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The Evolving Terrorism Threat in Europe

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Two decades on from September 11, 2001, the terrorist threat in Europe has been almost entirely transformed. Far from mass casualty spectacles like the public transportation attacks in Madrid in 2004 and London in 2005, the greater danger now is isolated individuals murdering politicians or stabbing random people in public places. Yet the dwindling scale of terrorism has only made plots harder to detect.

This was pointed out in the latest annual threat assessment by Europol (the European police coordinating agency), which noted that “more jihadist terrorist attacks were completed than thwarted” during 2020, the last year of reporting. Though less directly lethal, these low-scale attacks pick at social divisions in a way that can be even more dangerous than the large-scale, spectacular attacks directed by al-Qaeda or Islamic State (ISIS).

Europe has always seemed to be a secondary battlefield in the war on terrorism. But whereas the United States appears to have insulated itself from the threat at this point, Europe continues to confront a scenario that is noticeably more complicated and chronic. Terrorism’s evolving presence still poses a deep threat to European society.

POST-9/11 SPECTERS

In the immediate aftermath of the 2001 attacks on America, Europe became a key battlefield in the “Global War on Terrorism.” Revelations that a substantial part of the logistics, planning, and even recruitment for the al-Qaeda attacks had happened in Europe awakened the continent to a threat that it had inadvertently hosted. But only a few months later, Paris became a springboard for a follow-up attack on the United States. On December 22, as the

world was just starting to return to normal, a radicalized young Briton, Richard Reid, unsuccessfully tried to bring down a transatlantic flight to Miami with a bomb concealed in the heel of his shoe. Reid was part of a two-man team of Britons who had been sent by the al-Qaeda leader responsible for 9/11, Khalid Sheikh Mohammed. His co-conspirator, Saajid Badat, had backed out at the last minute.

From a European perspective, these two failed attackers were in many ways even more terrifying than the 9/11 group, for which the blame could be laid on foreign shores. The notorious Hamburg cell that produced key 9/11 hijackers Mohammed Atta and Ziad Jarrah was, for the most part, made up of foreigners like them who were in Europe studying or seeking employment. Similarly, Europe was simply a backdrop for the planning meetings that took place in Spain, or the network in the United Kingdom that facilitated the dispatch of a pair of suicide bombers to Afghanistan to carry out the assassination of leading Taliban adversary Ahmed Shah Masood. In all these elements of the attack plan, Europe served as a convenient staging point for the conspirators, who drew on the continent’s Middle Eastern population.

These communities were the product of trends that had been playing out for some time. As authoritarian Arab countries cracked down on dissidents, many fled to Europe’s more liberal and protective environment, from where they could agitate for change back home. This diaspora was a constant source of tension between Arab and European governments. Arab authorities lobbied their European counterparts to crack down; Europeans pushed back, claiming that these dissidents were simply calling for legitimate political rights, in ways that were legally protected in Europe. The dissidents were often harbored in the former colonial powers that had once ruled their home countries, giving a historical resonance to the clash.

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For the most part, these dissident communities were pacific. But among them were a number of individuals willing to use violence. For them, Europe was an ideal staging ground: local political attitudes and legal systems shielded them from repatriation, while local security forces often had a relatively limited grasp of their activities or the danger they might pose. Though the specter of Muslim fundamentalism was perceived as a growing menace, it was not well understood. Often it was assumed to be a threat only to the exiles' countries of origin. France had faced a number of such threats and attacks already, but given that the network behind them had links to Algeria, in many ways this was seen as simply an extension of colonial legacies.

The jihadists themselves openly talked about Europe as an excellent base. Abu Musab al Suri, an important Syrian ideologue who first advanced the strategy of lone-actor terrorist attacks, divided his time between Spain and the UK and married a Spanish woman, gaining Spanish citizenship. He found the UK a particularly convenient environment, describing years later in his writings how “among the Islamists, you will find everyone from Shaykh Muhammad Surur [a leading Syrian cleric who opposed the use of violence to create an Islamic state] to the jihadis, and lately it has become a refuge for everyone. . . . I found that being in London during that period would place you at the center of events.”

This perception of a permissive environment in the UK caused tensions within Europe. French authorities were especially furious that networks they linked to attacks in France had deep footprints in the UK. The term “Londonistan” was coined around this time, in the mid- to late 1990s.

