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The Myth of Homegrown Terrorism

Jytte Klausen

The enduring legacy of ISIS will be to have recruited more people to the global jihad movement than any previous terrorist organization.¹ In June 2014, Raqqa became the capital city of the Islamic State. The new “caliphate” became one great ethnic melting pot. With minimal adaptation, ISIS used the same methods to attract volunteers from Asia, Africa, North America, and Europe. Frenchmen and Britons executed Syrians and Iraqis in their own villages. Pakistanis moved on to the new “provinces” and command ISIS’s troops in Libya.² The truck attack in December 2016 in Berlin involved ISIS operatives based in Libya. Estimates are that, since 2013, 40,000 foreign fighters drawn from 100 countries were drawn to the jihadist organizations fighting in Syria and Iraq. The majority of the volunteers went to the Islamic State but many have joined other jihadist fighter groups in the region. The foreign fighter population included about 4,500 to 6,000 migrants from Western Europe who, once they arrived in the “caliphate,” began patrolling the streets of Raqqa as the new masters.

Europe in the Crosshairs

The new geopolitical reality of jihadist migration in the Mediterranean region will continue to pose severe challenges to Europe’s domestic security. Evidence of the escalation of terrorist capacities caused by ISIS recruitment strategies was amply provided by the attacks in Paris on November 13th, 2015 on the Bataclan theater and restaurants in the Marais and suicide attacks at a soccer stadium. Subsequent attacks in Brussels on March 22nd, 2016, carried out by the same network targeted the airport and a metro station near the European Union headquarters. Terrorist impact is often measured in casualties and in this respect the scope of the attacks was significant: 130 killed in Paris and 32 in Brussels. Grievous harm was done to many hundreds more. But terrorism aims to intimidate the public with the intention of forcing the


hands of governments, and in this too the attackers were successful. The attacks forced Europe
to collectively face the risks to domestic security posed by the presence of a “jihadistan” a car ride
away from some of Europe’s major metropolitan cities. They also further exacerbated the already
contentious domestic debate over Muslims’ place in Europe and their collective guilt for jihadist
extremism.

The Belgians took much of the blame. Two neighborhoods in Brussels, Molenbeek and
Schaerbeek, were widely portrayed as the home base for attackers. “The Islamic State of
Molenbeek” ran a headline on The New York Times’ opinion pages that went on to describe
Molenbeek as “the most acute manifestation of a European failure” to integrate Muslims.\(^3\)
Belgium’s ineffectual judicial system has a lot to account for when it comes to the country’s
failure to control extremism, but Brussels was less responsible for growing the massive network
than has been assumed.

Molenbeek is a mixed neighborhood comprised of bars and restaurants, immigrant
families, and hipsters and artists. It does not deserve the stereotype. The chilling part was that
the operatives responsible for the attacks were able to return to the city and hide among family
and friends while they planned their attacks—and afterwards. Terrorist networks rely on social
capital, and this network was able to call upon a lot of such social resources for its evil purposes.
Several of the key operatives grew up in Brussels, where they spent much of their youths in gangs
as they gravitated to extremism. But the network also included Frenchmen and young men from
small towns and midsized cities elsewhere in Europe, as well as Syrians and Iraqis who never set
foot in Europe before they converged on Paris, ordered there by their ISIS handlers. The scope
of this attack network was far larger than anything seen before in Europe. This was an example
of the merger of multiple micro-networks into one cohesive organization. The term
“homegrown” terrorism fails to capture its origin and the scope of the network.

From information gathered by late January 2017, we identified 85 individuals who
belonged to the inner circle of the perpetrators of the Paris and Brussels attacks. Using a network
graphing program, the connections between the individuals and their links to the various violent
conspiracies and organizations that were identified as part of the network were drawn (see Figure
1). The information was drawn from public sources and only terrorist acts verified by authorities
were recorded. It is fair to assume that our methodology underestimates the true reach of the
network.

