

FROM CRIMINALS TO TERRORISTS AND BACK?

The In-Betweeners? Links Between Crime and Terror in France

Quarterly Report: France

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The most well-known ISIS terrorist atrocities in Europe, including the 2015 Paris and 2016 Brussels attacks, saw individuals who in the past had been involved in organized crime and illegal trade graduate into the ranks of the world's most successful terrorist organisation. **It is now widely assumed that Europe's terrorists are no longer radicals first and foremost but criminals who turned to political violence at some stage throughout their ordinary crime careers.** Thus, a threat emanating from the "crime-terror nexus" hangs over Europe. GLOBSEC, an independent, non-partisan, non-governmental organisation which aims to shape the global debate on foreign and security policy, responded to this threat by developing a research and advocacy project aimed at addressing the "**crime-terror nexus**" in Europe. Our project titled *From Criminals to Terrorists and Back?* will:⁴

1. collect, collate and analyse data on terrorism convicts from 11 EU countries (Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands, Spain, the UK) with the highest number of arrests for terrorism offences. We will investigate whether these individuals had prior criminal connections, and if so, whether a specific connection to illegal trade is a precursor to terrorism, and to what extent this trade funds terrorism. In short, we will check whether crime-terror nexus exists and how strong it truly is.
2. disseminate project findings at high profile GLOBSEC Strategic Forums (GLOBSEC Bratislava Forum, TATRA Summit, Chateau Bela conferences) and other internationally acclaimed gatherings which attract decision makers, experts, private sector and law enforcement representatives, while also incorporating their expert level feedback into our work.
3. help shape and strengthen the European counter-terrorism efforts by providing tailor made solutions on combating crime-terror nexus and terrorist financing via education and awareness, and advocacy efforts involving decision makers and security stakeholders in the 11 targeted countries. This line of activity directly links the project to the widely acclaimed work of the GLOBSEC Intelligence Reform Initiative (GIRI), led by Sec. Michael Chertoff, which is involved in developing and promoting more effective transatlantic counter-terrorism solutions.

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⁴ The project is funded under PMI IMPACT, a global grant initiative of Philip Morris International to support projects against illegal trade. GLOBSEC is fully independent in implementing the project and has editorial responsibility for all views and opinions expressed herein.

1. Introduction

The French team of the GLOBSEC's *From Criminals to Terrorists and Back?* project has examined 32 cases of terrorist individuals since the beginning of the work in September 2017. The data is not yet extensive, and any conclusions drawn hereunder are therefore preliminary. The sample is not yet sufficient to allocate reliable percentage points to correlations that emerge. The following analysis is therefore qualitative in part.

The evidence gathered to date by the French team tends to confirm a strong correlation between terrorism and criminality in France. Most of the individuals examined **have had run-ins with the law**, convictions that tend to be misdemeanours or "minor" felonies, such as theft or assault, or non-terrorism violence. However, affiliation with **organized crime** is absent in the cases studied, so this link seems so far speculative. The crime-terror nexus in France appears to be composed of "**in-betweeners**" rather than hardened criminals: **low-to-mid-level delinquents** and "**polycriminals**" who seized opportunities. There are, however, significant exceptions.

At this stage, all of the cases examined are **Salafi-jihadi terrorists** with religious motivations and links with jihadis who emigrated to the Levant (Syria and Iraq). The vast majority of these individuals are **French-born citizens** or **French citizens naturalized** after their emigration to the French territory, where they spent most of their lives. French terrorist groups are mostly based in homegrown networks, but many individuals were part of the **French/Belgian network**, which is split between the two countries.

2. Existing literature

The material that the French team has analysed so far tends to confirm the assumptions contained in GLOBSEC's *From Criminals to Terrorists and Back? Kick-Off Report* (significant numbers of criminal-terrorism overlaps or "hybrids"⁵ in France, potentially a phenomenon of "gangster jihad" developing in the country, high number of terrorist arrests which are not immediately followed by a high number of convictions for terrorism offences, with further 450 judicial procedures which are linked to terrorism open).⁶ The

⁵ See: J. F. Gayraud, *Théorie des hybrids. Terrorisme et crime organisé*, Paris: CNRS Editions, 2017.

