

The Jihadist Threat in Europe

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Jihadist mobilisation in Europe is nothing new and has historically implied a range of activities: providing logistical and financial support to terrorist groups; planning and executing attacks; and travelling to conflict areas to join armed groups.¹

During the 1990s, groups such as the Algerian Armed Islamic Group (GIA), the Egyptian al-Jama'a al-Islamiyya, and the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG) set up a network of supporters across European countries. For example, in Italy, as early as the first part of the 1990s, various North African networks played a prominent role in the nascent global jihadist movement.²

Similarly, over the last few decades European militants joined jihadist armed groups in Afghanistan, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Chechnya, Iraq, Somalia, and other countries.³

However, jihadist mobilisation has witnessed a sharp increase in recent years—especially after the outbreak of the Syrian conflict, in 2011, and the rapid rise of Daesh, which proclaimed its “caliphate” on 29 June 2014. On the one hand, the number of foreign fighters heading to Syria and Iraq is unprecedented, both from a European and from a worldwide perspective. On the other hand, jihadist attacks in Europe—generally fol-

* This paper was submitted on 1 July 2018.

¹ In particular, Petter Nesser, *Islamist Terrorism in Europe: A History*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015.

² Lorenzo Vidino, *Home-Grown Jihadism in Italy: Birth, Development and Radicalization Dynamics*, Report, Italian Institute for International Political Studies (ISPI) and European Foundation for Democracy, 2014, <https://www.ispionline.it/it/EBook/vidino-eng.pdf>.

³ See, among others, Isabelle Duyvesteyn and Bram Peeters, *Fickle Foreign Fighters? A Cross-Case Analysis of Seven Muslim Foreign Fighter Mobilisations (1980-2015)*, Research Paper, The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague (ICCT), October 2015.

lowing a cyclical pattern, alternating between relatively quiet periods and more violent ones—have experienced a spike.

This chapter examines the jihadist mobilisation which has affected European countries over the last few years. In the first section, data and examples on jihadism-related arrests and convictions, terrorist plots and attacks, and foreign fighters are discussed. The second section provides an overview of the motivations and causes behind jihadist mobilisation and radicalisation in Europe.⁴

1. Jihadist Mobilisation in Europe: Data and Examples

To assess the scope of recent years' jihadist mobilisation and radicalisation across European countries, various indicators can be taken into account. We focus on data about arrests and convictions, terrorist plots and attacks, and foreign fighters.

1.1. Arrests and convictions

According to Europol, over the years 2012-2017, 2,880 suspects were arrested in European Union (EU) countries for jihadist terrorism-related offences. This accounts for more than double the figure of the period 2006-2011, with 1,056 arrestees. In particular, the number of arrests has sharply increased after 2012: only 159 individuals were apprehended for jihadist terrorism in 2012, whereas that figure reached 718 individuals in 2016 and 705 in 2017. However, the bulk of this rise occurred in the years 2013-2015, whereas the variation across 2015-2016 was less pronounced (687 arrests versus 718 arrests, respectively).⁵ In 2017, the vast majority of arrests took place in France (373), with a considerable distance from other relevant countries such as Spain (78), Germany (52) and Belgium (50).⁶

In 2017, the majority of verdicts for terrorism in the EU Member States concerned jihadism (352 out of a total of 569), confirming a trend that started in 2015. The highest number of verdicts for jihadist terrorism in

⁴ Cf. Lorenzo Vidino and Silvia Carenzi, *Terrorist Attacks. Youngsters and Jihadism in Europe*, European Institute of the Mediterranean (IEMed), IEMed Mediterranean Yearbook 2018.

⁵ Europol, *European Union Terrorism Situation and Trend Report (TE-SAT) 2018*, June 2018.

⁶ The data provided to Europol by the UK was not broken down by type of terrorism (jihadist or other types) and is therefore not included.

2017 (114) was rendered in France. Overall, in 2017, the vast majority of verdicts was in relation to Daesh or its affiliated groups. However, persons who had engaged with Al Qaeda, the Taliban or Al-Shabaab were also tried.

