



Lorenzo Vidino, Francesco Marone, Eva Entenmann

# FEAR THY NEIGHBOR RADICALIZATION AND JIHADIST ATTACKS IN THE WEST



ISPI

Program on Extremism  
THE GEORGE WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY



# ***FEAR THY NEIGHBOR***

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Lorenzo Vidino  
Francesco Marone  
Eva Entenmann



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# Program on Extremism

THE GEORGE WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY

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## Foreword

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“What is coming is tougher and worse for the worshippers of the Cross and their helpers”, the so-called Islamic State declared in its statement taking credit for the May 22, 2017 bombing of a crowded Manchester, England arena. Among the victims were scores of children and their parents – callously derided in the IS claim as “polytheists” and “Crusaders” attending “a profligate concert”. Seven children perished, including an eight-year-old girl.

It is worthwhile to recall that only a few years ago the end of terrorism was being heralded with the killing of bin Laden and advent of the Arab Spring. As one pundit then reassuringly pleaded, “So, can we all take a deep breath, stop cowering in fear of an impending caliphate, and put [the] problem of Islamic terrorism in perspective?”.

Today, there is indeed a very different perspective on this ongoing and, as some analysts believe, worsening threat: shaped not only by this most recent tragedy but by the events of the past two years that have seen a succession of attacks linked to IS convulse the West. Within the span of four weeks last summer, for instance, persons pledging or professing some allegiance to the IS were responsible for four terrorist incidents in three European countries that claimed the lives of more than 120 persons.

It is too soon to tell whether the Manchester attack will prove

to be a harbinger of another summer of tragedy and terrorism. But we now fortunately have a better understanding of this campaign along with an ability to anticipate the future evolution of the jihadist terrorist threat to the West as a result of the publication of *Fear Thy Neighbor*. Written by Lorenzo Vidino, Francesco Marone and Eva Entenmann, this report sheds important light on the historical record and characteristics of jihadist attacks against the West between 2014 and 2017. Among the study's most revealing findings is the United States' own prominence in this pantheon of Islamist terrorist attacks in the West as the country targeted most frequently after France – and with the second highest number of casualties. The report also incisively assesses the role of women and persons with criminal backgrounds in this campaign; the involvement of converts; and, most importantly the exact nature and dimensions of the ties between the attackers and the IS. The emergence of “radicalization hubs” in abetting or facilitating these heinous acts of violence is perhaps this work's single most important conclusion.

*Fear Thy Neighbor* is an invaluable resource that will be of great use to scholars, students, governmental agencies, non-governmental and community organizations, and the media. It presents a sober and compelling depiction of this threat and the measures needed to counter it.

Bruce Hoffman  
*Center for Security Studies*  
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## Foreword

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Like the phoenix rising from the ashes of its predecessor in Iraq and Syria, ISIS's rise to power was not only meteoric but also brought terror to new unspeakable levels of cruelty and barbarism. This terroristic proto-state *al-Dawla Islamiyyah* embraced a high degree of bureaucracy as it projected a virtual Caliphate embodying 35 *wilayats* (provinces) that seemed to be expanding. Even the ISIS slogan "*Baqiyah wa-Tatamaddad*" (remaining and expanding) project the image that ISIS constantly achieves success and inevitably victory.

Offering the false image of a religious utopia, ISIS obliged everyone to believe that it was an individual's sacred duty to perform *hijra* (emigrate) and to wage jihad against enemies. Even setbacks and defeats are interpreted as part of the coming final apocalyptic battles, which are part of ISIS eschatology. First it would defeat the rafidah (Shia Muslims) and then it would come for Rome (the West) before the final battles of Dabiq. Over 7,700 Western foreign fighters heeded this call together with another 35,000 extremists from over 120 countries.

Arriving across the border into ISIS territory, new recruits were vetted and registered filling in forms with 23 datafields containing everything from biographical data, contact persons to their desired jihadi missions. Here the ISIS Amniyat (Emni), its security service, handpicked potential operatives who could

be dispatched back to Europe on terrorist missions. Teaching them how to become killing machines and operational tradecraft so as to stay below the radar of intelligence services, groups and individuals were dispatched on terrorism missions back to the West already in 2013. Isolated plots and attacks grew in pace and intensity, culminating in the Paris attacks in 2015.

Afterwards the West continued to be rocked by successive terrorist attacks answering Adnani's call for "do-it-yourself terror" involving knife-attacks, truck and car attacks in major cities and capitals. Most of these attacks are directed or via remote-control. Some are lone-wolfe attacks. Even as the so-called Caliphate has seriously disintegrated with successive anti-ISIS coalition operations, the ISIS operational tempo has only increased against its enemies in the West and elsewhere. Today there is an average of five terror plots or attacks per month in the West. Understanding this modus operandi is critical for our top decision-makers, especially the trends and drivers of these terrorist plots and radicalization within society. ISIS is determined to target the ordinary citizens through these terrorist attacks to create polarization, fostering mobilization and radicalization together with further recruitment. The very title of this publication – *Fear Thy Neighbor* – starkly illustrates this strategic logic of terrorism used by ISIS against the West.

There are few better situated than Dr. Lorenzo Vidino and his research team at ISPI and at the Program on Extremism to investigate the unfolding of ISIS's terror campaign against the West and its underlying causes and broader consequences. This empirically-based and detailed study identifies 51 successful attacks throughout Europe and North America and dissects the profiles and what they mean for understanding the evolving jihadi terrorist threat.

This study makes some important findings. It strongly reinforces the view that ISIS is very much in the background choreographing and controlling some of the terrorist plots we are witnessing. Only 26% of the cases had no evidence of connections to ISIS.

The study also debunks the simple theory of social conditions as a major driver. Instead it contextualizes and adds more layers to

explain why deprived socio-economic areas may see more instances of radicalization as there seems to be a correlation with the presence and influence of “hubs” where you find so-called extremist feeder organizations (Sharia4Belgium; al-Mujaheroun, etc), radicalizers, mosques and dawa circles. Understanding how these hubs and layers of factors interact provides important analytical tools for policymakers and analysts alike.

Radicalization leading to terrorism is a multifaceted and complex phenomenon that is growing at an alarming rate in the West. A kaleidoscope of root causes explaining why individuals radicalize needs to be better understood by everyone. Providing a helicopter perspective of what are the current and future trends in ISIS’s terrorist modus operandi is extremely important in this process. That is why this study will be immensely valuable to policymakers, intelligence analysts and students trying to understand where jihadi terrorism is heading in the future.

Magnus Ranstorp  
*Quality Manager*

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## Executive Summary

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Over the last three years Europe and North America have been hit by an unprecedented wave of terrorist attacks perpetrated by individuals motivated by jihadist ideology. The roots of this development are largely to be found in two, deeply intertwined phenomena: the military successes achieved by the Islamic State and its declaration of a Caliphate along with the large number of followers the group has managed to attract in the West.

This report identified 51 successful attacks throughout Europe and North America from June 2014, when the Caliphate was declared, until June 2017. From coordinated operations causing large numbers of casualties like the November 2015 Paris attacks, to the many acts of violence carried out by lone attackers, the attacks vary significantly in terms of sophistication, lethality, targets and connectivity to the Islamic State and other groups. Similarly, the profile of the 65 identified involved in the 51 attacks is extremely heterogeneous from both demographic and operational perspectives. In particular, this report found that:

- The 51 attacks took place in a relatively limited number of countries (8). The country with the largest number of attacks was France (17), followed by the United States

(16), Germany (6), the UK (4), Belgium (3), Canada (3), Denmark (1) and Sweden (1). Therefore, 32 attacks were executed in Europe (63%) and the remaining 19 in North America (37%).

- The 51 attacks caused 395 deaths and no less than 1,549 physical injuries (with the exclusion of the perpetrators). While the average number of fatalities per attack is 7.7, the level of lethality varies considerably from one episode to another. France is by far the country with the largest number of victims (239), followed by the United States (76).
- Despite a general trend that sees increasingly younger people radicalizing, at 27.3 years the average age of attackers is not unusually young. Almost one third (27%) of perpetrators was above the age of 30. Five of the attackers were underage at the time of attack.
- Despite a general trend that sees an increasingly active presence of women in jihadist networks, only 2 out of 65 individual perpetrators were female.
- 73% of attackers were citizens of the country in which they committed the attack. Another 14% were either legal residents or legitimate visitors from neighboring countries. 5% were refugees or asylum seekers at the time of attack. 6% were residing in the country illegally at the time of the attack.
- 17% of perpetrators were converts to Islam, with a significantly higher percentage in North America.
- At least 57% of attackers had a prior criminal background.
- Only 18% of attackers are known to have previously been foreign fighters. However, these individuals tended to be involved in the episodes with the highest lethality.
- 42% of attackers had a clear operational connection to an established jihadist group, in most cases the Islamic State.
- 63% of attackers pledged allegiance to a jihadist group, almost always the Islamic State, during or before the attack.

- Jihadist groups, almost always the Islamic State, claimed 38% of attacks.

From an operational perspective, the attacks that have hit the West since June 2014 can be divided into three macro-categories:

- a) terrorist attacks carried out by individuals who were acting under direct orders from the Islamic State's leadership: 8% of attacks;
- b) terrorist attacks carried out by individuals with no connections whatsoever to the Islamic State or other jihadist groups, but were inspired by its message: 26% of attacks;
- c) terrorist attacks carried out by individuals who had some form of connection to the Islamic State or other jihadist groups but acted independently: 66% of attacks.

Socio-economic and integration issues are important to consider when trying to understand radicalization patterns. But an analysis that focuses solely on them is incomplete. Somewhat counterintuitively, for example, southern European countries have experienced significantly lower levels of radicalization than most of their central and northern European counterparts, despite performing significantly worse in integrating their Muslim population. Similarly, within each country the mobilization of Islamic State supporters is uneven, with a concentration found in a few notorious hotspots.

The report shows that an analysis which takes into consideration the existence of radicalization hubs explains these seemingly puzzling differences. The formation of hubs often happens around organized structures (militant Salafist groups, radical mosques), charismatic personalities or, in some cases, tight-knit groups of friends. Dynamics are complex and change from case to case, but there are indications pointing to the presence or absence of these hubs rather than social conditions as the main factor determining the higher or lower levels of radicalization and mobilization of a country or a town.



# 1. From Syria with Hate: The Origins of the Current Terrorist Wave

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Over the last three years, an unprecedented wave of terrorist attacks perpetrated by individuals motivated by jihadist ideology have hit Western countries.<sup>1</sup> Some attacks, such as those in Paris (November 2015, 130 victims), Brussels (March 2016, 32 victims), Orlando (June 2016, 49 victims), and Nice (July 2016, 86 victims), caused large numbers of casualties. Others claimed few or no victims. Moreover, for every attack carried out, there has been a much larger number of plots that, due to various reasons (in most cases the intervention of authorities) did not come to fruition.<sup>2</sup>

Terrorists have used several kinds of tactics and tools to carry out their attacks. These include synchronized, guerrilla-style raids perpetrated by small groups of gunmen utilizing automatic weapons to seemingly spontaneous attacks by lone individuals brandishing knives or hatchets, detonating explosives or using

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<sup>1</sup> The term “jihadist” inevitably generates controversy, as it employs the word “*jihad*”, which has various religious significances in Islam, in only one of its many meanings. Indeed, reducing the concept to simply the use of violence is incorrect and arguably offensive to many Muslims. At the same time, the term is widely used in the Arab and Muslim world by both supporters and critics to indicate groups that use religiously motivated violence to achieve their political goals. While the authors are fully aware of these problematic dynamics, the term will be used throughout the report to indicate the ideology inspiring the Islamic State, al Qaeda and other like-minded groups.

<sup>2</sup> In a telling example, in the aftermath of the March 2017 terrorist attack in London, British authorities revealed that they had thwarted 13 attacks since 2013. M. Weaver, “UK Police Have Thwarted Paris-Style Terror Plots, Top Officer Says”, *The Guardian*, March 6, 2017.

vehicles to mow down pedestrians in crowded areas. Their targets have ranged from large gatherings, like international football games or large boulevards packed with revelers, to intimate settings, like the private residence of a policeman, a small office party or mass in a rural church.

The perpetrators have been predominantly men (although in recent years a growing number of women have been actively involved in terrorist activities) whose age varied from teenagers to people in their mid-50s. Some of them had been known to authorities as committed militants for years, while others had previously displayed few or no external signs of radicalization. Many were born and raised in the West, while others had reached the target country for the first time often just few days before carrying out the attack.

Unsurprisingly, given the frequency and, in some cases, the lethality of these attacks, the issue of jihadist terrorism has come to the fore of news coverage, political debates and the psyches of many Westerners. While it is difficult to forecast future developments, it is widely believed that the threat is not likely to dissipate in the near future and many consider terrorism to be a generational challenge.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, how policymakers, counter-terrorism officials, and the general public in both Europe and North America will conceptualize and respond to this unprecedented wave of attacks has huge implications, shaping several overlapping issues of domestic and foreign policy throughout Western countries.

Given these dynamics, it is imperative to utilize empirical evidence in order to attempt to shed light on the current wave of jihadist terrorism in Europe and North America: from what triggered it to how it has manifested itself. This report seeks to do exactly this. It is based on a bespoke database of all attacks having taken place in North America and Europe since the proclamation of the Caliphate, analyzing the socio-demographic

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<sup>3</sup> J. Schuppe, “President Obama Calls ISIS Fight ‘a Generational Struggle’”, NBC News, July 6, 2015.

characteristics of each perpetrator, their pre-event behaviors and some (post-)event specific information, including their connection to terrorist groups such as the Islamic State. While it aims to provide hard facts to analyze the current characteristic jihadist terrorism in the West, the database is limited in its scope, as some of the details and even core facts of many of the attacks that have taken place in the West over the last three years are still unknown, not just to academics and analysts but also to law enforcement and intelligence agencies.

Despite these enormous but inevitable limitations, this report aims to provide an empirically-based analysis that will hopefully inform policymakers, counterterrorism practitioners and the general public alike. After providing a necessary historical and geopolitical background, it analyzes several demographic and operational characteristics of the perpetrators of all successful terrorist attacks carried out in Europe and North America between June 2014 and June 2017. After this quantitative analysis, it lays out a qualitative assessment of some core mobilization and radicalization dynamics characterizing the current wave.

## **The Syrian trigger**

The phenomenon of terrorist attacks carried out in the West by jihadist groups or individuals motivated by jihadist ideology is not a new one; the first incidents on both sides of the Atlantic date back to the early/mid-1990s. As early as 1993, a New York/New Jersey-based cluster of militants operating under the spiritual leadership of the late Omar Abdel-Rahman (better known in the West as “the Blind Sheikh”) detonated a large bomb in the underground garage of the World Trade Center, killing six and injuring more than one thousand. Europe’s first brush with jihadist-inspired terrorism arguably occurred in 1995, when a network with strong links to Algeria carried out a string of attacks throughout France to retaliate against Paris for its involvement in the North African country’s civil war.

The attacks of September 11, 2001 in the United States represent a watershed event, after which terrorist attacks carried out by groups or individuals inspired by jihadist ideology were no longer seen as sporadic events but as one of the top challenges to the security of most Western countries. The following decade was marred by several attacks on both sides of the Ocean, including two large-scale attacks (the March 2004 Madrid bombings and the July 2005 London bombings) and a series of smaller ones.

Yet, by 2011, the jihadist threat on both sides of the Atlantic appeared to have somewhat plateaued. To be sure, the problems of homegrown radicalization and externally based terrorist groups planning attacks in the West clearly still existed. But the somewhat stagnant level of the threat, better law enforcement and intelligence practices, the death of Osama bin Laden, and the enthusiasm generated in the West by the promise of the Arab Spring made many believe that jihadism was a manageable and potentially even subsiding problem.

This perception was completely shattered by the events that took place in the Middle East and, arguably, as a consequence, in the West after 2011. Data provided by Europol in its annual report (TE-SAT, Terrorism Situation and Trend) clearly reveal a stunning uptick in terrorist attacks and arrests throughout Europe over the last five years. In 2011, 122 individuals had been arrested throughout the continent for offenses related to jihadist-inspired terrorism.<sup>4</sup> 17 of these arrests were related to preparations for a terrorist attack, but no attack had been successfully conducted.<sup>5</sup> These numbers increased exponentially.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> “TE-SAT 2012: EU Terrorism Situation and Trend Report”, Europol, The Hague, Netherlands, 2012, p. 15, <https://www.europol.europa.eu/activities-services/main-reports/eu-terrorism-situation-and-trend-report>

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, p. 17.

<sup>6</sup> “TE-SAT 2013: EU Terrorism Situation and Trend Report”, Europol, The Hague, Netherlands, 2013, p. 16, <https://www.europol.europa.eu/activities-services/main-reports/eu-terrorism-situation-and-trend-report>; “TE-SAT 2014: EU Terrorism Situation and Trend Report”, Europol, The Hague, Netherlands, 2014, p. 46, <https://www.europol.europa.eu/activities-services/main-reports/>

each year the numbers of those arrested almost doubled, resulting in a whopping 687 individuals having been arrested in 2015 in connection with religiously-inspired acts of extremism. The same happened for the number of attacks carried out by “religiously inspired” terrorists: one attack in 2013, two in 2014, culminating in 17 different attacks with 150 fatalities in 2015. In relation to this, Europol already defined in 2014 the mobilization of Europeans traveling to Syria and Iraq for terrorist purposes as “unprecedented”.<sup>7</sup>

The United States and Canada have not seen the kind of major uptick in jihadist mobilization witnessed in Europe. Yet both countries have experienced a relatively large surge in the number of cases of individuals who traveled or attempted to travel overseas for terrorism purposes, or have been charged for providing various forms of logistical support to the Islamic State and other jihadist groups or for planning terrorist attacks on their behalf.<sup>8</sup> In the US, for example, while some 200 individuals were charged in the 13 years from September 11, 2001 to 2013, in the much shorter time frame coinciding with the rise of the Islamic State (March 2014, when the first individual linked to ISIS was charged in the country, to March 2017) 117 individuals have been charged.<sup>9</sup>

While dynamics vary from country to country and over time, it is arguable that this dramatic increase in arrests and attacks in

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[eu-terrorism-situation-and-trend-report](https://www.europol.europa.eu/activities-services/main-reports/eu-terrorism-situation-and-trend-report); “TE-SAT 2015: EU Terrorism Situation and Trend Report”, Europol, The Hague, Netherlands, 2015, p. 18 <https://www.europol.europa.eu/activities-services/main-reports/eu-terrorism-situation-and-trend-report>; and “TE-SAT 2016: EU Terrorism Situation and Trend Report”, Europol, The Hague, Netherlands, 2016, p. 22, <https://www.europol.europa.eu/activities-services/main-reports/eu-terrorism-situation-and-trend-report>

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid*, p. 18.

<sup>8</sup> L. Vidino and S. Hughes, *ISIS in America: From Retweets to Raqqa*, Program on Extremism, The George Washington University, Washington D.C., 2015.

<sup>9</sup> *GW Extremism Tracker: ISIS in America*, Program on Extremism, The George Washington University, Washington D.C., March 2017 (Update 2017), <https://cchs.gwu.edu/sites/cchs.gwu.edu/files/downloads/March%202017%20Snapshot.pdf>

the West has been influenced by two deeply intertwined phenomena: 1) the military successes achieved by the Islamic State and its June 2014 declaration of a Caliphate and 2) the large mobilization of foreign fighters from the West to Syria and Iraq.

This dynamic emerged as early as mid-2012, when the initially peaceful protests against the Syrian regime of Bashar al Assad slowly morphed into a civil war.<sup>10</sup> Better organized and equipped than most other Syrian formations, several militant groups with jihadist leanings began achieving substantial successes on the ground, both against government forces and rival armed groups. While the al Qaeda-linked Jabhat al Nusra managed to occupy relatively large parts of western Syria, those successes were dwarfed by those obtained by the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS). The group, which soon engaged in a fratricidal war with Jabhat al Nusra, began expanding not just in large parts of northern and eastern Syria, but by late 2013 had seized large sections of Sunni-majority areas in neighboring Iraq.<sup>11</sup>

By mid-2014 ISIS' momentum seemed unstoppable and reached its symbolic apex at the end of June, when it declared the re-establishment of the historic, global Caliphate, urging Muslims worldwide to pledge allegiance to the new state and its leadership.<sup>12</sup> Marking the occasion, the group also removed "in Iraq and Syria" from its name, clearly indicating that the Islamic State, as it seeks to be known, has a validity and ambitions that go well beyond a specific area of the Middle East.

The military successes of the Islamic State and its declaration of the Caliphate have triggered very critical responses within Muslim communities worldwide. Most Muslims, and also many in the global jihadist community, reject the new entity

<sup>10</sup> C. Lister, *The Syrian Jihad: Al-Qaeda, the Islamic State and the Evolution of an Insurgency*, Oxford University Press, Oxford UK, 2015.

