

Original article

Defense against a knifer – terrorist attack in Würzburg

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ABSTRACT

In the article, the authors present how a citizen can protect himself against an attack of a terrorist – knifer. The incidents where the main attackers are Islamic fundamentalists are increasingly heard in Europe. In order to bring this subject to light, the example of the terrorist attack in Würzburg has been described. Who was the terrorist? Is a citizen able to protect himself against an attack by a knife-wielding attacker? The primary assumption and purpose of the article below are to determine which method proves to be the most effective for the protection against a terrorist – a cutter. The authors have done so through the analysis of legal conditions regarding the use of various forms of defense on the example of self-defense techniques, the use of firearms or pepper spray, as well as the analysis of available literature.

KEYWORDS

knifer, terrorism, firearms, physical strength, security, ISIS

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Introduction

In the 21st century, terrorism is one of the greatest threats to state security. Currently, the most significant terrorist groups include Islamic organizations. It is worth noting that terrorists are getting better and better trained and use new methods of operation, which makes them even more dangerous. They recruit their members through various paths, for example via the Internet, which is why it is tough to detect them. In Europe, more and more people are experiencing attacks conducted by terrorists – knife fighters. The Polish dictionary defines that a knifer is a “bandit using a knife in fights and assaults” [1].

One of the ISIS methods is the exploitation of migrants with the status of refugees. According to the definition of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), an asylum seeker is a person that is searching for the protection as a refugee (has applied for refugee status), but his/her claims made for this status have not yet been resolved [2]. Such a person claims that he/she needs international protection due to the fear of persecution, he/she stays outside of the state of permanent residence and he/she does not want

to, or cannot because of these fears, return to the country of which he/she is a citizen [3]. The main point of this article is to determine how a citizen can protect himself against a terrorist-knifer's attack. This issue can be addressed by analyzing the exemplary attack as well as legal conditions. The event that will be presented is the attack conducted by a seventeen-year-old Afghan on the fellow passengers on the train in Würzburg in Germany on July 18, 2016.

The Europeans notice an increasing threat of terrorism. The attacks in Germany, France, and other Western European countries are proof that security services are not able to take action in good time in any situation to protect citizens from the threat. The increasing number of terrorist attacks is the evidence that, unfortunately, a state is not a guarantor of security and its services are unable to protect the health and life of citizens at all events. Terrorists prove that they can perform an attack almost anywhere, with the use of ever-newer tools. In the French capital in 2015, as many as six attempts were carried out. The biggest attack took place in the Bataclan Concert Hall, where about one hundred people died. Brussels has also become the target of terrorists. During the bombings at the Belgian airport and metro station, over thirty people were killed, and several dozens were injured.

The article aims to determine the best methods of defense against a terrorist – knifer. Paying attention to the possibilities of self-defense for citizens is essential.

The adopted hypothesis assumes that a good knowledge of self-defense techniques is the best, direct way of defense against a terrorist – knifer.

The first part of the article presents contemporary terrorism, taking into account the lone wolf terrorism. The following section describes the attack in Würzburg. The silhouette of an attacker is depicted to illustrate the situation and reasons for this better. In the subsequent part, individual ways of defending citizens against the attack of a knifer – a terrorist – are described and compared. The authors have undertaken the analysis of the above topic since terrorist attacks are becoming more frequent in Europe and therefore ensuring the security of citizens should be the foundation of the state activities.

1. Lone wolf terrorism

Modern terrorism undergoes constant changes. Since getting publicity and gaining media visibility belong to the main goals of terrorism, the perpetrators of attacks constantly use newer methods of action. Thanks to this, they attract more attention, and the propaganda effect is even more increased.

One of the contemporary forms of terrorism is the lone wolf terrorism. It is the fastest growing type of terrorism [4], which comes from one person and is more dangerous than the activities of entire terrorist groups because the person functions in society [5]. Lone wolves can act freely, are not controlled and make decisions themselves. The attacks they make are limited only by their creativity.

Terrorists most often search for information on the Internet. They have access to tools such as textbooks and training videos. An additional advantage of the network is that attackers can manifest their controversial views, spread ideology, and even consult on the planned attack. That makes them faster and more effective. They can remain anonymous on the Internet, thereby making themselves difficult to be detected.

