



Organization for Security and  
Co-operation in Europe

## **Be alert not alarmed – keeping the terrorist threat to Austria in perspective**

*By Raphael Perl, Head of the OSCE Action against Terrorism Unit*

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June 7 will mark the start of the European Football Championship, one of the largest sporting events in the world. Hosted this year by Austria and Switzerland, it means three weeks of enormous crowds and celebration.

For some terrorists, it could also mean three weeks symbolic of Western evils.

Think about it: men and women, often scantily clad, interacting together in public places, chatting, laughing, and drinking alcohol.

It is therefore not surprising that recently al Qaeda-inspired groups have reportedly called on the Internet for attacks in the countries hosting the *Europameisterschaft*. This comes as a sad reminder that no country is immune to terrorism in today's world.

Not even Austria.

True, recent history seems to tell us that there is not much for Austria to worry about in terms of terrorism. There has not been a successful high casualty terrorist attack in Austria in the last decade.

And indeed, we should avoid being unnecessarily alarmist if there is no need. After all, creating undue panic and paranoia is only playing the game of the terrorists.

### **“A country should always be alert”**

Nevertheless, a country should always be alert and aware of its vulnerability to terrorism.

In an interview about a year ago, Minister of the Interior Platter rightly declared that Austria “ist weiter kein primäres Terrorziel, allerdings auch keine Insel der Seligen”.

In today's world, however, even secondary targets, in fact any country needs to be vigilant and prepared.

Globalization has greatly enhanced the ability to put subversive and criminal ideas, including terrorist schemes, into action. With the growing ease of international travel, communication and transfer of money, few countries are truly isolated from the rest of the world.

If we look at the big picture of terrorism-related activities, and the possible overlap between terrorism and organized crime, we can grasp the ramifications and the multiple facets of terrorism. And, even if a country like Austria has a low threat level for terrorism, it may be vulnerable to significant economic disruptions as a by-product of terrorist attacks against other countries.

Increased international links and interdependencies are a fact of contemporary life. Let's take the Internet for instance, one of the key symbols of globalization.

It is clear that the Internet has also become a strategic tool for terrorists and other criminals. The increasing expansion of the Internet in Europe makes Austria and other countries increasingly dependent on information infrastructure and, as a result, vulnerable to cyber attacks.

To be clear, cyber attacks have a significant disruption potential in today's world where most, if not all critical infrastructures are networked and connected to the outside via computer networks. As the internet is increasingly being relied upon as a radicalization and recruitment tool by groups with terrorist goals, high usage of the Internet by Austria's population increasingly exposes the Austrian public to a well orchestrated onslaught of violent extremist and terrorist material.

The challenge here is the growing issue of radicalization and incitement to terrorism, an area where my organization, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), is increasingly taking an active role.

Clearly, Austria is not immune to terrorism because there is always a risk that disenchanted groups or individuals resort to violent means, including terrorist tactics, to try to achieve their goals.

And Austria, and more particularly Vienna, can be a tempting target for terrorists because of the number of major events it hosts every year, including conferences or concerts. . Very often these events are attended by high-profile participants who can themselves be attractive targets for terrorists.

Austria is also home to many symbolic targets such as headquarters of international organizations, including for example the United Nations, the OSCE, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC). To some, these organizations represent a world order they are dissatisfied with and seek to subvert.

Arguably therefore, the main terrorist threat to Austria is not mass civilian terror attacks, but attacks directed against international high-profile targets.

On the whole, the terrorist threat is becoming increasingly unpredictable. In Austria, as elsewhere, the terrorist threat is constantly evolving, which makes managing it more difficult.

And in spite of a usually low terrorist threat, there is always the danger of a catalyzing event or of some determined groups acquiring the necessary capabilities to stage an attack.

So, what should be done?

First of all, over-protecting is neither economical nor necessarily effective. Preparedness efforts have to match risk assessment and priorities. Sufficient resources should be allocated to mitigation and recovery capacity in case a terrorist attack occurs.

### **“Austria is correctly assessing the threat”**

I believe that Austria is correctly assessing the threat, making adjustment as conditions change and having contingency plans to handle the aftermath of possible attacks. Through its excellent international co-operation Austria stays abreast of intelligence developments and can upsize its security temporarily, should that be necessary.

This country is on the right track.

Unfortunately, terrorism is already a firmly entrenched phenomenon. One could argue that it has become a self-sustaining process and will be an ongoing part of our lives.

It is therefore fundamental in dealing with the terrorist threat on the long term not to let human rights erode, or to let mutual suspicion arise within society.

We have to be alert, but not alarmed.

And we have to show those that wish us harm that we are not scared by going out and enjoying opportunities for celebration such as the *Europameisterschaft*.

I know I will.