<sup>11</sup> G. Cameron, *Timeline: Rise and Spread of the Islamic State*, Wilson Center, 2016, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/timeline-rise-and-spread-the-islamic-state>

<sup>12</sup> M. Bradley, "ISIS Declares New Islamist Caliphate", *Wall Street Journal*, June 29, 2014, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/isis-declares-new-islamist-caliphate-1404065263>

as illegitimate and have been horrified by some of the actions carried out by the Islamic State in the name of their religion. Yet a minority of Muslims have supported it, in some cases by traveling to the territories it controls to fight alongside the group.

This kind of mobilization is not novel. Since the 1980s, in fact, several conflict zones around the world (Bosnia-Herzegovina, the North Caucasus, Yemen, Somalia, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iraq and Mali, amongst other countries) have attracted Western militants motivated by jihadist ideology.<sup>13</sup> While even a rough estimate of the number of militants involved in previous mobilizations is difficult to determine, it is undisputed that the current flow of jihadist foreign fighters from Western nations into Syria and Iraq is significantly larger and unprecedented.<sup>14</sup>

It is estimated that as of December 2015, of the roughly 30,000 foreign fighters estimated to have arrived in Syria and Iraq from over 100 countries, about one fifth (6,000) hail from the West, mainly from Europe.<sup>15</sup> This number is particularly troubling when compared to other parts of the world. Since there are roughly 20 million Muslims living in EU countries, the current data suggest that European Muslims are approximately 16 times overrepresented among the foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq compared to figures for Muslims traveling from other regions of the world.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> A.P. Schmid and J. Tinnes, *Foreign (Terrorist) Fighters with IS: A European Perspective*, ICCT Research Paper, The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism - The Hague, December 2015. See also I. Duyvesteyn and B. Peeters, *Fickle Foreign Fighters? A Cross-Case Analysis of Seven Muslim Foreign Fighter Mobilisations (1980-2015)*, ICCT Research Paper, The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism - The Hague, October 2015.

<sup>14</sup> T. Hegghammer, "Should I Stay or Should I Go? Explaining Variation in Western Jihadists' Choice between Domestic and Foreign Fighting", *American Political Science Review*, February 2013.

<sup>15</sup> C. Kroet, "UN: 30,000 foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq", *Politico*, July 15, 2016.

<sup>16</sup> F. Reinares, "Jihadist Mobilization, Undemocratic Salafism, and Terrorist Threat in the European Union", *Georgetown Security Studies Review*, 2017, pp. 70-76 (pp. 70-71).

The magnitude of the problem has not been the same for every European country. The largest contingents of foreign fighters have come from France (some estimated 1,700 foreign fighters), Germany (760), the United Kingdom (760), Belgium (470), Sweden (300), Austria (300), and the Netherlands (250).<sup>17</sup> Southern European countries have seen significantly lower degrees of mobilization – as of May 2017, Italian authorities, for example, estimated that 122 foreign fighters with connections to Italy had travelled to Syria and Iraq.<sup>18</sup> The United States and Canada also have smaller foreign fighter contingents (around 200 have travelled or attempted to travel from each country, according to what their authorities have publicly revealed) to those of some northern and central European countries, yet larger if compared to the levels the two countries had experienced in the past.<sup>19</sup>

By early 2014, as authorities on both sides of the ocean were watching the Islamic State (then still ISIS) expanding and consolidating its territory and an ever-growing number of Western militants joining the group, they began to publicly express concerns about the security implications of the phenomenon. In January 2014, for example, then EU Home Affairs Commissioner, Cecilia Malmström, warned about “Europeans [who] travel abroad to train and to fight in combat zones, becoming more radicalised

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<sup>17</sup> See, in particular, *Foreign Fighters. An Updated Assessment of the Flow of Foreign Fighters into Syria and Iraq*, The Soufan Group, December 2015; A.P. Schmid and J. Tinnis (2015).

<sup>18</sup> Data provided to Lorenzo Vidino by the Italian Ministry of Interior, May 2017.

<sup>19</sup> In July 2015, the Office of the Director of National Intelligence estimated that more than 250 individuals from the U.S. had traveled or attempted to travel to the conflict area, a few dozen had joined the ranks of ISIS, and some 20 had died; see B. Starr, “A Few Dozen Americans’ in ISIS Ranks”, CNN, July 15, 2015, <http://www.cnn.com/2015/07/15/politics/isis-american-recruits/index.html>.

For Canada, see R. Fife, “Spy Agencies See Sharp Rise in Number of Canadians Involved in Terrorist Activities Abroad”, *The Globe and Mail*, February 23, 2016; and J. Bronskill, “Number of Canadian Fighters in Syria, Iraq Levelling off: CSIS”, MacLeans, November 28, 2016.

in the process". "Some of these young men", she added, "have joined groups with terrorist agendas, they have been trained and hardened in war, and could pose a threat to our security upon their return from a conflict zone. In the longer term, they could act as catalysts for terrorism".<sup>20</sup> Similarly, Matthew G. Olsen, then-director of the US National Counterterrorism Center, stated: "The concern going forward from a threat perspective is there are individuals traveling to Syria, becoming further radicalized, becoming trained and then returning as part of really a global jihadist movement to Western Europe and, potentially, to the United States".<sup>21</sup>

These fears became even more concrete in September 2014, as then US President Barack Obama announced the formation of a global coalition against the Islamic State, with Western powers providing supplies and air support to regional allies fighting the group.<sup>22</sup> The intervention by the Coalition led to an acceleration of a dynamic that, according to many, was inevitable: the Islamic State setting its sights on the West.

An adversarial perception of the West was in the group's DNA from its inception, a byproduct of its jihadist ideology and its history as an insurgency in Iraq against American forces. And there are multiple examples of declared hostility by Islamic State leaders, members and sympathizers predating the attack by the international coalition. Tellingly, even during the early heydays of the Syria-bound mobilization, Western foreign fighters were

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<sup>20</sup> C. McDonald-Gibson, "EU Citizens Fighting in Syria Pose Threat of Terror Attacks When They Return Home, Says Domestic Affairs Chief", *The Independent*, January 15, 2014, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/eu-citizens-fighting-in-syria-pose-threat-of-terror-attacks-when-they-return-home-says-domestic-9062518.html>

<sup>21</sup> E. Schmitt, "Worries Mount as Syria Lures West's Muslims", *The New York Times*, July 27, 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/07/28/world/middleeast/worries-mount-as-syria-lures-wests-muslims.html>

<sup>22</sup> J. Drennan, "Who Has Contributed What in the Coalition Against the Islamic State?", *Foreign Policy*, November 2014, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2014/11/12/who-has-contributed-what-in-the-coalition-against-the-islamic-state/>

flooding the internet with messages promising attacks against the West.<sup>23</sup>

While it is impossible to establish how the Islamic State would have acted had it not been attacked, there are indications that the group was actively planning to carry out terrorist attacks against the West before September 2014. Indeed, one of the main reasons why Western governments decided to shed the timidity that had characterized their responses during the first years of the Syrian conflict and intervene was growing evidence that the Islamic State and other jihadist groups (in particular, a core unit of experienced al Qaeda militants operating within Jabhat al Nusra known as the “Khorasan Group”, which the American military targeted in the very first days of the intervention and whom Washington accused of planning large scale attacks in the West) were indeed using Syria as a staging ground for terrorist operations in Europe and North America.

Yet, after conquering territory in both Syria and Iraq, the Islamic State (then ISIS) made what seemed like a conscious decision not to attract excessive attention from the West. Its strategic focus appeared to be concentrating heavily on strengthening and expanding its presence in the Levant, Iraq, and neighboring areas. In doing so, it benefitted from the indecision of Western powers, which for a variety of complex and overlapping reasons had decided not to intervene in either Syria or Iraq. The vacuum created by the absence of international powers was one of the main enabling factors of ISIS’ rise and the group, while still maintaining a harsh rhetoric against the West, was judged by most Western observers to be striving to contain its innate impulse to carry out acts of violence against the West.

The initiation of airstrikes by the Coalition arguably changed this dynamic. The Islamic State’s propaganda quickly switched gears and began sending vitriolic and very direct threats against

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<sup>23</sup> T. Hegghammer and P. Nesser, “Assessing the Islamic State’s Commitment to Attacking the West”, *Perspectives on Terrorism*, vol. 9, no. 4, 2015, <http://www.terrorismanalysts.com/pt/index.php/pot/article/view/440>

the West. This new posture was perfectly encapsulated in a speech given in September 2014, a week after the declaration of the Coalition's intervention, and then widely circulated by the Islamic State's propaganda apparatus, by Taha Sobhi Fahla, better known as Abu Mohammed al Adnani, the group's official spokesperson.<sup>24</sup> The speech, entitled *Indeed Your Lord Is Ever Watchful*, follows a two-tiered approach through which the Syrian-born militant sent a strong message to two different audiences: Westerners and Muslims.

To the former, Adnani issued direct threats to their security:

... O Americans, and O Europeans, the Islamic State did not initiate a war against you, as your governments and media try to make you believe. It is you who started the transgression against us, and thus you deserve blame and you will pay a great price. You will pay the price when your economies collapse. You will pay the price when your sons are sent to wage war against us and they return to you as disabled amputees, or inside coffins, or mentally ill. You will pay the price as you are afraid of travelling to any land. Rather you will pay the price as you walk on your streets, turning right and left, fearing the Muslims ...

We will conquer your Rome, break your crosses, and enslave your women, by the permission of Allah, the Exalted. This is His promise to us; He is glorified and He does not fail in His promise. If we do not reach that time, then our children and grandchildren will reach it, and they will sell your sons as slaves at the slave market ...

For Muslims worldwide and, in particular, in the West, Adnani had, on the other hand, words that sought to incite them, at time seeking to trigger their sense of pride, to support the Islamic State by attacking the West:

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<sup>24</sup> "Indeed Your Lord Is Ever Watchful", speech by Shaykh Abu Muhammad Al-Adnani Ash-shami, Al Hayat Media.

... So rise O muwahhid. Rise and defend your state from your place wherever you may be ...

... So O muwahhid, wherever you may be, what are you going to do to support your brothers? What do you wait for as the people have become two encampments and the heat of the war increases day by day? O muwahhid, we call you up to defend the Islamic State ...

... Will you leave the disbeliever to sleep safely at home while the Muslim women and children shiver with fear of the roars of the crusader airplanes above their heads day and night? How can you enjoy life and sleep while not aiding your brothers, not casting fear into the hearts of the cross worshippers, and not responding to their strikes with multitudes more? So O muwahhid wherever you may be, hinder those who want to harm your brothers and state as much as you can. The best thing you can do is to strive to your best and kill any disbeliever, whether he be French, American, or from any of their allies ...

Adnani continued his speech suggesting various tactics to those who accepted his exhortation. Western countries have become tragically acquainted with some of them:

... So O muwahhid, do not let this battle pass you by wherever you may be. You must strike the soldiers, patrons, and troops of the tawāghit. Strike their police, security, and intelligence members, as well as their treacherous agents. Destroy their beds. Embitter their lives for them and busy them with themselves. If you can kill a disbelieving American or European – especially the spiteful and filthy French – or an Australian, or a Canadian, or any other disbeliever from the disbelievers waging war, including the citizens of the countries that entered into a coalition against the Islamic State, then rely upon Allah, and kill him in any manner or way however it may be. Do not ask for anyone's advice and do not seek anyone's verdict. Kill the disbeliever whether he is civilian or military, for they have the same ruling. Both of them are disbelievers ...

... Rig the roads with explosives for them [the disbelievers]. Attack their bases. Raid their homes. Cut off their heads. Do not let them feel secure. Hunt them wherever they may be. Turn their worldly life into fear and fire. Remove their families from their homes and thereafter blowup their homes ...

... If you are not able to find an IED or a bullet, then single out the disbelieving American, Frenchman, or any of their allies. Smash his head with a rock, or slaughter him with a knife, or run him over with your car, or throw him down from a high place, or choke him, or poison him ...

... If you are unable to do so, then burn his home, car, or business. Or destroy his crops. If you are unable to do so, then spit in his face ...

Adnani repeated his incitement on several occasions before being killed in Aleppo province by a US airstrike in August 2016.<sup>25</sup> For example, in March 2015, shortly after the attacks in Paris that targeted the satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo* and the Hypercacher kosher superette, Adnani again announced: “know that we want Paris – by Allah’s permission – before Rome and before Spain, after we blacken your lives and destroy the White House, the Big Ben, and the Eiffel Tower”.<sup>26</sup>

Similar messages began appearing regularly in *Dabiq*, *Rumiyah*, other Islamic State official publications, and throughout its propaganda. The group issued direct threats against specific Western countries (the United States and France are most frequently cited, but the United Kingdom, Germany and Australia are also frequently mentioned). Eulogies of “soldiers of the Caliphate” – Islamic State supporters who carried out attacks in the West – and detailed descriptions of their gestures became

<sup>25</sup> “Islamic State: Abu Muhammad Al-Adnani ‘Killed in Aleppo’”, BBC News, August 31, 2016, <http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-37224570>

<sup>26</sup> Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, “They kill and they are killed”, March 12, 2015.

a way for the group to simultaneously threaten the West and encourage others to heed its call. Examples of this dynamic include, among many:

- *Dabiq*, Issue 9, praising the perpetrators of the May 2015 Garland attack: “their determination to support the cause of Allah and punish those who insult the Prophet (*sallallāhu `alayhi wa sallam*) should serve as inspiration to those residing in the lands of the crusaders who are still hesitant to perform their duty. Those men who have read the countless āyāt and *ahādīth* on the virtues of *jihād* and have made sincere *du`ā`* to Allah asking Him for *shahādah* but have yet to act, should consider that Allah will not grant them their *du`ā`* until they take a step towards this noble duty”.<sup>27</sup>
- *Dabiq*, Issue 12, praising the November 2015 attacks in France: “For until then, the just terror will continue to strike them to the core of their deadened hearts”.<sup>28</sup>
- *Dabiq*, Issue 13, praising the December 2015 San Bernardino attacks: “Thus, the *Khilāfah*’s call for the Muslims to strike the crusaders in their own lands was answered once more ...”,<sup>29</sup> and “Let the crusaders get used to the sound of explosion and the image of carnage in their very own homelands”.<sup>30</sup>
- *Dabiq*, Issue 13, also praising the November 2015 Paris attacks: “Let Paris be a lesson for those nations that wish to take heed”.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>27</sup> “They Plot and Allah Plots”, *Dabiq*, no. 9, May 2015, p. 3, <http://jihadology.net/2015/05/21/al-%E1%B8%A5ayat-media-center-presents-a-new-issue-of-the-islamic-states-magazine-dabiq-9/>

<sup>28</sup> “Just Terror”, *Dabiq*, no. 12, November 2015, p. 3, <http://jihadology.net/2015/11/18/new-issue-of-the-islamic-states-magazine-dabiq-12%E2%80%B3/>

<sup>29</sup> “The Rāfidah: From Ibn Saba’ to the Dajjāl”, *Dabiq*, no. 12, January 2016, p. 3, <http://jihadology.net/2016/01/19/new-issue-of-the-islamic-states-magazine-dabiq-13/>

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 55.

- *Rumiyyah*, Issue 2: “Those Muslims residing in the West, in particular, have an opportunity to terrorize the Crusaders themselves as well as the *imams* of *kufr* allied to the Crusaders”.<sup>32</sup>

## And the attacks came....

Some terrorist incidents tracing their roots to Syria took place before the Coalition’s intervention, and in fact, before the formal declaration of the Caliphate. In February 2014, authorities in Nice arrested a 23-year-old French-Algerian, Ibrahim Boudina, whom they accused of having just returned to France after fighting alongside both Jabhat al Nusra and ISIS in Syria. In early January, Greek authorities had briefly detained Boudina after he had crossed the border from Turkey and found him in possession of €1,500 and a French document titled *How to Make Artisanal Bombs in the Name of Allah*.<sup>33</sup> Given the absence of an arrest warrant, the Greeks released Boudina, but warned their French counterparts. Upon his return to France, Boudina, who was known to French authorities as part of a large group of men who had radicalized around a mosque in Cannes, was put under heavy surveillance and was eventually arrested when authorities found he had access to three soda cans filled with TATP (an explosive frequently used in bombmaking) and a gun, which French authorities suspected he wanted to use to plan one or more attacks in the French Riviera.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>32</sup> “A Message from East Africa”, *Rumiyyah*, no. 2, October 4, 2016, p. 3, <http://jihadology.net/2016/10/04/new-release-of-the-islamic-states-magazine-rome-2/>

<sup>33</sup> R. Callimachi, “How ISIS Built the Machinery of Terror Under Europe’s Gaze”, *New York Times*, March 29, 2016, [https://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/29/world/europe/isis-attacks-paris-brussels.html?\\_r=0](https://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/29/world/europe/isis-attacks-paris-brussels.html?_r=0)

<sup>34</sup> A. Vidalie, “Djihadisme: Ibrahim Boudina, Itinéraire D’un Fou d’Allah [Jihadism: Ibrahim Boudina, Itinerary of a Madman of Allah]”, *L’Express*, June 23, 2014, [http://www.lexpress.fr/actualite/societe/djihadisme-ibrahim-boudina-itineraire-d-un-fou-d-allah\\_1552496.html](http://www.lexpress.fr/actualite/societe/djihadisme-ibrahim-boudina-itineraire-d-un-fou-d-allah_1552496.html); and R. Callimachi (2016).

More concrete evidence of the dangerous trail connecting Syria to the West came on May 24, 2014, when another French national, Mehdi Nemmouche, opened fire in the Jewish Museum of Belgium in central Brussels, killing four people.<sup>35</sup> Nemmouche had an extensive criminal past and had reportedly radicalized in French prisons before traveling to Syria and joining various jihadist groups.<sup>36</sup> The Jewish Museum attack was initially believed to be the work of a “lone wolf”. However, further investigations revealed that not only had Nemmouche counted on the logistical support of various individuals in France and Belgium in conducting the Jewish Museum attack, but that he was in close contact with Abdelhamid Abaaoud and several other members of the Syria-based cell of Francophone Islamic State militants that later carried out the November 2015 Paris attacks and March 2016 Brussels attacks.<sup>37</sup>

At the time, few within Western counterterrorism communities had seen the cases of Boudina, Nemmouche and a handful of other individuals who had returned to the West from the Syrian battlefield as part of a strategy by the Islamic State to carry out attacks. Rather, the general consensus saw them simply as wild cards, radicalized individuals operating outside any scheme or plan. Over time, though, it became clear that the group sought to organize terrorist attacks in the West as early as 2012, when it first moved to Syria, and for that purpose it had dispatched dozens of operatives

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<sup>35</sup> “Brussels Jewish Museum Killings: Fourth Victim Dies”, BBC News, June 6, 2014, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-27733876>

<sup>36</sup> L. Borredon, “Tuerie de Bruxelles : ce que l'on sait de l'homme arrêté à Marseille”, *Le Monde*, June 1, 2014.

<sup>37</sup> J.-P. Stroobants, “Un troisième homme incarcéré après l'attentat contre le musée juif de Bruxelles”, *Le Monde*, September 29, 2015, [http://www.lemonde.fr/europe/article/2015/09/29/un-troisieme-homme-incarcere-en-belgique-apres-l-attentat-du-musee-juif-de-bruxelles\\_4775840\\_3214.html](http://www.lemonde.fr/europe/article/2015/09/29/un-troisieme-homme-incarcere-en-belgique-apres-l-attentat-du-musee-juif-de-bruxelles_4775840_3214.html); “Les Confidences de Mehdi Nemmouche À Un Détenu Ont Fuite”, *Le Soir*, September 7, 2016, <http://www.lesoir.be/1311309/article/actualite/belgique/2016-09-07/confidences-mehdi-nemmouche-un-detenu-ont-fuite>; R. Callimachi (2016).

to the (mostly European) countries it sought to attack.<sup>38</sup> Many of these operatives were intercepted and arrested throughout Europe. Others carried out unsophisticated terrorist attacks which, while often causing little damage, overloaded Europe's already overwhelmed counterterrorism apparatuses (whether that in itself was a strategy on the part of the Islamic State is debatable). A handful of remaining operatives carried out the spectacular November 2015 Paris and March 2016 Brussels attacks.

The relatively small number of operatives dispatched by the Islamic State is only one part of the wave of attacks that has hit the West. As events on both sides of the Ocean have clearly demonstrated, an even larger number of attacks have been carried out by individuals with no operational links to the Islamic State but who have only been inspired by the group's narrative and achievements. Irrespective of whether it entailed direct, indirect or no links whatsoever, it has become evident that fears about links between the Islamic State-triggered mobilization of Western jihadists and attacks in the West – what Petter Nesser, Anne Stenersen and Emilie Oftedal have termed the “IS-effect” – were well founded.<sup>39</sup>

It is difficult at this point in time to provide a conclusive analysis of these dynamics. Detailed information on the attacks that have taken place is in many cases incomplete, not just for researchers but also for authorities. Moreover, the wave of Islamic State-related attacks in the West does not appear to be decreasing. Rather, it is anybody's guess what the short and mid-term security implications of the group's apparent decline in the Syrian-Iraqi theater might mean for Europe and North America.

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<sup>38</sup> R. Callimachi (2016).

