

The Current Terrorism Threat in Europe

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Senior members of the security establishment have claimed that the current terrorist threat in Europe is unprecedented. This essay examines this claim against the background of the waves of terrorism that have plagued Europe over the last five decades, and specifically in light of the nature of the current threat and the response that it demands. The terrorist threat in Europe in recent years has focused primarily on Muslim Europeans and converts to Islam. These perpetrators are usually veterans of the wars in Iraq and Syria who joined the ranks of the Islamic State and internalized its ideas and methods. Also participating in this activity are Europeans who did not emigrate to the Middle East to take part in the fighting, along with immigrants who operate under the inspiration of the Islamic State. The essay presents the challenges currently facing Europe's leaders and its security services and the ways in which they must respond to the real and potential threats that exist, in view of the threats by Salafi jihadist organizations, particularly the Islamic State and al-Qaeda, to flood Europe "with a river of blood."

According to the media and statements by members of the security establishment and various analysts, Europe is currently under a serious terrorist threat, perhaps the worst it has ever known.¹ This contention comes in the wake of a series of terrorist attacks that have killed hundreds, as well as the fear of what will happen when those among the over 5000 Europeans who joined the Salafi jihadist ranks in the war zones of Syria

and Iraq return to Europe with the goal of continuing the fight. There is also concern over the radicalization processes underway among hundreds of young European Muslims and converts to Islam who are exposed to Salafi jihadist propaganda on the social networks, which incites them to carry out violent acts in the West.

This essay will consider whether the current threat of terrorism is indeed the worst Europe has known over the past fifty years, what characterizes the current wave of terror, and how Europe is dealing with the challenge.

Terrorism in Europe since the late 1960s

The terrorism that struck Europe in the past was both internal and external. The internal terrorism, which originated among European citizens and residents, was characterized by several types. The first was terror carried out by local separatist organizations that were seeking to achieve national and political goals, such as the Basque underground in Spain, the Irish underground in North Ireland, the Moluccan underground in Holland, and the Corsican underground in France. The second was terror carried out by local organizations with Marxist-Leninist ideologies that sought regime change in their countries by means of violence, including Baader-Meinhof in Germany, the Red Brigade in Italy, Direct Action in France, and the Communist Combatant Cells in Belgium. Apart from these, there were far right groups that carried out sporadic though deadly terrorist attacks in Europe.

At the same time, many countries in Europe became the focus of terrorist activity brought in from the outside by foreign terrorist organizations as well as by states that support terrorism, such as Iraq, Libya, Syria, Algeria, Yemen, and Iran, which exported their local conflicts to the capitals of Europe. The most prominent foreign terrorist organizations that operated in Europe during the 1970s and 1980s were the Palestinian organizations, which began to operate in Europe to apply political pressure on European nations to intervene on their behalf in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Among the leading organizations were the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (led by George Habash and Wadia Haddad), Fatah, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine – General Command (led by Ahmed Jibril), and Abu Nidal. These organizations benefited from cooperation with local European terrorist organizations, which shared the idea of promoting an international Marxist ideological agenda.²



Paying tribute at a makeshift memorial in front of the Bataclan concert hall in Paris, site of the November 13, 2015 terror attack. Photo: Miguel Medina / AFP

In the latter half of the 1980s, Shiite organizations, and especially Hezbollah, joined the growing terrorist activity in Europe, under the auspices of the Islamic Republic of Iran and with its active support. The Shiite terrorist organizations added a new and particularly deadly *modus operandi* to the international terrorist repertoire, namely suicide bombings. Under their influence suicide bombings became a dominant mode of attack, and as such was adopted and further developed by many other terrorist organizations, due to the extent of damage it causes, and even more, due to the fear that it instills.³ From the second half of the 1990s, the Salafi jihadist organizations, such as al-Qaeda and its affiliates and in recent years the Islamic State as well, which are all members of the global jihad movement, joined the terrorist activity in Europe.⁴

The Terrorist Threat in Europe in the Early 21st Century

The Salafi jihadist terrorist threat to the West, including Europe, showed its full potential in the attacks of September 11, 2001. The investigation of the attack in the US revealed a deeply embedded terrorist infrastructure in Europe that operated prior to the attack and was used to recruit and prepare some of the September 11 terrorists. The image of immense power

that al-Qaeda commanded following its success in causing such extensive damage and casualties in the US and the threats of the organization and its supporters to “flood Europe with rivers of blood” created anxiety about what was to come. Nonetheless, and even though there were a number of mass terrorist attacks in Europe during the first decade of the 2000s, such as those in Istanbul (2003), Madrid (2004), and London (2005), the European security services managed to deal with the threat and foil dozens of other attacks before they occurred.