The concluded jihadist terrorism cases had a very high conviction rate (89%) in 2017, similar to 2016 (92%) and 2015 (94%). In the EU the average prison sentence for jihadist terrorist offences was five years.⁷

1.2. Terrorist plots and attacks

European countries witnessed a boost in the number of jihadist attacks perpetrated on their soil in recent years, especially after 2014. According to the Italian Institute for Political International Studies (ISPI) Database,⁸ 46 terrorist attacks inspired by jihadist ideology were carried out between 2014 and 2017 in Europe: 20 attacks in 2017, 14 in 2016, and 10 in 2015. In the first half of 2018, at least three jihadist attacks were carried out in the region.

During the 2014-2017 wave, the most affected country was France—which saw 23 attacks on its territory since 2014—followed by the United Kingdom and Germany (7 attacks in both cases), Belgium (4 attacks), Austria, Denmark, Finland, Spain, and Sweden (one attack each). These acts of violence resulted in a death toll of roughly 350 victims and over 2,000 injured.

Apart from the “completed” attacks,⁹ a significant number of plots have been thwarted by authorities: for instance, over the period 2014-2016, 24 well-documented jihadist terrorist plots (and an even greater number of vague plans) were foiled.¹⁰

⁷ Europol, *European Union Terrorism Situation and Trend Report (TE-SAT) 2018*, op. cit.

⁸ Database of jihadist terrorist attacks in the West, Italian Institute for Political International Studies. See also Lorenzo Vidino, Francesco Marone and Eva Entenmann, *Fear Thy Neighbor: Radicalization and Jihadist Attacks in the West*, Report, Italian Institute for International Political Studies (ISPI) / Program on Extremism at George Washington University / International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague (ICCT), June 2017, https://www.ispionline.it/sites/default/files/pubblicazioni/radicalization_web.pdf.

⁹ Erik J. Dahl, “Comparing Failed, Foiled, Completed and Successful Terrorist Attacks,” presentation, 18 September 2014, START – National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism; Lorenzo Vidino, Francesco Marone and Eva Entenmann, *Fear Thy Neighbor*, op. cit., p. 39.

¹⁰ Petter Nesser, Anne Stenersen and Emilie Oftedal, “Jihadi Terrorism in Europe: The IS-Effect,” *Perspectives on Terrorism*, Vol. 10, No. 6, 2016, pp. 3-24; ISPI Database of jihadist terrorist attacks in the West.

Among the major halted plots, there was a terrorist plan envisioned by the so-called “Verviers cell”, dismantled in Belgium in January 2015. It apparently involved the use of TATP (triacetone triperoxide, a non-nitrogenous explosive) and semiautomatic weapons; although the intended target was not clear, it seemed that Brussels’ Zaventem Airport was an option. It was reportedly masterminded by Abdelhamid Abaaoud—a Belgian operative and key figure in Daesh external operations branch, who took part in the November 2015 Paris attacks.¹¹

Another notable example was the Riviera bomb plot, foiled in February 2014 in the Cote d’Azur region, France. The suspect, Ibrahim Boudina, had allegedly trained with Daesh in Syria, and possibly contemplated targeting the Nice Carnival celebrations. He, too, appeared to have been dispatched back to France by Daesh.

With respect to attacks successfully launched in 2014-2017, according to the ISPI Database, most of them (39 out of 46 attacks, i.e., nearly 85%) were carried out by single actors. While in most cases links between perpetrators and members of Daesh were rather weak, in a few instances a more substantial coordination can be spotted. The May 2014 shooting at the Brussels Jewish Museum is a good example: the perpetrator, Mehdi Nemmouche, was initially thought to have acted alone; however, further investigations revealed that he had travelled to Syria and had been sent back to France by Daesh. Conversely, Mohamed Lahouaiej-Bouhlel, the Tunisian citizen who killed 86 people in the July 2016 Nice attack, did not seem to be connected with Daesh operatives, at least according to information disclosed so far.