<sup>39</sup> P. Nesser, A. Stenersen, and E. Oftedal, “Jihadi Terrorism in Europe: The IS-Effect”, *Perspectives on Terrorism*, vol. 10, no. 6, 2016, <http://www.terrorismanalysts.com/pt/index.php/pot/article/view/553>. Analyzing a different yet partially overlapping sample (both successful and not successful terrorist plots, only in Europe, and between 2014 and 2016; this study looks only at attacks carried out in both Europe and North America and encompasses a slightly different time frame), the authors calculated that 38 out of the total 42 plots “involve some kind of IS-link”.



## 2. Three Years of Attacks: An Analysis

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As the so-called Caliphate marks the third year since its declaration, still in existence despite suffering significant setbacks, it is useful to provide a preliminary and inevitably incomplete analysis of the attacks that have bloodied the streets of Europe and America, and were in one way or another linked to the Islamic State. Who were the individuals who carried out these attacks? Were they born and raised in the West, or were they an “imported threat” in the form of refugees and migrants? How did they radicalize? Did they have a criminal past? Were they well educated and integrated, or social outcasts? Did they act alone? What were their connections to the Islamic State?

The answers to these and other questions have substantial implications for our understanding of the threat, and consequently help us to design sound policy solutions based on empirical evidence. This study, the first of its kind, seeks to analyze the demographic profile, radicalization trajectories and connections to the Islamic State of those individuals who carried out attacks inspired by jihadist ideology in North America and Europe during the three years since the self-proclamation of the Islamic State’s caliphate in June 2014.

### **Methodology**

Some methodological clarifications are necessary in order to explain the study’s approaches, aims and limits.

Researchers first identified all terrorist attacks in the West between June 29, 2014, and June 1, 2017.<sup>1</sup> Definitions of terrorism at the national and international level are divergent, depending on the context, purpose and actor defining the term.<sup>2</sup> For the purpose of this report, terrorism is interpreted as a deliberate act of violence against persons, committed by one or more individuals motivated by a violent ideology, with the intention to coerce, intimidate or convey some other message to an audience larger than the immediate victims.<sup>3</sup> This report specifically focuses on individuals or groups that are motivated by jihadist ideology, which is defined in accordance with Europol TE-SAT's formulation: "[j]ihadist terrorism is perpetrated by individuals, groups, networks or organisations that evoke their very particular interpretation of Islam to justify their actions".<sup>4</sup>

This working definition is broken down into the following inclusion criteria:

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<sup>1</sup> Information on attacks and attackers was compiled thanks to the invaluable help of Prachi Vyas, Katerina Papatheodorou, Sam Ricciardi, Helen Powell, Marco Olimpio, Jessica Gimpel, and Cole Swaffield at the Program on Extremism and Johanna Pohl at ICCT.

<sup>2</sup> Among others, L. Weinberg, A. Pedahzur and S. Hirsch-Hoefer, "The challenges of conceptualizing terrorism", *Terrorism and Political Violence*, vol. 16, no. 4, 2004, pp. 777-794; A.P. Schmid (Ed.), *The Routledge handbook of terrorism research*, Routledge, 2011.

<sup>3</sup> For our database, the difference from hate crimes is important. From a conceptual point of view, hate crimes intend to directly hit and punish (presumed) members of specific social groups (usually minorities), based on prejudice and discrimination. In practice the distinction may be blurred. It may be useful to note that, unlike most terrorist attacks, generally, hate crimes are committed on the spur of the moment, are not claimed and publicized and do not imply the presence of groups with relatively clear ideological orientations and political programmes. See C.E. Mills, J.D. Freilich and S.M. Chermak, "Extreme Hatred Revisiting the Hate Crime and Terrorism Relationship to Determine Whether They Are 'Close Cousins' or 'Distant Relatives'", *Crime & Delinquency*, forthcoming, p. 5.

<sup>4</sup> "TE-SAT 2016: EU Terrorism Situation and Trend Report", op. cit, p. 22.

### Violence must be carried out *deliberately* against person(s)

The act of violence must be an active and deliberate behavior, carried out against a person rather than (only) against property. While it does not need to be carefully planned in advance, it cannot simply be a reaction to an external stimulus (therefore, various incidents in which suspected terrorists engaged police forces seeking to arrest them during a raid are not categorized as terrorist attacks). The act of violence must actually be carried out; mere threats of violence without any physical coercion do not fall under this criterion.

Only “completed” attacks, where the physical act of violence resulted in the injury or death of person(s), are included. This standard is applied regardless of whether the attack was “successful” in the strictest sense, meaning that it must not have fulfilled all original intentions or goals of the perpetrator(s) in logistical terms. “Failed” attacks, where the act of violence was not carried out because of mistakes or the decisions of the perpetrator(s) and “foiled” attacks, where the act of violence was not initiated because it was prevented, are excluded.<sup>5</sup>

### Violence must have an *ideological* (in our case, jihadist) motivation

This report focuses on attacks where one or more of the perpetrators was motivated or inspired by jihadist ideology, regardless of whether it is connected to the ideology of a specific group. In principle, different ideological orientations may not be mutually exclusive. For the purpose of this report, ideological motivation is established if, in the context of the attack, the perpetrator had an operational connection to a jihadist group, or was inspired by jihadist ideology.

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<sup>5</sup> E.J. Dahl, “Comparing Failed, Foiled, Completed and Successful Terrorist Attacks”, presentation, September 18, 2014, START - National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism, [https://www.start.umd.edu/pubs/START\\_Dahl\\_ComparingFailedFoiledCompletedSuccessfulTerroristAttacks.pdf](https://www.start.umd.edu/pubs/START_Dahl_ComparingFailedFoiledCompletedSuccessfulTerroristAttacks.pdf)

## Violence cannot be linked purely to personal gains or considerations

This criterion relates to the scale and purpose of violence. It requires that there is no evidence that the perpetrator(s) primarily acted for personal motives such as individual revenge, profit and personal gain. For example, the case of an alleged radicalized man stabbing his father and his brother in Paris on March 17, 2017, is not included in the dataset because there is evidence that the man acted primarily for personal reasons in the context of a family drama.<sup>6</sup> Conversely, Yassin Salhi, who beheaded his boss at a chemical plant in Saint-Quentin-Fallavier in June 2015, is included in the dataset because of the jihadist flags he positioned next to his victim's head during the attack and the messages he sent to Islamic State operatives after it. For the act to be included the perpetrator(s) must aim to coerce, intimidate or convey some other message to an audience that extends beyond the immediate victim group.

In order to be included in the dataset, there must be evidence to indicate that *each* of these three criteria has been met<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup> S. Kovacs, "Un jeune égorgé son père et son frère à Paris", *Le Figaro*, March 17, 2017, <http://www.lefigaro.fr/actualite-france/2017/03/17/01016-20170317ARTFIG00132-deux-hommes-retrouves-egorges-a-paris.php>

<sup>7</sup> Clearly, some episodes may be ambiguous. For example, an interesting case concerns a recent stabbing incident in Italy. On 18 May 2017, Ismail Tommaso Ben Youssef Hosni, a homeless 20-year-old Italian citizen, born in Milan to a Tunisian father and an Italian mother, stabbed a policeman and two soldiers with two kitchen knives after they asked to see his identity papers at Milan's central train station. None of the three suffered life-threatening injuries. Hosni, who had a criminal record (in particular, for drug dealing), was reportedly under the influence of cocaine at the time of the incident. Italian authorities found that the young man was an Islamic State sympathizer and he was placed under investigation for suspected international terrorism. On the other hand, his real motives are still unclear and the attack has not been claimed in any way. See A. Galli and G. Santucci, "Hosni, il 20enne italiano (ai margini) che ha scelto il radicalismo islamico", *Corriere della Sera*, May 19, 2017; C. Giuzzi and S. Regina, "Aggressione in Centrale, Hosni: «Non ricordo nulla, avevo preso cocaina»", *Corriere della Sera*, May 21, 2017. According to the information available at the time of writing, this case cannot be considered

**Geographical limitation:** The analysis covers terrorist attacks committed in North America and Europe. The former is confined to the United States and Canada. The latter includes the 28 Member States of the European Union (EU) plus Norway and Switzerland. It does not include non-EU Balkan countries, Turkey, the Russian Federation and former Soviet republics.

**Temporal limitation:** The research focuses exclusively on attacks that have been carried out from the Islamic State's proclamation of the so-called Caliphate on June 29, 2014 through June 1, 2017.

**Single attack determination:** In order to determine the total number of attacks, individual incidents were identified as single or multiple attacks. Given the nature of attacks within the dataset, the determination of each attack is not confined to the same geographic and temporal point. Incidents were instead treated as one attack even when "the time of occurrence of incidents or their locations are discontinuous"<sup>8</sup>. Instead, if multiple acts of violence occurred within close geographical proximity (for example, the same city), and/or were carried out within a short time frame (e.g. same day or night such as the Paris attacks of November 13-14, 2015) by the same attacker or team of attackers, they qualified as one attack. This applies to the Copenhagen attacks of February 14-15, 2015, the Paris attacks of November 13-14, 2015, the Brussels attacks on March 22, 2016, and the attacks perpetrated by Amedy Coulibaly at two locations in Paris over multiple days in January 2015.

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as a genuine terrorist attack because there are not clear indications that the act of violence was an active and deliberate behaviour (and not a simple reaction) (1), had a jihadist motivation (2) and was not linked purely to personal gains or considerations (3).

<sup>8</sup> Global Terrorism Database (GTD), *Codebook: Inclusion Criteria and Variables*, June 2016, <http://www.start.umd.edu/gtd/downloads/Codebook.pdf>

## **Definition of perpetrator(s)**

This project focuses on examining the characteristics of individuals who carried out terrorist attacks. As such, the research analyzes only those who intentionally and physically carried out such attacks by personally using a weapon (firearm, knife/machete/axe, explosive device, vehicle, etc.). Even though their role in the success of a terrorist attack was in some cases crucial, individual(s) who only offered logistical, financial or planning support are not included. This decision was made because for many attacks, particularly complex ones such as the November 2015 Paris attacks, it is very difficult to fully reconstruct the murky web of operatives involved in the operation's planning.

## **Sources and research methodology**

Data collection is based largely on open-source material, at times supplemented by interviews with government officials. As a first step, researchers built on existing research by the Program on Extremism and created a database containing all the attacks that occurred in Europe and North America within the relevant time frame. These results were cross-referenced and updated using various terrorism databases and chronologies.<sup>9</sup> The list of potential cases was checked separately by each of the three main researchers to ascertain if each occurrence met the criteria for inclusion. In cases of disagreement where consensus could not be found, a majority decision was taken.

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<sup>9</sup> See, for example, Global Terrorism Database (2016); P. Nesser, A. Stenersen, and E. Oftedal, “Jihadi Terrorism in Europe: The IS-Effect”, *Perspectives on Terrorism*, vol. 10, no. 6, 2016, <http://www.terrorismanalysts.com/pt/index.php/pot/article/view/553>; K. Orton, *Foreign Terrorist Attacks By The Islamic State, 2002-2016*, Report, The Henry Jackson Society, March 2017; and C. Beuze, *Terrorist attacks, failed attacks and plots in the West linked to the Syrian-Iraqi context (2013-2016)*, Center for the Analysis of Terrorism (CAT), April 11, 2017, <http://cat-int.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/Terrorist-attacks-Report-2013-2016.pdf>

In the second phase, the attacker(s) for each event was identified. A coding scheme was developed specifically for this project. For each identified perpetrator, all variables in the coding scheme were researched, again using open-source data and the “snowballing” approach.

Research was conducted in English, French, German, Italian, Dutch, Spanish and Danish.

### ***Limitations and caveats***

The research team took every effort to ensure that the database was as complete as possible. However, there exist risks especially associated with the use of open-source material in terms of amount, consistency, and reliability of information. As a result, it is unavoidable that mistakes or misrepresentations might be present in the dataset.

First, while it can be reasonably assumed that any terrorist attack resulting in injuries over the past three years in the geographical area considered would be reported in the media, it may nevertheless be the case that some attacks were not reported at all, or were so under-reported that they were not discovered by the research team.

Secondly, the researchers were faced with various limitations in their data gathering efforts. For example, information about certain attacks and perpetrators was limited because of privacy and various security classifications. In some cases, counterterrorism authorities themselves are faced with a dearth of reliable information on issues, such as radicalization trajectory of connectivity with groups operating outside of the West. The short time frame of the study accentuates these issues, and it is likely that additional (and in some cases, conflicting) information on some cases might arise in the future.

Every care was taken to ensure that multiple sources (including media and news reporting in various languages, court documents, in-depth academic analyses, reports and conversations

with individuals with specific knowledge of certain cases) were used to verify information. However, some information may nevertheless be inaccurate.

Additionally, ambiguity was present in the coding of variables in the database. Indicators were only coded positively when information supporting the claim was considered reliable beyond reasonable doubt. All “unknown” cases wherein no information was available to either support or refute a fact were coded as “no”. Some variables were difficult to code by virtue of their nature, especially using open-source data. For example, determining if an individual had been a foreign fighter or had an operational connection to a terrorist organization was at times particularly challenging.

**51** terrorist attacks  
related to the  
Islamic caliphate  
since June 2014

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Carried out by **65**  
identified attackers

## Examining the attacks

### Country

In the three years following the Caliphate's proclamation, a total of 51 attacks were successfully carried out in North America and Europe by individuals motivated by jihadist ideology. These 51 attacks included in the database took place in a relatively limited number of countries (8 out of 32). The country with the largest number of attacks was France (17), followed by the United States (16), Germany (6), the UK (4), Belgium (3), Canada (3), Denmark (1) and Sweden (1). Therefore, 32 attacks were executed in Europe (63%) and the remaining 19 in North America (37%).

The fact that the United States is a close second to France in terms of attacks runs somewhat contrary to common perceptions that view Europe as the primary target of jihadist violence. Though most attacks that occurred in the US were carried out by individuals with limited to no operational connections to the Islamic State or al Qaeda, some of them (such as Orlando and San Bernardino) had among the highest lethality levels.

Moreover, the data shows that there is no strong correlation between number of attacks and size of the general or the local Muslim population. For example, countries with large general and Muslim populations like Spain or Italy have not reported any attacks. Nevertheless, France, the most-hit country, has one of the largest general populations and the largest Muslim population in the West.

### Geography of Attacks

Europe: 63% of attacks

North America: 37%

North America: 32%

Europe: 68% of attackers

COUNTRY	ATTACKS	%
France	17	33%
United States	16	31%
Germany	6	12%
UK	4	8%
Belgium	3	6%
Canada	3	6%
Denmark	1	2%
Sweden	1	2%



### Geography of Attackers

COUNTRY	ATTACKERS	%
France	27	42%
United States	18	28%
Germany	7	11%
Belgium	5	8%
Canada	3	5%
UK	3	5%
Denmark	1	2%
Sweden	1	2%

## **Location**

Most attacks occurred in large urban centers. The city hit most is Paris (five incidents, plus two additional attacks in its immediate vicinity). 14 of 51 attacks occurred in capital cities: Paris (5), Brussels (3), Berlin (2), London (2), Ottawa (1), Copenhagen (1), and Stockholm (1). Other important cities with a population above 500,000 where attacks took place include New York (2 attacks), Philadelphia (1), Denver (1), Essen (1), Marseille (1), Columbus, Ohio (1), Hanover (1), Oklahoma City (1) and Manchester (1).

This dynamic falls in line with historical trends, as cities tend to experience higher levels of terrorist violence for four major reasons: 1) higher level of accessibility, anonymity, freedom of movement for terrorists; 2) better opportunities to maximize the lethality of violence; 3) better opportunities to maximize economic and material damage; 4) higher political and symbolic value of targets.<sup>10</sup>

A few attacks hit iconic targets, such as the Champs-Élysées and the Louvre Museum in Paris and Westminster in London, and many have targeted crowded spaces, including busy pedestrian areas or concert halls. On the other hand, some terrorist attacks have hit unusual places, such as an office Christmas party or a service at a rural church.

## **Date**

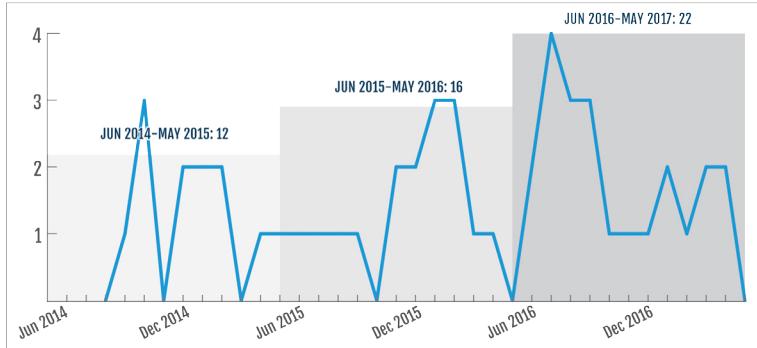
The 51 attacks that took place during the three years analyzed in the study took place at a relatively steady pace, with little more than one attack per month. The peak was in July 2016, with four attacks (two in France and two in Germany).

There are no visible trends in terms of countries. Nevertheless, it can be noted that all three attacks in Belgium occurred in 2016 and Germany was not targeted prior to September 2015.

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<sup>10</sup> H.V. Savitch, *Cities in a Time of Terror: Space, Territory, and Local Resilience*. London, M.E. Sharpe, 2007.

## Attack Frequency



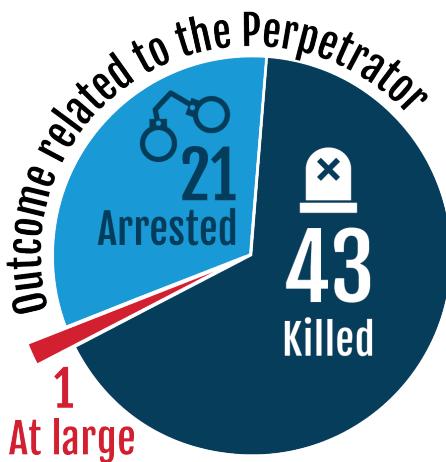
## Attack outcome: the attackers

A majority of perpetrators (43 out of 65; 66%) lost their lives during their attacks. Most died in the course of “high-risk missions”.<sup>11</sup> In other terms, the perpetrator’s death could have been (and likely was) foreseeable as probable but not certain. However, some attackers died in “pure” suicide missions in which death was self-inflicted, which is the case in the multiple November 13, 2015 Paris attacks, the March 22, 2016 Brussels attacks<sup>12</sup> and the July 24, 2016 suicide attack in Ansbach, Germany. On the other hand, some individuals were killed in the aftermath of the attack. For example, Anis Amri, the perpetrator of Berlin’s Christmas market attack, was killed in a shootout with police in Sesto San Giovanni (in Milan) four days after he had fled from the scene of the attack.

21 perpetrators (32%) were arrested at the crime scene or directly afterwards. Only one perpetrator, Mohammed Abdul Kadir, is still at large at the time of writing. Kadir fled the United Kingdom three days after the bludgeoning of elderly faith healer Jalal Uddin in an attack in Rochdale, near Manchester, on February 18, 2016. It is speculated he may have travelled to Syria.

<sup>11</sup> D. Gambetta (Ed.), *Making Sense of Suicide Missions*. Oxford University Press, Oxford UK, 2005.

<sup>12</sup> As mentioned earlier, in this report, for the sake of simplicity, these multiple attacks are considered as single incidents.



### ***Attack outcome: the victims***

In total, the 51 attacks caused 395 deaths and no less than 1,549 physical injuries, with the exclusion of the perpetrators. While the average number of fatalities is little more than 7 per attack, the level of lethality varies considerably from one episode to another. The November 2015 Paris attack was the most lethal (130 fatalities, 90 of which occurred at the Bataclan theatre). Seven additional attacks resulted in at least 10 victims: Nice (86 fatalities), Orlando (49), Brussels (32), Manchester (22), San Bernardino (14), Berlin (12), and the January 2015 attack by the Kouachi brothers in Paris (12). In total, these seven attacks are responsible for 357 out of the 395 deaths. On the other hand, more than half of all attacks (29 out of 51) did not cause casualties (0 is in fact the modal value), with the exclusion of the perpetrators. Other seven acts of violence resulted in one victim.

Among the first five episodes in terms of lethality, the attacks in Paris in November 2015 and in Brussels in 2016 were well orchestrated, multiple attacks directed by the Islamic State and executed in part by former foreign fighters. However, the June 2016 attack in Orlando and July 2016 attack in Nice were carried out independently by individuals without an operational

connection to a jihadist group. These episodes demonstrate that terrorist sympathizers who never traveled to conflict areas and operate autonomously can be just as dangerous as a team of skilled militants.

Attacks in France claimed the largest number of victims (239), followed by the United States (76).

**395 FATALITIES** 

Average fatalities per attack: 7.7

 **INJURIES 1549**

Average injuries per attack: 30.0

### ***Claim of responsibility by a jihadist group***

If a jihadist group declared that perpetrators were supporters of or inspired by the group, either directly after the attack or later via its media outlets (e.g., online magazines, such as *Dabiq* for IS), the attack was considered “claimed”. As such, according to our database, 20 attacks out of 51 (39%) were claimed.