The current threat of terrorism in Europe is a direct extension of the Salafi jihadist terrorist threat during the fifteen preceding years. However, it differs in the actual number of operatives and in the number of potential candidates that may take part in future attacks. The threat in its current form began to take shape several years ago following the intensification of the civil war in Syria, the rise of ISIS, and the announcement of the Islamic State as the basis for a caliphate. The establishment of the Islamic State motivated numerous young Muslims from around the world to join its ranks, and their numbers more than doubled with volunteers who went to Afghanistan in the decade from 1979-1989 to fight with the mujahidin.⁵ Moreover, the media and technological environment in which they operate today differs from that in the past and provides them with greater freedom of action, and in particular gives their activities much greater resonance.

The current generation of veterans from Syria and Iraq has adopted the extreme ideology of the Islamic State and their deadly methods of operation. Apart from the ideology, fighting for the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq served as an incubator for a generation of trained terrorists with extensive combat experience who absorbed the worldview and norms of their hosts. Among them are thousands of European citizens who openly declared that because of Europe’s involvement in the fighting against the Islamic State they intend to return to Europe and take revenge on Europeans on their own soil. And indeed, since early 2014, a gradual trend has appeared with Islamic State activists returning to Europe for the purpose of creating an operational infrastructure and carrying out terrorist attacks. Since then, there have been dozens of successful and attempted terrorist attacks in the cities of Europe, including Paris,⁶ London,⁷ Barcelona,⁸ Stockholm,⁹ and Turku, Finland.¹⁰

Terrorist attacks in Europe that are identified with the Islamic State can be divided into four categories:

- a. Terrorist attacks initiated and controlled from the main headquarters of the Islamic State in Syria (until it was destroyed).¹¹
- b. Terrorist attacks carried out by Europeans dispatched from Syria back to Europe to operate on their own.¹²
- c. Terrorist attacks initiated locally and in coordination with Islamic State operatives and contacts.¹³
- d. Terrorist attacks initiated and carried out by locals inspired by the Islamic State but without its direct contact.¹⁴

The easy access to the means for an attack – rudimentary weapons, vehicles, and improvised explosives – has made it possible to carry out a deadly terrorist attack without the need for a formal and professional hierarchical organization or prolonged preparations. This means that terror can take place at any time and in any place, without any prior intelligence warning that is necessary in order to counter it. In addition, the social networks provide incitement, radicalization, inspiration, and sometimes even instructions for lone terrorists and terrorist cells.

More than anything else, it appears that the current threat is what has been described by senior military and security officers as a “generational war.”¹⁵ Along with the fundamental difficulty in making predictions a generation ahead, the world is changing at an unprecedented pace. And yet, the presence of thousands of Western young men in regions of conflict and their contact with organizations that have a radical ideology and extreme methods and that deny the basic norms of the liberal democratic world has led to their indoctrination. Ours is an era in which a whole generation, including its offspring, have experienced the horrors of war in the Middle East and beyond, or alternatively, are exposed to the propaganda and uncensored radicalization efforts of terrorist organizations by way of the social media, and essentially do not share the democratic liberal values that form the foundation of European society.

