

The world has entered the fifth wave of anti-government terrorism

BY CHRISTOPHER P. COSTA, OPINION CONTRIBUTOR - 01/12/23 1:00 PM ET



(AP Photo/Markus Schreiber)

German lawmakers and officials enter a secure room at the basement of the German Parliament, for a briefing by intelligence officials on the alleged coup plot by far-right extremists that authorities uncovered in Berlin, Germany, Monday, Dec. 12, 2022. Prosecutors say some of those detained had plans to enter the German parliament, or Bundestag, with weapons. (AP Photo/Markus Schreiber)

In light of a failed far-right coup in December in Germany, fueled by ideologically and historically incoherent fantasies, a global trend is coming into sharper focus. This new trajectory reveals a dangerous hybridization of extremist ideologies and is distinguished by anti-government terrorism.

Even with courtroom revelations of far-right seditions plotting related to the Capitol attack on Jan. 6, I remained uncertain that a new fifth wave of anti-government terrorism arrived — until the coup plot in Germany. I believed that global jihadists would remain the most persistent terrorist threat. After all the U.S., together with partner forces in Iraq and Syria, reportedly killed a jaw-dropping 700 suspected members of ISIS in 2022, five years after its caliphate was lost. Other jihadists have shifted across Africa, from Somalia on the continent's eastern tip to West Africa, intent on exploiting large swaths of ungoverned space for use as sanctuaries. This pattern plays out in the Middle East and South Asia, too.

But I am now convinced that a fifth wave of anti-government terrorism is underway.

In sum, wave theory refers to political violence in four historical waves. This framing metaphorically likened generational trends in terrorism to waves in the history of shared terrorism ideology and tactics. Importantly, right-wing groups have been present and coexisted in every wave era. Currently, it seems that the terrorist script is flipped with "blurred ideological lines." So, even though I think that anti-government terrorists are the successors to the fourth or religious wave, jihadists will still remain

a persistent undertow that coexists — and may very well cooperate operationally — with anti-government fifth wave groups.

That's dangerous.

FBI Director Christopher Wray noted that the “purity of radical ideology” is gone. That observation seems to substantiate the idea that hybridized grievances and beliefs are increasingly behind terrorist attacks. Take the case of U.S. Army Pvt. Ethan Melzer, who began plotting an attack on his own military unit by conspiring online with neo-Nazis and researching jihadists and aligning with their attack patterns. This all crystallized when Melzer conspired with the neo-Nazi organization, 09A, “Order of 9 Angles,” — a group of Satanists and avowed white supremacists. This case is a troubling new archetype of hybridizing ideologies.

It seems that the Federal Republic of Germany is an accidental bellwether of an emerging era of anti-government terrorism. This emergence in Germany is an ironic accident of history because some 900 million people watched ethno-nationalist terrorism play out live during the Munich 1972 Olympic Games. Last September, after 50 years, Germany exorcised the demons of that troubling phase of terrorism. I had an opportunity to attend a special Munich 1972-related commemoration where I met German Interior Minister Nancy Faeser. Just a few months later, Faeser spoke publicly about the failed far-right coup plot in Germany and the anti-government attack on Germany's rule of law.

Even with the present threat from far-right terrorism, Minister Faeser reminded Germans that they remain in the “crosshairs” of Islamist terrorists. She was referring to a lone perpetrator arrested in Germany for planning to use ricin and cyanide to carry out an Islamist-motivated chemical attack. This disrupted plot comes on the heels of a self-radicalized, Islamist-motivated American charged with attacking three police officers with a machete near Times Square on New Year's Eve. Islamist-motivated terrorism is a persistent dynamic existing in parallel with a nascent anti-government wave of political violence.

Still, my past work with German colleagues focused on the jihadist terrorist threat. In fact, I was traveling with German colleagues when the Boston Marathon bombing happened. Just a few years later, while on the Trump presidential transition team, and preparing to become the senior director for counterterrorism at the National Security Council, a truck plowed into a packed Christmas market in Berlin, killing and injuring scores of people. The perpetrator was inspired by ISIS propaganda. That attack framed much of the counterterrorism work during the first year of the Trump administration — when the threats came mostly from jihadists, not far-right anti-government extremists.

How terrorism scholars choose to classify the current wave of terrorism is an open question; what is more straightforward is that Germany stayed ahead of their domestic terrorism threats. Germany's security services kept tabs on extremists like the Reichsbürger movement, and other groups that refuse to accept the legitimacy of the modern German state. Though Germany's work against anti-government terrorism is instructional, U.S. authorities will approach these threats differently, because America is bounded by its own Constitution.

As clichéd as it seems, national leadership is essential for properly framing domestic terrorism threats. With that being the case, an overriding government aim must be protecting U.S. citizens and unflinchingly focusing on the rule of law, never forgetting that the anti-government domestic terrorist threat comes from only a small percentage of misguided fellow Americans.

But if anti-government terrorism is a fifth wave, America and the rest of the world better get ready because terrorist waves last generations.

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