The Islamic State, as the largest terrorist group, tries to employ methods that result in the most spectacular and surprising effects. As a result of recent terrorist attacks in Europe, a lone wolf can also be a refugee who has been radicalized and became a member of ISIS. The perpetrators admit that they belong to this organization. It is extremely dangerous because all information about attacks can be found on the Internet, moreover, the Islamic State sends instructions on attacks, and the detection of an individual terrorist's plans is very often impossible. That is why attacks that can be led through the network by lone wolves are so attractive to ISIS.

Islamic terrorists often choose public places as the target of their attacks. Due to the effectiveness of anti-terrorism policy in the field of weapon control, terrorists use other tools in their operations than they did before. The weapons they use during attacks include, above all, axes, bombs, and knives. Vehicle use is also very popular. However, the attackers are constantly looking for new ways that will allow them to sow terror. That is why states should be prepared for the fact that terrorists will use new tools.

2. Terrorist attack in Würzburg

2.1. Description of the attack

On July 18, 2016, a terrorist attack carried out by seventeen-year-old Afghan Riaz Khan Ahmadzai took place in the German city of Würzburg in Bavaria. Late in the evening the attacker got on the train, which had about 20 people onboard. During the travel, Ahmadzai went to the toilet, and after he returned he started to shout Islamic slogans and attack his fellow passengers with an ax and a knife. Two men of Chinese origin suffered head, abdomen, neck and hand wounds when trying to protect their loved ones. Two women joined in the defense, the older of them also suffered serious injuries. In the effect of his attacks with an ax and a knife, four people of Chinese origin were injured [6]. People in the wagon had no tools that would help them defend themselves against the stabber. Therefore, they decided to try to protect life and health using physical force. The train was moving, thus in the case of this event the injured took the best decision. The terrorist was convinced of the rightness of what he was doing, and therefore attempts to plead for him to stay alive would not have worked.

The attack took place on the Treuchtlingen – Würzburg train at about 9:00 PM. It is a 140-kilometer-long railway connection with 14 stations. It starts in Treuchtlingen in south-central Franconia, leads via Gunzenhausen, Ansbach, Steinach, Marktbreit and Ochsenfurt to the capital of Lower Franconia – Würzburg. It is one of the oldest railway lines in Germany.

In addition to the injured family, a dozen or so witnesses to the event were injured, for whom the passive participation ended with an acute stress reaction, which required the care of a psychologist. Passengers were able to notify the driver and the police. The attacker got off at the nearest Heidingsfeld station and tried to escape. As a result, it ended with shooting him by a special German police force, 500 meters from the train in question [7]. Figure 1 shows the route of the train on which the attack was carried out.

2.2. Silhouette of the attacker

The terrorist attack in Würzburg was launched by seventeen-year-old asylum seeker Muhammad Riyad, also known as Riaz Khan Ahmadzai. The young man came from Afghanistan. He arrived in Germany two years earlier; he had lived with a foster family in Ochsenfurt for two



Fig. 1. The route of the train on which the attack was performed

Source: [8].

weeks before the attack. He gave the impression of a calm and balanced person, was a believing Muslim, and his surroundings did not suspect that he could be a radical [9]. During the investigation, it was revealed that one of his closest friends had died in Afghanistan a few days earlier. It is possible that this event caused that the man decided to carry out the attack.

In the attacker's room, public officials found a hand-made Islamic State flag. Besides, ISIS published a video in which the attacker said that the Islamic caliphate would murder all unbelievers everywhere in the world. Both the flag and the released film indicated that he was a member of ISIS [10].

3. Ways of citizens' defense against a terrorist – knife fighter

At present, society should be prepared for self-defense in the event of a terrorist attack. Above all, the state should take care of the appropriate preparation of its citizens for such threats. A critical analysis of the available literature revealed that in the case of a knifer's attack, it would be advisable to use a firearm or self-defense techniques. Considering the example of the attack on the German train, the authors have reviewed the possibilities that citizens – passengers could use during the attack of the stabber, in order to stop him and prevent further blows with tools.