\(^3\) Roger Cohen, “The Islamic State of Molenbeek,” The New York Times, April 11, 2016,
The network was responsible for at least eleven violent plots, of which six were successful and the rest foiled. The perpetrators of a series of well-known incidents before and after the Paris and Brussels attacks, starting in 2014 through 2016, were closely connected to the key operatives in the Franco-Belgian network. These include the 2014 shooting at the Jewish Museum in Brussels, the coordinated attacks on the Charlie Hebdo editorial office and a Jewish supermarket (here counted as one inter-connected conspiracy), and other shootings by the same men, as well as an attack on a high-speed train between Brussels and Paris in 2015 that did not come off as planned when the gunman was tackled by passengers. Among those foiled was a plot to kidnap a
Belgian policeman and execute him for a YouTube production and a planned suicide attack on the La Defense district in Paris scheduled for a few days after the November 13th attacks. An attack on Schiphol Airport near Amsterdam that some of the Brussels-based members of the network have been reported to have been considering was not included in the graphing of the network because the planning appears to not have been advanced. Another deadly attack, the 2016 Bastille Day attack in Nice, was not found to tie in with the Brussels-Paris network and is therefore not included in our graphing of the network.

Using a snowball method to include first-person contacts from this inner circle, a total of 352 individuals were identified as having been linked to terrorist actions and arrests related to the core network. Of these, 319 were arrested and 86 died in terrorist incidents—in Europe or abroad. 26 of those who have died belonged to the inner circle. Getting arrested does not preclude dying later in a terrorist incidents, which is why the number of arrested and dead combined is higher than the total number of people identified as members of the network. One of the criticisms against Belgian judicial practices has been that too many suspects are arrested and then let back on the street awaiting later trial giving them opportunity and incentive to join a jihadist organization abroad.

The analysis highlighted nine recruitment organizations based in Europe that drove the initial recruitment to ISIS and the formation of the network. Two Belgium-based groups were particularly important meeting places. One was the Brussels-based Zerkani network named after Khalid Zerkani, a 42-year old street preacher from Morocco. Another was the now banned Sharia4Belgium, an offshoot of the British preacher Anjem Choudary’s empire of similarly named organizations. These organizations are well known incubators of extremism but the inclusion of several older French recruitment rings highlight how today’s terrorist networks grow from yesterday’s. One such group is the so-called 19th Arrondissement group, also known as “filière irakienne”—Brothers for Iraq—that was dismantled in 2005. The group recruited young men from the Paris area to fight for al-Qa’ida in Iraq against US troops.

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4 The data collection draws on the Western Jihadism Project, a comprehensive database charting the evolution of al-Qa’ida-related networks since the early 1990s.


6 The sociogram produced by the analysis reveals a contiguous and overlapping attack network that These are all first-person connections so that if A ➔ B and B ➔ C, then A, B, and C are included. A and C may not have met face to face but are networked through what Mark Granovetter, the Stanford sociologist, called “weak links,” peer-based influence networks.
To get a better handle on the origins of the network, we collected data about the militants’ hometowns, here defined as the individual’s last known living location before his or her first known terrorism-related act. The assumption is that this was the initial site of the radicalization process that put the person on the path to join the terrorist network. From this information we constructed a “heat” map of the hometowns (depicted in Figure 2).

Brussels was a hotspot but the involvement of militants from the United Kingdom and Scandinavia and from small and medium-sized cities in France and Holland puts new light on how and where terrorist networks are formed. The concept of “homegrown” terrorism has for the past decade and a half been used to describe individuals who act alone or in small groups on behalf of al-Qa’ida and now ISIS without any direct or formal connection to the foreign terrorist organizations. The concept is profoundly misleading.

The futility of focusing on “homegrown” terrorism rather than the transnational organization that sustains terrorist recruitment was further underscored by the fact that the network included 41 non-Western individuals, whose countries of last residence—before the Islamic State—were Saudi Arabia (10), Morocco (7), Algeria (4), Tunisia (4). Several other countries contributed 1 or 2 individuals.

Figure 2. Heat map showing the hometowns of individuals who have publicly been identified by law enforcement as participants or suspected participants in the network responsible for the attacks in Paris and Brussels between 2014–2016.
The astonishing scope of the network and the planning that went into assembling the attack cells in Europe has become apparent as we learn more about how the members made their way back to Europe and their time together as combatants in the insurgency. The cohesion of the network build on encounters and bonds formed between the men during their time with ISIS. We rarely have sufficient information to draw the networks formed in combat but occasionally social media feeds provide a glimpse. An ISIS militant known by his social media kunya, Situ-Veux Mon-Avis (“If you want my opinion”), was arrested in Turkey in July 2015 on his way back to Europe. His real name is Tyler Vilus, a French convert. Vilus was traveling to Prague, by train, on a valid Swedish passport belonging to a Bosnian man from the southern Swedish city of Malmö who had gone to Syria. From Istanbul, Vilus texted his friend in Paris that he wouldn’t make their rendezvous. The friend was Abdelhamid Abaaoud, the ground manager for the November attacks.7

Figure 3: Facebook photo of Belgian and French fighters in a house in Aleppo from December 2013 or January 2014.

