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Alexandre Rodde

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LTN (OR) Alexandre RODDE



PLANNED KILLINGS IN EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS Background, developments and security-based approach

On October 16, 2020, an eighteen-year-old jihadist beheaded Samuel Paty, a teacher of History and Geography, not far from his middle school Le Bois d'Aulne in Conflans-Sainte-Honorine (Yvelines). The attack was motivated by a desire for retaliation, after the teacher used cartoons of the Prophet Mohammed as a teaching tool during a course on freedom of expression. The violence of this attack and the choice of its target had a considerable impact in France but also abroad. Indeed, hitting a teacher and, by extension, the school institution with the republican symbol it represents, ensures important and immediate media coverage. If the young age and the lack of preparation of the assailant suggest that he had potentially not taken all these elements into account, it is relevant to look at educational institutions as targets of planned attacks. By studying the phenomenon and its evolution in the western world (I), it is possible to identify parts of the answer concerning prevention (II), detection (III), but also the security-based response to these attacks (IV).

I) Definitions, scope and evolution of the phenomenon

A planned killing can be defined as the preparation and execution of one or more homicides in a public space¹. It is sometimes referred to as a mass killing when at least four homicides take place². It is considered to be perpetrated in an educational facility if the assailant deliberately targets a school, university or academic institution. There are several reasons for choosing such a target:

- it is a so-called "soft" target, i.e. not benefiting from a high level of protection and whose architecture and organization allow easy access ;
- it is a symbolic target, because of its place, its role in the republican organization and the young age of the students who attend it ;
- it is an environment rich in targets gathered in small spaces and at times known to all.

These characteristics make educational facilities increasingly regular targets of attacks. Studying the history of attacks in the Western world confirms that attacks with various motivations (terrorist attacks school

1 By public space, we exclude planned killings that take place in the family sphere, such as the "Dupont de Ligonnès" case or the Troadec family case.

2 There is no legal definition of a mass killing, but the number of 4 homicides is the one used by the majority of police institutions, especially in the United States.

shooters³, amoks⁴) target academic institutions. From the beginning of the 1990s, the United States witnessed a series of attacks by students in their schools, notably in Oliverhurst (California, 1992), Jonesboro (Arkansas, 1998) and Thurston High School (Oregon, 1998). In Europe, the shooting at the University of Aarhus (Denmark) resulted in three deaths in 1994, while the killing by Thomas Hamilton in Dunblane (Scotland) the same year resulted in the death of a teacher and sixteen students aged 5 to 6⁵. However, it was the Columbine high school shooting (Colorado) on April 20, 1999, that marked the beginning of the modern era of school shootings, showing an evolution both in the modus operandi of school shooters and in the operational doctrine of law enforcement. The attack, which became the third biggest media event of the 1990s in the United States, resulted in a rapid increase in cases across the Atlantic and in Europe. Germany became the second most affected country after the United States, with cases of attacks by high school students in several schools (Erfurt in 2002, Coburg in 2003, Emsdetten in 2006 and Winnenden in 2009), some of which resulted in over 15 deaths. The following decade saw a further increase in the number of planned killings, which were not only carried out by school shooters or amoks but also by terrorists⁶. In Europe, the attack on the Utoya political youth camp killed 69 people in 2011⁷. The following year, it was the first mass school shooting in France, and the revival of jihadist terrorism when Mohamed Merah shot four victims outside the Ozar Hatorah school in Toulouse. Cases of school shooters continued across the Atlantic, with several attacks resulting in more than ten deaths. There was also an adaptation of the assailants to police methods and attacks optimized to kill as many people as possible. In 2017, the first case of a French school shooter occurred in Grasse (Alpes- Maritimes). A 17-year-old shooter, inspired by the Columbine massacre, opened fire in his high school, injuring four people. In February 2019, a teenager, suspected of planning a massacre in a school, was arrested by the General Directorate for Internal Security (DGSI) in Montpellier, before being committed⁸. A month later, a 21-year-old man was arrested in Seine-et-Marne, claiming to be "*the spiritual son of Mohamed Merah*"⁹ and seeking to strike a kindergarten. This year, the attack in Conflans-Sainte-Honorine shows the vulnerability of educational institutions and their surroundings to this type of threat. The prevention and detection of attacks are therefore key factors in the protection of these institutions.

