

# Jihadist Networks: Response in Europe and the Arab World

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Since 2011, Syria has been experiencing a civil war of great intensity. To date, this conflict has caused nearly 200,000 casualties, a conflict in which the jihadist movements are particularly active, not only going against regular forces that have remained faithful to Bashar el-Assad, but also the other factions in the Syrian rebellion. Despite the chaotic situation in Syria, the country has become the epicentre of world jihadism, attracting jihadists from the Mediterranean Basin and EU Member States. The departure of nearly 5,000 Europeans,<sup>1</sup> 8,000 Maghrebi and 8,000 Middle Easterners to fight in Syria since spring 2013 has caused great social, security, media and political apprehension in both northern and southern Mediterranean societies.

Given such increasingly common situations, political, social and media impacts have certainly struck a chord in European and South Mediterranean Muslim Arab societies. The executive branches of European and Arab states have adopted and implemented varied responses, often in urgent, post-attack contexts. At the heart of these measures is an increasingly convergent discourse on the violent radicalization phenomena nearly systematically associated with involvement in “international jihadism” This association also leads to a largely predominant continuum in

much of political discourse: Islam + radicalization = terrorism. The major media coverage of terrorism is thus central for comprehending to what degree these dominant representations often automatically draw a link between religious radicalism and involvement in terrorist violence, primarily via debate regarding cultural and religious identities.

Proposals for action in the sphere of public policy to deal with the issue of the Syrian networks have revolved around several options oscillating very unevenly between security and social responses.

## Cooperative and Institutional Measures

Such measures are devised by governments and institutions aiming at improved cooperation in information exchange. In Europe, for instance, the aim is to step up information exchange between the different ministries of the interior and intelligence agencies of European Union Member States. Another example is the intention to make Europol a platform uniting all terrorism intelligence (EU Radicalisation Awareness Network). The implementation of the Passenger Name Record (PNR) system is another illustration of this policy of cooperation intended to allow improved data collection regarding airline passengers.

In the Arab world, there are various initiatives aiming to improve cooperation between countries, but they are for the most part sporadic and bilateral. Often presented as the sovereign domain par excellence and thus governed exclusively by national interests, the Arab sphere of security and counter-terrorism is

<sup>1</sup> According to estimates, Europeans represent 18% of the total foreign forces involved in the war in Syria on the rebelling side. More specifically, in late 2015, the main countries of provenance for Europeans fighting in Syria were France, the United Kingdom, Belgium, Germany, Kosovo and the Netherlands.

having a hard time emerging. Indeed, whereas the Algerian and Tunisian governments continually co-operate to stem the jihadist uprisings in the Mount Chaambi area, relations between Algiers and Rabat are nearly non-existent and run up against the issue of Western Sahara. There are various cooperation institutions such as the African Centre for Study and Research on Terrorism (ACSRT), but for the time being, it lacks the efficiency of such European structures as Eurojust or Europol. Whether it be the Arab Maghreb Union or the Arab League, these institutions have yet to make a significant decision in the field of security cooperation.

Inter-Arab relations in the sphere of cooperation to counter jihadism are neither quantitatively nor qualitatively equivalent to relations within the European Union, for North-South relations seem more important. Hence, the European Union and certain Member States have bilaterally decided to strengthen diplomatic and security collaboration with Turkey or other countries of the Mediterranean Basin. France, Belgium and Germany have announced, at various times over the course of 2014, deepening of diplomatic and security contacts with Turkey designed to improve intelligence sharing and prevent the passage of European nationals to Syria. Regarding the matter of Syrian networks and violent radicalization, the European Counter-Terrorism Coordinator, Gilles de Kerchove, is actively participating in producing discourse and expertise by multiplying initiatives for exchange between Member States and Mediterranean countries on this topic.

### Measures of a Sociocultural and Religious Order

These measures are generally the purview of national agencies associated with ministries of justice or of the interior, or in the Arab world, the ministry of religious affairs. At present, they take the form of radicalism prevention centres or of compulsory integration or mentoring programmes for imams (France, the Netherlands and Belgium, for instance). A great supplier of jihadists, Saudi Arabia has likewise implemented this type of programme. By the

same token, Aarhus, the second most important city in Denmark, has established an innovative reintegration programme for Danish youth coming back from Syria and Iraq. This programme was launched in 2011, at the start of Syria's civil war. Recall that Denmark is the second country most affected by the departure of its nationals to Syria, just behind Belgium.