The shoe bombers, however, were something different. They were both born and raised British, yet they had made the same choices as the transient Middle Easterners. It also turned out that they were not unique. The continent was struck by a series of large-scale spectacular attacks, including the 2004 Madrid bombings that killed 191 people and the 2005 London bombings that murdered another 52. Both of these plots had links to al-Qaeda; the London plot was directed by the organization. But the attacks were undertaken for the most part by cells of individuals with long histories in Spain and the UK, often born there and seemingly well

integrated. A number of other plots disrupted by security services around the same time demonstrated the depth of the problem that Europe faced.

HOMEgrown EXTREMISM, LONE ACTORS

These so-called homegrown terrorists became the dominant part of the European threat picture for the next decade or so, all the way to 2015. In January of that year, Paris was rocked by the murders of several members of satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo's* editorial staff in an attack by a pair of gunmen linked to al-Qaeda in Yemen. Then in November, Paris was hit again, harder, with a full-scale, city-wide assault by a 10-man team dispatched by ISIS in Syria. They indiscriminately murdered 130 Parisians who had been enjoying a Friday evening out. Though the organizations (al-Qaeda and ISIS) involved in sending the attackers were different, the community of young, radicalized French citizens (often second-generation immigrants) from which they recruited was largely the same.

For some time, European authorities had struggled to find ways of managing the threat posed by radicalized young Europeans trained in Syria, Afghanistan, or Iraq and sent back to kill, or by young Europeans radicalized by foreign ideas and persuaded to try to stage attacks at home against their native countries. Yet 2015 proved to be the apex for this sort of threat.

Though 2016 and 2017 saw many dozens killed in Europe in a variety of terrorist incidents, these were less coordinated and directed than the dramatic attacks of 2015. The perpetrators were not networks or cells dispatched from foreign battlefields, but rather were isolated, radicalized individuals lashing out at society. Some had clear links to larger terrorist networks; ISIS in particular became extraordinarily adept at manipulating young people through social media into launching attacks. In some cases, there was evidence of direction through communications apps like WhatsApp, Telegram, or Surespot. In other instances, rather than having any direct link to ISIS, the perpetrators were aping what they interpreted to be the characteristics of an ISIS attack.

In fact, what ISIS was doing was the industrialization of something that had been happening in Europe for some time already. The idea of isolated individuals launching attacks inspired by extremist ideologies was not new. In the spring of 1999,

Europe struggled to manage the threat posed by radicalized young Europeans.

London was rocked by a series of nail bombs left in public places associated with minorities (people of color, South Asians, and the LGBT community). The last bomb killed three people in a pub in Soho. The investigation revealed that a young man on the fringes of extreme right-wing communities had staged the attacks on his own. In May 2002, a left-wing activist murdered prominent Dutch right-wing politician Pim Fortuyn in the Netherlands, infuriated by what he perceived as Fortuyn's anti-Muslim rhetoric. And in September 2003, a Serbian-Swede stabbed and killed Swedish foreign minister Anna Lindh as she was shopping in a Stockholm department store. Though his exact motive was never uncovered, the murderer claimed that he hated politicians in general.

The same trend started to emerge among Islamists soon thereafter. In November 2004, a member of a radicalized community of young Dutchmen assaulted and killed filmmaker Theo van Gogh in the street in Amsterdam, angered by his provocative films about Islam. The assassin proved to be part of a wider network, but it was never entirely clear whether the attack was directed or rather was the act of a single individual from within the group.

Starting in 2007, the phenomenon manifested itself in the UK in a series of lone-actor plots undertaken by radicalized individuals, some of whom appeared to have been linked only very loosely to any organized group, or even to any religious affiliation. In two prominent cases, the perpetrators were Muslim converts with a limited understanding of the religion in whose name they purported to act. One of them later decided that he was in fact a member of the extreme right, while serving a prison sentence for planning to detonate a suicide vest at a shopping center in Bristol.

Al-Qaeda sought to stimulate this trend further through its English-language magazine *Inspire* and videos aimed at younger followers. But it was never quite able to claim a causal link of responsibility between any individual lone actors and its propaganda. In contrast, the emergence of ISIS in 2013 led to a surge in exhortations to supporters to launch attacks with whatever tools they found around them. In September 2014, ISIS spokesman Abu Muhammad al-Adnani released such a message to followers of the group: "If you are not able to find an [improvised explosive device] 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. Do not lack. Do not be contemptible."

