You are currently viewing the printable version of this article, to return to the normal page, please click here.

The Washington Times

French murders spark Internet debate

By Ruby Russell and Louise Osborne - Special to The Washington Times

Friday, March 30, 2012

BERLIN — A murder spree in France by a gunman inspired by al Qaeda computer sites has European experts debating proposals to criminalize the act of regularly visiting terrorist web pages.

French President Nicolas Sarkozy called for new legislation last week that would punish people that "habitually consulted" websites that advocate terrorism or incite hatred and violence.

The move followed the killing of three Jewish children, a rabbi and three French soldiers by Mohamed Merah, 23, before police fatally shot him after a 32-hour standoff at his home in southwestern France.

Many analysts say Mr. Sarkozy's initiative is "ludicrous," and some questioned the feasibility of widespread Internet monitoring.

"You have to understand that this is just an announcement because we are in a presidential campaign, so I don't think it's going to be transformed into a new law," said Eric Denece, director of the French Center for Intelligence Research in Paris.

"The French now permit police to arrest people before they commit an attack, and that is enough for the time being. Most of the lawyers and judge and prosecutors say that this new project is absolutely stupid and will probably be ineffective."

Mr. Sarkozy is in a tight race for reflection in voting scheduled in April and May.

Extremist websites have been often been cited by government officials and analysts as the source of inspiration for would-be terrorists. The Web pages provide a means of research, contact and communication for various terrorism groups. The killings in Toulouse, France, have sparked a renewed debate in Europe on what to do about them.

"We've begun to see a bigger debate around online networking. We're beginning to enter into a debate around cybersecurity in relation to extremism," said Matthew Goodwin, who specializes in extremism at the University of Nottingham in Britain.

"The responses across Europe vary, but what we are seeing is a growing interest around the tools that extremist groups use, whether Internet sites or social media or networking."

EU combating recruitment

European antiterrorism policy has focused on combating radicalization and recruitment to terrorist

organizations, according to an European Union report in December that cites a number of initiatives put in place by member states to combat extremist propaganda via the Internet.

One is the Check the Web portal, a project led by Germany, which allows experts from 24 countries within and outside the EU to share information about radical websites through the European Police Office (Europol).

Another initiative, Dutch-led Clean IT, works with the private sector, training Internet service providers to recognize extremist content and encouraging them to take down such websites on a voluntary basis.

The project involves participation from EU countries including Germany, the Britain, Belgium and Spain as well as Europol.

In 2002, the European Union adopted rules to combat terrorism, compelling member states to introduce legislation that criminalizes preparing and training for a terrorist attack.

Producers of such content have faced prosecution for violating laws against incitement to hatred or violence, while such websites have been forced to close.

In Britain, the terrorism acts of 2000 and 2006 encourage members of the public are to report terrorist content to the police.

"There are no holes in the legislative net anymore. We can prosecute and prohibit almost everything connected to terrorism," said Beatrice de Graaf of the International Center for Counterterrorism in The Hague, who conducted a recent comparative study of counterterrorism measures.

"The point is not a lack of legislative measures. The problem is living up to these laws, monitoring these sites, assessing and analyzing and processing all the material."

Large-scale monitoring of the Internet would lead to high costs for governments and threaten people's privacy, analysts say.

"Targeted surveillance is much easier than mass surveillance; but if you wanted to try to capture people you don't know about, the problem is, who are you going to include — the population as a whole or people on incredibly vague suspicions?" said Peter Sommer, who specializes Internet issues at the London School of Economics.

Laws hamper online sleuths

Some say European laws prevent more effective monitoring.

"In the U.S. you can use a lot of technology for screening the Internet so that it's automatically screened … in Germany you are not allowed to use it because of civil rights," said Astrid Botticher of the University of Witten/Herdecke's department of Political Science and Security Management in Witten, Germany.

"We are in a process of putting civil rights together with security."

Others feared authorities could abuse Internet monitoring laws.

"There's a trade-off between policy aspirations for the Internet that you keep people safe but that you keep

the Internet open for innovation and the free flow of ideas," Mr. Sommer said.

"Any compromise between those two positions is bound to be messy."

Meanwhile, digital-rights campaigners said plans to go after people visiting the websites, rather than those producing the sites, are "ridiculous."

"The first thing that needs to be established is what is legal or not. If somebody is generating content that is illegal, then the person who is committing that offense is the person that you should go after, not the people who, for whatever reason, end up on a particular website reading it," said Joe McNamee of Digital Civil Rights in Europe.

Analysts said it was difficult to deal with websites hosted outside of the individual countries.

"It's very easy with a website in France [or the EU] because the law will apply immediately," said Mr. Denece.

"The main problem is what can we do to stop the online publication of very dangerous information when the website is somewhere [such as] the Middle East, Southeast Asia or China or because it's impossible for the French police or a French lawyer or prosecutor to [tell] the company that hosts the website to stop the activity."

Others say governments should be careful about how they deal with the terrorist threat through the Internet.

"You don't want to limit freedoms just because a very small minority in your population is abusing that freedom for its own political reasons …," said Peter Knoope, director the International Center for Counterterrorism at The Hague.

"Trying to keep your own values is important and expanding those values to your whole population is more important and more relevant than letting some of these minorities induce you to reduce your own values."