Riyadh and Copenhagen based themselves on the observation that any measures eventually leading to marginalization of this youth would be the most likely to render them dangerous. The interest of society is to reintegrate these young people into the social fabric. The primary concern of the programme is thus not to investigate and morally judge their actions but to work towards their reintegration into society. This approach is driven less by a generous, empathetic vision than a pragmatic logic: for its promoters, it is the most effective manner of "demobilizing" this youth in the long term.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, the programme's local approach is complementary to a more security-minded global approach.

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Meetings with psychologists to comprehend the mechanisms of radicalization of the accused, a religious leader to put them back on the right path of Islam and social and economic reintegration are the three lines of this de-radicalization policy.

These measures are based on the will to stem or prevent jihadism through the development of a counter-discourse, a religious soft power primarily coming from Salafist religious figures. Hence the imam from Tangiers, Omar Haddouchi, has condemned the actions of the Islamic State, and Tun-

<sup>2</sup> Mohssin EL GHABRI, "Belges partis combattre en Syrie. Quelle réponse politique?", December 2014, Etopia.be, [www.etopia.be/spip.php?article2832](http://www.etopia.be/spip.php?article2832).

sian imams have reviled the authors of the Bardo attack in their Friday sermons. In Egypt, Sayyed Imam Al-Sharif, a prominent figure in jihadism but with little media coverage, published the work *Wathiqat Tarshid Al-'Aml Al-Jihadi fi Misr w'Al-'Alam* (Guide to Jihad in Egypt and the World) in 2007, in which he called for ceasing jihad in the West and against the regimes of Muslim countries. In the different Maghreb countries and Egypt, the authorities, through their religious affairs ministries, have decided to regain control of the religious offer by adopting measures concerning the training and recruitment of imams.

### **Penal Measures: Between Criminalization and Amnesty Policies**

These are judiciary measures aiming to physically prevent European nationals from travelling to Syria or sanctioning them upon their return to Europe (criminal sanctions, dismantling of networks, etc.). Such proposals emerged, beginning in 2012, after the attacks in Toulouse (Mohamed Merah). The supporters of these measures aim to dissuade individuals who may wish to depart for Syria and sanction European nationals upon return with a penalty that, in Europe, can amount to several years in prison. Criminal sanctioning of nationals having participated in military action abroad is a flagship measure taken by certain countries to stem the departure of nationals for the Syrian front. In France, the counter-terrorism bill of law proposed by the Minister of the Interior, Bernard Cazeneuve, and adopted on 17 September 2014 by the French National Assembly, in addition, established the offence of "association with an individual terrorist undertaking" in order to target jihadists working alone who had thus eluded certain sanctions. In Great Britain, the government stepped up anti-terrorist legislation as of 2014 by allowing terrorism suspects' freedoms to be restricted without any judicial proceedings (obligation to wear an electronic bracelet and keep a curfew, travel ban).

From 2004 to 2015, Rabat decided to strengthen its repressive, counter-jihad provisions. Rallying of terrorist groups, participation in training camps, apology of terrorism and incitement to commit terrorist acts are now punishable by Moroccan Law.

Jihadists wishing to join an organization considered terrorist face prison sentences of 5 to 15 years. The apology of terrorism is likewise punishable by a 5 to 15-year prison sentence. The majority of jihadists returning from jihad are directly apprehended at the airport and sentenced to four years of prison based on anti-terrorist law.

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Since the development of the phenomenon of youth leaving to fight in Syria, the opportunity of suppressing recruitment networks has rapidly gained consensus among actors in the sphere. Everyone agreed to assert the need to dismantle these groups and arrest the people organizing the mobilization of European and Maghrebi youth, even more so in the case of enlistment of minors (banning charity and humanitarian initiatives suspected of serving as covers for recruitment, arresting decisive individuals in the recruitment networks, as well as symbolic and media figures who are not decisive on the organizational level, etc.). Regarding security agencies and socio-educational actors, the practical difficulties seem significant in defining their role in these new, constantly evolving provisions.

In any case, these legal provisions do not exclusively take the form of repressive measures. Amnesty initiatives can be decreed by the Algerian authorities or partial pardons granted by Tunisian and Moroccan political leaders. They are designed to free prisoners and attempt to reintegrate them into the country's economic and social spheres. Since 1995, the Algerian authorities have adopted different legal measures facilitating repentance. This is how nearly 15,000 terrorists have laid down their arms. In Morocco, certain figures of the jihad constellation considered responsible for the 2003 Casablanca attack, such as Mohamed al-Fizazi, have been granted royal pardon and freed.