The Global Terrorism Database (START, University of Maryland) and 'Delhi temple attack: HC says "no" to plea for SIT probe,' *The Hindu*, 5 July 2019, URL: <https://www.thehindu.com/news/cities/Delhi/delhi-temple-attack-hc-says-no-to-plea-for-sit-probe/article28294588.ece>

[4] Attack occurred in United Kingdom, Yemen, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Pakistan, Italy, Philippines, India, St. Lucia, Bangladesh, Venezuela, Iraq, Colombia, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Nigeria, Kenya, United States, Central African Republic, Indonesia, Jamaica, Latvia, Turkey, Nepal, Australia, Chile, and Sri Lanka. Sources for this information: The Global Terrorism Database (START, University of Maryland) and 'Sri Lanka attacks: Easter Sunday bombing marked one year on,' *BBC*, 21 April 2020, URL: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-52357200>

[5] Soft Target Protection Institute (2016), 'Basics of soft target protection—guidelines (2nd version)', URL: <https://mail.google.com/mail/ca/u/1/#inbox/KtbxLvHcJtBwVnwhPjPngSspcHSLxZcSB?projector=1&messagePartId=0.8>

[6] Moeller, Hans Mathias (2016), 'Why Soft target terrorist attacks will remain a threat?' *Global Risk Insights*, URL: <https://globalriskinsights.com/2016/07/soft-target-terrorist-attacks/>

[7] Karlos, V., Larcher M., Solomos G. (2018), 'Review on soft target/public space protection guidance', *JRS Science for Policy Report*, 2018, 2nd Edition, URL: https://publications.jrc.ec.europa.eu/repository/bitstream/JRC110885/soft_target-public_space_protection_guidance.pdf

[8] Attack occurred in Central African Republic, India, Indonesia, Italy, Kenya, Nigeria, Pakistan, Philippines, Sri Lanka, St. Lucia, Turkey, the United Kingdom, and the United States.

[9] Religious sites are only one type of soft targets, therefore to be able to compare fatality rates of plots against soft and hardened targets, a specific type of a so-called hardened spot (police station) has been chosen for the analysis. To ensure a consistent comparison between incidents on houses of worship and police-related facilities, the same basic criteria have been used for both types of targets during the same time period (1998–2018) in the same countries (Central African Republic, India, Indonesia, Italy, Kenya, Nigeria, Pakistan, Philippines, Sri Lanka, St. Lucia, Turkey, the United Kingdom, and the United States) committed against government, military and police targets by the same perpetrator groups (Loyalist Volunteer Forces (LVF), International Solidarity, Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG), Jemaah Islamiya (JI), Al-Qaeda in Iraq, Boko Haram, Al-Shabaab, Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant

(ISIL), Tehrik-i Taliban Pakistan (TTP), and Union for Peace in Central Africa (UPC). The Global Terrorism Database (START, University of Maryland) provided the incident data for this analysis.

- [10] Boko Haram continuously improved its operational capabilities and was highly active under Abubakar Shekau's leadership. On March 7 2015, Boko Haram's leader entered into an alliance with the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, reconstituting itself as the Islamic State in West Africa. (Chandler, Adam (2015) 'The Islamic State of Boko Haram?' *The Atlantic*, URL: <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2015/03/boko-haram-pledges-allegiance-islamic-state/387235/>). In 2014, TiP's organization was fractured and most of the partaking groups pledged their alliance with the Islamic State. ('Pakistan Taliban sack spokesman Shahidullah Shahid for IS vow', *BBC*, October 21, 2014, URL: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-29640242>)
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