3.1. The use of firearms and pepper spray for self-defense

In connection with the wave and the immigration crisis as well as in the face of more than a million asylum seekers from Africa, Asia, and the Middle East, Germany is increasingly interested in the possibilities of defense, including access to firearms. The reasons for the increase in demand for all types of weapons can also be found in the rapid rise in crimes for which immigrants are responsible, among others attacks of knifers, robberies, burglaries, thefts on the territory of the whole country. The confirmation of the above information is the German police report, according to which as many as 38,000 asylum seekers were convicted of crimes

committed in 2014. This number translates into over 100 crimes per day, and it is worth bearing in mind that some of the offenses are not reported to the police authorities at all [4].

In the last decade, the right of access to weapons has undergone many reforms that have made them even more rigorous. The first amendment took place in 2003 after the shooting in the city of Erfurt, in which the student killed 16 people. Another reform was carried out in 2009 in response to the massacre in Winnenden, during which an eighteen-year-old murdered 15 people in the school. The National Firearms Register has been introduced, the age requirements for minors on the shooting range increased, and the authorities were given the power to more effectively monitor the safe storage of firearms in the hands of German citizens. According to statistics and data of the National Firearms Register, in 2013, nearly 5.5 million weapons were possessed by private owners (total population of Germany reaches approximately 80 million). The total number of weapon holders is approx. 1.4 million people [12]. In contrast, in October 2015, this number increased by 290 thousand and there were already 5.7 million firearms in the hands of private persons and associations [13].

When it comes to pepper spray, its two types can be distinguished in Germany. Pepper spray to defend against animals is permitted. The container must have clear markings informing about the purpose for protection against dangerous animals. It is worth noting that a spray without those markings or with an illegible label is subject to the provisions on firearms and is prohibited. When the competent authorities establish the possession of pepper spray not intended for defense against animals, criminal proceedings are instituted pursuant to the Law on Weapons [14]. However, since the outbreak of the migration crisis in Germany in August 2015, the sales of pepper spray throughout the country increased by 600% [15]. Pepper spray and other types of non-lethal weapons that are to be used for personal protection are legal, however to be in possession with them and use them, the so-called “small arms permit” is required, which, like in the case of firearms, is regulated by the German Law on Weapons.

When considering that there are approximately 30.3 weapons per 100 German inhabitants, it is likely that one of the passengers could have a firearm. However, restrictive regulations regarding the ban on possessing prove that the probability decreases. Given the significant increase of its holders, the use of pepper spray by the train passengers against the terrorist – knifer would be more plausible.

3.2. The use of self-defense techniques

The term “self-defense” is not sufficiently specified in reference books. Jan Harasymowicz stated that the term relates to “a self-preservation act or action taken by a person in a situation of danger and a direct assault on his health, life or own good” [16, p. 19]. Self-defense techniques are a combination of various martial arts and sports, including karate, judo, and boxing. Currently, an increasing number of training and self-defense courses are organized. The basic principle of teaching the fight in self-defense by instructors should be to develop such skills and techniques that would correspond to the real attack [17, p. 242]. They should be simple, because the more complex the method is, the more unreliable it is [18, p. 53]. Participants take part in classes where, among other things, they are shown how to defend themselves against dangerous tools (including a knife). Properly used physical force can prevent further dangerous deeds. However, it is worth noting that a civilian should escape immediately after the defense.

Self-defense techniques are used to counter an attack. In German law, the right of self-defense has been described in the Civil Code (BGB) in § 227 section 1. This paragraph states that the action taken as part of the self-defense cannot be treated as unlawful. Both in Polish and German law, to be able to take advantage from the provisions protecting the event participant from a criminal penalty, it is essential that the defense should be a response to the unlawful and current attack [19, p. 111, 112].

During an incident such as a terrorist attack, due to the threat to human life and health, a citizen has the right to act for the sake of defending his life or the lives of others. In the case of danger associated with a terrorist – knifer’s attack, in a situation where public services are not present at the scene, and the citizen cannot escape from the attacker, he is allowed to use a chosen technique of self-defense. It does not have to rely solely on the use of physical strength. It is worth observing the immediate surroundings to locate objects that would reduce the risk of injury.

Self-defense training should be carried out regularly because they shape right habits. However, if one is not sure about having the right skills, direct confrontation is not recommended. The probability that anyone on the train knew self-defense techniques against an attacker using white weapons was high, so it should be assumed that this is an appropriate way of action to take.

