

Law Enforcement and Emergency Services Responses during and in the Immediate Aftermath of Terrorist Attacks

29 March 2022

Organised by the Council of Europe Committee on Counter-Terrorism (CDCT)

Summary¹

In line with Activity 3.6 of the Council of Europe Counter-Terrorism Strategy (2018-2022), the Committee on Counter-Terrorism (CDCT) held a virtual Seminar on Law Enforcement and Emergency Services Responses during and in the Immediate Aftermath of Terrorist Attacks on 29 March 2022. This event provided a platform for expert discussions on the importance of ensuring adequate and timely responses to terrorist attacks, the sharing of good practices and challenges and ways existing response structures could be improved. The event hosted independent experts, relevant authorities and key actors involved in emergency planning, coordination of emergency services and law enforcement, as well as those responsible for press relations and information during terrorist incidents from different Council of Europe jurisdictions. The discussions took place across three thematic Sessions namely:

1. First Responders: Health Services and Law Enforcement;
2. The Press, Public Support and Access to Information;
3. Multi-agency Co-operation: Successful Interaction and Exchange of Information between all Agencies.

The opening session highlighted the ever-evolving and permanent threat of terrorism, demonstrated by the attacks that continue to target our countries and their citizens. Following the wave of attacks in 2015-16 within and beyond Europe, much has been done to ensure that law enforcement and emergency services are well equipped to respond in the immediate aftermath of terrorist attacks. However, the modus operandi of terrorist attacks has changed drastically over time, prompting us to reflect on whether the structures we have in place are adequate to coordinate responses to new and emerging terrorist threats, or if such structures exist at all.

The first session was dedicated to an exchange of experiences, challenges and best practices in the field of hospital management. Drawing from the medical response to the Strasbourg Christmas Market attacks in 2018, it was emphasised that plans cannot be improvised and must be established in advance. Good practices were highlighted, including the efficient mobilisation of victims and prompt reactivity to the attack. However, areas for improvement included the need to address the 'basics'. Namely, whether entrances and evacuation zones to large-scale premises such as arenas, theatres, concert halls, etc are likely to cause difficulty when evacuating injured persons in the event of an attack. In addition, regarding the method of staff access to hospitals or other premises, whether it is scanning barcodes or other means, it should be clarified as to whether this may inhibit the response. The need to improve our methods of victim identification through coloured or symbolised bracelets depending on the type and urgency of care required was also emphasised.

Discussions on the response to chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear (CBRN) attacks underlined the need for specialised facilities such as biocontainment units with filters, sterilizers and personal protective equipment (PPE) for medical staff to protect and be protected against liquid chemicals, solid particulates and infectious agents. This said, whilst such units can provide the highest level of safety for healthcare providers and ensure fast response times, the provisions and respective trainings are extremely expensive and often provide limited capacity. The need, therefore, to incorporate a 'CBRN' mindset into the development of hospital response systems was highlighted to find means of overcoming such barriers to ensure that appropriate measures can be put in place. This was noted as a relatively new phenomenon that response agencies should now become accustomed to.

From a law enforcement perspective, crisis management within the counter-terrorism field was discussed whereby there is a need for police to secure the area and ensure that any secondary threats/follow-ups are dealt

¹ Disclaimer: The views presented in this document do not represent the official position of the Council of Europe.

with as soon as possible. Investigation units should be connected with victims and ensure that crime scene investigators can collect evidence, remove unauthorised individuals from the area and ensure an effective follow-up.

The second session was split into two parts, the first of which focused on the balance between the public right to information, ethics (keeping operational and victim data confidential) and facilitating communication. This discussion highlighted the types of information that are required by the media to support the public and the format in which this should be conveyed. Despite common conceptions of media being considered a barrier to the work of emergency response entities, the promotion of media as a key partner in the immediate aftermath of terrorist attacks was underlined. There is a need for reliable, true, understandable, consistent and necessary information to be released at the scene, the respective government needs to be informed ensuring that every relevant resource is made available to the public and the duty to inform the public whether the supposed threat has been secured or not should be fulfilled.

