

Jihadism in Europe

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The year 2015 opened with dramatic reminders that jihadism still poses a significant threat to the security of most European countries. The attacks that bloodied the streets of Paris (January attack against the offices of the *Charlie Hebdo* magazine and a kosher market) and Copenhagen (February attack against a freedom of speech event and a synagogue hosting a religious ceremony) confirmed the fears that had long been expressed by authorities throughout the Continent. The death of Osama bin Laden and the enthusiasm ingenerated by the Arab Spring had initially triggered hopes that the War on Terror and its toxic legacy had become a thing of the past. Yet, over the last couple of years, there has been a chilling realisation that the global jihadist movement is anything but vanished. Rather, it has been experiencing a resurgence worldwide, including in Europe. No indicator is more telling of this dynamic than the mobilisation of European foreign fighters for the conflict in Syria and, subsequently, Iraq. The mobilisation of European jihadists for foreign battlefields is not a new phenomenon. It dates back to the 1980s (Afghanistan), continued throughout the 1990s (Bosnia and Chechnya) and surged in the 2000s (Afghanistan, Iraq and Somalia). Even so, the number of European-based fighters who have reached Syria and Iraq since 2011 is unprecedented in size. One of the

latest estimates, provided in January 2015 by Europol, puts that number at up to 5,000.¹ Larger countries like France and the United Kingdom have contributed the lion's share of the fighters (some 1,000 and 800, respectively), but even smaller ones have seen large numbers of their residents (and, in most cases, citizens) travel to Syria to fight. Worrying is, for example, the case of small Belgium, which has provided a disproportionate 400 fighters.

Even though not all do, the vast majority of these European volunteers join jihadist groups, in particular the Islamic State. European authorities are understandably concerned about the implications. British authorities have described this phenomenon as “a game-changer” and “the most profound shift in the threat we have seen since 2003.”² In January 2014, the then French Interior Minister Manuel Valls called the possibility of these individuals returning to France as hardened jihadists as “the biggest threat that the country faces in the coming years.”³ Hans-Peter Friedrich, the Germanys's former Interior Minister, has stated that returnees from Syria trained in “deadly handwork” will be “ticking time bombs.”⁴

To be clear, not all foreign fighters will pose a threat upon returning to Europe (and some will never return at all, either because they will die on the battlefield or because they will continue their militancy in Syria/Iraq or elsewhere). But it seems inevitable that at least some of those who do will attempt to carry out attacks against targets in their own or other European countries. So far the only successful attack carried out by a returning foreign fighter is the May 2014 shooting of four visitors at Brussels Jewish

¹ Michael HOLDEN, “Up to 5,000 European fighters in Syria pose risk: Europol,” *Reuters*, January 13, 2015.

² Ruth SHERLOCK and Tom WHITEHEAD, “Al-Qaeda training British and European ‘jihadists’ in Syria to set up terror cells at home,” *The Telegraph*, January 20, 2014.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Nikolas BUSSE, “Diese Leute sind tickende Zeitbomben in Europa,” *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, June 7, 2013.

Museum by Mehdi Nemmouche, a Frenchman who had just returned to Europe after fighting with ISIS.⁵ But attacks tracing their roots in the Syrian/Iraqi conflict have been thwarted in Britain, Sweden, Belgium, France, and Switzerland. Many of these were just in the planning stages, and it is unclear whether the planners were acting independently or under some form of command from various groups operating in Syria and Iraq.

Mirroring dynamics seen in European jihadist networks over the last decade, the European 'contingent' in Syria is characterised by the extreme diversity in origin, age, background, and socio-economic conditions of the individuals fighting there. Some of them are seasoned jihadists, individuals with a long track record of militancy and fighting experience. Yet most appear to be young aspiring jihadists with no previous battlefield experience. Many of them were known to belong to militant networks or be active in the Salafist scene in their countries of origin but had not been previously involved in any direct violent action, whether domestically or abroad. Others were individuals who had previously not given any sign of sympathy with jihadist ideology or even of any interest in politics or religion. Cases of individuals that, in a matter of weeks, go from no interest in jihadism to fighting in Syria are frequently reported throughout the continent.

One characteristic that has been noticed in most European countries is that many of the foreign fighters are extremely young, in some cases as young as 13. And another development that has been witnessed Europe-wide is the growing number of females who decide to travel to Syria with their husbands or to get married to mujaheddin they meet online. There are indications that some of these women are also involved in actual fighting, a relatively new development in the world of jihadism. Emblematic of these developments is the case of Sabina Selimovic and Samra Kesinovic, two Viennese girls of Bosnian descent aged 15 and 16 who reportedly left their parents' home and have reached Syria, where they post on Facebook pictures of themselves donning a *niqab* and handling weapons.⁶

The reasons that attract European foreign fighters to Syria are as diverse as their backgrounds and vary

from case to case. It is arguable that, in most cases, various factors are concurrently at play. In interviews and on their social media profiles many of them talk about their frustration at the apathy of other Muslims and the international community at the plight of Syrians and their desire to defend fellow Muslims from an unjust fate. Indeed many of them unquestionably perceive their participation in the conflict as a noble and altruistic gesture aimed at saving innocent women and children.