It is clear that groups can claim acts of violence that they have not actually orchestrated. For example, the Islamic State claimed responsibility for the March 2017 Westminster attack through its Amaq news agency. However, there is no clear evidence of an operational connection between the perpetrator, Khalid Masood, and the group.

## Examining the attackers<sup>13</sup>

### Age

In recent years, media and academic discourse has frequently highlighted the declining age of individuals attracted to jihadist ideology. The many cases of adolescents (sometimes pre-teens) who radicalized and, in certain cases, travelled to Syria or attempted to carry out attacks have received considerable attention. While counterterrorism officials throughout the West have confirmed this trend, it is not clearly reflected in the demographic characteristics of individuals responsible for the attacks perpetrated during the past three years. In fact, the data show that the average attacker is not unusually young: the average age is 27.3 years, with a median age of 28 and a mode of 24.<sup>14</sup> Most perpetrators were in the 25-30 age bracket.

Five of the attackers (8%) were under 18 at the time of attack. The youngest two were both 15: an unnamed boy who attacked a Jewish teacher with a machete in Marseille in January 2016, and Safia Schmitter, who stabbed a police officer at a Hannover train station in February 2016. The other minors were two 16-year-old boys who carried out the bombing of a Sikh temple in Essen, Germany, and a 17-year-old who injured 5 individuals wielding an axe on a train in Würzburg, Germany. Comparatively, their actions led to less deaths and injuries than those of older perpetrators: collectively, the 5 underage perpetrators injured 13 victims. The only person killed as a result of an underage attack was one of the perpetrators (Riaz Khan Ahmadzi, who was killed by authorities during the attack in Würzburg). Interestingly, 4 out of the 5 underage attackers carried out their acts in Germany.

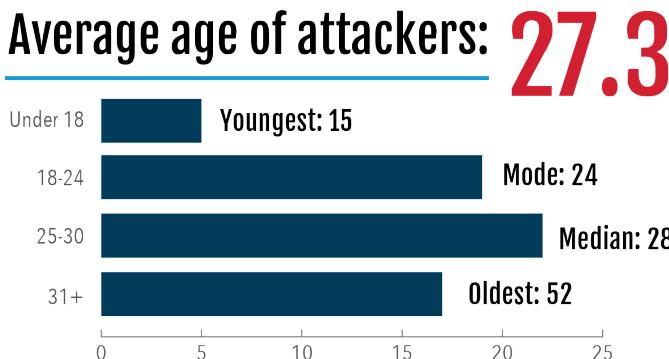
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<sup>13</sup> The analysis does not include the case of the perpetrator of the Manchester Arena bombing on 22 May 2017 (attack no. 51), due to a lack of reliable and detailed information on this individual at the time of completing this report.

<sup>14</sup> Note that the age of two individuals was unknown, namely those of the two Stade de France suicide attackers during the November 2015 Paris attacks.

A somewhat surprising trend, considering the axiom that terrorist recruits are steadily getting younger, is that almost one-third (27%) of perpetrators were above the age of 30. The majority of this “older” cohort were in their thirties, with three individuals age 40 or older. The oldest attacker, Khalid Masood, was 52 when he carried out an attack in Westminster, London in March 2017. It is noteworthy that the older perpetrators are twice as likely to have been imprisoned and to have a history of substance abuse; and they are also more likely (65%) to have been part of a local network prior to their attack.

The majority of the older perpetrators (74%) and all of the underage perpetrators carried out their attacks in Europe, with the North American attackers being more “average” when it comes to age. Both older and younger cohorts are less likely to have been a foreign fighter (only 1 in the older age bracket). Interestingly, for both age groups, all but 1 (older) person had been on authorities’ radar before the attack.



### Gender

Traditionally, the role of women in jihadist terrorism has been mainly limited to non-combat and auxiliary activities such as recruitment, logistics, support or advocacy for terrorist activity, as

well as being mothers to a new generation of militants.<sup>15</sup> In some instances, women have taken on more active roles. Al Qaeda, Boko Haram, al Shabaab and other jihadist groups have occasionally used females as suicide bombers. The Islamic State appears to have long developed a strategy to attract a high number of women among its ranks, even though most of their roles appear to be limited to online and offline recruitment, state-building efforts (working as nurses, teachers, etc.), and policing other women (through the all-female al Khansaa Brigade).

This dynamic is reflected somewhat in the number of female perpetrators in this study. Only 2 out of 65 individual perpetrators (3%) were female: Tashfeen Malik, who carried out the San Bernardino shooting with her husband, Syed Rizwan Farook, and Safia Smitter, who stabbed and injured a police officer with a knife at a train station in Hanover in February 2016.

Compared to the inclusion of women in other studies, the percentage of women in our database is low. For example, an analysis conducted by CAT of attacks linked to the Syria-Iraq conflict in the West between 2013-16 found that more than 10% of perpetrators were female.<sup>16</sup> Similarly, a study of Islamist-inspired offenders by the Henry Jackson Society placed the percentage of females convicted for involvement in attacks between 2011 and 2016 at 10.6%.<sup>17</sup> The number in our dataset also pales in comparison to the number of females who have travelled to Syria and/or Iraq to join IS; recent studies put that number at 20%.<sup>18</sup> Similarly, French authorities recently indicated that 25%

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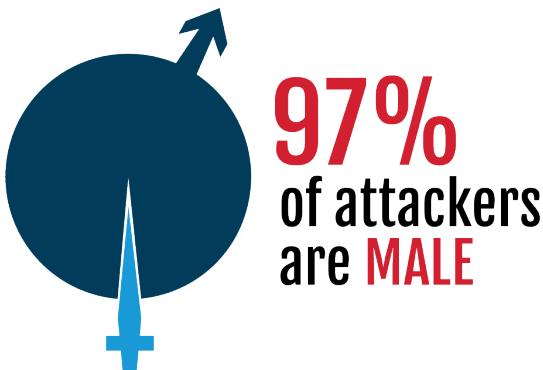
<sup>15</sup> A. Alexander, *Cruel Intentions: Female Jihadists in America*, Program on Extremism, The George Washington University, Washington D.C., November 2016, <https://cchs.gwu.edu/sites/cchs.gwu.edu/files/downloads/Female%20Jihadists%20in%20America.pdf>

<sup>16</sup> Terrorist attacks, failed attacks and plots in the West linked to the Syrian-Iraqi context (2013-2016), Center for the Analysis of Terrorism (CAT).

<sup>17</sup> K. Orton (2017).

<sup>18</sup> E.E.J. Strømmen, *Jihadi Brides or Female Foreign Fighters? Women in Da'esh – from Recruitment to Sentencing*, PRIO Policy Brief 1. Oslo, Norway, Peace Research Institute Oslo, 2017, <https://www.prio.org/Publications/Publication/?x=10546>

of individuals arrested for jihadist activities in 2016 were women.<sup>19</sup> The reason for this gap is clear: this report looks exclusively at perpetrators who directly carried out attacks, those who figuratively had “their finger on the trigger” or “the knife in their hand”. While only a handful of women have been physically involved in successful attacks in the West thus far (and a few more in unsuccessful attacks), women are increasingly playing important roles in a variety of support functions within Western jihadist milieus.



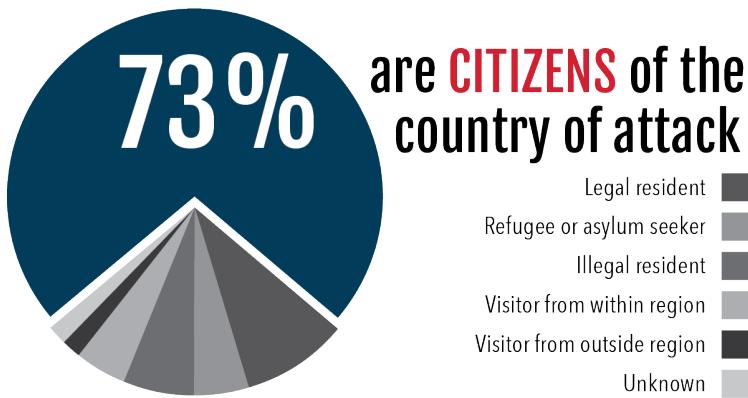
### ***Immigration status***

The relationship between terrorism and migration is a complex one that has been at the center of extremely polarizing debates, but has received little scholarly attention. Our dataset shows that, compared to attackers who were citizens, legal residents or visitors from neighboring countries, those who were residing illegally in a country or came from abroad is small. In fact, 73% were citizens of the country in which they committed the attack (in some cases, they were dual citizens of another country). Another 14% were either legal residents or legitimate visitors

<sup>19</sup> “Françaises djihadistes: les femmes «représentent un quart des personnes poursuivies pour terrorisme»”, *Le Parisien*, April 6, 2017, <http://www.leparisien.fr/faits-divers/francaises-djihadistes-les-femmes-representent-un-quart-des-personnes-poursuivies-pour-terrorisme-06-04-2017-6828957.php>

from neighboring countries, such as dual Belgian and Moroccan citizen Chakib Akrouh, who lived in Belgium before becoming one of the attackers in Paris in November 2015.

At least two individuals, both involved in the November 2015 Paris attacks, had allegedly posed as refugees to enter Europe via Greece. Three individuals (5%) were refugees or asylum seekers at the time of attack, and an additional 4 (6%) were either residing in the country illegally or awaiting deportation. The latter include Uzbek national Rakhmat Akilov, who drove into pedestrians with a hijacked truck in Stockholm in April 2017, and Tunisian citizen Anis Amri, who also used a truck to commit his attack on the Berlin Christmas market. The dataset also includes one case of “terrorist tourism”: Egyptian citizen Abdullah Hamamy, who lived in the United Arab Emirates, had travelled to France on a business trip before he attacked soldiers at the Louvre museum in February 2017.



### Converts

Several studies suggest that converts have been considerably over-represented in Islamist militancy and extremism when compared to the relatively small share they make up in Western societies.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>20</sup> R. Simcox, *WE WILL CONQUER YOUR ROME: A Study of Islamic State Terror Plots in the West*, Centre for the Response to Radicalisation and Terrorism

Numerous, overlapping hypotheses have been put forward in an attempt to explain the relationship between conversion and Islamist militancy.<sup>21</sup>

The information in our database shows that 17% of perpetrators were converts. North American converts (two-thirds US citizens and one-third Canadians) greatly outnumbered converts from European countries (14% versus 3%). Whereas 100% of all Canadian perpetrators in the dataset were converts, a third of all perpetrators in the US were not natives to the faith. Conversely, only 4% of perpetrators in France were converts. No perpetrator of the attacks in Belgium, Sweden, Germany and Denmark had converted. Of the two attacks registered in the UK, a convert had perpetrated one.

The data in this study thus only partially confirms the trend of convert overrepresentation.<sup>22</sup> Whereas the percentages of convert perpetrators from Canada, the US and the UK exceed those countries' overall percentages of converts among their respective Muslim populations, the percentage of convert perpetrators in

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Report, The Henry Jackson Society, 2015, <http://henryjacksonsociety.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/ISIS-brochure-Web.pdf>; S. Mullins, "Re-Examining the Involvement of Converts in Islamist Terrorism: A Comparison of the U.S. and U.K.", *Perspectives on Terrorism*, vol. 9, no. 6, 2015, pp. 72-84; L. Vidino and S. Hughes, *ISIS in America, From Retweets to Raqqa*, Program On Extremism, The George Washington University, Washington D.C., 2015, <https://cchs.gwu.edu/sites/cchs.gwu.edu/files/downloads/ISIS%20in%20America%20-%20Full%20Report.pdf>

<sup>21</sup> For an in-depth overview of explanations, see B. Schuurman, P. Grol and S. Flower, *Converts and Islamist Terrorism: An Introduction*, ICCT Policy Brief, The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism - The Hague, June 2016.

<sup>22</sup> The reference percentages of converts among Muslim populations of each country analysed is taken from B. Schuurman, P. Grol and S. Flower (2016), p. 8; data for Canada's convert population is taken from S. Flower and D. Birkett, (*Mis*) *Understanding Muslim Converts in Canada: A Critical Discussion of Muslim Converts in the Contexts of Security and Society*, TSAS Working Paper Series no. 14-06, Canadian Network for Research on Terrorism, Security and Society (TSAS), July 2014, [http://tsas.ca/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/TSASWP14-06\\_Flower-Birkett.pdf](http://tsas.ca/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/TSASWP14-06_Flower-Birkett.pdf)

France actually corresponds to a high estimate of the number of converts among France's Muslim population. In Belgium, Sweden, Germany and Denmark, the percentage of convert perpetrators is below that of overall converts among their Muslim populations.<sup>23</sup>

Interestingly, the percentage of converts from European countries in this dataset is considerably lower than the percentage of converts among EU foreign fighters.<sup>24</sup> In the case of Germany, 12% of the country's foreign fighters were estimated to be converts, but none of the attacks there were perpetrated by converts. Similarly, the percentage of converts among French foreign fighters was estimated at 23%,<sup>25</sup> whereas only 4% of perpetrators of attacks in France were converts.

Convert perpetrators in the dataset span most age groups. The youngest convert perpetrator, Justin Nojan Sullivan, was 19 years old when he carried out an attack in Morganton, NC, in December 2014. The oldest, Khalid Masood, was 52 years old at the time of the 2017 Westminster attack. None of the convert perpetrators in the dataset were underage. All of the convert perpetrators were male.

Interestingly, 73% of converts had a prior criminal background (compared to 57% of overall perpetrators), and 55% of convert perpetrators had served prison time prior to their attack (as compared to 34% of overall perpetrators). These findings could bolster the argument that converts with a prior criminal background are more vulnerable to radicalization. Such inferences, to

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<sup>23</sup> Note that the overall percentages may project an unfair representation due to the small sample size of attacks in various countries, especially in the cases of Canada (n=3) and the UK (n=2).

<sup>24</sup> B. Boutin, G. Chauzal, J. Dorsey, M. Jegerings, C. Paulussen, J. Pohl, A. Reed and S. Zavagli, *The Foreign Fighters Phenomenon in the European Union: Profiles, Threats & Policies*, ICCT Research Paper, ICCT International Centre for Counterterrorism-The Hague, 2016, [https://www.icct.nl/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/ICCT-Report\\_Foreign-Fighters-Phenomenon-in-the-EU\\_1-April-2016\\_including-AnnexesLinks.pdf](https://www.icct.nl/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/ICCT-Report_Foreign-Fighters-Phenomenon-in-the-EU_1-April-2016_including-AnnexesLinks.pdf)

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

be sure, should be drawn with caution.

Whereas 18% of overall perpetrator population was known to have travelled to jihadist-controlled territories, none of the convert perpetrators had done so. However, the percentage of perpetrators with an operational connection to a terrorist group varied, to a limited extent, between convert and non-convert perpetrators: while 42% of overall perpetrators had an operational connection, just 27% of converts did. Attacks by convert perpetrators resulted in fewer casualties on average: while their attacks caused an average of less than one victim per attack, overall attackers had an average of 5.7 fatalities per attack.



### ***Criminal background***

Many facets of the complex relationship between crime and terrorism have received considerable attention in the context of radicalization patterns in the West.<sup>26</sup> Our dataset found that at least 57% (37) of the attackers had a prior criminal background, with

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<sup>26</sup> R. Basra, P.R. Neumann and C. Brunner, *Criminal Pasts, Terrorist Futures: European Jihadists and the New Crime-Terror Nexus*, The International Centre for the Study of Radicalization and Political Violence (ICSR), King's College, London, 2016, <http://icsr.info/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/Criminal-Pasts-Terrorist-Futures.pdf>

the criminal activities of many in the dataset not known.<sup>27</sup>

In many cases, a criminal background was an indicator of operational connections to the Islamic State. In fact, those who had been in direct contact with the group were more likely to have had a criminal past (at least 62% of those with an operational connection also had a criminal past, with many of the remaining 38% being coded as “unknown”). Those with a criminal background were also more likely to have been involved in a local network during their radicalization trajectory.

## **Prisons**

Evidence from most Western countries has frequently shown prisons as breeding grounds for radicalization, a place where committed militants can connect with like-minded individuals and where many others first discover jihadist ideology. Roughly one third (34%) of the perpetrators in our database had, at some stage in their lives, been imprisoned. Time served ranged from a number of days to up to over a decade in prison, with some individuals being imprisoned multiple times before carrying out their attack. While this is a considerable portion of the total number of who have been imprisoned, it is difficult to ascertain if imprisonment had indeed played a role in their radicalization trajectory. Anecdotal evidence, particularly in many French cases, appears to show that it did.

In any case, the vast majority of the attackers in Europe and North America had not been imprisoned for terrorism-related offences, but rather for drug-related crimes, possession of weapons, and physical violence, including (attempted) murder, robbery and assault. Attackers in North America were almost as likely as their counterparts in Europe to have had prison experience

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<sup>27</sup> It is noteworthy that especially for this variable (but also conversion to Islam), many cases were coded as “unknown” and therefore the likelihood of a higher proportion of those with a criminal background is likely. This underreporting is due to the lack of attention paid to this topic in news media reporting as well as privacy concerns.

prior to their attack. The US is somewhat below the average (28%), while France is in line with the average (33%). A prison background is more prevalent among attackers in the older age bracket.



**of attackers  
were KNOWN to  
AUTHORITIES  
prior to attack**

**57%**  
had a criminal  
background

**34%**  
served time  
in prison

**22** Attacks committed  
by a person with  
prison experience

**15** EU attacks  
EU attackers

**7** U.S. attacks  
U.S. attackers

### ***Connections to a local (not Internet-based) jihadist network***

This variable seeks to measure the attacker's affiliation, at the time of the attack, to a physical, in-person network, either at the place of attack or of usual residence. These networks include connections to a localized violent extremist network, a radical preacher or mosque, etc. On the other hand, Internet contact with recruiters or plotters is not taken into account.

In general, the open-source information about this category may be confusing and conflicting. However, according to our database, slightly more than half of the perpetrators (33 out of 65;

51%) had a connection to a physical local network. The importance of local networks will be discussed at length in Chapter 4.

## **Foreign fighters**

Today, the danger of so-called foreign fighters<sup>28</sup> ranks high on the international agenda. Across the globe, there are widespread concerns that in addition to their role in conflict areas, some of the survivors may return to their home or third countries and carry out or support terrorist attacks by taking advantage of the connections, experience and status gained in conflict areas.

According to our data, there are clear indications of foreign fighter experience for 12 individuals out of 65 (18%), which were involved in 5 different attacks (Charlie Hebdo, Paris November 2015, Thalys attack, Brussels, Ansbach). 11 of these 12 foreign fighters had traveled to Syria and Iraq, and had joined the ranks of the Islamic State. According to currently available information, one, Chérif Kouachi, had travelled to Yemen and trained with al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). Allegations that his brother, Saïd, had also visited the same country in 2011 have not been definitively confirmed and the possibility of a passport exchange between the two brothers has caused additional uncertainty.<sup>29</sup>

The “blowback rate” – the proportion of outgoing fighters who return and actually carry out attacks against their home country or region – is considerably low thus far: 12 terrorist returnees

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<sup>28</sup> Among others, T. Hegghammer, “The rise of Muslim foreign fighters: Islam and the globalization of Jihad”, *International Security*, vol. 35, no. 3, 2010/11, pp. 53–94; T. Hegghammer, “Should I stay or should I go? Explaining variation in Western jihadists’ choice between domestic and foreign fighting”, *American Political Science Review*, February 2013, pp. 1-15; D. Malet, *Foreign fighters: transnational identity in civil conflicts*. Oxford University Press, New York NY, 2013.

<sup>29</sup> E. Schmitt, M. Mazzetti and R. Callimachi, “Disputed Claims Over Qaeda Role in Paris Attacks”, *The New York Times*, January 14, 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/01/15/world/europe/al-qaeda-in-the-arabian-peninsula-charlie-hebdo.html>

from an outgoing contingent of more than 6,000. However, the average death toll of these five attacks is more than 35 deaths per attack, compared to 7 in general. In fact, two of the four most lethal attacks (Paris in November 2015 and Brussels in March 2016) involved the participation of returned foreign fighters. Thus, there seem to be indications of a “veteran effect”, but only in the context of a limited number of episodes (and with the outlier of the catastrophic attack in Paris in November 2015).<sup>30</sup>

All 12 foreign fighters carried out their attacks in Europe, specifically in France, Belgium and Germany. These three countries are also those that have seen the largest number of jihadist foreign fighters in the West together with the UK.<sup>31</sup>



### ***Operational connection***

According to our data, 27 out of 65 perpetrators (42%) had a clear operational connection to an established jihadist group. For the purpose of this report, an operational connection entails actual membership in the group and/or regular communications, including conversations on operational matters, with a member of the group. The vast majority of perpetrators had operational connections to the Islamic State, while a handful had connections with al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula and al Shabaab (in

<sup>30</sup> Cf. T. Hegghammer (2013).