⁶ See: <https://www.globsec.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/Crime-Crime-Terror-Nexus-update.pdf>, p. 7 (accessed 20.03.2018).

main caveat concerns the current level of threat. At the time of writing, the threat level has slightly decreased in France since 2017. The French team considers it unlikely that the conclusions from the French cases with a larger sample will be radically different to the trends identified hereunder, but this remains a possibility.

The preliminary findings of the French team confirm the hypothetical profiles presented in the 2016 **ICSR Report** on criminal pasts.⁷ Most of the individuals examined to date are in their early twenties, with a non-negligible proportion of converts. Many have expressed the wish to go to Syria, have tried, or even succeeded, often after having been incarcerated for petty or violent crimes. Most of them were “early” in their criminal careers. Familiarity with violence, clandestine activity, and access to weapons is common and can be linked to the “gangster jihad” concept.

Tamara Makarenko’s analysis is more focused on the group dynamics in the crime-terror continuum rather than on the individual.⁸ However, the analysis can be adapted to the individual cases, particularly the crime-terror continuum scale (cooperation, convergence, transformation). The scale shows how an individual can move up and down this scale, depending on their (active or passive) involvement in a terrorist group. This echoes the issue mentioned in GLOBSEC’s *Kick-Off Report* with regard to the question “how many non-terrorist criminals cooperate with or gravitate towards terrorist groups?”⁹

3. What next?

Given the Islamic State’s recent military setbacks, it is likely that we will be presented with more and more cases of **returning foreign fighters**. It is hoped the team will have access to more information on these subjects (including more female cases).

Going forward, the French team has decided to only treat individuals who have a French passport in order to keep the focus on the French crime-terror nexus. However, it seems

⁷ See: R. Basra, P. R. Neumann, and C. Brunner, *Criminal Pasts, Terrorist Futures: European Jihadists and the New CrimeTerror Nexus*, The International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence, <http://icsr.info/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/Criminal-Pasts-Terrorist-Futures.pdf> (accessed 20.03.2018).

⁸ See: T. Makarenko, “The Crime-Terror Continuum: Tracing the Interplay between Transnational Organised Crime and Terrorism,” *Global Crime*, Vol. 6, No. 1, 2004, <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/1744057042000297025?journalCode=fglc20> (accessed 17.03.2018).

⁹ See: note 1, p. 10.

clear, as mentioned above, that French Salafi-jihadi terrorists consider the French/Belgian border as immaterial and that most of these groups are mixed, irrespective of their passports, which in any case is irrelevant given the ideology, since the notion of *Ummah* /Islamic nation prevails. Most jihadi networks in France (Buttes-Chaumont, Artigat, Toulouse, Roubaix) have had strong ties with the Belgian groups (Charleroi, Molenbeek-Saint-Jean, Schaerbeek) for decades.

Other than a foreseeable lack of open-source data at times, there have been no insurmountable methodological issues thus far in the cases examined. In terms of the numbers, the reference point for the French team remains the number sent to GLOBSEC by the team in the first progress report a figure based on Ministry of Interior sources: **136 procedures opened by the antiterrorism prosecutor for 165 individuals, resulting in 90 convictions**. However, the ministry's numbers do not encompass all the cases, in particular those categorized as "criminal association related to a terrorist endeavour" ("association de malfaiteurs en relation avec une entreprise terroriste"). Therefore, the final number will likely be higher. Sources suggest however that there is no consolidated data available in-house or on the Ministry of Justice's intranet, and that the interior and justice ministries, the Centre for the Analysis of Terrorism (CAT), and the anti-terrorism prosecutor (parquet antiterroriste) operate with different parameters. There is also a significant number of trials scheduled for the beginning of 2018, as mentioned above, which will add to the fluctuation in data. Therefore, the French team still expects that it will come up with a *sui generis* number that will refine the initial baseline.