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At the same time religious motivations play a crucial role. Most foreign fighters who join jihadist groups are driven by a deep hatred for Alawites and Shias in general and see fighting what they consider deviant Islamic sects a religious duty. Similarly, many of them are enthusiastic about the idea of establishing an Islamic state governed by a strict interpretation of the sharia in Syria, a country in the heart of the Arab world. This prospect arouses particular emotions among those espousing jihadist ideology also due to Syria's particular importance in Islamic history and eschatology. Finally, personal issues and circumstances cannot be ignored as important drivers behind the radicalisation process and the decision to travel to Syria of many European foreign fighters. These intertwined factors are visible in the personal recollections of some of the first European jihadists who have publicly spoken about their experiences in Syria. One of them is a slightly atypical militant, 38-year-old Abderrozak Benarabe. Benarabe is widely known in Denmark as Store A (Big A) and is the former leader of one of the coun-

⁵ "Brussels Jewish Museum killings: Suspect 'admitted attack'," *BBC*, June 1, 2014.

⁶ Jörg DIEHL and Björn HENGST, "Verschwundene Österreicherinnen: Als Teenager in den Dschihad," *Der Spiegel*, April 23, 2014.

try's most notorious criminal gangs, the Blågårds Plads Gruppe. Benarabe was profiled in a 2013 documentary broadcasted by Danish public television that followed the gangbanger's journey from Copenhagen to Syria, where he spent time with the Sunni militant group Ahrar al Sham.⁷

In the documentary Benarabe explained that he had spent most of his life engaging in criminal activities and without being religious. But when his younger brother, who was also a gang member, found two nodes in his neck, Benarabe reconsidered his approach to life. "I made a covenant with God that if he let my little brother survive," he recounted "I would pull myself together and stay away from crime."⁸ Big A interpreted the fact that the nodes were found to be harmless as a sign: "I began to relate to Islam, stopped smoking marijuana, tried to stay away from crime and had started frequenting the local mosque." After a few months he decided to travel to Syria. "With all the crap I've done in my life, I want to do something good again, and if it costs me my life, at least it's in a good cause," he explained. "I will fight against the injustice that is happening down there, while the whole world is looking on."

These factors are unquestionably crucial for some of the Europeans who travel to Syria. Yet, in other cases, more superficial factors are equally important. In many cases, in fact, the search for a life time adventure, the attraction to violence and the sheer 'cool' appeal of being involved in militancy are extremely important factors.

The European Response

European authorities have reacted in a variety of ways. Many initiatives have focused on preventing European Muslims from traveling to Syria in the first place. While the approaches vary from country to country, most employ a mix of hard and soft measures. When possible, authorities seek to arrest and criminally prosecute individuals seeking to leave. And while no country criminalises traveling to Syria or any other conflict area per se (although proposals to do so are currently being discussed), many have statutes under which individuals seeking to make the

journey can be charged with training for terrorist purposes, providing support to a terrorist organisation or similar offenses.

Obviously, in order to do so, authorities need to be in possession of solid evidence that can be produced in court, something that is not easy to obtain when seeking to prosecute individuals who are simply planning terrorism-related activities. This often leads to frustrating situations in which authorities have to watch individuals leave for Syria with what can be quite reasonably assumed to be the intention of joining *jihadi* groups but are unable to arrest them for lack of adequate evidence. In many instances European authorities resort to alternative, but arguably not very effective, measures such as the confiscation of travel documents or, in the case of minors, judicial custody.

Authorities face similarly significant challenges when dealing with individuals who have returned from Syria. Those seeking to prosecute returnees are faced with the challenge of proving through evidence admissible in court that a given individual committed specific crimes – a daunting task given the difficulty in obtaining reliable evidence from the Syrian and Iraqi battlefields.

Many European countries have also been employing various measures to reintegrate returnees. Countries such as Denmark and the Netherlands have had a counter-radicalisation structure in place for almost ten years, and are now using many of their resources to diffuse the potential threat posed by returnees. In many countries, such efforts take the form of psychological counselling and coaching from trusted mentors. At the same time, authorities seek to monitor the returnees' activities and assess the dangerousness of each.

Overall, however, these measures seem inadequate to stem the steady flow of foreign fighters now migrating to the Levant – or prevent the return of at least some of them home, with the intention of carrying out attacks. Europe's struggle in confronting this emerging threat demonstrates all too clearly that liberal democracies face significant, and perhaps ultimately insurmountable, barriers to their ability to defend against this current trend in transnational terrorism.

⁷ The documentary can be seen at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7wKG82b9lrw>

⁸ Frank Hvilsom, "Bandedeler fra Nørrebro i krig i Syrien," *Politiken*, September 7, 2013.