This blood-curdling message came alongside a proliferation of plots that included both isolated, radicalized Europeans and people who were in communication with ISIS fighters in Syria and Iraq. Using social media applications, these fighters in the Levant steered followers in Europe into launching attacks against fellow citizens. Among the key online influencers were Europeans such as Briton Junaid Hussain and Frenchman Rachid Kassim. There was a noticeable impact in Europe, with a series of dramatic attacks as well as large numbers of detentions.

MIGRATION TENSIONS

All of this played out against the double crisis of the war in Syria and the migration wave that arrived across Europe in 2015. European unity was pushed to its limits as hundreds of thousands of migrants from across the wider Middle East and North Africa entered the continent and sought refuge. Their stories of human misery were offset by stories of crime and violence committed by some of the new arrivals. Even worse, among them were some individuals who went on to launch terrorist attacks.

Two of the eventual attackers involved in the ISIS-directed November 2015 assault on Paris slipped in amid the flow of migrants, masquerading as Syrian refugees. Other cases involved individuals launching isolated attacks. July 2016 brought two attacks in quick succession in Germany: one in which a Syrian asylum seeker blew himself up outside a music festival in Ansbach, and another in which a 17-year-old Afghan who had arrived in the country only a year earlier stabbed a family visiting from Hong Kong on a train in Würzburg. Soon after the train assailant was shot down by police, ISIS released a video in which the attacker pledged his allegiance to the group.

These sorts of cases were fodder for politicians and ideologues across Europe as the migrant issue melded with fears of Islamist terrorism. The link between these two issues was familiar. In the UK, a group called the English Defence League (EDL) emerged in 2009, seeking to rally the native English population to push back against the perceived Muslim invaders. One Norwegian who reportedly visited some of the EDL's marches in 2010 went on to launch a terrorist attack in Oslo in July 2011. After detonating a large bomb in the downtown government district, he proceeded to

Utoya, an island outside the capital where the youth wing of the ruling left-wing Labor Party was running a summer camp, and gunned down dozens, mostly teenagers. His attack left 77 dead. The 1,400-page screed he published online concurrently with the attack cited right-leaning ideologues, experts on violent Islamist terrorism, and more to justify fighting back against what he described as the invading hordes of Muslims who were destroying Europe, and were being allowed in by a feckless political class unwilling to stand up for European values.

Although few sympathized with Anders Behring Breivik's heinous acts, the sentiments he articulated were increasingly widespread, and were being adopted at more prominent political levels. Parties like the National Front in France, Alternative for Deutschland in Germany, Law and Justice in Poland, and the UK Independence Party were at the further-right edge of a growing movement across Europe of mainstream political parties (mostly right-leaning) that saw anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim sentiment as a core value of their political base. Mainstream politicians on the more traditional right struggled to respond to public anger over perceptions of uncontrolled migration, and the problems that came with it, without spilling into xenophobia.

This tension in turn expressed itself in two ways: a strengthening of the far-right parties in polls, as they seemed to be the only ones willing to talk about issues people were worried about; and a growing sense of embattlement among migrant communities. These trends mobilized extremists on both sides, supplying justification for further attacks as well as emboldening those who previously had felt marginalized.

The pressure on Europe's social fabric was immense, exacerbated by the tendency of violent Islamists to frequently target cultural institutions. There was a long history of such cultural conflict in Europe. In February 1989, Ayatollah Khomeini, Iran's spiritual leader, had issued a fatwa calling for the death of UK-based author Salman Rushdie for his novel *The Satanic Verses*. The result was a series of attacks in Europe and around the world linked to the book, and decades of hiding and security details for the author. In 2004 came the murder of Theo van Gogh in Amsterdam, and in 2005 an uproar when Danish newspaper *Jyllands Posten* published

a series of cartoons of the prophet Muhammad that were deemed blasphemous. The newspaper and its cartoonists have been targets ever since, though they have avoided the fate of the *Charlie Hebdo* editorial staff members who were murdered in their offices in January 2015 after the magazine republished the Danish cartoons.

This string of cultural and physical assaults was linked to a transformational wave of migration that was changing the very way Europe looked. The attacks often targeted people who would traditionally be associated with the liberal left of European society and with advocacy for a more open approach to migration.