4. Thematic analysis

Upon examination of the most important variables (sociological and economic background, religious education, geographical origin, age, and mainstream education), the French team were unable at this stage to draw any "standard profile" of a jihadi individual but did identify some key **similarities**.

Prior criminality is mostly committed by young males in their early 20s and is petty crime of the violent non-lethal type (theft, assault, fencing of stolen goods). Theft is the most prevalent. There is involvement in illicit trade, mostly fencing stolen goods and drug trafficking. The crimes are generally committed alone (violence, theft), although in some cases individuals who committed the crime together also radicalised together. There is a “delinquency of habit” that happens prior to the studied individuals embracing Jihadi ideology. When looking at the individuals’ origins, most came from medium-sized cities or similarly sized cities on the outskirts of major cities (10 000-100 000 inhabitants).

Based on the dataset, there has been no case of individuals with military experience who have turned to terrorism. No individual had previous **military experience** within the French military prior to their departure for Syria or Iraq, but most of them joined a paramilitary group affiliated with Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (formerly Al-Nusra Front), Al-Qaeda, or ISIS, while some of them were not technically part of any group but paid *Bay'a* (allegiance) to ISIS before committing their terrorist acts.

Regarding their **educational level**, the study does not lead us to a standard type. A lot of the profiles have very different education levels, and within the same networks some jihadis have completed a very high education curriculum (university degree) and some none at all. Some French jihadists completed a mainstream university degree (e.g., Institut Européen des Sciences Humaines) before turning to a Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated university and graduating, e.g., from the University of Medina in Saudi Arabia; while others barely achieved their *Baccalauréat* (Bachelor's degree). The vast majority of the studied individuals were apolitical.

Regarding ideology, the **conversion** phenomenon appears valid in the sense that individuals from both Muslim and non-Muslim backgrounds experienced their commitment to Salafi-jihadi groups as a form of conversion. Non-Muslims converted to Islam prior to their jihadi engagement, but even Muslims, or people with a Muslim cultural background, expressed their loyalty to ISIS as a form of “re-conversion,” as if they were returning to a purer form of Islam (Salafism) that they, their peers, parents, or ancestors had abandoned. However, if we consider that both Salafi-jihadists and non-Salafi-jihadists fall within Islam, even though they do not recognize it mutually, we might

speak of an ideological slide to Salafi-jihadism from within a more “classical” practice of Islam, rather than a “conversion.”

The importance of **propaganda** as a radicalizing factor is difficult to establish at present. Qualitative input suggests that the importance of propaganda as a radicalizing factor has been slightly overrated. If most of the individuals who joined ISIS were in possession of ISIS videos, pictures, and official press releases, it does not seem clear that propaganda played a more important role in radicalization of the ISIS jihadis than during the Bosnian and Algerian jihad in the 1990s (in which a lot of French citizens participated), even though the departures for those “lands of jihad” were less significant than today.

There are recurrent **radicalisation** agents: recruiters; prison; trips abroad. It is also interesting to notice a family dynamic in radicalisation in which brothers embrace the ideology together. Groups play a significant role in radicalisation, often revolving around charismatic recruiters and preachers, and they embrace the ideology together but also contribute to the construction of their clandestine identities, creating a strong loyalty network. These small groups often undertake *Hijra* (“Emigration”) together or strike alongside each other in terrorist attacks.

Most of the individuals **travelled quite significantly** to prepare for Jihad, whether it was directly to a military zone (Syria/Iraq) or to other Islamic regions or countries (North Africa, Saudi Arabia) for religious education. However, if a lot of the individual cases examined made timely return journeys to France/Belgium, some left Europe to accomplish *Hijra* and never came back once they reached the Levant. This is especially the case of individuals who were strongly socialized and active in the Salafi community before their emigration.

As regards **foreign fighters**, they hail mostly from Syria and Iraq, but also Yemen. Some travelled to join Al-Qaeda in the early 2000s and others pledged allegiance to ISIS later on and trained or fought with other individuals in the dataset . Many of the studied individuals stayed more than two years in Syria or Iraq before going to France to strike a target, be killed, or captured. Some individuals in the dataset stayed in Syria/Iraq to fight or to organise recruiting, attacks, or take part in the ISIS administration. For these individuals, returning “home” did not seem to be an option.