Another type of connection emerging in recent years’ attacks was “virtual planning” (also known as “virtual entrepreneurship”),¹² where Daesh militants assisted would-be terrorists outside of Syria and Iraq in preparing and committing attacks, by using social media and encrypted online messaging platforms. This is precisely what happened in the Wurzburg, Ansbach and Normandy church attacks, all executed in July 2016.

¹¹ See Guy van Vlierden, “Profile: Paris Attack Ringleader Abdelhamid Abaaoud,” *CTC Sentinel*, Volume 8, Issue 11, 2015, pp. 30-33.

¹² See Alexander Meleagrou-Hitchens and Seamus Hughes, “The Threat to the United States from the Islamic State’s Virtual Entrepreneurs,” *CTC Sentinel*, Volume 10, Issue 3, 2017, pp. 1-8; R. Kim Cragin and Ari Weil, “Virtual Planners’ in the Arsenal of Islamic State External Operations,” *Orbis*, Vol. 62, No. 2, 2018, pp. 294-312.

According to the ISPI Database, only in 7 cases out of 46 (i.e., roughly 15% of total 2014-2017 attacks), a group consisting of two or more actors physically took part in a terrorist act. However, the number of thwarted plots involving a group of militants is higher. This is possibly due to the fact that single-actor plots are less likely to be detected by authorities, in contrast with group-based plans.¹³ The (quite narrow) set of group-led attacks in 2014-2017 includes the November 2015 Paris attacks, the March 2016 Brussels attacks, and—more recently—the August 2017 Catalonia attacks.

As Europol has recently underlined, most terrorist activities with which the EU was confronted in recent years were inexpensive and did not require external sources of funding, in particular attacks committed by single actors using weapons or even everyday objects such as knives or cars. In particular, micro-financing of jihadist groups operating in the EU usually works via the private financial means of group members.¹⁴

1.3. Foreign fighters

Another phenomenon which characterises the post-2011 jihadist mobilisation is the large flow of foreign fighters¹⁵ heading to Syria and Iraq (and, secondarily, other countries such as Libya). At a worldwide level, more than 40,000 individuals may have joined insurgent groups in the Syrian-Iraqi region. An unprecedented figure, indeed—and this holds true for European countries, too, although on a smaller scale. As a matter of fact, no less than 5,000 foreign fighters are estimated to hail from EU countries. The vast majority of these volunteers enlisted in or supported jihadist groups, especially Daesh.

Departures of foreign fighters affected European countries in an uneven fashion. According to recent estimates, France saw the largest number of “travellers” (nearly 2,000), followed by Germany (over 900), the United Kingdom (around 900), and Belgium (over 500).¹⁶

¹³ Petter Nesser, Anne Stenersen and Emilie Oftedal, “Jihadi Terrorism in Europe,” *op. cit.*

¹⁴ Europol, *European Union Terrorism Situation and Trend Report (TE-SAT) 2018*, *op. cit.*, p. 12.

¹⁵ Among others, see Thomas Hegghammer, “The Rise of Muslim Foreign Fighters: Islam and the Globalization of Jihad,” *International Security*, Vol. 35, No. 3, 2010/11, pp. 53-94.

¹⁶ Richard Barrett, *Beyond the Caliphate: Foreign Fighters and the Threat of Returnees*, Report, The Soufan Group, 2017.

In relative terms (that is, in relation to each country's general population), Belgium ranks first (with about 46 foreign fighters per million inhabitants), followed by Austria (33), Sweden (31) and France (28).

In contrast, Southern European countries such as Spain and Italy¹⁷ produce relatively modest national contingents, both in absolute and relative terms: 223 and 129 foreign fighters, respectively, which means about 4 and 2 "travellers" per one million people. The number of foreign fighters is even smaller in Eastern European countries: for instance, as of April 2016, Estonia and Latvia witnessed the departure of just two individuals each.