The media in the response phase should be consistently respectful of the local authorities at the scene to ensure that each agency's objective can be attained. All communications must be conscious of the families of the deceased and those who have experienced injuries and/or trauma. Communication teams should, therefore, be prepared and trained to ensure that they can cope in the aftermath of a crisis and support the public accordingly.

With regards to victim support and access to information, key structures were underlined to ensure that assistance is available across borders. Support should be provided in multiple languages and structures should be in place to ensure that victims are aware of the available practical, psychological and financial support as well as who the competent authorities are. In this regard, the Council of Europe Network of Single Contact Points for the Exchange of Procedural Information regarding the Legal Standing of Victims of Terrorism and the EU Network of Single Contact Points for Victims of Terrorism, which was established under the umbrella of the European Network on Victims' Rights (ENVR) were highlighted as key structures that enable access by competent authorities to victim support information both in the immediate aftermath of an attack and in the medium-and long-term.

The third and final session on multi-agency co-operation: successful interaction and exchange of information between all agencies provided a platform to exchange experiences on the opportunities and challenges in this domain. Despite the common goal of minimising the impact in the immediate aftermath of a terrorist attack, there are many entities involved, requiring an unparalleled level of coordination. From a public health perspective, should a CBRN attack take place for example, it would not be possible for law enforcement to make standard arrests or investigations. The perpetrator may be contagious even if deceased and therefore, requires interagency incident management to ensure that the relevant response actors can coordinate and carry out their respective roles without putting themselves at risk. In this regard, crisis decision making should be regularly tried and tested to ensure that should an attack occur, the process can be as smooth and efficient as possible. Such a process was discussed as the establishment of short-term objectives that are continuously evaluated and the role of information management should be considered, including the efficient use of resources, situational awareness and investigative case management (neutralising the threat, ensuring case files are available and analysing every piece of information available to ensure that a case is in place for prosecution). Thirdly, response and coordination options should be created and analysed with regards to their efficacy, predicted outcomes and time management, in view of a course of action being decided upon and executed.

Drawing upon the Manchester Arena attack in 2017, the joint emergency services interoperability principles (JESIP) were underlined as useful tools in enabling responders to coordinate effectively, namely:

- ✚ **Co-location:** Co-locate with other responders as soon as practically possible at a single, safe and easily identified location;
- ✚ **Communication:** Communicate using language which is clear and free from technical jargon and abbreviations;
- ✚ **Co-ordination:** Co-ordinate by agreeing on the lead organisation. Identify priorities, resources, capabilities and limitations for an effective response;

- ✚ **Joint Understanding of Risk:** Jointly understand risk by sharing information about the likelihood and potential impact of threats and hazards, to agree appropriate control measures;
- ✚ **Shared Situational Awareness:** Communicate between control rooms in the initial stages and throughout the incident to establish situational awareness (identifying risks and hazards to all responders).²

With such theoretical elements in mind, it is essential that they also work in practice and that individuals and teams with sufficient experience are regularly undergoing training. This could be carried out through the implementation of table-top exercises between executives/teams of key entities to develop inter-agency networking and trust and improve the sharing of information, where possible, in accordance with national law.

Many experts underlined that a key challenge stemmed from attempting to coordinate all of the actors involved in the response without one single point of contact/team to manage the response. The need, therefore, to consider this in each respective State was discussed, for example, the inclusion of a “Resilience Minister”. Additionally, it was highlighted that any response to an attack must be followed by an operational debriefing which can provide a basis to develop and adjust existing or new response structures where appropriate and filter into the aforementioned table-top exercises to form good practices.

The Seminar was concluded by an expression of appreciation for the extremely valuable and fruitful discussions held by all participants, underlining the need for increased information sharing and cooperation between agencies, the need to test and develop existing structures, build trust and continue to improve and provide proficient support for victims of terrorism.

² JESIP(2022), Available at: [JESIP - Working together, Saving Lives](#)