Vehicles as Weapons of Terror

On July 14, 2016, Tunisian-born Mohamed Lahouaiej-Bouhlel drove a 19-ton truck into a crowd celebrating Bastille Day at Nice’s Promenade des Anglais, killing 86 people and wounding more than 430 others. ISIS claimed responsibility for the terrorist attack two days later, calling Lahouaiej-Bouhlel a “soldier of the Islamic State.” The attack in Nice, though not the first of its kind, was the deadliest modern vehicular terrorist attack in Europe, launching a wave of terrorist and ISIS-claimed vehicular attacks around the world. Since the Nice attacks, CEP has documented

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2 The U.S. Transportation Security Administration (TSA) defines vehicle ramming as an “attack in which a perpetrator deliberately aims a motor vehicle at a target with the intent to inflict fatal injuries or significant property damage by striking with concussive force.”
major vehicular incidents in Vienna,3 Ohio,4 Berlin,5 London,6 Antwerp,7 Stockholm,8 Paris,9 Barcelona,10 Edmonton,11 and New York.12 On August 14, 2018, an attacker struck pedestrians and bicyclists in London before crashing his car into security barriers outside the Houses of Parliament, leaving three people wounded.13

The 2016 Nice attack set off a wave of vehicular terrorist attacks in autumn of that year, which collectively left 12 people dead and 67 others wounded. In September 2016, an assailant drove his car at shoppers in Vienna’s Favoriten district while shouting “Allahu Akbar,” leaving no injuries.14

In November 2016, Somali-born Abdul Razak Ali Artan carried out a car and knife attack at Ohio State University, wounding 11 people. In December 2016, Tunisian-born Anis Amri charged at pedestrians attending the Christmas Market in Berlin, killing 12 people and wounding 56 others in an attack claimed by ISIS. Footage released by the ISIS-affiliated Amaq News Agency showed Amri pledging allegiance to the group’s leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, vowing “we will slaughter” the “crusaders who are shelling the Muslims every day.”

CEP has documented at least 43 vehicular terrorist attacks since 2006, collectively resulting in the deaths of at least 197 people and the injury of at least 1,078 others.

Vehicular attacks continued into 2017 and 2018, leaving at least 34 people dead and more than 240 wounded. On March 22, 2017, terrorist assailant Khalid Masood killed five people and wounded 50 more during a vehicle and stabbing attack in London. The following day, a similar attack was thwarted in Antwerp, Belgium. On April 7, another assailant carried out a suspected terrorist attack, this time in Sweden, hijacking a truck and careening into crowds of pedestrians at the Ahlens Mall in Stockholm, killing four people and wounding 15 more.

On the evening of June 3, 2017, three assailants drove a van at high speed into crowds on the London Bridge and exited the vehicle to stab other pedestrians at the nearby Borough Market. The attack, claimed by ISIS, left eight people dead and 48 others wounded, and followed a call by ISIS on May 17 to carry out terrorist attacks in the United States, United Kingdom, and European

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Union using knives and trucks. On June 19, 2017, an assailant drove at a crowd of worshipers near a mosque in north London, leaving at least eight people wounded. Later that day, an armed assailant rammed his vehicle at a police car on the Champs-Elysees street in Paris, seriously injuring himself but leaving no other casualties.

On August 17, 2017, a van was deliberately driven into a crowd of tourists in Las Ramblas, a tree-lined street in the center of Barcelona. The attack, claimed by ISIS, left 16 people dead and 120 others wounded. On September 30, 2017, an assailant launched two vehicular terror attacks in Edmonton, Canada, collectively injuring five people. In the first attack, the assailant used a car to ram into a police officer before exiting the car and stabbing him. The assailant later used a truck to ram into pedestrians, injuring another four people. An ISIS flag was later found in the suspect’s vehicle.