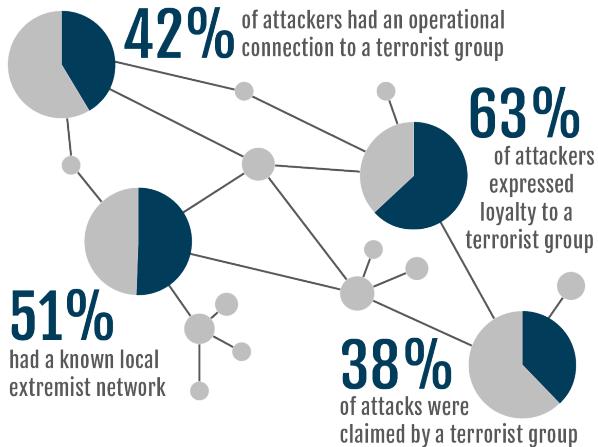
<sup>31</sup> A.P. Schmid and J. Tinnes, *Foreign (Terrorist) Fighters with IS: A European Perspective*, ICCT Research Paper, The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism - The Hague, December 2015; B. Boutin et al. (2016).

some cases, simultaneously having them with the Islamic State).

Interestingly, in North America, only 19% of perpetrators (4 out of 21) had an operational connection to a jihadist group, while in Europe this percentage rises to 52% (23 out of 44).

For a broader discussion on operational connections of attacks, see Chapter 3.

## Connections to Terrorist Groups



### **Pledge of allegiance to a jihadist group**

Even though information on the matter is often limited and ambiguous, our data reports that 41 perpetrators (63%) had pledged allegiance to a jihadist group, almost always the Islamic State, during or before the attack.



### 3. A Tripartite Categorization of Attacks

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From an operational perspective, the attacks that have hit the West since June 2014 can be divided into three macro-categories:

1. terrorist attacks carried out by individuals who were acting under direct orders from the Islamic State's leadership (8% in our database);
2. terrorist attacks carried out by individuals with no connection whatsoever to the Islamic State, but who were inspired by its message (26%);
3. terrorist attacks carried out by individuals who had some form of connection to the Islamic State but acted independently (66%).<sup>1</sup>

#### **Terrorist attacks carried out by individuals who were acting under direct orders from the Islamic State's leadership**

The first typology follows a model that was frequently adopted by al Qaeda. Throughout the 1990s and the 2000s, Osama bin Laden's organization selected individuals from its base of recruits with characteristics which would have made them particularly

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<sup>1</sup> This tripartite division is not new but has been elaborated by various scholars and experts. See C. Watts, "Inspired, Networked & Directed – The Muddled Jihad of ISIS & Al Qaeda Post Hebdo", *War on the Rocks*, January 1, 2015. <https://warontherocks.com/2015/01/inspired-networked-directed-the-muddled-jihad-of-isis-al-qaeda-post-hebdo/>; and S. Mullins, "Lone-Actor vs. Remote-Controlled Jihadi Terrorism: Rethinking the Threat to the West", *War on the Rocks*, April 20, 2017, <https://warontherocks.com/2017/04/lone-actor-vs-remote-controlled-jihadi-terrorism-rethinking-the-threat-to-the-west/>

suitable to carry out attacks in the West. Among the most sought after recruits were those with strong preexisting connections to the West, which allowed them to travel to the targeted countries while encountering a lower degree of scrutiny than foreign operatives. Once scouted, the group would train such recruits meticulously, providing them with the skills necessary to successfully carry out an attack, such as assembling explosives, handling automatic weapons, communicating securely and avoiding surveillance.

Although the dynamics and the degree of independence left to the attackers varied and are, in many cases, difficult to assess, al Qaeda planners would at a minimum provide a list of targets and modalities of attack to the recruits before dispatching them to the West. Even after departure, planners would maintain some form of communication with the dispatched team, coordinating logistical matters and providing suggestions in case of unforeseen problems. Upon completion of the mission, al Qaeda would immediately claim responsibility, often through a so-called “martyrdom video” featuring the attackers explaining the reasons for their actions. The attacks of July 7, 2005 in London are one archetypal example of this externally directed attack approach.<sup>2</sup>

By the second half of 2014, as it became clear that the Islamic State was involved in planning attacks in West, the debate on whether the group possessed al Qaeda's ability, sophistication and patience to plan externally directed attacks raged among experts. The first attacks that had some connections to the group, such as that of Mehdi Nemmouche, seemed to suggest it did not. They appeared to be the work of isolated individuals who possessed few of the skills and planning abilities of a sophisticated terror cell. Therefore, many assumed that the group had focused all of its energy on the Middle Eastern front and, when the West was concerned, it was satisfied with haphazard attacks carried out by sympathizers.

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<sup>2</sup> “Report of the Official Account of the Bombings in London on 7th July 2005”, 2006, [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/shared/bsp/hi/pdfs/11\\_05\\_06\\_narrative.pdf](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/shared/bsp/hi/pdfs/11_05_06_narrative.pdf)

Many of those assumptions were proved wrong on the night of November 13, 2015, when an Islamic State sleeper cell conducted three separate and near simultaneous attacks in Paris. Roughly four months later, on March 22, 2016, the remnants of the very same cell that carried out the Paris attacks conducted a series of coordinated suicide bombings in the Brussels airport and metro. Not all of the details of the Paris and Brussels attacks are known. Yet, with time, it has become clear that the attacks were conceived and planned abroad by a francophone unit within the Islamic State's foreign operations service, known as the Emni. The unit included the man who led the Paris commandos on the ground, Brussels-born Abdelhamid Abaaoud, who recruited many of his childhood friends to the Islamic State. But it also included other prominent French and Belgian militants like Abdelilah Himich (also known as Abou Souleyman Al-Faransi) and Oussama Attar.<sup>3</sup> The formation of this francophone unit within the Emni is likely the main reason that France and Belgium have suffered a disproportionate number of attacks, as the members of the unit have leveraged their own personal contacts (both online and offline) in those two countries.

While their details are, at this stage, largely unknown, it appears that the Islamic State had planned additional complex and remotely controlled terrorist attacks in Europe – while there are no publicly available indications that these operations have ever been planned in North America. Fortunately, these plots have all been thwarted, thanks largely to the improved levels of intelligence sharing among intelligence agencies. The major question currently puzzling the counterterrorism community is whether the Islamic State, having suffered significant territorial losses and having to spend most of its energies to prevent more, can still maintain the ability to centrally plan sophisticated attacks.

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<sup>3</sup> E. McLaughlin and M. Haddad, "How Top ISIS Operative Slipped through the Net", CNN, March 16, 2017, <http://www.cnn.com/2017/03/16/europe/oussama-atar-profile/index.html>

### The Emni

The Emni is the intelligence unit of the Islamic State.<sup>1</sup> The blueprints for the creation of the unit are based on documents composed by Samir Abd Muhammad al Khilafawi (aka Haji Bakr), a former colonel in the intelligence services of Saddam Hussein and a high-ranking ISIS leader. After Haji Bakr's death in 2014, his disciples used these documents to create the Emni unit, which was commanded by Abu Muhammad al-Adnani until his death in August 2016. The current leader of the unit is unclear.

The structure and operations of the Emni are influenced by the intelligence tactics used by the former Baathist government in Iraq, and the unit is staffed by several former Baathist intelligence officers together with individuals with a more "traditional" jihadist background. In ISIS territory, Emni seeks to develop the same culture of fear that Baathist secret police used to manage Iraq during Saddam's rule: they monitor contacts and communication inside and outside ISIS territory, encourage individuals to report the suspicious behavior of their neighbors, and conduct extensive counterintelligence operations against potential spies.

Besides internal intelligence, the Emni is additionally responsible for planning and managing external operations, including recruiting foreign fighters and attackers, gathering intelligence on rival terrorist groups, and devising attacks outside ISIS territory, including in Western countries. Various corroborated pieces of intelligence have now made clear that the Emni was responsible for training and recruiting the jihadists who carried out not only the November Paris 2015 attacks and the March 2016 Brussels attacks, but also several other operations in the West and around the world. Emni operations have also targeted defectors and Syrian refugees living in Turkey and Europe, including several assassinations.

The Emni is also heavily involved in the creation of pro-ISIS propaganda, especially media encouraging would-be jihadists to conduct attacks outside of ISIS territory. The group's former leader, Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, was frequently pictured in these propaganda messages, and at the time of his death was regarded as the "chief propagandist" of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria.

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<sup>1</sup> R. Callimachi, "How a Secretive Branch of ISIS Built a Global Network of Killers", *The New York Times*, August 3, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/04/world/middleeast/isis-german-recruit-interview.html>; A. Speckhard and A.S. Yayla, "The ISIS Emni: The Origins and Inner Workings of ISIS's Intelligence Apparatus", *Perspectives on Terrorism*, vol. 11, no. 1, 2017, <http://www.terrorismanalysts.com/pt/index.php/pot/article/view/573>

**Terrorist attacks carried out by individuals with no connection to the Islamic State but who were inspired by its message**

While in some cases, operational linkage to the Islamic State was uncovered by investigators months after the attack, many of the attacks over the last three years have been carried out by individuals whose only connection to the Islamic State was ideological. Attacks perpetrated by a single individual or by small groups of individuals who are consumers of extremist propaganda, have adopted jihadist ideology, and therefore see undertaking attacks as helpful to the cause and in response to the calls for attacks of the Islamic State are often improperly referred to as “lone wolf” attacks. In some cases perpetrators belonging to this category leave messages declaring their allegiance to the Islamic State.

Yet these individuals carry out the attacks without any form of support or even with the knowledge of any individual linked to the Islamic State. Some of them might have at some point interacted, whether online or in the physical space, with members of the group. But once they carry out the attack, the group provides no operational support whatsoever, and the entirety of the planning and execution process is left to the perpetrator(s).

Some of the attacks carried out by individuals with no operational connections have been difficult to categorize as motivated solely by support for the Islamic State. In some cases, while perpetrators’ sympathies for the Islamic State were clear, their actions seemed to have been additionally motivated by 1) other ideologies, 2) personal reasons, and/or 3) psychological and psychiatric issues (note that these three factors, but often to a lesser extent, play a role also in the other two typologies). Many cases are ambiguous and it is impossible to determine which motivation prevails. The authors have excluded some attacks where the jihadist motivation appeared to be extremely feeble, but decided to include many others where non-Islamic State-related motivations seemed to accompany the attack.

Cases in which perpetrators appear to have been motivated by both jihadist ideology and other ideologies have occurred in both Europe and the United States. One example is the case of Zale Thompson (aka Zaim Farouq Abdul-Malik), who attacked four New York Police Department officers with a hatchet in a busy street in Queens on October 23, 2014, injuring two before being shot dead by the officers. Zale was not known to authorities for any terrorism-related matter, but the investigation that took place after the attack revealed that during the previous months he had frequently consumed jihadist propaganda.<sup>4</sup> At the same time, he was also known as a supporter of Black Nationalism and had frequently ranted about his hatred for white people and the government. While it impossible to determine the underlying ideology behind the attack with certainty, it is likely that a mix of jihadist ideology and black nationalism motivated Zale's actions.

In other cases jihadist ideology seemed to have been accompanied by personal motivations. A notable example of this combination of ideologies is the attack carried out by Yassin Salhi on June 26, 2015, in Saint-Quentin-Fallavier, in the Isère department of France.<sup>5</sup> The 35-year-old Salhi drove into the local factory where he worked as a subcontractor, and proceeded to strangle and posthumously decapitate his boss, Hervé Cornara. He then wrapped the decapitated head in two black Islamic "shahada" flags, hung it inside the factory and proceeded to take a macabre selfie. Salhi proceeded to drive his vehicle into a storage container, causing an explosion. He was apprehended by firemen in a second storage shed screaming "Allahu Akbar" while opening bottles of Acetone, a highly flammable substance.

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<sup>4</sup> L. Kearney, "NYC Police Say Hatchet Attack by Islam Convert Was Terrorism", Reuters, October 24, 2014; C. Pleasance, "Hatchet-Wielding Muslim Radical Who Attacked Rookie New York Cops 'Spent Months Visiting Jihadist Websites and Stalked Officers for Hours'", *Daily Mail Online*, November 4, 2014.

<sup>5</sup> E. Tôn, "Qui Était Yassin Salhi, L'homme Qui Avait Décapité Son Patron?", *L'Express*, December 23, 2015, [http://www.lexpress.fr/actualite/qui-etait-yassin-salhi-le-terroriste-qui-s-est-suicide-en-prison\\_1748345.html](http://www.lexpress.fr/actualite/qui-etait-yassin-salhi-le-terroriste-qui-s-est-suicide-en-prison_1748345.html)

The motives for the attack appear to be a mix of vengeance and extremism. Two days before the attack, Salhi had gotten into a violent altercation with his employer after he dropped a pallet of computer equipment.<sup>6</sup> At the same time, Salhi was known to French intelligence services, having been marked as “fiche S” (i.e. radicalized and a threat to national security) from 2006 to 2008 due to his “links with the Salafi movement”.<sup>7</sup> Additionally, Salhi sent the selfie via a Canadian number on WhatsApp to a French jihadist who had lived in the same town as Salhi until his departure to the Levant.<sup>8</sup>

In other cases, mental issues appear to have played a role in the actions of perpetrators of attacks. There is no doubt that jihadist ideology was crucial in shaping the worldview and actions of individuals like Mohamed Lahouaiej Bouhlel, the Tunisian man who, plowed a rental truck through a crowd of people gathered for a Bastille Day celebration in Nice on July 14, 2016. However, it is noteworthy that he had been previously treated for psychiatric disorders and was known to be mentally unstable.<sup>9</sup> It would be incorrect to reduce his actions and those of other

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<sup>6</sup> S. Soren, “Attaque dans l’Isère : les motivations troubles de Yassin Salhi”, *Le Monde*, June 28, 2015, [http://www.lemonde.fr/societe/article/2015/06/28/attaque-dans-l-isere-les-motivations-troubles-de-yassin-salhi\\_4663475\\_3224.html](http://www.lemonde.fr/societe/article/2015/06/28/attaque-dans-l-isere-les-motivations-troubles-de-yassin-salhi_4663475_3224.html)

<sup>7</sup> E. Tôn (2015).

<sup>8</sup> “Attentat En Isère: Yassin Salhi a Envoyé Son Selfie Macabre En Syrie”, *L’Express*, June 28, 2015, [http://www.lexpress.fr/actualite/societe/fait-divers/attentat-en-isere-yassin-salhi-a-envoye-un-selfie-avec-la-tete-de-sa-victime-au-canada\\_1694072.html](http://www.lexpress.fr/actualite/societe/fait-divers/attentat-en-isere-yassin-salhi-a-envoye-un-selfie-avec-la-tete-de-sa-victime-au-canada_1694072.html); N. Bastuck, “Attentat En Isère : Le Destinataire Du Selfie Macabre Est Un Autre Franc-Comtois”, *SudOuest*, June 26, 2015, <http://www.sudouest.fr/2015/06/29/attentat-en-isere-le-destinataire-du-selfie-macabre-est-un-autre-franc-comtois-1972820-6093.php>

<sup>9</sup> S. Sayare, “The Baffling Master Plan of the French Truck Terrorist”, *GQ*, January 24, 2017, <http://www.gq.com/story/nice-france-bastille-day-attack-untold-story>; E.M. Saltman, “Orlando and Nice Attacks: Domestic Violence Links to Radicalization”. BBC News, July 22, 2016, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-36861840>

individuals involved in recent terrorist attacks who suffered from diagnosed or undiagnosed psychological and psychiatric ills to mental health issues while discounting the ideological element. By the same token, it would be equally misleading to ignore that mental instabilities do play a role in the thought process of some of the individuals who have carried out attacks in the West over the last three years.<sup>10</sup>

One final necessary clarification regarding many of the attacks belonging to this category is that they do not seem to be motivated solely by the Islamic State, but by jihadist ideology more generally. The global jihadist movement is currently highly fragmented, with the various groups often switching between co-operation and outright confrontation. In particular, the rivalry between the Islamic State and al Qaeda, borne out of the Syrian conflict but then extended globally, has created fissures that have often transcended into violence between jihadist groups. Yet, when it comes to many aspiring jihadists in the West, particularly those who have not developed operational ties to any established group, these fissures matter little. Most simply want to fight jihad and regard the squabbles between jihadist leaders as distant, confusing, annoying, and counterproductive. It is therefore not surprising that many attacks were carried out by individuals who declared their devotion to a variety of jihadist figures and groups.

A quintessential (and hardly isolated) example of attackers' seemingly contradictory allegiances is the case of Omar Mateen, the failed police officer responsible for the June 12, 2016 mass shooting at the Pulse nightclub in Orlando, Florida that killed 49 people and wounded 53 others.<sup>11</sup> During the attack, Mateen

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<sup>10</sup> For more information on mental health in connection to the foreign fighter phenomenon, see C Paulussen, J Nijman and K Lismont, "Mental Health and the Foreign Fighter Phenomenon", ICCT Report, The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism - The Hague, March 2017, <https://icct.nl/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/ICCT-Paulussen-Nijman-Lismont-Mental-Health-and-the-Foreign-Fighter-Phenomenon-March-2017.pdf>

<sup>11</sup> S. Visser, "Orlando Killer Repeatedly Referenced ISIS", CNN, September 24, 2016, <http://www.cnn.com/2016/09/23/us/orlando-shooter-hostage-negotiator/>

pledged allegiance to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and the Islamic State in an emergency call, and later IS media outlets claimed responsibility for the attack.<sup>12</sup> However, Mateen's loyalties were indicative of the “choosing and fusing” of ideologies often demonstrated by attackers without tangible connections to any group.<sup>13</sup> Mateen, despite his final pledge of allegiance, previously expressed support for IS and Jabhat al Nusra on social media, and also claimed to be a member of Hizbullah.<sup>14</sup> While changes in allegiance between IS and al Nusra, two groups with generally similar ideologies but different strategies and leadership disputes are more common amongst Western jihadists, the Hizbullah claims put Mateen on two different sides of the Sunni-Shi'a divide.<sup>15</sup>

Like many other Western jihadists, Mateen was attracted more to jihadist ideology than any specific group. Understanding and eventually exploiting the complex dynamics within the global jihadist movement is crucially important from a counterterrorism perspective. However, those leadership fissures should not be overemphasized when it comes to the grassroots level, particularly in the West. Most Western jihadists simply want to fight jihad and care little about whether they do so on behalf of al Qaeda, the Islamic State, al Shabaab, or any other group within the global jihadist community. In many cases, they join one of these groups not because they have a clear preference for one over the others, but rather because of chance encounters and logistical circumstances.

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call/index.html.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> P. Pascarelli, “Ideology À La Carte: Why Lone Actor Terrorists Choose and Fuse Ideologies”, *Lanfare*, October 2, 2016, <https://www.lawfareblog.com/ideology-%C3%A0-la-carte-why-lone-actor-terrorists-choose-and-fuse-ideologies>

<sup>14</sup> A. Taylor, “Omar Mateen May Not Have Understood the Difference between ISIS, Al-Qaeda and Hezbollah”, *Washington Post*, June 13, 2016, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2016/06/13/omar-mateen-may-not-have-understood-the-difference-between-isis-al-qaeda-and-hezbollah/>

<sup>15</sup> P. Pascarelli (2016).

As former GW Program on Extremism staffer Sarah Gilkes puts it in an analysis of American jihadists that can be applied also to many of their European counterparts:

... Group affiliation is perhaps less important than identification, albeit to varying degrees, with the central tenets of Salafi-jihadist ideology. Of course, group membership is significant when probing operational connections or assessing the resonance of a group's propaganda. But in many cases, it is apparent that Americans who radicalize are attracted to Salafi-jihadist ideology at large, and often care little about the philosophical or tactical differences among jihadist organizations. Which organization they identify with is often a function of circumstance, opportunity, and serendipity ...<sup>16</sup>



<sup>16</sup> S. Gilkes, *Not Just the Caliphate: Non-Islamic State-Related Jihadist Terrorism in America*, Program on Extremism, The George Washington University, Washington D.C., <https://abcnews.go.com/images/US/gwu-program-extremism-not-just-caliphate-20161206.pdf>

**Terrorist attacks carried out by individuals who had some form of connection to the Islamic State but acted independently**

Many of the attacks seen throughout the West over the last three years fall within a hybrid category, not externally directed but also not completely independent. Dynamics are at this stage difficult to assess, given the lack of detailed information on many cases.<sup>17</sup> However, quite a few attacks appear to be cases of crowd-sourcing: operations are carried out by individuals who possess some degree of operational connectivity to the Islamic State, but act in almost complete autonomy when carrying out the attack. This dynamic allows the Islamic State to obtain a high return in terms of publicity despite a low investment of resources. By the same token, perpetrators who associate themselves to the Islamic State amplify the mediatic impact of their actions and boost their chances of being glorified within the global jihadist community.

This hybrid dynamic has been boosted by the growth of the phenomenon of “virtual planners”. The Islamic State’s virtual planners are individuals who, using social media and encrypted online messaging platforms, connect with would-be attackers in countries outside of Islamic State-held territory and guide them through the execution of terrorist attacks.<sup>18</sup> By using virtual planners, the Islamic State drastically expands its reach and its ability to manage and plan attacks overseas.<sup>19</sup>

The Islamic State’s virtual planners are usually located in the territory the group holds, are skilled in the use of cyber resources, and have ties to the leadership of the organization, in

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<sup>17</sup> S. Mullins (2017).