Most of the cases studied were tied to networks of people who had **social connections prior to their jihadi enrolment** (family ties, friendship, community relations through mosques, or other means of “religious” socialization). These individuals did not travel or perform their terrorist activities alone. In relations with their **peers and family**, a variety of attitudes can be observed. Some jihadists decided to abandon their family, others decided to commit terrorist acts despite their family’s knowledge and disapproval, and others still went along with their whole family. Some recruited individuals among their own family, not only within their own generation but also amongst their parents’.

Solo actors do appear in the dataset, but their profiles are varied. The first type may be characterised as **opportunists** who may have hijacked the jihadi cause to express their frustration, hatred, or suicidal behaviour. One was incarcerated for long periods on and off and always deeply resented the police his whole life; the other suffered from schizophrenia and was in grave depression, a third was an alcoholic and went through a nervous breakdown. The second type, which could be “**real” solo actors**, a sturdier link between them and a terrorist organisation has been established (pledging allegiance before carrying out terrorist attacks). Solo actors are often called “lone wolves,” and this moniker has been criticised over the years and we can see here that some terrorists received outside help and operated within a very loose network.¹⁰ The importance of these networks, be they terrorist or criminal, play a major role in the preparation and execution of terrorist attacks.

Based on the current dataset, we cannot establish whether the studied individuals systematically resorted to crime to **fund** their terrorist enterprises, mostly because the information is rarely accessible via an open source. Some definitely did, but in other cases individuals received social benefits or contracted consumer loans participated in trade to finance their activities.

With regard to convictions, individuals arrested for terrorism in France are convicted for terrorism and not for lesser or “ordinary” crimes that can effectively act as a proxy charge for outright terrorism offences. If other charges are added to this conviction, they remain secondary.

¹⁰ See: B. Schuurman et al., “End of the Lone Wolf: The Typology that Should Not Have Been,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/1057610X.2017.1419554?scroll=top&needAccess=true> (accessed 20.03.2018).

5. Conclusions and recommendations

The radicalization of **returnees in custody** is an element that we did not analyse directly. It would involve studying returnees while in jail or once they are released. However, all the information we could get regarding their situation within the custodial space emphasizes a worsening disavowal of French society and their non-Muslim peers in general. The Salafi phrase “Loyalty and disavowal” (Al-Wala’ wal-Bara’) seems all the more applicable to Salafi-jihadi returnees in jail. The idea of loyalty (Al-Wala’) means the individual has to obey the most rigorist clerics and standards of the Salafi-jihadi movement, with the concept of disavowal (Al-Bara’) its opposite. Those ideas are conveyed by French Salafi-jihadi terrorists to petty criminals and gangsters in French prisons (Osny, Fleury-Mérogis in the Paris region for example), which not only reinforces the idea of a crime-terror nexus, but above all leads us to believe that this nexus is built within French prisons. Most French criminals who took part in jihadi activities did it after a period in jail. **The key to the crime-terror nexus for the French case may be within the organization of the custodial institution.**

The importance of **networks** cannot be understated. Most jihadists, depending on their geographical origins, have come across each other at one point in their lives. It would be helpful to focus on socialisation, group dynamics, how they constitute themselves, apprenticeship through the group, the construction of their identity and loyalty dynamics. However, it would be useful to make a clear distinction between “stay-at-home supporters,” “homegrown terrorists,” foreign fighters, and returnees. Their “radicalisation” is linked to very different motivations, desires, and expectations, and these should be acknowledged to better understand their thought processes and their profiles. In view of this, it could also help to address the seemingly shortening of the time between the different “stages of radicalisation”: from conversion to Jihadi ideology as an attraction and simple sympathy towards the ideology, to identity/ideological adherence and the rationalisation of this belief, and eventually to terrorist participation. The shortening of this period may be linked to the increase in terrorism-related arrests, foiled plots, and in isolated solo-actor type terrorist attacks.