Despite the recent uptick of ISIS-claimed attacks, vehicular attacks are not a new phenomenon. Terrorists have carried out car-ramming attacks for more than a decade, in locations ranging from

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North Carolina\textsuperscript{26} to Jerusalem,\textsuperscript{27} Tel Aviv,\textsuperscript{28} Quebec,\textsuperscript{29} Dijon,\textsuperscript{30} Nantes,\textsuperscript{31} the West Bank,\textsuperscript{32} Graz,\textsuperscript{33} and Xinjiang.\textsuperscript{34} The recent uptick in vehicular attacks, however, appears to have been in large part inspired by ISIS’s explicit calls to employ cars as weapons. In May 2017, the U.S. Transportation

Security Administration (TSA) issued a warning to truck and bus companies urging companies to watch out for potential vehicular terrorist assailants and listing more than a dozen car-ramming attacks since 2014 that have collectively killed more than 170 people. As the TSA wrote in its memo, terrorist groups will likely continue to encourage “unsophisticated tactics such as vehicle-ramming” since these types of attacks are difficult to prevent and “could inflict mass casualties if successful.”

Al-Qaeda, ISIS, and Hamas Call for (and Claim) Attacks

Terrorist groups like al-Qaeda, ISIS, and Hamas have long called for—and claimed responsibility for—vehicular terrorist attacks. Al-Qaeda’s second issue of Inspire magazine, released in October 2010, contained an article calling for vehicular attacks and referring to a pickup truck as a potential “mowing machine” that can be used to “mow down the enemies of Allah.” Inspire editor-in-chief Yahya Ibrahim urged al-Qaeda followers to “[g]o for the most crowded location” and “pick up as much speed as you can” in order “strike as many people as possible.” An FBI memo released in December of that year noted the emerging danger from vehicular attacks, which may allow terrorists with “limited access to explosives or weapons” the ability to conduct an attack with “minimal prior training or experience.”

Following the October 31, 2017, truck-ramming attack in New York City, several old images praising vehicular and other attacks reappeared on pro-ISIS channels on the encrypted messaging service Telegram. In addition, ISIS propaganda calling for vehicular attacks was accessible online the same day of the attack.

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35 CEP has added to the TSA’s findings, identifying several other terrorist incidents during this period and since 2006.
An old ISIS propaganda image from Nashir, a news organization affiliated with the group, recirculated on a pro-ISIS Telegram channel on October 31, 2017.

On October 16, 2017, an Internet user uploaded to the U.S. Internet Archive an ISIS video instructing how to carry out a ramming attack. The video is a 26-second segment of the longer video, “We Will Surely Guide Them to Our Ways,” which features the self-identified American fighter Abu Hamza Al-Amriki, who encourages lone wolf attacks with knives and motor vehicles. The video also features several short clips of U.S.-based locations, including New York City’s Times Square. The video was originally released on May 17, 2017.

In September 2014, ISIS spokesman Abu Muhammad al-Adnani issued a call to kill non-believers using any means at their disposal. “[S]ingle out the disbelieving American, Frenchman, or any of his allies,” he said. “Smash his head with a rock, or slaughter him with a knife, or run him over with your car.”

In November of that year, French foreign fighter Abu Salman al-Faranci appeared in a video reiterating ISIS’s call for followers—particularly in France—to carry out domestic attacks if they could not join ISIS abroad. As Faranci said to his viewers: “Terrorize them and do not allow them to sleep due to fear and horror. There are weapons and cars available and targets ready to be hit.”

In mid-November 2016, ISIS’s third issue of online magazine *Rumiyah* included an article calling for its followers to carry out vehicle attacks. The article specified the ideal type, weight, and speed of a car needed for terror purposes, and encouraged attacks on “large outdoor conventions and celebrations, pedestrian-congested streets, outdoor markets, festivals, festivals, parades[, and] political rallies.” Later that month, Somali-born Abdul Razak Ali Artan carried out a car and knife attack at Ohio State University, wounding 11 people.

Following the wave of vehicular terrorist attacks in 2016 and 2017, ISIS has continued to issue calls to violence and warnings of additional car-ramming attacks. On May 17, 2017, the group released a video threatening attacks in the United Kingdom, Europe, and the United States, especially in New York, Las Vegas, and Washington, D.C. ISIS has also threatened and encouraged vehicular attacks on gay pride parades. In June 2017, an account operating under the name of ISIS’s Nashir agency released a renewed call for ISIS supporters to “[r]un over people by vehicles and [c]ut off their necks in any time [sic].”

