



Emerging Challenges June 2016

Orlando's mass shooting

Orlando's mass shooting, where 49 people were killed by lone-wolf jihadist Omar Mateen, is the most significant terrorist attack on US soil since 9/11. It reopened the debate on Islamic extremism, homophobia and on the ease of access to acquiring weapons in the US. Regarding the first issue, even if Omar Mateen apparently pledged allegiance to ISIS in a last-minute 911 call, the assault is different from a classic ISIS strike, like Bataclan or the Zaventem's blast. In fact, the Orlando massacre looks like an ISIS inspired attack. Of course, the horrific assault on the nightclub demonstrates the devastation that can be unleashed by a loner with firearms.

However, when ISIS directs an attack, like the ones in France and the Belgium, the results are likely to be more deadly. In Orlando, as in the December 2015 San Bernardino shootings, the attacks seemed to mix personal motives (apparently homophobia), with an ISIS brand and policy (the classic stay away from Syria).

It is not entirely clear whether Mateen's choice of this target, a gay frequented night club, is logically linked with ISIS's hatred against homosexuals. As we know, ISIS hates almost everyone: Christians, Jews, Westerners, Shiites and all those who do not fit its distorted vision of Islam. Therefore, we cannot exclude the possibility that Omar Mateen executed the massacre independently of religious radicalisation; in fact it is more likely to be political radicalisation. Nevertheless, we have to be mindful of other scenarios where violent individuals could use Islam to justify their action and become martyrs for a small part of public opinion.

The well-known fact is that it is exceptionally difficult to stop lone-wolf attacks because these individuals do not travel abroad to Syria, Iraq or Afghanistan and there are no communications or interactions with ISIS or other terrorist organizations which US intelligence can intercept. The problem is compounded, in the United States by permissive gun laws which enabled Mateen, who allegedly abused his wife, to legally purchase a semiautomatic weapon.

Apparently the weapon was an AR-15 type assault gun and a pistol, but the relevant fact is that he was a licensed security guard and trained marksman. Several victims were shot many times during a shooting where the assailant fired more than 200 rounds, wounding 50 people in addition to the 49 killed ones. The dynamic of the shooting show that stopping that sort of killer is not easy: only 8 of the 150 rounds fired from 13 SWAT members at the perpetrator were fatal.