II) Prevention of planned killings

The consequences of an attack in a school environment are always tragic and, therefore, preventive measures must be put in place to protect the schools and their occupants. In this phase prior to the attack, it is relevant to consider its origin, which may be external (an assailant who is not linked to the school) or internal (a student or school staff). In both cases, preparation and prevention of the risks linked to this type of attack are relevant. To do so, it is necessary to act on three levels. The premises of educational institutions have often been designed to be welcoming and "open", leaving them vulnerable to an armed intrusion¹⁰. Entryways are numerous, rarely locked and the security is easily circumvented. Bay windows, non-opaque doors and open spaces visible from the surrounding streets are frequent. A security audit, by public or private professionals performing intrusion tests, allows a thorough assessment of these problems. This audit must take into account

3 On this subject, see: MEUNIER, Bernard, RODDE, Alexandre, *Passage à l'acte: Comprendre les tueries en milieu scolaire*, Éditions Kiwi, June 2020.

4 "Sudden bout of bloody madness" (Larousse Dictionary). See: [RODDE, Alexandre, Réflexion sur l'amok : une perspective américaine, CREOGN Note, No. 30, December 2017.](#)

5 The hostage-taking of children in a school bus in Loyada on February 3, 1976 and of a kindergarten class in the Commandant Charcot school group on May 13, 1993 are not included in this list, the primary intention being to take the children and the class hostage.

6 Planned terrorist killings targeting schools occurred as early as 1999, with the attack on the Jewish Community Center in Los Angeles, California by Bufford O. Furrow Jr.

7 One can dispute the term educational facility for Utoya Island, but the place gathered teenagers and organized different workshops and courses.

8 BARRÈRE, François, Montpellier : un adolescent qui envisageait une tuerie de masse dans son ancien lycée interpellé et interné, *La Dépêche*, February 2019. Available at: <https://www.ladepeche.fr/2019/02/15/montpellier-un-adolescent-qui-envisageait-une-tuerie-de-masse-dans-son-ancien-lycee-interpelle-et-interne.8017778.php>

9 STORME, Perrine, Mohamed Merah's spiritual son wanted to attack a school, *BFMTV*, April 2019: Available at: https://www.bfmtv.com/replay-emissions/bfm-story/le-fils-spirituel-de-mohamed-merah-voulait-attaquer-une-ecole_VN201904030149.html

10 RODDE, Alexandre, How to protect schools from armed intrusion, Center for Security and Defense Studies (CESED), October 2019.

the specificities of the establishment and avoid, if possible, the phenomenon of "bunkerization" that has been observed in some schools abroad.

The specific safety protocols (intrusion/PPMSi), which have been mandatory in all French schools since 2015, are the responsibility of school principals and require the implementation of evacuation and confinement protocols for students. Despite these directives, they remain for the most part far too incomplete and designed without real knowledge of the risks. The lack of training and budget makes it difficult to set up alert protocols. Indeed, the differentiation between fire alarm and intrusion alarm is essential in this type of situation, but has not yet been generalized. For example, some foreign countries, such as Germany, use coded messages to signal intrusion¹¹. Evacuation and containment protocols are also essential to a comprehensive and effective response. The safety of the people present, and particularly minors, requires a detailed knowledge of various subjects, such as ballistic protection or the modes of action of potential assailants. In addition, it is necessary to repeat these protocols in "degraded" contexts, outside of teaching periods (when leaving classes, during lunch hour or in between classes) when students are scattered throughout the school. School personnel must also be trained to follow these protocols and participate regularly in drills, as their actions during an armed intrusion will be critical. Additional training in first aid and particularly in bleeding control should be provided. Nevertheless, due to the nature of the threat and the context in which such an attack would take place, the anxiety-inducing nature of these preparations must be taken into account, and sustained and thoughtful efforts must be made to ensure that these exercises are organized in a calm environment for teachers and students.