ISIS and al-Qaeda are not the only terrorist groups to urge or claim credit for vehicular terrorist attacks. One of the first documented vehicular attacks was carried out by an unaffiliated Iranian-American, who wounded nine people at the University of North Carolina in 2006. As the assailant Mohammed Reza Taheri-azar told investigators, he had had carried out the attack in an

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45 Counter Extremism Project.

effort to punish the U.S. government and “avenge the deaths or murders of Muslims around the world.”²⁴⁷

A slew of car-ramming attacks have also been carried out by Palestinian assailants in Israel and the West Bank. In November of 2014, Hamas and other Palestinian terrorist groups—including the Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ)—praised a wave of vehicular attacks and called for more. One such image posted online read, “Run [them] over, son of Hebron...and son of Jerusalem. Take your car...and run over the Zionists.”²⁴⁸

Recent Vehicular Terrorist Attacks

Terrorists have carried out attacks using cars and trucks in a wide range of countries, including the United States, United Kingdom, France, Canada, China, Germany, Israel, and Belgium. In some cases, assailants have used gas canisters or other explosives to supplement the potential damage from car-ramming attacks. This type of planning could be seen in the June 2007 Islamist attack targeting Glasgow Airport in Scotland,⁴⁹ the May 2014 attack in China’s Xinjiang province,⁵⁰ and the June 2015 attack on a gas plant in southern France.⁵¹

In other cases, extremists have managed to launch deadly or harmful vehicular attacks using low-sophistication tactics like car-ramming and stabbing. CEP has documented more than two dozen vehicular terrorist attacks since 2000. Of these, the single deadliest attack was the July 2016 Bastille Day attack in Nice, when terrorist assailant Mohamed Lahouaiej-Bouhlel killed 86 people and wounded 434 more at Nice’s Promenade Des Anglais.⁵²

- **March 4, 2006:** North Carolina, United States. Iranian-born Mohammed Reza Taheri-azar uses an SUV to ram into pedestrians at the University of North Carolina, wounding nine people.⁵³ Taheri-azar tells investigators that he carried out the attack in order to punish the U.S. government and “avenge the deaths or murders of Muslims around the world.”⁵⁴

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• **June 30, 2007**: Scotland, United Kingdom. Terrorists drive a flaming jeep into the entrance of Scotland’s Glasgow Airport, wounding five people.  

• **2008—Present**: West Bank. Assailants carry out more than two dozen vehicular terrorist attacks targeting Israeli civilians and soldiers in the West Bank since 2008. The attacks collectively leave dozens of people wounded and at least one person dead.

• **July 2, 2008**: Jerusalem, Israel. Assailant rams a front-end loader into buses and cars in Jerusalem, killing three people and wounding 40 others.

• **July 22, 2008**: Jerusalem, Israel. Assailant rams a bulldozer into nearby vehicles in Jerusalem, wounding at least 16 people.

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• **September 22, 2008:** Jerusalem, Israel. Assailant rams his car into a group of Israelis in Jerusalem, injuring 15 Israeli soldiers and four civilians.  

• **March 5, 2009:** Jerusalem, Israel. Assailant uses a bulldozer to ram into an Israeli police car in Jerusalem, injuring two officers.  

• **August 29, 2011:** Tel Aviv, Israel. A suspected Hamas member drives a stolen taxi into a police checkpoint outside of a Tel Aviv nightclub filled with teenagers before exiting the vehicle and stabbing pedestrians. Nine people are wounded in the attack, including four police officers.  

• **May 22, 2013:** London, United Kingdom. Two British-born assailants—Michael Adebolajo and Michael Adebowale—ram a car into British soldier Lee Rigby before attacking and killing him with knives and a meat cleaver.  

• **May 23, 2014:** Xinjiang, China. Assailants ram two SUVs into a street market and throw explosives in Urumqi, the capital of China’s Xinjiang province, killing 39 people and injuring more than 90 others.  

• **August 4, 2014:** Jerusalem, Israel. Assailant plows a construction tractor at pedestrians, killing one person and wounding five others.  