3.3. Comparative analysis of direct forms of defense against a terrorist – knifer

If it is not possible to escape from the attacker (including hiding from him or barricading), one should consider how to defend himself. Table 1 indicates three forms of direct defense against a terrorist – knife-fighter: firearms, pepper spray and the use of self-defense techniques based on different types of criteria.

The above table indicates that it is necessary to have the relevant license to use defense measures such as firearms and pepper spray. In the case of self-defense techniques, they are not required. Nonetheless, this does not mean that every citizen is physically fit enough to

Table 1. Ways of defending against a terrorist – knifer

Criterion	Firearms	Pepper spray	Use of self-defense techniques
High skill level	Can be used	Not applicable	Can be used
Low skill level	Cannot be used	Not applicable	Cannot be used
Licence	Necessary	Necessary in the case of use of pepper spray not intended for protection against animals	Not necessary
Open space	Can be used	Can be used	Can be used
Enclosed area	Can be used	Cannot be used	Can be used
Opportunities to obtain the necessary measures to defend	Low	Medium	High

Source: Own study.

be able to defend himself. For an effective defense with the use of firearms and self-defense techniques, it is indispensable to have the skills to use them properly. They are not necessary if the use of pepper spray is concerned. Pepper spray cannot be used in an enclosed room, because gas, when sprayed, can affect not only the attacker but also third persons. Since with self-defense techniques sometimes only physical strength is enough, the availability of measures necessary for defense is the greatest.

Conclusions

Terrorists increasingly surprise society with their methods. It is worthwhile to know that a citizen can try to defend himself because legal regulations provide him with such an opportunity. The article aimed to determine the best methods of defense against a terrorist – knife fighter. After analyzing the literature as well as Table 1, it can be claimed with certainty that the hypothesis assuming that a good knowledge of self-defense techniques is the best way to protect against a terrorist – knifer is true. It is related to, among others, restrictive regulations on obtaining a license for firearms and pepper spray, as well as the possibility of taking advantage of legal protection in the case of necessary defense. If one uses physical force, the risk of exceeding the boundaries of the necessary defense is the smallest.

In the case of the terrorist attack in Würzburg, the probability of having a weapon permit by passengers was negligible. If anyone had one, they probably would not have a gun with them, due to the ban on carrying it. The use of pepper spray in a closed area would certainly not work, and more people could be affected because an attacker could react aggressively to gas and injure additional people. It should also be taken into account that not every citizen could have skills related to the use of physical force, and an attempt to use force could cause more damage. Nevertheless, this would be the least invasive way. It is worth noting that the probability of having the capability of self-defense against white weapons was the greatest and in the case of the Würzburg attack the use of physical strength proved to be effective. It should also be mentioned that the attack was carried out with an element of surprise and the passengers did not have time to undertake other methods of self-defense.

Conclusively, the authors would like to add that taking account of the events that are currently taking place in Europe, it should be considered whether the right to use firearms by citizens should be more liberal and if it did, would not it lead to the increased threat of attacks?

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Conflict of interests

All authors declared no conflict of interests.

Author contributions

All authors contributed to the interpretation of results and writing of the paper. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

Ethical statement

The research complies with all national and international ethical requirements.

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Biographical note

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Obrona przed nożownikiem – atak islamskiego terrorysty w Würzburgu

STRESZCZENIE

W prezentowanym artykule autorki przedstawiają, w jaki sposób obywatel może chronić się przed atakiem terrorysty – nożownika. W Europie o takich zdarzeniach słyszy się coraz częściej, a głównymi napastnikami są fundamentaliści islamscy. Aby można było przybliżyć tę tematykę, opisany został przykładowy atak terrorystyczny w Würzburgu. Kim był terrorysta? Czy obywatel ma możliwość ochrony przed atakiem napastnika posługującego się nożem? Głównym założeniem oraz celem poniższego artykułu jest określenie, która z metod jest najlepszym sposobem ochrony przed terrorystą – nożownikiem. Autorki dokonały tego za pomocą analizy uwarunkowań prawnych dotyczących stosowania różnych form obrony na przykładzie technik samoobrony, używania broni palnej, bądź gazu pieprzowego oraz analizy dostępnej literatury.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE nożownik, terroryzm, broń palna, siła fizyczna, bezpieczeństwo, ISIS

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