All of this played out against intra-European political tensions, as countries in different parts of the continent increasingly saw the centralized control exerted by the European Union as a stricture rather than a boon. In the UK, this culminated in the 2016 Brexit referendum in which voters narrowly decided to leave the EU. Brexit was not solely about migration, but the issue played an important role in the referendum campaign. European identity was

fragmenting, just as the United States elected Donald Trump as its president—a man who openly sided with extreme right elements in Europe and treated Muslims as if they were all part of an extremist sect

associated with al-Qaeda and ISIS.

A rising extreme right increasingly aped and mirrored violent Islamist groups. Some groups openly copied each other. The UK's now-banned neo-Nazi group National Action expressed rage at Muslims while calling for a "white jihad." One member who randomly tried to kill a Sikh dentist in a shop just outside London was obsessed with the infamous ISIS videos in which a British jihadist, later nicknamed Jihadi John, threatened America and its allies before decapitating hostages. In turn, violent Islamist groups pointed to the rise of the far right as evidence of widespread hatred of Muslims, and therefore as justification for terrorist acts against Europe.

IDEOLOGY RECEDES

But then, ahead of the COVID-19 pandemic's arrival, a newer pattern started to come into focus. Increasingly, in reports of terrorist attacks in Europe from around 2018 onward, terms like "mental health" or "autism spectrum disorder" started to appear. Individuals previously described as

A rising extreme right increasingly mirrored violent Islamist groups.

terrorists were now being classified as people suffering from mental health issues, or as neurodivergent. In many of these cases, even when an attack was clearly intended to look like a terrorist act, authorities struggled to understand whether the perpetrator was genuinely motivated by any ideology.

On New Year's Eve at the end of 2018, a Somali-born 26-year-old man who had been raised in the Netherlands started attacking people at random in Manchester's Victoria train station in northern England. He shouted "Allahu Akbar" and raved about events in Syria as he carried out the attack. He injured three before being subdued by authorities. Police initially sent him to a hospital. He was subsequently charged for attempted murder with terrorist links.

The investigation revealed that the attacker had a history of paranoid schizophrenia, leading to a series of encounters with mental health units in Somalia and the UK. In the runup to his attack, he had been frantically circulating a confused manifesto that blended violent Islamist ideologies with conspiracy theories involving mind control. Yet he had been an engineering student and had won a prestigious internship at Rolls-Royce. His friends said they were shocked by his act, deeming it entirely out of character.

By 2021, this sort of attack had become increasingly common. In various cases, it was mixed in with a rising number of confusing ideological backgrounds. Perpetrators no longer seemed to have a coherent motivation based on only one ideology (or any external direction), but often created highly idiosyncratic ideologies that pulled in ideas from a wide range of sources.

The caseloads faced by authorities were growing and confusing. Some cases were hard to separate from more traditional instances of lone, angry individuals simply lashing out at society. School shooters or random mass attackers now looked a lot like part of the terrorist milieu that was being monitored by police and security services. In the UK, the confusion had escalated to such a point that the Home Office created an entirely new category, labeling a growing number of cases as originating in "mixed, unstable, or unclear" ideology, as distinct from the more classical left-wing, right-wing, and violent Islamist ideologies.

In large part, many experts and officials suspect that the problem is driven by the Internet and the easy accessibility of ideas it provides, along with

accepting online communities and polarizing sentiments. This has made adopting terrorist ideologies easier and empowered a whole new group of people who previously struggled to make contact with others in person. Online they can reinvent themselves in ways that are unimaginable in real life.

PERENNIAL PROBLEMS

The wider problem for Europe, however, is that the older, more coherent form of terrorism linked to ISIS, al-Qaeda, and the violent ideas they espoused has not completely gone away. Europeans were reminded of the impact of this sort of violence in 2020, as a series of attacks in the latter half of the year shook the continent.

The first one came in September, when a young, relatively newly arrived Pakistani migrant in Paris attacked two men smoking cigarettes outside the old offices of *Charlie Hebdo*. The attack took place just as the trial of defendants linked to the 2015 attack on the magazine's staff was starting. It was a grim reminder to France that Islamist extremism did not forget its enemies, even though the perpetrator in this case actually linked his attack to a fundamentalist Muslim sect in Pakistan rather than al-Qaeda or ISIS. The incident suggested that even the violent Islamist threat was multiplying in new, threatening ways.