• **October 20, 2014:** Quebec, Canada. Canadian-born ISIS supporter Martin Couture-Rouleau rams a car into a group of soldiers at a shopping center in Quebec, killing one soldier and wounding another. During the attack, Couture-Rouleau instructed a 911 dispatcher “to alert Canada, the governor and everyone who is responsible for the army” to leave the anti-ISIS coalition.

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• **October 22, 2014**: Jerusalem, Israel. A suspected Hamas member rams his car into a crowd of pedestrians at a light rail train station in Jerusalem, killing two people—including a three-month-old girl—and wounding seven more.66

• **November 5, 2014**: Jerusalem, Israel. Assailant with alleged ties to Hamas drives into a crowded area in Jerusalem and continues to attack pedestrians using a metal pipe, killing three people and wounding 13 others. Hamas and PIJ both praise the recent wave of vehicular attacks and call for more.67

• **December 21, 2014**: Dijon, France. A man rams his car into crowds in the eastern French city of Dijon while shouting “Allahu Akbar,” injuring 13 people.68

• **December 22, 2014**: Nantes, France. A man rams a van into a crowd of pedestrians at a Christmas market in Nantes, western France, killing one person and wounding 10 others.69

• **March 6, 2015**: Jerusalem, Israel. Assailant rams his car at border police in Jerusalem, wounding four policewomen and one pedestrian, before exiting the vehicle wielding a meat cleaver. Hamas spokesman Sami Abu Zuhri posts a statement on Facebook praising the attack on behalf of the terrorist group and calling it “historic.”70

• **April 15, 2015**: Jerusalem, Israel. Assailant rams his car into a bus stop in Jerusalem, killing one person and wounding another.71

• **June 20, 2015**: Graz, Austria. Assailant rams into a crowd of pedestrians before exiting the vehicle and stabbing passersby, killing three people and wounding three dozen more.72

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• **June 26, 2015**: Lyon, France. Assailant Yassin Salhi decapitates his boss and drives his van into a gas plant where he worked in Lyon, southern France, lobbing gas cylinders, causing an explosion, and wounding two people.73

• **October 13, 2015**: Jerusalem, Israel. Assailant rams his car into a bus stop in Jerusalem before exiting the vehicle and stabbing pedestrians, killing one person and wounding two others.74

• **January 1, 2016**: Valence, France. Assailant drives his car into a group of French soldiers guarding a mosque in Valence, southern France, injuring one person.75

• **July 14, 2016**: Nice, France. Tunisian-born Mohamed Lahouaiej-Bouhlel carries out the Bastille Day attacks in France, killing 86 people and wounding 434 more. ISIS claims responsibility.76

• **September 29, 2016**: Vienna, Austria. Assailant drives his car at shoppers in Vienna’s Favoriten district while shouting “Allahu Akbar,” leaving no injuries.77

• **November 28, 2016**: Ohio, United States. Somali-born Abdul Razak Ali Artan carries out the car and knife attack at Ohio State University, wounding 11 people. Prior to the attack, Artan calls al-Qaeda propagandist Anwar al-Awlaki “our hero” in a message posted to Facebook. ISIS claims responsibility.78

• **December 19, 2016**: Berlin, Germany. Tunisian-born Anis Amri carries out the Christmas Market attack in Berlin, killing 12 people and wounding 56 others. ISIS claims responsibility.79

• **March 22, 2017**: London, United Kingdom. British-born Khalid Masood carries out a car-ramming and stabbing attack, killing five people and wounding 50 others. Masood first rams a crowd of pedestrians on London’s Westminster Bridge, killing four people and

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wounding dozens more. Masood then crashes his car into the gates of the Palace of Westminster. He stabs to death a police officer outside the nearby Houses of Parliament before being shot and killed by police. ISIS claims responsibility.