The Response to the Threat

The counter-terrorism policy in Europe remains primarily the responsibility of the individual states, each within its own jurisdiction. Nonetheless, mutual responsibility and cultural and moral solidarity exist between the countries, and this leads to tight cooperation in the fight against terror.¹⁶ To this end, the activity of joint European frameworks has been intensified. The leaders of the EU member states have committed themselves to strengthen

cooperation in both long term strategic aspects of counter-terrorism and the tactical immediate-response aspects: ensuring the safety of citizens by organizational-bureaucratic means; preventing radicalization and maintaining liberal values by legal, educational, and legislative means; and engaging in intelligence and security cooperation with international allies.¹⁷ Among the various measures resulting in the most progress are increased inspections and security measures at the borders; improved regulatory and technological means for identification and processing of personal data; cooperation between the agencies of the various EU countries to prevent cross-border crime and terror; and increased intelligence cooperation between the individual countries and the EU and its allies, and between the EU and third party countries, which has been upgraded in order to fight terror and potential threats.¹⁸

Legislation to counter terrorism in the various countries and in the EU as a whole has also been strengthened in order to disrupt the financing of terror and make it difficult for terrorists to buy weapons and explosives,¹⁹ and in addition a number of multi-national units have been established. Thus, the EU hopes to improve the legal legislative efforts against the threat of cross border terror by means of designated legislation at the EU level; encouragement of coordination in investigation and prosecution between agencies of the EU member countries and in the exchange of information; and a European judicial network for fighting cyber crime.²⁰

Apart from the legislative response, the EU has developed a response to threats of radicalization and cyber attack. In order to deal with domestic radicalization, the individual countries and the EU have developed programs to deal with extremist violence (Counter Violent Extremism – CVE), which seek to deal with extreme ideologies used to recruit young recruits to terror.²¹ In addition, there is an initiative to create educational and outreach programs in the Muslim communities in order to reduce their feeling of exclusion; provide families with the possibility of providing a warning of the radicalization of their younger members; and create an organized discourse with the leadership of these communities. In the cyber domain, a number of operational units have been established in order to provide a real time response to terrorist threats; multi-institutional forums in the EU have been created in order to define operating methods and to deal with hate and incitement to violence and terrorist activity placed on the internet and on the social media by terrorist recruiters and organizations; and finally, collaborations have been formed with leading hi tech companies worldwide.²²

In this context, and apart from the practical steps taken by the government and security authorities, it is of utmost importance to develop the abilities of societies in democratic countries to withstand the psychological threat that forms the basis of terrorist strategy. The development of social resilience is an important challenge for every society that is facing terror, especially societies that are not used to dealing with terror on a daily basis. This is not a simple task, and the mass media, including the new media and the social networks, have an important role to play in this regard. The modern era is characterized by shared media technologies and platforms that are also available to terrorists and which for them constitute a force multiplier. These means, together with the media coverage of terrorist attacks and the terrorists' declared threats, make it possible for the terrorists to inflate their image of power to dimensions that could not be achieved in the past, and this is used to instill fear that goes beyond the effect of the terrorist attacks themselves. Moreover, it is now even more difficult for heads of state and politicians with democratic and liberal values to demonstrate the leadership that is so essential in order to lead an effective battle against the threat of terror that will instill a sense of security. The recent election campaigns in Europe are evidence that it is easy for populist leaders to ride the wave of violence and threats of terror and to gain votes for themselves through scare tactics and incitement against minorities and foreigners in the name of the war against terror.

Conclusion

Over the past two years, Europe has devoted a great deal of effort to counter-terrorism. This imperative is reinforced not only by the declarations of the Islamic State and its supporters and by al-Qaeda and its affiliates, which threaten to flood Europe with terror, but also by every additional terrorist attack in European cities, as well as the arrests and thwarted terrorist activity, which reveal the dimensions of the threat.

The response to these challenges takes place on two levels, and combining them may prevent the terrorists from achieving social, economic, and political impact. The first is tactical-operative, which involves the deployment on the ground to prevent terrorist attacks, protect the public, and minimize the damage from terrorist attacks through reinforcement and increased presence of security and enforcement agencies; the creation of barriers in locations that are subject to repeated attacks; the training of intelligence and operational

manpower; and finally the modification of legal and judicial tools to deter and punish terrorists and locals who assist them.

The second level is systemic-strategic. The main challenge is to prevent terrorist organizations from achieving their main goals, namely undermining public confidence in the ability of the government to protect them, disrupting relations between the various sectors of the population based on ethnic origin, religion, and the amount of time they have been in the country, and finally undermining a democratic and liberal society's fundamental principles and norms.