A common fear relating to foreign fighters has to do with the so-called "blowback effect": namely, the risk that a number of combatants may return to their home countries to conduct or at least support a terrorist attack. This threat was highlighted by Europol as early as 2012: *mujahidin* may take advantage of the training, the experience, the knowledge, the connections and the social status acquired at the front to strike at home. As is well-known, such concerns are not unfounded: in recent years, jihadist veterans took part in various attacks worldwide, including the November 2015 Paris attacks and the March 2016 Brussels attacks. Another example is provided by Rachid Redouane, one of the June 2017 London Bridge attackers, who had reportedly fought in Libya.

Returnees may also be involved in support activities—logistically and/or financially assisting other cells or militants, as well as acting as "radicalising agents" vis-à-vis other members of their community.

What is more, Daesh endured massive territorial losses over the last year, with the risk that an increasing number of jihadist combatants and supporters may return to their countries of origin or move to other states. According to the available estimates, around 30% of European foreign fighters have already returned home.

Nonetheless, various factors mitigate this sort of threat. In the first place, it would be misleading to equate the experience of fighting abroad with the execution of terrorist attacks at home. Not all the militants will head back home: many are already dead (approximately 1,000 from European countries), others could move to other conflict areas. Even returnees may not intend to target their countries of origin. As shown in

¹⁷ On the Italian case, Francesco Marone and Lorenzo Vidino, *Destinazione Jihad. I foreign fighters d'Italia*, Report, ISPI, June 2018 (in Italian; English version forthcoming), <https://www.ispionline.it/sites/default/files/pubblicazioni/foreignfighter.pdf>.

an influential study written by Thomas Hegghammer in 2013, focused on waves of Western foreign fighters from 1990 to 2010, only 1 out of 9 returned to carry out an attack in their country of origin.¹⁸ According to the ISPI Database, in the period 2014-2017, only 15 out of 66 terrorist perpetrators (23%) were actually jihadist veterans.

2. The Reasons for Jihadist Mobilisation

Many studies have argued that a common jihadist profile does not exist. By contrast, there are significant differences in socio-demographic variables such as age, gender, education, and economic conditions. Nevertheless, a few recurring patterns can be pointed out, one of them being the relatively young age of jihadist attackers and foreign fighters

2.1. The role of youngsters

According to the ISPI Database, when analysing attacks carried out in European countries between 2014 and 2017, it emerges that the average age of perpetrators is roughly 27.5 years. The mode, i.e., the most often recurring age, is 29, while the median, i.e., the “central” value, is 27; moreover, the youngest attacker was 15 years old at the time of the terrorist act, whereas the oldest was 54. Indeed, only 6 out of 66 perpetrators (accounting for 9%) were underage at the time of the attack; 20 individuals (30%) were in the 18-24 bracket; 20 (30%) were in the 25-30 bracket, and finally 18 (27%) were over 30 years old.

Individuals aged 30 and younger account for the vast majority (nearly 70%) of perpetrators in Europe in the last 4 years. For example, the jihadists who physically carried out the August 2017 Catalonia attacks were all under 25, and one of them, Moussa Oukabir, was underage at the time.

However, the proportion of over-30 attackers (27%) is far from negligible. In two occurrences—the March 2017 Westminster attack and the June 2017 Linz stabbing—attackers were in their 50s. Moreover, the average age of European perpetrators (27.5 years), though under 30, is not exceptionally low.

¹⁸ Thomas Hegghammer, “Should I Stay or Should I Go? Explaining Variation in Western Jihadists’ Choice between Domestic and Foreign Fighting”, *American Political Science Review*, Volume 107, Issue 1, 2013, pp. 1-15.