- **March 23, 2017**: Antwerp, Belgium. A man is intercepted while driving at high speed toward crowds at De Meir, the major shopping street in Antwerp.
- **April 7, 2017**: Stockholm, Sweden. An assailant drives a truck into a crowd at a shopping mall in Stockholm, killing four people and wounding 15 more.
- **June 3, 2017**: London, United Kingdom. Three assailants drive a van at high speed into crowds on the London Bridge and exit the vehicle to stab other pedestrians at the nearby Borough Market. The attack leaves at least eight people dead and least 48 others wounded. The attackers are later identified as Youssef Zaghba, Khuram Butt, and Rachid Redouane.
- **June 19, 2017**: Paris, France. An armed assailant rams his vehicle at a police car on the Champs-Elysées street in Paris, seriously injuring himself but leaving no other casualties.
- **August 17, 2017**: Barcelona, Spain. A van is deliberately driven into a crowd of tourists in Las Ramblas, a tree-lined street in the center of Barcelona. The attack, claimed by ISIS, leaves 16 people dead and 120 others wounded.


• **September 30, 2017**: Edmonton, Canada. A Somali assailant is suspected behind two vehicular attacks, collectively injuring five people. In the first attack, the assailant uses a car to ram into a police officer before exiting the car and stabbing him. The assailant later uses a truck to ram into pedestrians, injuring another four people. An ISIS flag is later found in the suspect’s vehicle.87

• **October 31, 2017**: New York, United States. Uzbek immigrant Sayfullo Saipov drives a rented Home Depot truck onto a bicycle path along New York City’s West Side Highway for approximately 20 blocks. The driver strikes several people before he drives into a school bus. Police shoot and arrest the driver after he exits the truck carrying a paintball gun and a pellet gun. At least eight people are killed and at least 12 are wounded. Mayor Bill de Blasio calls the attack “an act of terror.” It is the deadliest terror attack in New York since 9/11. Police find handwritten notes near the truck attributing the attack to ISIS, and Saipov is reportedly linked to social media accounts that posted ISIS-related material.88

• **November 17, 2017**: West Bank. A 17-year-old Palestinian attacker drives a car into a 70-year-old pedestrian at the Efrat South Junction near the Israeli settlement of Efrat. The attacker then continues to the nearby Gush Etzion Junction where he strikes a 35-year-old pedestrian. The attacker exits his vehicle and attempts to stab an Israeli soldier, who shoots and wounds the attacker. Both pedestrians are wounded but survive. The attacker is arrested.89

• **March 16, 2018**: West Bank. Alaa Rateb Aa-Latif Kabha drives a car into a group of soldiers outside the Mevo Dotan settlement in the northern West Bank, killing two soldiers and wounding two others. Kabha is detained and taken to a hospital with injuries. The Israeli military labels the ramming a terrorist attack. Hamas praises the attack but does not claim credit.90

• **August 14, 2018**: London, United Kingdom. A man drives his car into bicyclists and pedestrians during morning rush hour in London before crashing into security barriers

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outside the Houses of Parliament, wounding three. Police label the incident an act of terrorism and arrest the driver, whose identity is not immediately revealed.91

- **November 26, 2018**: West Bank. Ramzi Abu Yabes drives his car into a group of soldiers on a sidewalk along the Route 60 highway near the Karmei Tzur settlement, wounding three. The driver is shot dead.92

- **January 1, 2019**: Germany. A 50-year-old German man rams his car into two groups of New Year’s revelers shortly after midnight in the city of Bottrop and then again in Essen, wounding eight people, including a 4-year-old boy. Seven of the victims are from Syria and Afghanistan. The eighth victim is identified as a German-Turk from Essen. The driver is charged with multiple counts of attempted murder and is suspected of carrying out a hate crime after telling police he wanted to kill foreigners.93

- **March 4, 2019**: West Bank. A car drives into a group of soldiers on the side of the road at the entrance to the village of N’ima near Ramallah, injuring two. The soldiers open fire at the three occupants in the car, killing two and wounding the third. Soldiers find Molotov cocktails in the car. The two slain attackers are identified as Amir Daraj and Yousef Inqawi. The wounded attacker is not publicly identified. Hamas praises the attack.94

- **August 19, 2019**: West Bank. A car hits two teenage siblings at a bus stop outside the Elazar settlement in the central West Bank, wounding both, one seriously. The vehicle rolls over after the attack and police shoot the driver dead as he tries to exit. The driver is identified as 26-year-old Ala’a Harimi of Bethlehem. The car he was driving had been reported as stolen. Hamas praises the attack.95

