
One-year assessment for 2021 – summary

The terrorist threat to Sweden in 2021

The overall terrorist threat to Sweden is assessed to be elevated (3).¹ The elevated threat level includes the possibility of a terrorist attack in 2021.

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic set its mark on the year 2020 and will likely continue to do so in 2021. This has thus far had a limited impact on the violent extremist² environment in Sweden and the terrorist threat to Sweden. However, the negative economic effects of the pandemic and dissatisfaction over how the pandemic has been handled likely increase the possibilities for the violent extremist environment to successfully spread propaganda and recruit more sympathisers.

The attack on the US Capitol and the riots in connection with the *Black Lives Matter* movement in the US have so far had limited impact on the violent extremist environment in Sweden. Further events in the US and other Western countries could possibly continue to serve as a source of inspiration for the violent extremist environment in Sweden to mobilise, spread propaganda and carry out actions. Incidents similar to the one that triggered the Black Lives Matter movement could also occur in 2021 and result in reactions that spread internationally.

In September 2020, the French satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo* republished the Mohammed cartoons, which caused this conflict to flare up again. If more actions perceived to be insulting to Islam are carried out in Sweden or other Western countries in 2021, this will probably further negatively affect the terrorist threat to Sweden. *Daesh* and *al-Qaeda* are still active, as are other Islamist terrorist organisations, mainly in the Middle East and Africa. Their activities, together with current conflicts and socio-economic unrest in this part of the world, could continue to inspire actors in the violent extremist environment and cause them to mobilise.

The terrorist attack threat to Sweden

Violent right-wing extremism and violent Islamism pose the main terrorist threats to Sweden. A small number of individuals in these extremist environments could possibly develop the intent and capability to carry out a terrorist attack in Sweden. For a number of years, most terrorist attacks in the West have been planned and carried out by lone perpetrators who, on their own initiative, became inspired and developed an attack intent. This trend will probably continue in 2021 as well. If a terrorist attack were to take place in Sweden in 2021, it would probably be carried out by a lone perpetrator or a small group of like-minded individuals using easily accessible means.

Lone perpetrators are often found outside or on the fringes of known violent extremist environments. Their motive often ensues from violent extremist propaganda and previous

¹ In Sweden, a five-level scale is used to describe the relevant threat. The threat levels are: No identified threat (1), Limited threat (2), Elevated threat (3), High threat (4) and Very high threat (5). The Head of the Swedish Security Service sets the threat levels for Sweden.

² *Violent extremism* is defined as endorsing, supporting, preparing or committing ideologically-motivated violence to further political or religious agendas.

terrorist attacks. Individual circumstances, such as personal setbacks, mental health problems or frustration following certain developments across the globe, could also trigger an individual to develop an attack intent.

Compared to 2019, the number of violent Islamist terrorist attacks in the West increased in 2020. The republication of the Mohammed cartoons contributed to this increase, which is also due to the continued inspirational power of the violent Islamist ideology. Organisations such as Daesh and al-Qaeda still have the ability to inspire sympathisers in the West to plan and carry out terrorist attacks. In 2020, Sweden was pointed out in international violent Islamist propaganda as a country where insults to Islam are accepted. This is one of the reasons why violent Islamists consider Sweden and Swedish interests abroad as legitimate targets for terrorist attacks also in 2021.

Compared to 2019, the number of violent right-wing extremist terrorist attacks decreased in 2020. However, the attack threat posed by the violent right-wing extremist environment has gradually increased in the past few years. The polarised society of today, along with an increased spread of violent right-wing extremist propaganda, have contributed to this development. The increased threat posed by the violent right-wing extremist environment is evident in counter-terrorism efforts currently carried out in Sweden and other European countries.

As a result of the setbacks in Syria and Iraq, Daesh has a limited capability to direct terrorist attacks in the West. Daesh will likely try to regain this capability, and this goal will remain in 2021. The main terrorist threat to Sweden posed by Daesh will probably be its capability to inspire its sympathisers to carry out terrorist attacks. Also al-Qaeda probably has a limited capability to direct terrorist attacks in the West. Al-Qaeda-affiliated groups around the world mostly prioritise local and regional conflicts over attack plotting targeting the West.

In 2020 and the beginning of 2021, a small number of women, former members of Daesh in Syria, returned to Sweden together with their children. An additional small number of individuals will likely return to Sweden in 2021. Depending on the developments in Syria, it is also possible that several individuals will return. Some Swedish citizens are still active in al-Qaeda-affiliated groups in north-western Syria, and it is possible that these individuals will leave the area and return to Sweden.

Radicalisation and recruitment into violent extremism and terrorism

Violent extremist environments serve as breeding grounds for terrorism. Radicalisation and recruitment into violent extremism are multidimensional constantly ongoing processes in Sweden. The violent Islamist environment is likely the largest extremist environment in Sweden, and the violent right-wing extremist environment the second-largest. It is possible that these environments will increase in size in 2021. Radicalisation and recruitment into violent extremism occur in various ways, but online radicalisation, e.g. via social media, has gradually become more prominent. The international character of digital media enables individuals who are geographically wide apart to join together into communities and create ideologically closed echo chambers where radicalisation can be speeded up. These platforms also make it easier for minors to participate and become radicalised.