Similar remarks can be made as regards (jihadist) foreign fighters from European countries. The European contingent is highly diversified—so generalisations would be ill-suited—but it is possible to identify some recurrent age patterns. In this case, too, young men between 18 and mid-to-late twenties (at the time of their departure) are over-represented, with differences across countries. In a few Eastern and Southern European countries, foreign fighters tend to be older.¹⁹ For instance, Italy displays a significant proportion of over-30 individuals (40%) and the average age is 30.²⁰

2.2. Main drivers of radicalisation

The ultimate question of “why” individuals become involved in jihadism-related activities—be it in the form of supporting or preparing attacks at home or joining armed groups abroad—has bedevilled policy-makers, security services, scholars, and public opinions alike. All the more so because the pathway towards mobilisation, implying a process of radicalisation, is complex and multifarious, at the crossroads between personal factors and structural drivers, originating from a conducive environment, and often with the contribution of a structured organisation and/or an informal group.²¹ Thus, mono-causal explanations are at best insufficient—if not misleading—when trying to understand the radicalisation and mobilisation of jihadist sympathisers. Yet, potential drivers can roughly be divided into two sets: push factors and pull factors.

Among *push factors*, socio-economic factors are the most recurring explanations. This line of thought looks at the characteristics of the individuals (at the “micro” level), the conditions of their environment (at the “macro” level) or the interplay between these two levels of analysis: for example, lack of social integration, difficult access to education and employment, and economic deprivation. However, clearly, not every terrorist case can be explained with the “poverty/social hardship – extremism” hypothesis.

¹⁹ Bibi Van Ginkel and Entenmann Eva (eds.), *The Foreign Fighters Phenomenon in the European Union. Profiles, Threats & Policies*, The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague (ICCT), April 2016, p. 51.

²⁰ Francesco Marone and Lorenzo Vidino, *Destinazione Jihad. I foreign fighters d'Italia*, op. cit.

²¹ Among others, see Mohammed Hafez and Creighton Mullins, “The Radicalization Puzzle: A Theoretical Synthesis of Empirical Approaches to Homegrown Extremism”, *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, Vol. 38, No. 11, 2015, pp. 958-975.

Actually, the existence of a strong, direct link between socio-economic deprivation, on the one hand, and violent extremism, on the other hand, has proved to be at least uncertain.²² In the case of Europe, while it is true that jihadists, on average, tend to be economic underperformers (and that is worrying, for the future as well),²³ correlation is not tantamount to causation. The true question relates to the extent of the nature of this potential causal chain and its interplay with other factors.

Other types of individual-related factors have been underlined, including personal frustrations experienced by people at some moment in their lives. Interestingly, Oliver Roy proposed an alternative interpretation. According to this scholar, it makes sense to speak of the “Islamisation of radicalism”, rather than “radicalisation of Islam”: some individuals, usually youngsters, feeling alienated in Western societies, and at the same time experiencing a generational revolt against their fathers, frame this sense of nihilistic rebellion in jihadist terms, with jihadist ideology being one of the few anti-system grand narratives left in the West.²⁴ Thus, Roy argues, the real issue is that these individuals are in search of an extremist cause to embrace, while they overlook the specific religious dimension.²⁵

At the “meso” level, between individuals and their social environment, another important aspect has to be addressed: “radicalisation hubs”²⁶ present in the territory. The “hub” model can complement other interpretations, offering an explanation for geographical discrepancies which, on the surface, seem to be difficult to explain. Actually, the scope and intensity of jihadist activities varies not only across European countries, but even within a given country. A particular city or town, for instance, may stand out for its unusually high number of jihadist sympathisers and militants or foreign fighters, in spite of sharing virtually identical social, economic, and demographic indicators with nearby areas. In this case, the dynamics of hubs may well be at work. Why and how these territorial clusters

²² See, for example, Alan B. Krueger, *What Makes a Terrorist: Economics and the Roots of Terrorism*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007.

²³ Thomas Hegghammer, “The Future of Jihadism in Europe: A Pessimistic View,” *Perspectives on Terrorism*, Vol. 10, No. 6, 2016, pp. 156-170.

²⁴ Olivier Roy, *Jihad and Death: The Global Appeal of Islamic State*, London: Hurst & Co., 2017.

²⁵ See also Olivier Roy, *Holy Ignorance: When Religion and Culture Part Ways*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014.