- **September 20, 2019**: Illinois, United States. Javier Garcia drives his SUV through the front entrance of a Sears store at the Woodfield Mall in Schaumburg, Illinois, wounding seven people. State authorities charge Garcia with terrorism and criminal damage to property. Authorities do not immediately determine a motive. Garcia suffers from

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schizophrenia, paranoia, and bipolar disorder and accidentally drove through the mall because of his mental illness, according to Garcia’s attorney.96

- **October 22, 2019:** Oslo, Norway. An armed man steals an ambulance and drives it into a crowd, wounding three, including 7-month-old twins. The hijacker is wounded in a firefight with police who then arrest him and charge him with attempted murder. A woman at a nearby shopping center is also arrested in connection with the attack on a charge of illegal possession of a firearm. Police find a shotgun and an Uzi machine gun at the scene where the ambulance was stolen. Authorities do not immediately identify a motive for the attack. The attacker reportedly had previously distributed propaganda for the Nordic Resistance Movement, raising suspicion of a far-right motive, though he allegedly did not belong to the group.97

**Conclusion:**

As the TSA notes, vehicular terrorist attacks are becoming “more commonplace around the globe.”98 Indeed, terrorists are increasingly relying on low-sophistication tactics like car-ramming and stabbing to kill or injure large groups of people without easy detection or intervention by law enforcement. These assailants often target locations where large numbers of people congregate, particularly on or around major national holidays, when civilians are likely to be outdoors shopping or celebrating.99

Although there is little that can be done to prevent the weaponization of motor vehicles, the TSA has encouraged bus and trucking companies to be vigilant about indicators—like modifications to vehicles—that may suggest a vehicular terrorist attack. The TSA has also encouraged the use of vehicle barriers to prevent vehicles from accelerating into populated areas, protecting large crowds of people from attacks at outdoor venues like concerts, sporting events, and holiday markets.100

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99 For more on common terror targets, see CEP’s report, *Terror Targets in the West: Where and Why*.

As CEP notes, far more can also be done by tech companies to counteract calls to violence by groups like ISIS, al-Qaeda, and Hamas. After the March 2017 Westminster attack, YouTube was “inundated with violent ISIS recruitment videos,” according to findings by the U.K. government. The British government noted that YouTube failed to block this slew of content, despite the videos being easily searchable and posted under usernames like “Islamic Caliphate.” After the June 2017 London Bridge attack, U.K. Prime Minister Theresa May called for increased regulation on the Internet, where terrorist recruitment and incitement to violence largely takes place remotely. Despite Google’s claims to have improved its takedown efforts, CEP has tracked the appearance and reappearance of major ISIS videos on YouTube (Google’s subsidiary), including those calling for vehicular terrorist attacks. CEP’s findings raise serious questions about Google’s stated commitment to confronting terrorist recruitment using hashing technology, which prevents flagged content from being re-uploaded to a platform.

CEP has tracked the appearance and reappearance of major ISIS videos on YouTube calling for vehicular terrorist attacks. CEP’s findings raise serious questions about the company’s stated commitment to confronting terrorist recruitment on its platform.

In many cases, assailants themselves are active on tech platforms like Google, Facebook, and WhatsApp prior to carrying out an attack. Abdul Razak Ali Artan, perpetrator of the November 2016 Ohio State University attack, called al-Qaeda cleric Anwar al-Awlaki “our hero” in a message posted to Facebook. Khalid Masood, perpetrator of the March 2017 Westminster attack, sent a message on WhatsApp announcing his intention to wage jihad minutes before launching his assault.

While it is impossible to prevent all vehicular terrorist attacks, far more can and should be done to reduce the threat. Tech companies, for one, can do far more to prevent groups like ISIS, al-Qaeda, and Hamas from using their platforms to recruit new members and reach their target audiences. These companies can also be more proactive and cooperative with law enforcement about the activity of lone-wolf terrorists on their platforms. Although we cannot prevent each and every vehicular attack, efforts to prevent even a few attacks can have the foreseeably large impact of reducing widespread fear and, most importantly, saving lives.

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