<sup>18</sup> A. Meleagrou-Hitchens and S. Hughes, “The Threat to the United States from the Islamic State’s Virtual Entrepreneurs”, *CTC Sentinel*, vol. 10, no. 3, 2017, <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/the-threat-to-the-united-states-from-the-islamic-states-virtual-entrepreneurs>

<sup>19</sup> D. Gartenstein-Ross and M. Blackman, “ISIL’s Virtual Planners: A Critical Terrorist Innovation”, *War on the Rocks*, January 4, 2017, <https://warontherocks.com/2017/01/isils-virtual-planners-a-critical-terrorist-innovation/>

particular its intelligence wing, the Emni. They are divided by nationality and language skills, and are tasked with identifying and grooming potential attackers who speak the same language online. The identification process for attackers includes virtual planners finding vocal supporters of the Islamic State on social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, initiating contact and conversation with them via encrypted messaging platforms like Telegram, SureSpot, Kik, and Whatsapp, and instilling them with technical and/or operational knowledge necessary to begin planning an attack.<sup>20</sup>

One of the most prolific Islamic State virtual planners was Rachid Kassim, a former rapper from the French city of Roanne whose Telegram channel “Sabre de Lumière” helped guide multiple recruits into committing attacks in France.<sup>21</sup> Kassim traveled to Syria in 2015 with his family to join the Islamic State, and began directly encouraging some of the group’s supporters who remained in Europe to target religious officials, media personalities, musicians, and law enforcement via “targeted attacks” graphics posted weekly on his Telegram page. In 2015, Kassim also appeared in an official Islamic State French-language propaganda video, threatening France with continued attacks.<sup>22</sup>

While it is unclear whether Kassim directed or inspired attacks on orders from the Islamic State’s leadership or on his own

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<sup>20</sup> A. Meleagrou-Hitchens and S. Hughes (2017).

<sup>21</sup> T. Raisse, “Terrorisme : Rachid Kassim, L’arme de La Manipulation”, *Le Parisien*, November 1, 2016, <http://www.leparisien.fr/faits-divers/rachid-kassim-l-arme-de-la-manipulation-01-11-2016-6274656.php>; P. Alonso and W. Le Devin, “Les Flux Furieux de Rachid Kassim”, *Libération*, September 16, 2016, [http://www.libération.fr/france/2016/09/16/les-flux-furieux-de-rachid-kassim\\_1499709](http://www.libération.fr/france/2016/09/16/les-flux-furieux-de-rachid-kassim_1499709); M. Peyrard, “Rachid Kassim : Enquête Sur Le Donneur D’ordre de Daech”, *ParisMatch.com*, September 23, 2016, <http://www.parismatch.com/Actu/Societe/Rachid-Kassim-Le-donneur-d-ordre-de-Daech-1073623>; S. Sellami, “Terrorisme : Le Recruteur Rachid Kassim a-T-il Été Punie Par Daech ?”, *Le Parisien*, November 29, 2016, <http://www.leparisien.fr/faits-divers/rachid-kassim-puni-par-daech-29-11-2016-6388731.php>

<sup>22</sup> P. Alonso and W. Le Devin (2016).

volition, he was involved in at least a dozen successful and thwarted plots in France. Some of the attackers guided by Kassim were Larossi Abdalla, who stabbed a policeman and his wife in the town of Magnanville in June 2016, Ines Madani, who orchestrated a plot to bomb the Notre Dame cathedral in Paris, and Adel Kermiche and Abdel Malik Petitjean, who killed an 85-year old priest in a church.<sup>23</sup> The last communication from the Sabre de Lumière channel was in October 2016, and by that time it was heavily monitored by law enforcement and thus avoided by many Islamic State supporters in Europe. Kassim himself was the reported target of a US airstrike in Mosul in February 2017; the strike was claimed to be successful and it is likely that Kassim was killed.<sup>24</sup>

Another example of use of virtual planners is Muhammed Abdullahi Hasan, a US resident who traveled to Somalia in 2008 at the age of 17 to join al-Shabaab.<sup>25</sup> Hasan, who maintained Twitter, Facebook, and ask.fm accounts under the name “Mujahid Miski”, was initially an active online recruiter for al-Shabaab and other terrorist groups, but later declared his support for the Islamic State. The “Mujahid Miski” accounts amassed followings amongst online supporters of jihadist organizations, and Hasan used the accounts to praise terrorist attacks committed in the West and provide tips for other Westerners looking to travel abroad to join terrorist organizations.

A few months after the attack on the newspaper *Charlie Hebdo* in January 2015, Hasan posted a link on Twitter to the planned “Draw the Prophet Muhammad” contest in Garland Texas, with the status: “The brothers from the Charlie hebdo [sic] attack did their part. It’s time for brothers in the #US to do their

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<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> T. Gibbons-Neff, “Rachid Kassim, ISIS Recruiter and Failed Rapper, Targeted in U.S. Airstrike”, *Washington Post*, February 10, 2017, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/checkpoint/wp/2017/02/10/rachid-kassim-isis-recruiter-and-failed-rapper-targeted-in-u-s-airstrike/>

<sup>25</sup> A. Meleagrou-Hitchens and S. Hughes (2017).

part".<sup>26</sup> Soon after the status was posted, an account managed by Elton Simpson responded, asking "Mujahid Miski" to send him a private message. Ten days after the tweet by Hasan, Elton Simpson and his friend Nadir Soofi opened fire on the Curtis Culwell Center in Garland, Texas, where the "Draw the Prophet Muhammad" event was being held.

The tweet before the attack was not the first time that Hasan and Simpson had been in contact with one another. Prior to his declaration of support for ISIS, Simpson also unsuccessfully attempted to travel to Somalia to join al-Shabaab in 2009. Hasan and Simpson were in contact on social media as early as December 2014, and stayed in touch until Simpson was killed in the Garland attacks. On several occasions, Hasan encouraged Simpson to conduct an attack in the United States. Although Hasan eventually surrendered to Somali government forces in late 2015, his imprint on jihadist networks in the United States was substantial: besides the Garland attackers, the "Mujahid Miski" accounts have come up in the court proceedings of several Americans arrested on charges of material support for ISIS and/or attempting to travel to join the group in Iraq and Syria.

The effectiveness of and preference by terrorist groups for this last operational connection is clear in our dataset: Two-thirds of the attacks carried out in the West over the past three years were somehow connected to a jihadist organization (most often, the Islamic State, but also Al Qaeda). An additional dynamic that might explain, and certainly facilitate the effectiveness of such loose operational connection is explored in the next Chapter.

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<sup>26</sup> R. Callimachi, "Clues on Twitter Show Ties Between Texas Gunman and ISIS Network", *The New York Times*, May 11, 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/05/12/us/twitter-clues-show-ties-between-isis-and-garland-texas-gunner.html>

## 4. The Role of Radicalization Hubs

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The recent surge in the number of attacks and cases of radicalization has led to an increased effort on the part of academics and counterterrorism professionals to understand the drivers that push a statistically insignificant, yet still disturbing number of Western Muslims to embrace jihadist ideology and, in some cases, kill and be killed for it. Despite the difficulty in obtaining reliable primary evidence to firmly support them, many theories have been formulated. Some focus on structural factors such as political tensions and cultural cleavages, discrimination, and relative economic deprivation. Others emphasize personal factors, such as the shock of a life-changing event or the search for identity among second generations.

In reality, most experts tend to agree that radicalization is a highly complex and individualized process, often shaped by a poorly understood interaction of structural and personal factors. Each case is different, and there is no grand theory of radicalization that can explain all processes. The enormous heterogeneity of profiles among Western jihadists clearly demonstrates that there is no single demographic and socio-economic background, no single psychological profile and no single trajectory that characterizes individuals who radicalize.

Unidimensional theories that seek to make sense of such complex and diverse processes with simplistic, catch-all explanations reveal either poor analytical skills or political biases. Rather, during the last few years experts have increasingly accepted that the soundest approach in trying to understand radicalization is a multidisciplinary one. Sociology, criminology, psychology, theology, social sciences, and anthropology are just some of the disciplines from which counterterrorism experts borrow in order

to gain a better grasp of radicalization dynamics.

Yet, it is not uncommon for many voices within the media, the policymaking community and the general public to make sweeping statements about what causes radicalization, often attributing the phenomenon to one causal factor. Arguably the most common factors utilized in these mono-causal approaches is integration – or, more specifically, the lack thereof – and socio-economic deprivation. While variations of this argument abound, at its core the theory argues that radicalization is simply the byproduct of the marginalization that plagues large cross-sections of Muslim communities, particularly in Europe. The theory argues that a lack of access to opportunities education, and jobs, alongside a general level of disenfranchisement, that drive young Muslims to lash out at the societies in which they were born and embrace an ideology that enables them to avenge their frustrations and offers new meaning to their lives.

This theory applies the broader axiom that extremism and terrorism are byproducts of poverty and exclusion to the specific case of Western Muslims. The issue has been debated for decades and has polarized both the academic and policymaking communities. While it is not this report's aim to enter this debate, it can be safely said that a large body of evidence has refuted the existence of a clear and linear link between poverty and terrorism.<sup>1</sup> Rather, many studies analyzing radicalization dynamics throughout the world have shown that contrary to commonly made assumptions, higher degrees of sympathy for extremist ideas and involvement in terrorist groups are found in individuals with higher degrees of education or economic success.

For example, in a 2007 study entitled *Evidence about the Link Between Education, Poverty and Terrorism among Palestinians*, Claude Berrebi analyzed the socio-economic and educational statuses of Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad suicide bombers

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<sup>1</sup> A.B. Krueger and J. Maleckova, "Education, Poverty and Terrorism: Is There a Causal Connection?", *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, vol. 17, no. 4, 2013, pp. 119-43.

and compared them to those of the general Palestinian population.<sup>2</sup> Berrebi found that while less than 15% of the general Palestinian population possessed more than a high school diploma, nearly 60% of suicide bombers did. Other studies have found similar statistics throughout the world. Most recently, a 2016 study by the World Bank that examined the profiles of 331 recruits from the Islamic State found that 69% had at least a high school diploma, and that a quarter had finished college. Moreover, the report found that “those offering to become suicide bombers ranked on average in the more educated group”.<sup>3</sup> Studies by Alan Krueger, Marc Sageman, and many others have highlighted similar dynamics.<sup>4</sup>

The evidence is less conclusive when it comes to European jihadists. Some studies indicate that the absence of the poverty-radicalization links applies also to this category.<sup>5</sup> A 2015 study of Dutch foreign fighters conducted by Rotterdam’s Erasmus University, for example, found a direct correlation between higher degrees of economic integration and radicalization.<sup>6</sup> A 2014 study by Queen Mary University surveyed over 600 men

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<sup>2</sup> C. Berrebi, “Evidence about the Link Between Education, Poverty and Terrorism among Palestinians”, *Peace Economics, Peace Science and Public Policy*, vol. 13, no. 1, 2007, pp. 1-36.

<sup>3</sup> “Isil Recruits Better Educated than Their Average Countryman, World Bank Study Finds”, *The Telegraph*, February 6, 2016, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2016/10/06/isil-recruits-better-educated-than-their-average-countryman-world/>

<sup>4</sup> A.B. Krueger, *What Makes a Terrorist: Economics and the Roots of Terrorism*, Princeton University Press, Princeton NJ, 2008; M. Sageman, *Understanding Terror Networks*, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, 2004.

<sup>5</sup> For an extensive review of the literature on the subject, see S Rahimi and R. Graumans, “Reconsidering the Relationship Between Integration and Radicalization”, *Journal for Deradicalization*, no. 5, December 2015, pp. 28-62, <http://journals.sfu.ca/jd/index.php/jd/article/view/34/32>

<sup>6</sup> M. Van San, “Hoe Beter Geïntegreerd, Hoe Meer Kans Op Radicalisering”, *De Standaard*, February 2, 2015, [http://www.standaard.be/cnt/dmf20150201\\_01504894](http://www.standaard.be/cnt/dmf20150201_01504894)

and women of Muslim heritage in London and Bradford and came to the same conclusion, finding much higher degrees of support for extremist views among the highly educated and better integrated.<sup>7</sup>

On the other hand, many studies clearly show that most jihadists are socio-economic underperformers. A recent study of 137 radicalized individuals conducted by Norwegian security services, for example, showed that 68% of them had a criminal record, 64% were unemployed or had only sporadic jobs and that none of them had completed higher education.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, educational data on German foreign fighters indicate that only 1,6% of them completed university studies.<sup>9</sup>

Radicalization dynamics recently witnessed throughout Europe further complicate this picture. Particularly puzzling are, *prima facie*, the uneven levels of radicalization witnessed throughout Europe. While it is virtually impossible to empirically determine which country suffers from higher or lower levels of radicalization, the number of Syria-bound foreign fighters each country has produced represents a relatively reliable indicator. An analysis of the different degrees of mobilization among Western European countries reveals some interesting dynamics. In fact, the countries that have experienced some of the highest per capita numbers of foreign fighters are central and northern European countries such as Sweden (300 out of a population of 9.5 million), Austria (350 out of a population of 8.5 million) and Denmark (125 out of a population of 5.6 million).

Over the last few decades, these countries have invested enormous resources in extending the benefits of their welfare states to migrants and refugees. While these countries do experience

<sup>7</sup> *Youth, Wealth and Education Found to Be Risk Factors for Violent Radicalisation*, Queen Mary University of London, March 19, 2014, <http://www.qmul.ac.uk/media/news/items/smd/125815.html>

<sup>8</sup> T. Hegghammer, “Revisiting the poverty-terrorism link in European jihadism”, lecture before the Society for Terrorism Research annual conference, Leiden, November 8, 2016.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

significant problems in integrating many of their immigrant communities, using all indicators commonly used to assess integration and socio-economic performance (unemployment, access to education, etc.) they fare much better than southern European countries. Despite the disparity, southern European countries have seen significantly lower levels of mobilization of foreign fighters compared to their northern counterparts. Large countries like Spain and Italy have contributed fewer foreign fighters (208 and 122 respectively) than many northern and central European countries, not just in absolute terms, but also when compared to the size of the local Muslim population.

Moreover, if it is true that all European countries (albeit to different degrees) experience serious problems in the integration of sections of their Muslim populations, it is often held that those problems do not exist in Canada and the United States, which are often seen as successful cases of integration. Generally speaking, most American and Canadian Muslims enjoy economic and educational achievements that put them in the top tier of their societies. Exceptions do exist: over the last few years the lack of integration and marginalization of sections of the Somali community in America have received substantial attention. However, in what is an almost inconceivable dynamic in any European countries, according to a Pew Research Center study, the average American Muslim household's income is equal to, if not higher, than the average American's.<sup>10</sup> Despite higher levels of integration, neither Canada nor the United States have been immune to radicalization and while not seeing the levels of radicalization of central and northern European countries have had numbers similar to others.

These are just some of the points that undermine the linearity of the relationship between lack of integration/socio-economic marginalization and radicalization. That is not to say that

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<sup>10</sup> See "Muslim Americans: Middle Class and Mostly Mainstream", Pew Research Center, Washington D.C., 2007, pp. 24-25, <http://www.pewresearch.org/files/old-assets/pdf/muslim-americans.pdf>

understanding the social environment in which radicalization happens is not important or that situations of real or perceived marginalization cannot contribute to the radicalization process. Clearly any analysis that ignores social conditions is incomplete. But one that focuses only on them and ignores other factors is equally flawed.

If it were just a matter of social conditions, why is it that only a statistically insignificant minority of the tens of millions of European Muslims, most of which are exposed to the same levels of marginalization, radicalize? It seems apparent that other factors, operating conjunctly with social conditions, are crucial in determining why and how radicalization happens. As Thomas Hegghammer puts it, while there is no doubt that most European jihadists are economic underperformers, the question is “to what extent there is a causal link” between their marginalization and their radicalization and, if such link exists, “what the precise mechanisms are and how economic deprivation interacts with other factors”.<sup>11</sup>

### **Radicalization by contact: the hubs factor**

Radicalization patterns throughout Europe and North America have been unevenly distributed. Not only have some countries seen larger mobilizations than others in both absolute and proportional terms, but within individual countries mobilization levels have been uneven. Some cities or areas seem to be affected more than others. Indeed, reverting to the discussion on the relationship between lack of integration and radicalization, it is seemingly puzzling that two towns in a single Western country with virtually identical socio-economic and demographic characteristics could suffer from drastically different levels of radicalization and mobilization. If both towns experience highly similar integration problems, why is it that dozens of residents of one

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<sup>11</sup> T. Hegghammer (2016).

town travel to Syria or join the Islamic State while there are very few in the other?

There are no easy, one-size-fits-all answers for this question. Each dynamic should be analyzed individually. In each case, various overlapping reasons are at play. Yet one factor does seem to have an important role in shaping these dynamics: the existence of “radicalization hubs”. The vast majority of individuals who radicalize do so in small groups of like-minded individuals, generally under the influence of radicalizing agents. Exceptions exist: some individuals radicalize in complete solitude, often solely in front of a computer screen and without any contact with like-minded individuals in the physical space. However, many studies have abundantly proved that radicalization is, generally speaking, “about who you know”.<sup>12</sup> It is a group phenomenon, which takes place among small clusters of individuals who influence and support each other.<sup>13</sup> The formation of “clusters” often occurs around organized structures (militant Salafist groups, radical mosques), charismatic personalities or, in some cases, tight-knit groups of friends without formal leadership that promote the progressive radicalization of the individuals involved via maintaining a horizontal internal structure.

The presence of radicalization agents is often what turns a specific area into a radicalization hub. In many cases the formation of these clusters of jihad sympathizers will take place in areas that

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<sup>12</sup> A. Dalgaard-Nielsen, “Violent Radicalization in Europe: What We Know and What We Do Not Know”, *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, vol. 33, no. 9, 2010, pp. 797-814.

<sup>13</sup> Tellingly, in their extensive study of Spanish jihadists, Carola García-Calvo and Fernando Reinares have demonstrated that only 4.6% of 130 individuals arrested in the country for Islamic State-related activities from June 2013 to August 2016 were “lone wolves”, that is individuals who had become involved in jihadist activities of different kind isolated from other jihadists, C. García-Calvo and F. Reinares. 2016. “Patterns of Involvement among Individuals Arrested for Islamic State-Related Terrorist Activities in Spain, 2013-2016”, *Perspectives on Terrorism*, vol. 10, no. 6, 2016, <http://www.terrorismanalysts.com/pt/index.php/pot/article/view/562>

suffer from various social ills. But in other cases, as many examples demonstrate, it does not. And even when they do take place in marginalized areas, it is debatable whether there is a direct, causal connection between the disenfranchisement suffered by many residents of the area and the radicalization of a few individuals who form the cluster. Each situation should be examined individually, and undeniably in some cases environments characterized by social exclusion, crime, low levels of education and unemployment are particularly conducive to radicalization. But an analysis of radicalization dynamics shows that clusters form wherever effective radicalizing agents operate, in underprivileged neighborhoods and prison blocks, but also on university campuses or small towns without significant socio-economic challenges.

Examples of these dynamics abound throughout Europe and North America. Germany provides a few interesting examples. In their extensive study of German foreign fighters, Sean Reynolds and Mohammed Hafez have found “only modest support for the integration deficit hypothesis”. “Instead”, they argue, “the preponderance of evidence suggests that interpersonal ties largely drive the German foreign fighter phenomenon. Recruitment featured clustered mobilization and bloc recruitment within interconnected radical milieus, leading us to conclude that peer-to-peer networks are the most important mobilization factor for German foreign fighters”.<sup>14</sup>

Radicalization dynamics in the town of Hildesheim, in the German state of Niedersachsen, provide a telling example of these dynamics. Hildesheim is an unremarkable town of around 100,000 residents.<sup>15</sup> Roughly mirroring percentages seen throughout the country, 12% of its residents are foreigners and in recent years it has received a relatively large influx of refugees. Hildesheim’s foreign-born population is socially disadvantaged,

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<sup>14</sup> S.C. Reynolds and M.M. Hafez, “Social Network Analysis of German Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq”, *Terrorism and Political Violence*, February 2017, pp. 1-26.

<sup>15</sup> 103,804 inhabitants were living in Hildesheim as of 1 January 2017. Information provided to the authors by the Municipality of Hildesheim.

as 25% of them are unemployed (compared to a general unemployment rate of 10%).<sup>16</sup> Similarly, 14% of all foreign-born youth in the district of Hildesheim did not finish school (compared to 6% of local Germans).<sup>17</sup> Yet these data are in line with national averages, with some other German cities and towns faring significantly worse.