²⁶ Lorenzo Vidino, Francesco Marone and Eva Entenmann, *Fear Thy Neighbor*, op. cit.

emerge and solidify is difficult to ascertain: usually due to an interplay of different factors. Among them, there may be the presence of “radicalising agents” (such as a charismatic extremist preacher or a jihadist veteran), but also kinship and friendship bonds may play a huge role. The August 2017 Catalonia attacks are telling in this regard: it is suspected that Imam Es Satty (the ringleader, older than the other plotters, and arguably more experienced and familiar with the jihadist milieu) operated as a radicalising agent, while pre-existing ties between the other members of the cell would do the rest. In other instances, peculiar conditions of a certain area (e.g., high rate of crime, social exclusion, etc.) may provide a conducive environment for the rise of jihadist hubs. In some circumstances, fortuity may be involved, too. The case of Lunel, a French town which is home to less than 30,000 people, and, puzzlingly, “produced” some twenty foreign fighters, is illustrative in this respect.²⁷

With reference to *pull factors*, a variety of elements prompted the mobilisation of European foreign fighters towards Syria and Iraq in recent years. The two most prominent triggers were possibly the outbreak of the Syrian conflict in 2011 (and the ensuing violence) and the proclamation of the so-called caliphate by Daesh, on 29 June 2014.

As a matter of fact, a significant number of volunteers were apparently motivated by the desire to fight the al-Assad regime in Syria and defend local Muslims, considered to be under siege, especially in the first phase of the conflict.

After the establishment of the “caliphate”, further motivations have become more salient: quest for identity; fascination with the narrative skillfully nurtured by Daesh²⁸ and other jihadist groups; adventurism and the wish to evade reality; and willingness to live in a “utopian” place where, according to jihadists, Islamic tenets would be strictly implemented. Additionally, in practical term, for years the Syrian-Iraqi area was relatively easy to reach.

²⁷ Lorenzo Vidino, Francesco Marone and Eva Entenmann, *Fear Thy Neighbor*, op. cit.

²⁸ See, for example, Francesco Marone, “Examining The Narratives of Radical Islamists and Other Extremely Violent Groups: The Case of the ‘Islamic State’,” in Maurizio Martellini and Jason Rao (eds.), *The Risk of Skilled Scientist Radicalization and Emerging Biological Warfare Threats*, Amsterdam: IOS Press – NATO Science for Peace and Security Series, 2017, pp. 64-73.

3. Conclusions

This chapter aimed at outlining the nature and development of jihadist activities in Europe in recent years. Especially the outbreak of the Syrian conflict in 2011 and the rise of Daesh in 2014 favoured a spike in jihadist mobilisation in Europe; a fact which is mirrored by the sheer number of arrests and convictions, terrorist plots and attacks, and foreign fighters' flows.

Jihadist mobilisation, nonetheless, hit European countries unevenly. The most affected country—in relation to arrests, attacks, and foreign fighters' departures alike—was France. Countries like Germany, the United Kingdom, and Belgium have, too, been significantly affected by the phenomenon. In contrast, other nations—first and foremost Eastern European countries, but also, to some extent, Mediterranean countries, such as Italy²⁹—saw a rather low degree of mobilisation. Understanding the exact triggers and drivers which do activate radicalisation and mobilisation is no smooth task. A variety of factors, indeed, are featured in this complex process: individual characteristics, structural conditions and organisational/group dynamics. In the future, it may be beneficial to explore intersections between the different explanatory models, on the basis of empirical analysis.

In conclusion, some important pull factors appear to be less relevant nowadays, especially with the crisis of the “caliphate” in Syria and Iraq, but, in any case, many push factors in Europe are still at work and will hardly disappear soon. For this reason, the jihadist threat in the region is probably destined to remain significant in the years to come.

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²⁹ Lorenzo Vidino and Francesco Marone, *The Jihadist Threat in Italy: A Primer*, Analysis, ISPI, November 2017, https://www.ispionline.it/sites/default/files/pubblicazioni/analisi318_vidino-marone.pdf.