The challenges surveyed in this essay underscore that the threat of terror facing Europe is indeed serious and complex and differs from terror in the past with respect to some of its characteristics, such as its perpetrators, and its potential scale. Dealing with terror in a manner that is effective, flexible, and appropriate to the character of the threat can help reduce its scope, as was accomplished in the previous five decades, while maintaining the democratic and liberal character of European societies and fighting terror through collaboration and public transparency.

Notes

- 1 Thomas Hunt, „Huge Increase in Fatal Terror Attacks as Western Europe Rocked by ISIS, Study Shows,“ *Daily Express*, July 13, 2017, <https://bit.ly/2vfeqAi>.
- 2 Ariel Marari and Shlomi Elad, *Terrorist Attacks Abroad – Palestinian Terror Abroad 1968-1986* (Hakibbutz Hameuhad Publications and Tel Aviv University: Jaffe Center for Strategic Studies, 1986), pp. 9-13.
- 3 Shaul Shay, *Terrorism Dispatched by the Imam – 20 years of Shiite Terror – 1979-1999* (Herzliya: Interdisciplinary Center Herzliya, International Institute for Counter-Terrorism, 2001), pp. 5-7, 65-93.
- 4 Yoram Schweitzer and Aviv Oreg, *Al-Qaeda's Odyssey to the Global Jihad*, Memorandum No. 134 (Tel Aviv: Institute for National Security Studies, 2014), pp. 53-63.
- 5 Peter R. Neumann, “Foreign Fighter Total in Syria/Iraq Now Exceeds 20,000; Surpasses Afghanistan Conflict in the 1980s,” International Centre for the Study of Radicalization and Political Violence (ICSR), January 26, 2015, <https://bit.ly/1JPbSsG>.
- 6 For example, on April 20, 2017, one person was killed and three others injured in Paris in a shooting attack from a passing car. See “Reports from the Terrorist Attack in Paris: We Concealed Customers in the Basement of the Restaurant,” *Ynet*, April 21, 2017, <http://www.ynet.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-4951782,00.html>.

- 7 For example, on June 3, 2017, a shooting and stabbing attack was carried out in London by three terrorists; seven were killed and 48 wounded. Harriet Alexander, "London Bridge Attack – Everything We Know," *The Telegraph*, June 6, 2017, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2017/06/03/london-bridge-everything-know-far/>; Mark Hodge, Neal Baker, and Emma Lake, "Seconds from Slaughter: London Bridge Attack – ISIS Claims Responsibility for Borough Market Terror as Video Shows Jihadis Stalking Pubs Searching for Victims," *The Sun*, June 7, 2017, <https://www.thesun.co.uk/news/3717339/london-bridge-attack-victims-terrorists-isis/>.
- 8 For example, on August 17, 2017, a terrorist from a local cell in Spain ran over and shot 14 people in Barcelona. See "Barcelona and Cambrils Attacks: What We Know So Far," *BBC*, August 21, 2017, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-40964242>. See also "Vehicle Terrorist Attacks in Spain: Current Situation," *Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center*, August 20, 2017.
- 9 For example, on April 7, 2017, four were killed and 15 were injured in a vehicle terrorist attack carried out with a truck in a shopping center in Stockholm. See Lauren Said-Moorhouse and Bryony Jones, "Dazed but Defiant, Stockholm Unites after Attack," *CNN*, April 8, 2017, <http://edition.cnn.com/2017/04/08/europe/sweden-truck-attack-aftermath/>.
- 10 For example, on August 18, 2017 two women were killed and eight people injured in a stabbing attack. See Nicola Harley, "Finland 'Terror' Attack: Briton Stabbed Four Times 'Trying to Save' Women Targeted in Attack Which Left Two Dead," *The Telegraph*, August 19, 2017, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2017/08/19/finnish-knifeman-moroccan-say-police/>.
- 11 For example, 130 were killed and 352 injured in the terrorist attack in Paris in November 2015 and 32 were killed and more than 300 injured in Brussels in March 2016. See Sebastian Rotella, "Terror in Europe," *Frontline*, October 18, 2016, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/film/terror-in-europe/>.
- 12 For example, four people were killed, two of them Israelis, in the shooting attack carried out by Mehdi Nemmouche in May 2014 in the Jewish Museum in Brussels. It led to the arrest of 16 members of a terrorist cell in January 2015 in Verviers, Belgium. See "Abdelhamid Abaaoud, the Alleged Mastermind of the Attacks Killed in Saint-Denis," *Le Monde*, November 16, 2016, <https://lemonde.fr/1HOYBFn>; Anne Penketh, "French Suspect in Brussels Jewish Museum Attack Spent Year in Syria," *The Guardian*, June 1, 2014, <https://bit.ly/1Kf18Ix>; "Belgian anti-Terror Raid in Verviers Leaves Two Dead," *BBC*, January 16, 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-30840160>.
- 13 For example, four were injured in a stabbing attack in July 2016 on a train in Würzburg, Germany, and 15 were injured in a suicide terrorist attack in Ansbach, Germany in July 2016. See Andreas Ulrich, "Germany Attackers Had Contact with Suspected IS Members," *Der Spiegel*, August 5, 2016, <https://bit.ly/2aFLjMO>.
- 14 For example, five were killed and more than 50 injured in the vehicle attack in March 2017 on the Westminster Bridge in Britain. See Dominic Casciani, "London