The photo is from late 2013 when ISIS fighters freely posted pictures of themselves on their Facebook and Twitter feeds.\(^8\) It was allegedly taken in Aleppo, in a house taken over by this group of francophone fighters.\(^9\) Several of the men in the group came from Lunel, a small French town that became known for its outsized contribution of volunteers to the ranks of the jihadist fighter. One of the men identified is Vilus, who is sitting in the circle with his back against the wall under the window. Most of the men in the picture have been identified.\(^10\) The Franco-Belgian network members spoke French and pidgin jihadi-Arabic. Language remains an important segmentation line in ISIS’s ethnic melting pot. Nationality, not so much. The diversity of the Paris-Brussels attack network is astonishing. Twelve different ethno-national origins were recorded. A plurality (23%) of the network members was comprised of native-born Europeans of Moroccan descent. European native-born individuals of Algerian descent comprised 14%, 8% were White European converts, and individuals of Tunisian descent but born in Europe comprised 6%. Members of Sub-Saharan origin comprised only 3%.

**The Balkans and Jihadist Travel**

Fluid and networked organization will be characteristics of the next phase of the jihadist adaptation process. Well-trodden routes for illegal migration managed by people smugglers exist that link Africa and Asia to Europe, by land and sea. In the west, it goes to Spain from the country’s North African enclaves, Ceuta and Melilla.\(^11\) Italy can be reached by boat from Libya, and in the east Greece is accessed from small towns and beaches in Lebanon and southern Turkey. A land route to Western and Central Europe, meanwhile, goes through the Balkans. Members of the Franco-Belgian network were apprehended in Turkey, Greece, Italy, the

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Balkans, Germany, and Hungary. Refugees are not terrorists, but ISIS operatives have been hiding in refugee centers and come to Europe through the routes carved out by illegal immigration. Screening procedures at airports have effectively closed airports to suspected terrorists. If the jihadist cannot travel by air, they will travel by car or by boat. The road from the Islamic State and other points in Asia to Europe often goes through the Balkans.

Three states, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Albania, and Kosovo, feature as important gatekeeper countries. With an estimated 1,000 foreign fighters who have joined either al-Qa’ida affiliates or ISIS, the region has the highest concentration of ISIS fighters in Europe. Hundreds of Bosnian and Albanian foreign fighters have come also from diaspora communities in Western and Northern Europe. Many of the foreign fighters from Bosnia, Kosovo, or Albania have previously lived in Western Europe or have cousins living there. The infrastructure for the further expansion of a jihadist presence is in place.

Two, if not three, possible outcomes present themselves for what will happen if ISIS is thrown out of Syria and Iraq: (1) Local fighters will return to the area; while challenging, dealing with them is more of a local police matter. (2) The Balkans will be used by the terrorist networks as a place to cultivate connections with smuggling networks and a safe-zone for transiting to battleground elsewhere, particularly in Western and Northern Europe. (3) In a worst-case scenario, Bosnia and Albania may become a new jihadist battleground.

The first two options are not mutually exclusive and would become a new challenge to Europe’s security if left alone. Mergers and acquisitions between terrorist networks and the Balkan criminal networks provide the jihadists with access to lucrative illicit businesses and opportunities for the transport of operatives from Asia to Europe and back. The acquisition of criminal networks specializing in counterfeit documents, arms smuggling, and the smuggling of drugs and people is a logical adaptation to increased border controls and heightened efforts to police travel. A sensational report emerged in October 2016 that ISIS had taken over—by purchase—the Mafia’s drug production in Albania and had started to flood the United Kingdom with cannabis produced on its farms there. If accurate, ISIS entry into the Albanian drug trade is indicative of a shift to retail-level involvement in the drug trade that has not been seen previously. It follows on ISIS’s entry into other illegal crime rings: counterfeit passports, people

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smuggling, and illegal trade in guns.\textsuperscript{14} Affiliates of al-Qa‘ida have for some time developed similar operations in North Africa fueling smuggling networks stretching from Western Africa to Northern Europe.\textsuperscript{15}