Even worse was to come a month later. In a Paris suburb, a teenage Chechen resident decapitated a teacher in the middle of a street. The assailant was then shot down as he charged at police officers. The teacher, Samuel Paty, had already been the subject of threats from parents at the school where he taught. They accused him of forcing his students to view images of the Prophet Muhammad and discuss matters that disturbed their religious sensitivities in class. These threats had spilled online, where they were noticed by the young, radicalized Chechen. He was in contact with fighters in Syria and had sought to go and join them.

Those two attacks were not the first that year in Europe, or even in France. The continent had already seen three attacks in France, two in Germany, and at least three in the UK. But these two in France had a particularly totemic aspect to them, aggravating culture war narratives and highlighting the menace that still existed five years after the traumatic 2015 attacks. They seemed to be directed at the most fundamental republican values of liberty, freedom of the press, and the

separation of church and state. Their impact resonated around the continent, leading to calls for greater restrictions on religious expression (such as dress and the content of preachers' messages) and providing further opportunities to right-wing politicians.

A November 2020 incident in Vienna seemed to hearken back to an even more dangerous threat. A young man with deep connections and contacts among Europe's radicalized Islamist youth went on a shooting rampage through the center of the city, killing four people. He also released images and a statement linking his attack to ISIS. It turned out that he was the latest in a long line of radicalized young European men who were known to authorities, but nonetheless were able to carry out terrorist attacks. He was deeply entrenched in the ISIS-supporting milieu around the continent and unsuccessfully tried to travel to Syria to become a fighter, then decided to launch his attack in Europe.

Yet time has shown how the threat has in fact stayed relatively static. The initial concerns over the Vienna attack remain, but the network has been rolled up, with arrests of militants linked to the plot in Germany, Poland, Italy, Switzerland, Albania, and elsewhere. The attacks in France were dramatic and intensified domestic tensions, but ultimately were not replicated. Nonetheless, these incidents all served to highlight how Europe is still at the ideological and practical front line of the jihadist threat in its many forms. It may be that attacks on the scale of those in Madrid in 2004, London in 2005, or Paris in 2015 are now in the past, but the Paty murder showed how scale and volume are not prerequisites for impact.

The additional problem for Europe is that this is no longer the only terrorist threat it faces. The threat from the extreme right was considered marginal in the past. As one former head of Britain's internal security service MI5, Sir Jonathan Evans, put it, he saw them largely as a "zoological" curiosity during his time leading the service, from 2007 to 2013. Now they occupy a growing portion of police and intelligence attention.

French authorities have disrupted far-right plots intended to overthrow and execute President Emmanuel Macron. In June 2019 in Germany, a neo-Nazi extremist murdered local politician Walter Lübcke. In Belgium, in May 2021, an

extreme right-wing member of the special forces ran away from his base laden with weapons after threatening a senior public health official whom he saw as part of a conspiracy linked to COVID-19 pandemic restrictions. A young Frenchman was arrested in late 2021 for allegedly trying to source uranium powder on eBay, which he planned to incorporate into pipe bombs he had built at home. When police raided the studio he had rented in Rouffach, in northeastern France, they found "Nazi badges and a complete Ku Klux Klan outfit in sight on a mannequin." The 26-year-old had been flagged to authorities after he boasted to his college classmates about what he had built. He was also reported to have suffered from undefined "psychiatric disorders."

At the other end of the scale, European security forces found that a growing number of their own members belonged to extreme right-wing groups. In Belgium, a large network linking politicians, soldiers, and activists was discovered in 2021. In the UK, a policeman was jailed for membership in a neo-Nazi group, while a special forces unit in Frankfurt had to be disbanded in June 2021. In other parts of Germany, groups of police officers were detained on similar charges.

This is the threat that Europe now faces: a baffling mix of classic threats, lone-actor attacks that pop up with persistent regularity all over the continent, and highly dangerous plotters. Many cases seem confused in both ideology and motivation, with mental health problems or neurodivergency increasingly the norm. But all of this is still striking at the heart of European identity and ideals, and playing out against a backdrop where migration remains a highly charged issue and political polarization is at high levels. The COVID-19 pandemic appears to have exacerbated the situation, pushing people online for longer periods, leading to greater exposure to extremist ideas. Anti-vaccination narratives have taken off as a rallying cry for those seeking an anti-establishmentarian cause to join.

Twenty years on from 9/11, Europe may not face the same sort of threat it used to, but the problems associated with terrorism, extremism, and societal polarization appear to have become even more ingrained and menacing. They are likely shaping the continent's political outlook for the decades to come. ■