However, all radicalisation and recruitment do not take place online. All the violent extremist environments also engage in radicalisation and recruitment activities in targeted personal meetings. Some radicalisation and recruitment could be described as horizontal, such as when friends get together to explore, and allow themselves to be inspired by, violent extremist ideologies. Violent right-wing extremist actors and violent Islamist actors also actively approach individuals, for instance upper secondary school students or asylum seekers, in order to introduce them to violent extremist ideologies and encourage them to explore these.

The violent Islamist environment in Sweden has no cohesive leadership or organisational structure. Often, the unifying force of this environment is the violent Islamist ideology, and its main activity is to directly and indirectly support the global violent Islamist struggle. This is done through financing, radicalisation and recruitment both in Sweden and other countries. Radicalisation and recruitment into the violent Islamist environment in Sweden take place mostly covertly. Violent ideology is rarely communicated openly at venues where radicalisation and recruitment into violent extremism occur, such as schools, mosques, associations, and youth groups, but are introduced gradually, and individuals assessed to be receptive to this ideology are invited to closed circles where the radicalisation process is furthered. Members of the same family also sometimes radicalise and recruit each other.

The Swedish violent right-wing extremist environment has coordinating organisations at the national level, but some of this environment prefers to gather in ideologically like-minded friendship groups or virtual social media forums. Individuals who seek to join the violent right-wing extremist environment likely have varying degrees of ideological conviction from the start. Some individuals probably join violent right-wing extremist organisations in their search for excitement and a sense of belonging and to send signals to people around them, while others have a sense of ideological conviction already before joining. However, a common denominator is their dissatisfaction with the society of today, especially developments perceived as consequences of Sweden's immigration policy.

Recruitment into the right-wing extremist environment takes place openly in Sweden. The principal organisations are relatively easy to contact for those interested, but these are also actively recruiting new members, either by approaching individuals identified as potential new members, or by organising manifestations or other forms of propaganda-spreading activities in public places to share information about their ideology and attract new members.

People are also radicalised online, e.g. via social media, and get together and radicalise others there. By means of digital platforms, lone individuals with atypical violent ideologies could relatively quickly become part of a global context, giving them a sense of community and belonging. Hate messages, weapons manuals and direct calls for attacks, combined with irony and conspiracy theories, are spread online by violent extremists. Acts of violence in support of ideological conviction are advocated over "keyboard warriorism".

Financing of violent extremism and terrorism

Fundraising is being carried out in Sweden to finance violent extremism in Sweden and terrorist organisations abroad. This will likely continue to be the case in 2021. International terrorist organisations receive funding through voluntary donations but also through criminal activities. There are foundations and companies in Sweden that are likely used to finance terrorism abroad. Sweden-based financing of terrorism is probably significant.

Financing in Sweden is likely to be for violent extremism rather than terrorism. However, violent extremism is a breeding ground for terrorism, and financing of such activities thus contribute to the terrorist threat to Sweden. Financing enables for instance violent extremists to engage in radicalisation and recruitment into the extremist environment in Sweden.

The violent Islamist environment is probably the environment in Sweden with the greatest capability to generate money in Sweden, both lawfully and unlawfully, to finance their activities in Sweden. For instance, actors and Islamist organisations linked to the violent Islamist environment receive public funding from Swedish authorities. It is doubtful whether financial support contributes directly to reinforcing individuals' intent and capability to carry out terrorist offences. However, financial support probably contributes indirectly to individuals being able to maintain their ideological commitment and continue to propagate their ideology. Financial

support is probably a factor which contributes to radicalisation, leading to growth of the environment in the long term.

The violent Islamist environment is likely the environment in Sweden that receives most funding from abroad. Prominent representatives of some organisations in Sweden are active in the violent extremist environment. Some of these organisations receive funding from other countries. The extent of such foreign funding to Islamist platforms varies. The funding could be for official legitimate purposes, but probably creates conditions that enable these organisations to contribute to radicalisation and recruitment into violent Islamism.

Funds raised in Sweden by the violent Islamist environment are also used to finance terrorist organisations abroad. Money could be sent via bank transfer, courier, cryptocurrencies, *hawala*³ etc. It is often difficult to trace and establish the final purpose of such transactions. Money is also sent to support individuals in the violent Islamist environment abroad.

The activities of the organised right-wing extremist environment in Sweden are largely financed through membership fees and funds raised among members and adherents. In the past, this environment has also received some financing from abroad, but such financing has likely been limited and has probably not had any significant impact on their activities over time. Funds raised are likely used mostly to finance the organisations' activities, such as maintaining websites and social media channels. Eventually, this could probably contribute to further radicalisation and, in combination with other factors, lead to the possibility that individuals in this environment develop the intent to carry out terrorist offences.

The National Centre for Terrorist Threat Assessment (NCT) is a joint working group staffed by personnel from the National Defence Radio Establishment, the Military Intelligence and Security Service and the Swedish Security Service. The NCT makes strategic analyses of incidents, events, trends and tendencies within terrorism and assesses their impact on the terrorist threat to Sweden and Swedish interests in the short and the long term. The National Defence Radio Establishment may process personal data only when it is relevant to specified defence intelligence matters. The National Defence Radio Establishment does not process personal data concerning violent extremism unrelated to foreign circumstances.

³ *Hawala* is a global system which allow individuals, mostly from the Middle East and Africa, and other, especially Muslim, countries to transfer money to family and friends, but which could also be used to finance terrorism.