Despite possessing no abnormally low socio-economic conditions, in recent years Hildesheim has seen unusually high levels of radicalization. Tellingly, 17 individuals from the town or with strong connections to it have traveled to Syria or Iraq to join the Islamic State and others who have not done so have engaged in militant activities in Germany.<sup>18</sup> The most infamous example of the latter category is Anis Amri, the Tunisian militant who carried out the December 2016 Berlin Christmas market attack. He had become fully immersed in the town's militant scene while living in Hildesheim in 2015.<sup>19</sup>

At the center of this mobilization, and arguably the key to understanding the Hildesheim conundrum, is the Deutsch-Islamischer Kulturverein (DIK), a small group of Salafist leaning individuals who split from the local Muslim community in 2012 and acquired a mosque in Hildesheim's Nordstadt district.<sup>20</sup> Taking advantage of Hildesheim's convenient location in central Germany, only a few hours away from Berlin, Hamburg, Frankfurt and the Ruhrgebiet conurbation, where many German Muslims live, DIK turned the town into a hub for German

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<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> "Hildesheim – Eine Hochburg Der Salafisten", *Hildesheimer Allgemeine Zeitung*, March 2017, <http://magazin.hildesheimer-allgemeine.de/salafisten>

<sup>19</sup> M. Amjahid, "Anis Amri: 'Ein Anschlag Ist Zu Erwarten'", *Die Zeit*, April 6, 2017, <http://www.zeit.de/2017/15/anis-amri-anschlag-berlin-terror-staatsversagen>

<sup>20</sup> Niedersächsisches Ministerium für Inneres und Sport, "Verfassungsschutzbericht 2015", 2016, [http://www.verfassungsschutz.niedersachsen.de/download/115991/Verfassungsschutzbericht\\_2015\\_Islamismus.pdf](http://www.verfassungsschutz.niedersachsen.de/download/115991/Verfassungsschutzbericht_2015_Islamismus.pdf); *Hildesheimer Allgemeine Zeitung* (2017).

militant Salafism.<sup>21</sup> The country's most prominent Salafist leaders frequently gave lectures or seminars at the mosque, which began attracting a steady stream of followers from the local Muslim community and from neighboring areas. Personalities that lectured at the mosque included Muhammed Ciftci, Ahmad Armih, Abdelilal Belatouani, Sven Lau and Efstathios Tsounis – all key players of the Germany's Salafist scene who have been accused, at best, of radicalizing German Muslims and, at worst, of directly recruiting for the Islamic State and other likeminded groups.<sup>22</sup>



The undisputed leader of the Hildesheim scene was an Iraqi imam, Ahmad Abdulaziz Abdullah A. Known in the Salafist scene as Abu Walaa, he became a magnet for young Salafists in the region and beyond, also thanks to his savvy use of social media (which included his own app).<sup>23</sup> As information disclosed

<sup>21</sup> Niedersächsisches Ministerium für Inneres und Sport (2015).

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> G. Von Heil, V. Kabisch and G. Mascolo “Nach Islamisten-Festnahme: ‘Walaa War Kopf Des Netzwerks’”, *Tagesschau*, November 8, 2016, <https://www.tagesschau.de>

after his November 2016 arrest showed, Abu Walaa oversaw a sophisticated propaganda network that expanded from its center in Hildesheim to North Rhine-Westphalia and other parts of Germany and that, according to German authorities, recruited for the Islamic State.<sup>24</sup> Apparently, Abu Walaa and the network he had built around himself made Hildesheim a radicalization hub.

The role that militant Salafist organizations like DIK play in the formation of jihadist hubs cannot be overstated. Dynamics are somewhat different in North America, particularly in the United States, where such organizations barely exist or operate on a much smaller scale (arguably Revolution Muslim, active in the mid-2000s, was a smaller American version of it). But in many European countries, these dynamics are quite common and, in the wake of the Syria-related jihadist mobilization, have become particularly evident with the case of the trans-European Sharia4 network.

The Sharia4 network traces its origins in the late-2000s in the United Kingdom, when Anjem Choudary and other activists linked to radical Islamist group al Muhajiroun used the name Islam4UK to continue their propaganda activities after several of their previous organizations had been banned by British authorities.<sup>25</sup> Choudary and his ilk adopted a unique form of activism characterized by highly provocative rhetoric accompanied by publicity-seeking stunts. From declaring neighborhoods “sharia-controlled zones” to disturbing funerals of soldiers, the group attracted massive media attention despite its small numbers. The group used incendiary rhetoric denouncing democracy and calling for the establishment of an Islamic State, but was always careful in straddling the line between extremist and illegal activities.

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[tagesschau.de/inland/is-261.html](http://tagesschau.de/inland/is-261.html)

<sup>24</sup> G. Von Heil, “The Berlin Attack and the Abu Walaa Network”, *CTC Sentinel*, vol. 10, no. 2, 2017, pp. 1-11.

<sup>25</sup> For a history of the Sharia4 movement and its spread throughout Europe see L. Vidino, “Sharia4: From Confrontational Activism to Militancy”, *Perspectives on Terrorism*, vol. 9, no. 2, 2015, <http://www.terrorismanalysts.com/pt/index.php/pot/article/view/415>

This kind of activism also attracted small groups of sympathizers in various continental European countries, who started their own branches of the movement. One of the first and, eventually, largest of the Sharia4 franchises was Belgium's. In early 2010, a small group of mostly Antwerp-based activists led by the charismatic spokesman Fouad Belkacem started Sharia4Belgium. The group adopted the same tactics as their British counterparts: confrontational protests aimed at attracting media attention, publicity stunts, disruption of events and aggressive online presence. Its message was also identical, from a direct condemnation of democracy as un-Islamic to a stated goal of introducing sharia law in the country. Over time, official and unofficial spinoffs of the movement popped up in various European countries.

Sharia4's simplistic, black-and-white, good-vs-evil approach, combined with the shock effect of its actions and an aggressive online presence attracted individuals who were mostly born in the West: second or third generation European Muslims and converts. It also gave a feeling of a higher purpose to many poorly adjusted young men (and, in a growing number of cases, women) by making them feel that they were part of a vanguard fighting for justice and God against all enemies. It is a kind of activism that Danish scholar Ann-Sophie Hemmingsen has defined as "plebeian jihadism". "In addition to being burly, confrontational and local in its main focus, it is to some extent also an individualized version of jihadism", argues Hemmingsen. "Adherents follow a 'my opinion is as good as your knowledge'-line of reasoning, which is derived from an eschatological narrative that casts them as *the chosen few* who receive direct divine guidance. In their view, such individuals are just as authoritative as any scholar or expert. In other words, plebeian jihadism is both anti-elitist and anti-intellectual".<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> A.-S. Hemmingsen, "Plebeian Jihadism in Denmark: An Individualisation and Popularization Predating the Growth of the Islamic State", *Perspectives on Terrorism*, vol. 10, no. 6, 2016, <http://www.terrorismanalysts.com/pt/index.php/pt/article/view/561>

While assessments and policies varied from country to country, in the early 2010s most European intelligence and law enforcement agencies did not see the Sharia4 movements as major security threats. The polarizing impact of the rhetoric spread by the groups that belonged to it was not lost on most. Yet, partially due to the fact that it was legally difficult to monitor groups that, for the most part, engaged in provocative yet lawful activities, and partially because they adopted the “dog that bark does not bite” approach, most European authorities did not move aggressively against Sharia4 organizations. In substance, overall the groups were considered a nuisance but not a major security threat.

These assessments proved to be spectacularly wrong once the civil war in Syria began. Once the conflict began to have a significant jihadist footprint, the groups of the Sharia4 network began mobilizing, funneling their rosters of members and sympathizers into Syria. As Europol put it in its 2014 TE-SAT assessment:

... Some salafist individuals and groups in the EU, such as the Sharia4 movement, seem to have heeded the advice of prominent jihadist ideologues to stop their controversial public appearances in Europe, for example demanding the immediate implementation of Islamic law in Europe. Instead, they have been encouraged to participate in what these ideologues describe as a ‘jihad’ against un-Islamic rule in Muslim countries. Indeed, there are more and more indications that members of Sharia4Belgium, for example, have joined armed groups in Syria adhering to an al-Qaeda-inspired ideology ...<sup>27</sup>

This phenomenon has been particularly evident in Belgium. During the first half of 2012, Sharia4Belgium engaged in extremely provocative actions in Belgium. However, other than scuffles with the police during some protests, there were no indications that the group was involved in any violent activity. But in

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<sup>27</sup> “TE-SAT 2014: EU Terrorism Situation and Trend Report”, Europol, The Hague, Netherlands, 2014, p. 23, <https://www.europol.europa.eu/activities-services/main-reports/eu-terrorism-situation-and-trend-report>

August 2012, a handful of core Sharia4Belgium members left for Syria to join various jihadist outfits. Over the following months larger numbers of Belgian aspiring jihadists followed them in an apparent “snowball effect”: many of the new travelers were second-tier Sharia4Belgium members, sympathizers, or personal contacts of first-tier members already in Syria.<sup>28</sup>

The active involvement of Sharia4Belgium in mobilizing its networks is arguably one of the main reasons that explains the disproportionately large number of Belgians fighting in Syria. In fact, a map indicating the areas of origin of Belgian foreign fighters would show a very uneven distribution, with disproportionate and extremely high concentrations in the mostly Flemish speaking parts of the country (Antwerp, Brussels and Vilvoorde) where Sharia4Belgium and two separate but overlapping radicalization/recruitment networks were active.<sup>29</sup> Those areas are indeed plagued by various socio-economic issues, but so are other parts of the country that have not seen even remotely comparable levels of mobilization. It seems apparent that the mobilization favored by Sharia4Belgium, in conjunction with other similar networks, are the determining variable.

This dynamic was also observed in neighboring Holland. The AIVD, the Netherlands' domestic intelligence agency, argued that by the end of 2012 Sharia4Holland and two like-minded local outfits, Behind Bars and Street Dawah, had ceased their public activities. “This”, states the AIVD, “coincided with the first wave of jihadist departures from the Netherlands to Syria, the success of which was probably attributable to the close contacts between Behind Bars/Street Dawah and Sharia4Belgium. Individuals associated with the two movements were at the heart of that sudden exodus”. The agency continued its analysis:

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<sup>28</sup> P. Van Ostaeyen, “Belgian Radical Networks and the Road to the Brussels Attacks”, *CTC Sentinel*, vol. 9, no. 6, 2016, <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/belgian-radical-networks-and-the-road-to-the-brussels-attacks>

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

... Several members of radical Islamist organisations such as Sharia4Holland and Behind Bars are among those that left to Syria to join the jihad. This is indicative of how blurred the line between radicalism and jihadism has become. These movements have created an environment in which people with similar ideas meet and develop radical ideas into jihadist ideologies. This group dynamic has led to a rapid radicalization of many individuals as well as concrete attempts to join the jihad in Syria ...<sup>30</sup>

Another country where the activities of a militant Salafist organization have been one of the determining factors for the scale of the mobilization to Syria is Norway.<sup>31</sup> The Prophet's Ummah (PU) was a homegrown group that formed in 2009 after incidents between protesters and the police in front of the Norwegian parliament building. It carried out activities and adopted similar rhetoric to the Sharia4 organizations throughout Europe, although it developed links to it only at a later stage. Once the conflict in Syria began, it too began recruiting for jihadist organizations in Syria, first for Jabhat al Nusra and then for ISIS.

In the following years Norway saw 90 foreign fighters leave the country for Syria and Iraq despite its small population of roughly 5 million and a Muslim minority of less than 150,000. This ratio of foreign fighters to total Muslim population is one of the highest in the West, and is all the more surprising when considering that Norway has been declared “the world’s best country to live in” by the UN’s Human Development Index. Norway is a country characterized by virtually non-existent unemployment, low levels of socio-economic inequality, and relatively few integration tensions. What, then, explains Norway’s inordinate production of foreign fighters? It is difficult to point to one single

<sup>30</sup> “The Transformation of Jihad in the Netherlands: Swarm Dynamics and New Strength”, General Intelligence and Security Service (AIVD), 2014, p. 13, <https://english.aivd.nl/publications/publications/2014/10/01/the-transformation-of-jihadism-in-the-netherlands>

<sup>31</sup> L. Brynjar and P. Nesser, “Jihadism in Norway: A Typology of Militant Networks in a Peripheral European Country”, *Perspectives on Terrorism*, vol. 10, no. 6, 2016, <http://www.terrorismanalysts.com/pt/index.php/pot/article/view/563>

factor. However, in contrast to its exceptional socio-economic conditions, the fact that the many Norwegian foreign fighters (at least in the early years of the mobilization) appear to have had connections to PU seems to be one determining factor.<sup>32</sup>

The role (or lack thereof) of militant Salafist organizations within particular countries arguably explains the paradoxical gap explained earlier: that is, why northern and central European states with higher integration and fewer socioeconomic disparities have experienced higher levels of jihadist mobilization than their southern European counterparts. One crucial difference between the two categories of countries, other than the different levels of integration, is the extension of the presence of militant Salafist organizations a-la-Sharia4. In fact, while those groups have had a fairly large following in most central and northern European countries, they have barely existed or have operated in a severely smaller form in Spain, Italy or Greece.

The reasons for this difference are manifold, ranging from the different approaches adopted by authorities in some southern European countries (Italy, in particular, has adopted a zero-tolerance policy towards these forms of Islamism, even if non-violent), to the fact that they mainly attract second-generation immigrants. Given the different immigration patterns that southern European countries have experienced, second-generation immigrants mostly have not yet come of age in southern European countries. In any event, it seems apparent that the presence of radicalizing agents such as militant Salafist networks, rather than poor integration and socio-economic conditions, is one of the most important factors shaping each country's radicalization patterns.

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<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

## Bottom-up hubs

If, as established previously, militant Salafist organizations and charismatic leaders often play a key role in the formation of jihadist hotspots, concentrations of extremists often also form through bottom-up processes wherein aspiring jihadists radicalize collectively without the role of external radicalizing agents. In many of these cases tight-knit groups of long-time friends influence each other; a few members of the group radicalize and the others follow suit. Personal attachments among the members of the clusters, who are often related by family ties, marriage or friendships dating back to childhood, play a role which as may even be more important than ideology and personal conditions.

An interesting example of bottom up formation of a hub is the case of the French town of Lunel. Located near Montpellier in the country's deep south, this town of less than 30,000 where almost one third of the population is Muslim, has traditionally suffered from high unemployment and drug trafficking.<sup>33</sup> In recent years, it has acquired the unenviable nickname of the "capital of jihad" in French media outlets, because some twenty of its residents (including women and children) have traveled to Syria to join various jihadist groups and several of them have perished since doing so.<sup>34</sup>

Virtually all the Lunel residents who left for Syria had grown up together in the town. Most were French-born children of North African immigrants. But some were converts – particularly remarkable is the case of Raphael Amar (who was killed in October 2014 while battling the Syrian regime at the Deir

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<sup>33</sup> T. Dugeon, "La Face Cachée de Lunel, 'Capitale Du Djihad'", *Vanity Fair*, May 5, 2015, <http://www.vanityfair.fr/actualites/france/articles/la-face-cachee-de-lunel-capitale-du-djihad-/25651>; "Comparateur de Territoire: Commune de Lunel", L'Institut national de la statistique et des études économiques, 2016, <https://www.insee.fr/fr/statistiques/1405599?geo=COM-34145>

<sup>34</sup> T. Dugeon (2015); A. Higgins, "A French Town Linked to Jihad Asks Itself Why", *The New York Times*, January 16, 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/01/17/world/europe/french-town-struggles-over-departures-for-jihad.html>

Ezzor airport), the son of an engineer of Jewish background and a youth psychologist who had grown up in an affluent home.<sup>35</sup>

Most of them had not grown up particularly religious but, by their early 20s, they started becoming increasingly interested in both Islam and politics.<sup>36</sup> Whether it was at al Baraka, a local mosque run by the Tablighi Jamaat, a highly conservative Islamic movement, or at *Le Bahut*, a local snack and shisha bar, the group of friends engaged in lively conversations about the ills of French society, the injustices suffered by Muslims worldwide and, as their process of radicalization progressed, the endeavors of jihadist groups in Syria.<sup>37</sup>

Shocking the town they left behind, the Lunel residents made their journey to Syria in small groups between 2013 and 2014. They first joined Jabhat al Nusra, but then made the switch to ISIS as the rift between the two groups emerged. While at least six of them have died, others are still reportedly in Islamic State-controlled territory. One of them has climbed the ranks of the Islamic State, becoming one of the world's most wanted terrorists. Born in Morocco in 1989, Abdelilah Himich grew up in Lunel

<sup>35</sup> J.-M. Verne, “Djihad - Raphael, Houssem, Sabri, Ahmed: Mourir à 20 Ans”, *Paris Match*, October 29, 2014, <http://www.parismatch.com/Actu/International/Raphael-Houssem-Sabri-Ahmed-mourir-a-20-ans-642432>; B. Zagdoun, “Lunel Traumatisée Par Ses Jeunes Jihadistes Morts En Syrie”, *Franceinfo*, December 13, 2014, [http://www.francetvinfo.fr/france/jihadistes-francais/lunel-traumatisee-par-ses-jeunes-jihadistes-morts-en-syrie\\_771633.html](http://www.francetvinfo.fr/france/jihadistes-francais/lunel-traumatisee-par-ses-jeunes-jihadistes-morts-en-syrie_771633.html)

<sup>36</sup> D. Delseney and J. Abbott, “Pourquoi Lunel a vu Partir Une Vingtaine de Jeunes Jihadistes En Syrie”, *RTL*, January 28, 2015, <http://www rtl fr/actu/societe-faits-divers/pourquoi-lunel-a-vu-partir-une-vingtaine-de-jeunes-jihadistes-en-syrie-7776363968>

<sup>37</sup> S. Seelow, “Lunel, laboratoire miniature du djihad made in France”, *Le Monde*, January 31, 2015, [http://www.lemonde.fr/police-justice/article/2015/01/31/lunel-laboratoire-miniature-du-djihad-made-in-france\\_4567277\\_1653578.html](http://www.lemonde.fr/police-justice/article/2015/01/31/lunel-laboratoire-miniature-du-djihad-made-in-france_4567277_1653578.html); D. Delseney (2015); B. Daldorph, “Jihadist Arrests Deepen Divisions in French Town”, *France 24*, March 3, 2015, <http://www.france24.com/en/France-Lunel-jihadist-town-divisions>; E. de Mareschal, J. Duportail, G. Mollaret and C. Cornevin, “Cinq arrestations dans une opération anti-djihad à Lunel”, *Le Figaro*, January 27, 2015.

and joined the French Foreign Legion at age 19.<sup>38</sup> After serving in Afghanistan and receiving two decorations for his service, he returned to Lunel with his long-time girlfriend, Alexandra V., but struggled to find his way. Arrested for transporting 1.2 kilograms of cocaine from Amsterdam, he was sentenced to 3 years in prison. After an early release from prison, Himich returned to Lunel, displaying signs of growing religiosity. He regained his military form by training in an isolated area of the Cévennes and purchased several pieces of military gear. He eventually made his way to Syria alongside his wife and other Lunel residents.

After a first stint with the Jaysh Mohammed Brigade, Himich joined the ranks of the Islamic State. His prior service with the Foreign Legion, in addition to his purported fluency in French, English and Arabic, allowed Himich to climb the ranks of the group. In 2014, he became the leader of a 300-man strong battalion of mostly European ISIS fighters, which included many of his fellow Lunel residents.<sup>39</sup> The group, which engaged the troops of Bashar al Assad in the bloody battle for the town of Deir Ezzor, was known as the Tariq bin Zayed battalion (from the name of the commander who led the Muslim conquest of the

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<sup>38</sup>S.Seelow, “Abdelilah Himich, le légionnaire devenu cadre de l’organisation Etat islamique”, *Le Monde*, November 23, 2016, [http://www.lemonde.fr/attaques-a-paris/article/2016/11/23/abdelilah-himich-le-legionnaire-de-l-etat-islamique\\_5036387\\_4809495.html](http://www.lemonde.fr/attaques-a-paris/article/2016/11/23/abdelilah-himich-le-legionnaire-de-l-etat-islamique_5036387_4809495.html); B. Eschapasse, “De La Légion Étrangère À Daech: L’inquiétant Parcours D’un Ex-Militaire Français”, *Le Point*, October 20, 2016 , [http://www.lepoint.fr/societe/de-la-legion-etrangere-a-daech-l-inquietant-parcours-d-un-ex-militaire-francais-20-10-2016-2077297\\_23.php](http://www.lepoint.fr/societe/de-la-legion-etrangere-a-daech-l-inquietant-parcours-d-un-ex-militaire-francais-20-10-2016-2077297_23.php); “Abdelilah Himich, de Soldat de La Légion Étrangère À Lieutenant de l’EI”, *L’Obs*, November 23, 2016, [http://tempsreel.nouvelobs.com/attentats-terroristes-a-paris/20161123\\_OBS1635/abdelilah-himich-de-soldat-de-la-legion-etrangere-a-lieutenant-de-l-ei.html](http://tempsreel.nouvelobs.com/attentats-terroristes-a-paris/20161123_OBS1635/abdelilah-himich-de-soldat-de-la-legion-etrangere-a-lieutenant-de-l-ei.html); T. Liabot, “Abou Souleymane, Un Légionnaire Devenu Commandant de Daech?”, *Le JDD*, October 20, 2016, <http://www.lejdd.fr/Societe/Abou-Souleymane-un-legionnaire-devenu-commandant-de-Daech-818479>

<sup>39</sup> “State Department Terrorist Designations of Abdullah Ahmed Al-Meshedani, Basil Hassan, and Abdelilah Himich”, Bureau of counterterrorism and countering violent extremism, United States Department of State (Diplomacy in Action), November 2016, <https://www.state.gov/j/ct/rls/other/des/266471.htm>

Iberian Peninsula in the eighth century).