Attack: Who was Khalid Masood?" *BBC*, March 26, 2017, <http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-39373766>.

- 15 David Petraeus, the former head of the CIA and former general who led the international forces in Iraq and Afghanistan, described the fight against terrorism as a generational conflict, and Andrew Parker, the head of MI-5, described the threat of terrorism as "multi-dimensional, evolving rapidly and operating at a scale and pace we've not seen before." See Michelle Grattan, "David Petraeus on US Policy under Donald Trump, the Generational War against Islamist Terrorism, and Dealing with China," *The Conversation*, June 25, 2017, <https://bit.ly/2IFaQqx>; Vikram Dodd, "UK Facing Most Severe Terror Threat Ever, Warns MI5 Chief," *The Guardian*, October 17, 2017, <https://bit.ly/2rWPu1h>.
- 16 Europol, "TE-SAT- European Union Terrorism Situation and Trend Report 2017," EUROPOL, 2017.
- 17 "The European Union Counter-Terrorism Strategy," European Council, Brussels, November 30, 2005, <http://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/fight-against-terrorism/eu-strategy/>.
- 18 The various types of cooperation between the EU, the US, and other countries is manifested in a number of ways. These include a system called Passenger Name Record (PNR) which enables EU member countries to process data provided by the airline companies with the goal of identifying dangerous passengers. The system is able to hinder the free movement of terrorists throughout Europe by identifying both known and unknown terrorists who are traveling to or returning from regions of conflict. The introduction of Common Risk Indicators (CRI), the amendment of the Schengen borders agreement, and the False and Authentic Documents Online (FADO) system provide additional opportunities for identification, countering, and monitoring of terrorists' movement within the EU, and make it possible to achieve a richer intelligence picture and a more efficient working framework for cooperation on the borders. In the area of weapons and explosives, the EU Council has invited the member countries to jointly develop the skills and expertise needed to improve the reporting of illegal trade in weapons, and indeed steps have been taken to improve the monitoring of weapons, and a guide has even been produced for all the countries on this issue. Europol has also recently improved the use of the European Union Bomb Data System (EBDS) and the use of the Interpol database with respect to stolen or lost travel documents has significantly increased in the past year. For further details, see European Border and Coast Guard Agency, "European Cooperation on Coast Guard Functions," Frontex, September 11, 2016. See also "Proposal for a Directive of the European Parliament and of the Council on the use of Passenger Name Record data for the prevention, detection, investigation and prosecution of terrorist offences and serious crime," Brussels, November 30, 2005, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex%3A52011PC0032>; Council of the European Union, "Implementation of the counter-terrorism agenda set by the European Council," Brussels, December 20, 2016, <http://data.consilium>.