III) Detection of planned attacks

In the case of an internal attack, when an individual who is regularly present in the school decides to take action, it is necessary to put in place mechanisms to detect weak signals. Research on planned killings in schools was conducted by *Secret Service* agents, members of the *American Education Department* and academics after the Columbine massacre¹². If weak signals vary according to ideologies and therefore require an in-depth knowledge of the different movements, several methods can be considered and complement one another:

- *Profiling*: a prospective use of *profiling* methods could allow the detection of potential attackers already present in the institution. By studying the profiles of past assailants, it is possible to find recurring elements (criminal record, violent language, unsupervised access to the institution, proselytizing during the hours of attendance, etc.) and to establish a profile that makes it possible to determine whether an individual is a potential danger for the institution. However, there are many difficulties: sensitivity of the profile, risk of "false positives", difficulties in setting up this process due to the diversity of threats, lack of precision in the profile, respect for public and individual liberties, etc. ;
- *The cross-discipline assessment committee*: a committee bringing together the school principal, a member of the teaching staff, a psychologist and the competent law enforcement forces who have authority could facilitate the exchange of information for the detection and management of potential attackers. A frequent element observed in cases of school shooters is the fragmentation of weak signals between the different actors, which once gathered, could have confirmed the suspicions. Involving parents or students in this type of committee can be considered as a second step, obviously taking into account the possibility that the desire for violence against the school is shared by the family circle, as was perhaps the case in Conflans-Sainte-Honorine. This method, quite similar to the operation of the Departmental Radicalization Assessment Groups, has proven its effectiveness ;

11 In Germany, the phrase "*Frau Koma Kommt*" (Mrs. Koma is coming), an anagram of amok, signals to teachers the start of a school shooting.

12 REDDY, M., BORUM, R., BERGLUND, J., VOSSEKUIL, B., FEIN, R., MODZELESKI, W., "Evaluating Risk for Targeted Violence in Schools: Comparing Risk Assessment, Threat Assessment, and Other Approaches", *Psychology in the School*, 2001.

- *Algorithmic analysis*: the use of automatic systems using artificial intelligence to assess weak signals in large amounts of data has been discussed in the United States¹³ Automated monitoring of social networks and school records could thus facilitate the detection of a potential attacker and his or her management before any violent action. Two important limits must be mentioned: this type of detection must always be followed by a human evaluation and access to the data raises legal questions.

IV) Response to a Planned School Massacre

Beyond the implementation of prevention and detection measures, the *continuum* of response must include the competent law enforcement agencies. They are the only ones able to assess the degree of the threat and provide a comprehensive response. Thus, regular communication between educational institutions and law enforcement agencies must be established. The existence of a certain "judicial taboo" in the Education Nationale, aimed at keeping problems internal for the good image of the institution, cannot be an obstacle to the protection of the physical integrity of students and staff. Cooperation with the local police or gendarmes can take various forms. Frequent exchanges make it possible to establish a relationship of trust between the institutions and to take advantage of the expertise of the law enforcement agencies regarding any potential threat. The Conflans-Sainte-Honorine attack shows that the situation can change rapidly¹⁴ and that information must be transmitted without delay. The law enforcement agencies will then be able to adapt their actions, whether through the judicialization of the case or through special surveillance. Closer cooperation may include the ability of response units to reconnoitre the facility and its surroundings, define guidelines, and conduct drills at the facility without students being present. These efforts are crucial to ensuring a rapid operational response during an intrusion and should be encouraged across all educational institutions.

From Columbine to Conflans-Sainte-Honorine, academic institutions have been targeted by violent assailants whose motivations and modes of action have varied. Beyond the terrorist risk, armed intrusions are a regular occurrence on national territory. Over the last twelve months, nursery schools, primary schools, high schools and universities have seen armed individuals enter their premises in Brest (29), Saint-Médard-en-Jalles (33), Béziers (34), Richelieu (37), Arradon (56), Prades (66), Paris (75), Cerny (91), Massy (91), Aubervilliers (93), Clichy-sous-Bois (93) and Saint-Denis (93). Faced with the threat of jihadist terrorism in France, it is essential that teaching staff are aware of the risks and work with law enforcement and private security actors to ensure good learning conditions. By taking care not to create a climate of anxiety, the joint implementation of the measures mentioned in this article can help prevent a tragedy similar to that of the Bois d'Aulnes school. It is certain that budgetary considerations and the lack of training in security issues can hinder the securing of schools, but faced with a risk of such magnitude, it is necessary to act promptly to reinforce the protection of educational facilities.

Alexandre RODDE is a lieutenant in the gendarmerie operational reserve and a researcher specializing in terrorism and mass killings issues.

Translated by ASP Delphine CORREARD and the French Gendarmerie Officers Academy Language Department

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13 "Can Artificial Intelligence Help Stop School Shootings?" R.Rieland, Smithsonian Mag, June 2018. Available at: <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/innovation/can-artificial-intelligence-help-stop-school-shootings-180969288/>

14 Only two weeks separate Samuel Paty's lesson on freedom of expression from his assassination.