In the summer of 2015, once his wife Alexandra gave birth to the couple's son Souleyman, Himich would change his *kunya* (nom de guerre) from Abdel le Légionnaire (Abdel the Legionnaire) to Abou Souleyman Al-Faransi (Father of Souleyman, the Frenchman). It would be under this sobriquet that Himich would work for IS' foreign operations branch, the Emni, by handpicking perpetrators, selecting targets and handling logistics for the Paris and Brussels attacks.<sup>40</sup> After the successful execution of both attacks, Himich is believed to have been promoted to head of the Emni's European Operations Division. In November 2016, the US State Department designated Himich as a terrorist.<sup>41</sup>

Even though Lunel presents some of the social conditions frequently associated with radicalization, it is hardly unique, as many other French towns with similar demographics and relatively high levels of unemployment and marginalization exist – yet they do not produce the same number of foreign fighters. Why Lunel then? This is difficult to answer given the multiple levels of analysis necessary to formulate it and the limited information available. Often, this could come down to pure chance: in a certain town a handful of individuals might, in one way or other, pick up the ideology and then influence the others, while in the next town over, with the identical demographic and social conditions, that dynamic does not take place. Issues of personalities and pure serendipity should not be discarded when analyzing radicalization patterns.

Equally puzzling from this perspective is the case of Ravenna. Ravenna is a prosperous city located in Emilia Romagna, on the northeastern Italian coast. It has a population of roughly 160,000 (12% of which are immigrants), and consistently ranks among

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<sup>40</sup> R. Callimachi, "How a Secretive Branch of ISIS Built a Global Network of Killers", *The New York Times*, August 3, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/04/world/middleeast/isis-german-recruit-interview.html>

<sup>41</sup> United States Department of State (Diplomacy in Action) (2016).

the top cities in Italy when it comes to quality of life.<sup>42</sup> Ravenna has a GDP per capita that is above the national average, and the region of Emilia Romagna has consistently been one of the richest in Italy.<sup>43</sup> Yet the city has the surprising record of having produced at least nine foreign fighters (but indications suggest the number may be as high as 20) – a number that is significantly higher than any other Italian city, including metropolises with much larger Muslim populations and larger social ills like Rome, Naples or Milan.<sup>44</sup>

Recent radicalization dynamics in Italy have followed somewhat unusual patterns. The number of foreign fighters has been relatively small (around 122) when compared to the most European countries with few of the Italian foreign fighters migrating in large groups. Instead, most of them were isolated individuals who decided to reach Syria by themselves. Moreover, a large number of Italian foreign fighters originated not from the country's cities but from villages and rural areas throughout the country. The case of Ravenna, a small city which has seen a relatively large mobilization of individuals, all of which had ties to each other, is therefore particularly puzzling, all the more because of Ravenna's affluence and lack of segregated neighborhoods.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> “Cittadini Stranieri 2016 - Provincia Di Ravenna (RA)”, *Tuttitalia.it*, January 2017, <http://www.tuttitalia.it/emilia-romagna/provincia-di-ravenna/statistiche/cittadini-stranieri-2016/>; “Qualità Della Vita 2016, Ravenna 12esima in Italia”, Ravenna24ore, December 12, 2016 <http://www.ravenna24ore.it/news/ravenna/0074031-sole24o43>

<sup>43</sup> “Prodotto Interno Lordo Lato Produzione - Dati Territoriali (Milioni Di Euro) – edizioni precedenti ottobre 2014”, I.Stat, [http://dati.istat.it/Index.aspx?DataSetCode=DCCN\\_PILPRODT](http://dati.istat.it/Index.aspx?DataSetCode=DCCN_PILPRODT)

<sup>44</sup> F. Tonacci, “L'insospettabile Ravenna capitale italiana dei foreign fighter”, *Repubblica.it*, July 5, 2014, [http://www.repubblica.it/cronaca/2015/07/05/news/1\\_inospettabile\\_ravenna\\_capitale\\_italiana\\_dei\\_foreign\\_fighter-118370422/](http://www.repubblica.it/cronaca/2015/07/05/news/1_inospettabile_ravenna_capitale_italiana_dei_foreign_fighter-118370422/); C. Domini, “A Ravenna Torna L'ombra Della Jihad”, *Corriere Romagna.it*, July 2, 2016, <http://www.corriereromagna.it/news/ravenna/19225/a-ravenna-torna-l-ombra-della-jihad-.html>

<sup>45</sup> Most of the information on the Ravenna case come from personal interviews

The roots of the dynamics seen in Ravenna seem to find a partial explanation in El Fahs, a Tunisian town of some 25,000 residents, 60 kilometers south-west of Tunis. Several young (in some cases under 18 years old) residents of El Fahs made their way to Ravenna during the first days of the Arab Spring, joining a handful of friends and relatives from the same town who had settled there in previous years. As soon as they arrived many of them became engaged in drug trafficking, mostly selling small amounts of marijuana and cocaine in the city parks.

Some of these Tunisian youths became fascinated with the Islamic State and other jihadist groups in Syria, despite not living a particularly religious lifestyle or frequently attending any local mosque. This interest was shared by other former residents of El Fahs who had settled in Ravenna, some of them marrying Italian women and leading relatively well-adjusted lives. By 2013, Italian authorities began noticing the formation of a cluster of a few dozen young men, all Tunisian and most of them from El Fahs, who had become avid consumers of ISIS propaganda and had begun fantasizing about traveling to Syria.

Dynamics taking place in El Fahs also seemed to play an important role in the radicalization processes taking place among the young Tunisians in Ravenna. In the years immediately following the fall of the Ben Ali regime in Tunisia, the town of El Fahs saw a relatively high number of its young residents join Ansar al Sharia, the militant Salafist organization that sprung up in Tunisia during those years. Many members of Ansar al Sharia also traveled to Syria to join various jihadist outfits; Tunisia is among the largest contributors of foreign fighters to the conflict. Many of these El Fahs militants were close friends or relatives of those who resided in Ravenna and maintained communications with them. These interactions unquestionably influenced some of the Tunisians in Ravenna, who started seeing migration to Syria as a way to reconnect with family, abandon their mundane lives and participate in an epic endeavor. Soon, some of them

turned fantasies into reality, while others were intercepted while trying.<sup>46</sup>

The events seen in Ravenna, while not completely clear even to Italian authorities, demonstrate some interesting dynamics. First, it is remarkable to note how the Italian city that has seen the largest mobilization of foreign fighters is a small-sized one with one of the highest standards of living in the country. While some immigrants to Ravenna unquestionably do not enjoy the same high quality of life as most local residents, that relative disadvantage is experienced by all immigrant communities. Tunisians, in fact, are not the largest immigrant or even the largest Muslim immigrant group in Ravenna. Yet, 100% of foreign fighters that left Ravenna were Tunisians, and actually with strong ties to El Fahs.

Therefore, it seems apparent that two crucial factors explain the “Ravenna puzzle”. Firstly, in a similar fashion to Lunel, group dynamics ensued within a tight-knit cluster of childhood friends and relatives. Whether it was locally born or raised individuals, as in Lunel, or, a fortiori, recent immigrants, the sense of belonging that the small cluster provided was likely as important of a radicalization factor as the appeal of ISIS’ propaganda. Moreover, in the case of Ravenna, seemingly unlike in Lunel’s, the role played by the (mostly online) interactions with close friends and relatives from Tunisia who had mobilized played an additional role in furthering the radicalization process of members of the cluster.

The importance of radicalization hubs is further demonstrated by the analysis of attacks in the West in the 2014/2017 time frame conducted for this study. As seen in Chapter 2, 33 out of the 65 perpetrators in the data set (51%) belonged, in various ways, to local jihadist milieus.

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<sup>46</sup> “Ordinanza di Convalida del Fermo e di Contestuale Applicazione di Misura Cautelare contro Noussair Louati”, Tribunale di Ravenna, April 23, 2015.



## Conclusion

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Since the proclamation of the Caliphate three years ago, 65 identified perpetrators carried out a total of 51 jihadist terrorism attacks in Europe and North America. As seen, a detailed analysis of the attackers confirmed one of the least contested facts in terrorism research: there is no one profile of a terrorist. The attackers were teenagers and men in their 50s, drifters and seemingly well-adjusted individuals, seasoned foreign fighters and lone wolves without any trace of radicalization in their past.

One data that stands out in this report is that 73% of perpetrators were citizens of the country in which they committed the attack. This provides further confirmation of the predominantly homegrown nature of the current threat, even in the context of growing concerns about the potential infiltration of terrorists in migration flows the West.

This homegrown nature may suggest to focus more attention on the structural features and the internal dynamics of contemporary Western societies. This report has demonstrated that hubs centered around charismatic personalities are an important determinant of radicalization patterns. But it is at the same time important to reflect on the failures of different models of integration across the West as another major contributing factor.

On the other hand, it is clear the terrorist wave that has hit Europe and North America has strong roots in developments that have taken place well outside the borders of the West. The rise of the Islamic State and its unprecedented declaration of a caliphate has inspired scores of Western Muslims, who were captivated by its gestures and slick online propaganda. The impact of the mobilization of Islamic State sympathizers, whether it entailed travel to areas of the self-declared Caliphate or carrying out

attacks in their home countries, cannot be overestimated when assessing the growth in the terrorist threat to the West.

Today the Islamic State appears to be militarily in crisis in the Middle East and its fall might be near. Irrespective of this crucially important developments, it seems nonetheless likely that the cause of global jihadism will survive the group and continue to represent a threat to the West in the years to come.<sup>1</sup>

This insidious threat, in an ever-shifting environment, requires a comprehensive response. On one hand, repressive measures are inevitable, especially in the short and medium term. Among other things, Western countries will probably have to commit themselves to further strengthening intelligence cooperation, despite inherent constraints and difficulties in this sensitive field. On the other hand, “soft” approaches associated with counter- and de-radicalization programs are also salient, especially in the long term.

In general, it is understandable that counter-terrorism responses may need to appear prompt and resolute, also because they have to reassure the public. At the same time, they need to be well-balanced and avoid the risk of unintentionally facilitating polarization dynamics that are desired by jihadist groups themselves.<sup>2</sup> As the al Adnani quote used in the title of this report, *Fear Thy Neighbor*, reminds us, terrorists want to divide the societies they target. Any response to their actions therefore needs to be grounded in facts and balanced, mindful of the perils of both action and inaction.

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<sup>1</sup> T. Hegghammer, “The Future of Jihadism in Europe: A Pessimistic View”, *Perspectives on Terrorism*, vol. 10, no. 6, 2016.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. J. de Roy van Zuijdewijn, “Terrorism and Beyond: Exploring the Fallout of the European Foreign Fighter Phenomenon in Syria and Iraq”, *Perspectives on Terrorism*, vol. 10, no. 6, 2016.

# Appendix

## List of Attacks

### LIST OF ATTACKS

ATTACK	PLACE	COUNTRY	DATE		
1 Oklahoma Vaughan Foods Beheading	Moore, OK	United States	24	September	2014
2 Saint-Jean-sur-Richelieu Vehicle Ramming	St-Jean-sur-Richelieu, Quebec	Canada	20	October	2014
3 Parliament Hill Shooting	Ottawa	Canada	22	October	2014
4 Hatchet Attack on New York Police Officers	Queens, NY	United States	23	October	2014
5 John Bailey Clark Jr. Shooting	Morganton, NC	United States	18	December	2014
6 Joue-les-Tours Police Station Stabbing	Tours	France	20	December	2014
7 Charlie Hebdo Newspaper Shooting	Paris	France	7-9	January	2015
8 "Shooting of Montrouge Police Officer, Fontenay-aux-Roses Jogger Shooting, and Porte de Vincennes Supermarket Siege"	Paris	France	7-9	January	2015
9 Jewish Community Center Stabbing	Nice	France	3	February	2015
10 Krudttonden Cultural Center and Krystalgade Great Synagogue Shootings	Copenhagen	Denmark	14-15	February	2015
11 Woman Shot and Killed in Connection with Suspected Church Terrorist Attack	Villejuif	France	19	April	2015
12 Curtis Culwell Center Muhammad Art Exhibit Shooting	Garland, TX	United States	3	May	2015
13 Herve Cornara Decapitation	Saint-Quentin-Fallavier	France	26	June	2015
14 Navy Reserve Shootings	Chattanooga, TN	United States	16	July	2015
15 Thalys Train Stabbing	Just after border to Belgium; train stopped in Arras	France	21	August	2015
16 Stabbing of Spandau Policewoman	Berlin	Germany	17	September	2015
17 University of California, Merced (UCM) Stabbing	Merced, CA	United States	4	November	2015
18 Paris Attacks: Stade de France, Restaurants and Bataclan	Paris	France	13-14	November	2015
19 San Bernardino Shooting	San Bernardino, CA	United States	2	December	2015
20 Leytonstone Subway Stabbing	London	United Kingdom	5	December	2015
21 Mosque and Soldier Vehicle Ramming	Valence	France	1	January	2016
22 Shooting of Philadelphia Police Officer	Philadelphia, PA	United States	7	January	2016
23 Jewish Teacher Machete Attack	Marseille	France	11	January	2016
24 Restaurant Machete Attack	Columbus, OH	United States	11	February	2016
25 Bangladeshi Imam Bludgeoning	Rochdale	United Kingdom	18	February	2016
26 Train Station Stabbing	Hanover	Germany	26	February	2016
27 Brussels Bombings - Airport and Metro	Brussels	Belgium	22	March	2016

ATTACK	PLACE	COUNTRY	DATE		
28 Sikh Temple Bombing	Essen	Germany	16	April	2016
29 Orlando Nightclub Shooting	Orlando, FL	United States	12	June	2016
30 Police Stabbing and Livestream Hostage Taking	Magnanville	France	13	June	2016
31 Nice Bastille Day Vehicle Ramming	Nice	France	14	July	2016
32 Train Axe Attack	Würzburg-Heidingsfel	Germany	18	July	2016
33 Wine Bar Suicide Bombing	Ansbach	Germany	24	July	2016
34 Normandy Catholic Church Attack	Saint Etienne du Rouvray	France	26	July	2016
35 Charleroi Machete Attack on Police	Charleroi	Belgium	6	August	2016
36 Explosive Detonation in Taxi	Strathroy, Ontario	Canada	10	August	2016
37 Roanoke Double Stabbing	Roanoke, VA	United States	20	August	2016
38 Osny Prison Melee Attack	Osny	France	4	September	2016
39 Minnesota Mall Stabbing	St. Cloud, MN	United States	17	September	2016
40 New York-Chelsea Bombing, Seaside Park Bombing	Manhattan, NY and Sea Side Park, NJ	United States	17/19	September	2016
41 Double Stabbing of Schaerbeek Police Officers	Brussels	Belgium	5	October	2016
42 Ohio State University Campus Stabbing	Columbus, OH	United States	28	November	2016
43 Berlin Christmas Market Attack	Berlin	Germany	19	December	2016
44 Ft. Lauderdale Airport Shooting	Ft. Lauderdale, FL	United States	6	January	2017
45 Denver Transit Officer Shooting	Denver, CO	United States	31	January	2017
46 Louvre Knife Attack	Paris	France	3	February	2017
47 Orly Airport Attack	Orly	France	18	March	2017
48 Westminster Vehicle Ramming and Stabbing	Westminster	United Kingdom	22	March	2017
49 Stockholm Vehicle Ramming	Stockholm	Sweden	7	April	2017
50 Shooting of Champs Élysées Police Officer	Paris	France	20	April	2017
51 Manchester Arena Bombing	Manchester	United Kingdom	22	May	2017

# List of Attackers

## LIST OF ATTACKERS

NAME OF ATTACKER	ATTACK
1 Alton Nolen	Oklahoma Vaughan Foods Beheading
2 Martin Couture-Rouleau	Saint-Jean-sur-Richelieu Vehicle Ramming
3 Michael Zehaf-Bibeau	Parliament Hill Shooting
4 Zale H. Thompson	Hatchet Attack on New York Police Officers
5 Justin Nojan Sullivan	John Bailey Clark Jr. Shooting
6 Bertrand Nzohabonayo	Joue-les-Tours Police Station Stabbing
7 Cherif Kouachi	Charlie Hebdo Newspaper Shooting
8 Said Kouachi	Charlie Hebdo Newspaper Shooting
9 Amedy Coulibaly	"Shooting of Montrouge Police Officer, Fontenay-aux-Roses Jogger Shooting, and Porte de Vincennes Supermarket Seige
10 Moussa Coulibaly	Jewish Community Center Stabbing
11 Omar Abdel Hamid el-Hussein	Krudttonden Cultural Center and Krystalgade Great Synagogue Shootings
12 Sid Ahmed Ghlam	Woman Shot and Killed in Connection with Suspected Church Terrorist Attack
13 Elton Simpson	Curtis Culwell Center Muhammad Art Exhibit Shooting
14 Nadir Soofi	Curtis Culwell Center Muhammad Art Exhibit Shooting
15 Yassin Salhi	Herve Cornara Decapitation
16 Muhammad Youssef Abdulazeez	Navy Reserve Shootings
17 Ayoub El-Khazzani	Thalys Train Stabbing
18 Rafik Mohamad Yousef	Stabbing of Spandau Policewoman
19 Faisal Mohammad*	University of California, Merced (UCM) Stabbing
20 Bilal Hadfi	Paris Attacks - Stade de France
21 "Ahmad al-Mohammed"	Paris Attacks - Stade de France
22 Brahim Abdeslam	Paris Attacks - Restaurants
23 Ismael Omar Mostefai	Paris Attacks - Bataclan
24 Foued Mohamed-Aggad	Paris Attacks - Bataclan
25 Samy Amimour	Paris Attacks - Bataclan
26 "M al Mahmod" aka Ali al-Iraqi	Paris Attacks - Stade de France
27 Chakib Akrouh	Paris Attacks - Restaurants
28 Abdelhamid Abaaoud	Paris Attacks - Restaurants
29 Tashfeen Malik	San Bernardino Shooting
30 Syed Rizwan Farook	San Bernardino Shooting
31 Muhamydin Mire	Leytonstone Subway Stabbing

\* Was revealed as ISIS supporter one year later, initially only school shooting

	NAME OF ATTACKER	ATTACK
32	Raouf el Ayeb	Mosque and Soldier Vehicle Ramming
33	Edward Archer	Shooting of Philadelphia Police Officer
34	Unidentified Minor	Jewish Teacher Machete Attack
35	Mohamed Barry	Restaurant Machete Attack
36	Mohammed Abdul Kadir	Bangladeshi Imam Bludgeoning
37	Safia Schmitter	Train Station Stabbing
38	Ibrahim el-Bakraoui	Brussels Bombings - Airport
39	Najim Laachraoui	Brussels Bombings - Airport
40	Khalid el-Bakraoui	Brussels Bombings - Metro
41	Yusuf T.	Sikh Temple Bombing
42	Mohammed B.	Sikh Temple Bombing
43	Ormar Mateen	Orlando Nightclub Shooting
44	Larossi Abballa	Police Stabbing and Livestream Hostage Taking
45	Mohamed Lahouaiej Boullel	Nice Bastille Day Vehicle Ramming
46	Riaz Khan Ahmadzai	Train Axe Attack
47	Mohammad Daleel	Wine Bar Suicide Bombing
48	Abdel Malik Petitjean	Normandy Catholic Church Attack
49	Adel Kermiche	Normandy Catholic Church Attack
50	Khaled Babouri	Charleroi Machete Attack on Police
51	Aaron Driver	Explosive Detonation in Taxi
52	Wasil Farooqui	Roanoke Double Stabbing
53	Bilal Taghi	Osny Prison Melee Attack
54	Dahir Adan	Minnesota Mall Stabbing
55	Ahmad Khan Rahimi	New York-Chelsea Bombing, Seaside Park NJ Bombing
56	Hicham Diop	Double Stabbing of Schaerbeek Police Officers
57	Abdul Razak Ali Artan	Ohio State University Campus Stabbing
58	Anis Amri	Berlin Christmas Market Attack
59	Esteban Santiago-Ruiz	Ft. Lauderdale Airport Shooting
60	Joshua Cummings	Denver Transit Officer Shooting
61	Abdullah Hamamy	Louvre Knife Attack
62	Ziyed Ben Belgacem	Orly Airport Attack
63	Khalid Masood	Westminster Vehicle Ramming and Stabbing
64	Rakhmat Akilov	Stockholm Vehicle Ramming
65	Karim Cheurfi (aka Abu Yusuf al-Beljiki)	Shooting of Champs Élysées Police Officer

## The Authors

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