europa.eu/doc/document/ST-14260-2016-ADD-1-EXT-1/en/pdf. The PNR agreement is another example of cooperation with the US that has been expanded so as to maintain a high level of access for all members of the agreement. It has proven effective also in the case of the Terrorist Financing Tracking Programme (TFTP) by means of Europol requests. TFTP has proved its worth in the investigation of terrorist events. In addition, there is collaboration with Jordan, Algeria, Turkey, the Palestinian Authority, Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Egypt, Israel, and Tunisia. In addition, the EU is initiating a counter-terrorism initiative in the western Balkan countries where the work plan for 2015-17 is currently being implemented and is supported financially. Moreover, there is a plan to include Radicalization Awareness Network (RAN) abilities in the region. The EU is also assisting the Sahel and Nigeria. In Nigeria, the war against terror continues, with its focus on deradicalization of prisoners belonging to the Boko Haram organization and by means of collaboration with the regime to strengthen the rule of law based on a criminal justice system that responds to terror. Spain is a partner in the efforts of the US and Africa to monitor and disrupt the transfer of funds to terror; it also provides assistance to Mali and Mauritania in order to deal with violent extremists.

- 19 Council of the European Union, "State of play on implementation of the statement of the Members of the European Council of 12 February 2015, the JHA Council Conclusions of 20 November 2015, and the Conclusions of the European Council of 18 December 2015," Brussels, March 4, 2016, <http://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-6785-2016-INIT/en/pdf>.
- 20 The budget for training and guidance of EU judges and attorneys (The European Judicial Training Network – EJTN) has been increased and the program currently offers guidance to judges and prosecutors in 28 member nations. The goal of collaboration in this area is, inter alia, to deal with the legal challenges of counter-terrorism among the EU countries, both on the ground and in the cyber domain. For further details, see "Implementation of the counter-terrorism agenda set by the European Council."
- 21 Note the creation of the Radicalization Awareness Network (RAN), which connects about 2400 professionals throughout the EU and is active against radicalization in all sectors. Participating in this framework are experts from diverse fields, such as education, health, and prison services who operate based on their experience and knowledge in order to learn from one another and develop recommendations for decision makers and to provide an alternative narrative to the extremist propaganda on the basis of personal testimonies. The EU is intensifying the war against radicalization not only by means of declarations but also by committing significant financial resources. Thus in 2016, the EU Council transferred more than 200 million euros to finance education for tolerance, social integration, and critical thinking; the creation of a pool of role models who visit schools, sports clubs for youth, and so on in order to share experiences and provide inspiration for others; encouragement of institutions of higher learning to award prizes for volunteering; the encouragement

of curricula that combine academic content with civic involvement; prevention of radicalization in prisons and support of rehabilitation programs; and the war against discrimination and racism and the promotion of shared values, as well as programs to deal with propaganda on the internet and personal radicalization, strengthening of cooperation with third party countries, and research to better understand the developing nature of radicalization and ensure a better response on the policy level. For further details, see “State of play on implementation of the statement of the Members of the European Council of 12 February 2015, the JHA Council Conclusions of 20 November 2015, and the Conclusions of the European Council of 18 December 2015.”

- 22 In 2015, the EU created a cyber unit in Europol (EU Internet Referral Unit – EU-IRU) and currently 26 EU countries have connections points with the unit and can consult with it in real time. In addition, starting from 2016, the EU Council and four large hi-tech companies (Facebook, Twitter, Alphabet, and Microsoft) agreed to an operating code to deal with hate content on the internet. The companies committed to remove hate content that is published on their platforms within 24 hours of receiving a complaint. Additional efforts to deal with the increasing use of the internet and the social media by recruiters and terrorist organizations include the creation of the EU Internet Forum, which is used by EU interior ministers and internet companies; and the adoption of the directive for Network and Information Security (NIS) which proposes means of enhancing security of the internet and information in the EU, and facilitates collaboration and exchange of information among the member countries; as well as response units to deal with computer security incidents and the creation of the Strategic Communication Advisory Team. For further details see “State of play on implementation of the statement of the Members of the European Council of 12 February 2015, the JHA Council Conclusions of 20 November 2015, and the Conclusions of the European Council of 18 December 2015.”