The social and political situation in the Balkan mini-states has become more hospitable to exploitation by the jihadists. Jurisdictional fragmentation combined with the presence of a significant number of extremist communities that are, for better or worse, self-policing present a special opportunity for the relocation of foreign fighters exiting the insurgency in Syria and Iraq. Reports about Burhan Seferi, a Macedonian Albanian who is wanted for ISIS-related prosecution in Macedonia but allowed sanctuary in Kosovo, are illustrative. Macedonia is ethnically Slavic and Greek Orthodox, whereas Kosovo is ethnically Albanian and Muslim.\textsuperscript{16}

In Bosnia, focus has been on the so-called \textit{paradzemats}, communities that reject the official Islamic Community in Bosnia-Herzegovina and insist on living under their own religious authorities. These so-called “black flag” villages—villages that fly the flag of jihad—are a local worry. Some are abandoned villages that have been bought up by Salafist financiers. Local newspapers reported earlier this year that 108 companies acted as intermediaries for Kuwaitis and other Arabs purchasing land for religious communities in Bosnia-Herzegovina.\textsuperscript{17} A number of prominent foreign fighters and recruiters have come from villages that have pledge allegiance to ISIS. Husayn “Bilal” Bosnic was convicted in a Bosnian court of recruiting for ISIS.\textsuperscript{18} Another notorious preacher, Nusret Imamovic, was designated an international terrorist by the US government in September 2014. He too came from a sharia-based community. Both men fought with the jihadist brigade in the Bosnian war in the early 1990s.\textsuperscript{19}


\textsuperscript{19} A well-known Kosovar-Albanian propagandist for ISIS, Lavdrim Muhaxheri, was designated an international terrorist at the same time, see http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2014/09/232067.htm
Recent reports of Russian meddling in Montenegro, the smallest of the small states, reinforce that these are low-capacity states made further vulnerable by their internal divisions and vulnerable to, once again, become a Gray Zone for not one but two hostile operations challenging public commitments to a shared European identity.\(^20\)

The Next Five Years

The focus will shift to the redrawing of borders in the region. The jihadists’ resettlement strategy will depend, in part, on the short-term calculations of state actors in the region. Will Iran tolerate fighters traveling through the Northern corridor to Pakistan as it has for decades? Iran is at war with ISIS but not so much with al-Qa’ida. Will Turkey continue to see advantages in using jihadists as a buffer against Kurdish independence? Will the Europeans belatedly manage to set up an effective deterrence to the traffic of people smugglers across the Mediterranean Sea?

The risk is that renewed fighting among the fragile coalition of anti-ISIS forces will give way to a new civil war. The gruesome toll inflicted by ISIS’s regime on the local Muslim population in the territories it has controlled is an enormously difficult historical fact that will continue to influence policy for decades. The jihadists’ aptitude for regeneration in the midst of chaos is a known factor.

It is probable that al-Qa’ida in the end will benefit from the suppression of ISIS. The collapse of ISIS’s “state” will confirm Ayman al-Zawahiri’s assessment that that al-Baghdadi’s proclamation of a new caliphate was not only premature, but also counterproductive to the forward march of the jihadist movement. Al-Qa’ida may emerge strengthened from the collapse of the Islamic State in other ways. The decision by al-Qa’ida’s affiliate in Syria, Jabhat al-Nusra, to a friendly separation with al-Qa’ida in July 2016 and name change to Jabhat Fatah al-Sham (Conquest of Syria Front) puts the group in a position to soak up fighters defecting from the Islamic State and to become the major post-ISIS jihadist fighter group in the area.\(^21\)

The dirty secret is that there actually aren’t that many jihadists in the world. ISIS’s fighter force has variously been estimated at 10,000, then 40,000. The Pentagon recently estimated that as many as 60,000 combatants with ISIS had been killed in military action which


puts the original estimates of the fighter force in doubt. Nonetheless, tallying the numbers, country by country, the combined jihadist force strength is probably about 100,000. Even if the size is about double that, the jihadists are not a mighty army but a cunning and ideologically cohesive terrorist movement whose leaders have figured out how to exploit globalization and local armed conflicts to challenge the contemporary state system. A focus on “crushing” ISIS at the cost of putting in place a broader vision for containing the jihadist movement and its entrenched and interconnected transnational networks will put us on track to fight the same fight under new flags again and again.

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