

FROM CRIMINALS TO TERRORISTS AND BACK?

QUARTERLY REPORT 2018

ITALY



FROM CRIMINALS TO TERRORISTS AND BACK?

Quarterly Report: Italy

Giovanni Giacalone and Nicolò Spagna¹

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:²**

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.

1. Introduction

The crime-terror nexus so far has not been established, as only two out of the 14 examined cases have a proven criminal past. However, it is important to

¹ Both authors are affiliated with the Italian Team for Security, Terroristic Issues and Managing Emergencies (ITSIME), Research Center of Department of Sociology of the Catholic University of Sacred Heart in Milan.

² 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.

consider that most of the cases so far analysed are still pending; the search for information on possible past criminality is still underway and the criminal status of several of the individuals under analysis is currently unknown. Expressing a connection between crime and terror at this early stage of the research is premature and could even be misleading, as information still needs to be acquired to complete the pending cases. However, if needed, it is possible to state that so far, a crime-terror connection is not prevailing. Additionally, this might change as more information is acquired in time and as more cases are analysed.

In relation to the old-school nexus in Italy (between organisations like the Islamic State and the mafia and to a lesser extent, the “gangster jihad” phenomenon), if we take an overview of all 57 cases with terror links for the year 2015, none of them were involved in illegal trade activities with Italian criminal organisations. The only case that did involve a cell of 10 Pakistani individuals active in human trafficking were members of a foreign Al Qaeda-linked criminal organisation operating in Italy. Their leader was blacklisted by the FBI and already under surveillance. The cell was operating between Lombardy, Lazio, Marche, Puglia, and Sardinia, and the cell leader was in touch with Al Qaeda senior leaders. However, this can be considered an isolated case.³

2. Main theme of the research

Over the total course of the project **we expect to analyse 57 cases, 14 of which have already been examined or are currently pending**. We define a case as “pending” when most of the information available at the time has been collected but we believe that it is still possible to find out more as different sources become available. A case is defined as “closed” when all options of further research have been exhausted

Throughout the process of the data collection, we have struggled with obtaining information related to the following categories from the project’s codebook:

- Military/Paramilitary/Foreign Fighting Experience Variables;
- Radicalisation Variables;
- Education and career;
- Health/Mental Health, addictions.

First, the individuals arrested for terrorism offences in Italy in 2015 are mostly foreign. The authorities of the countries of origin of the individuals under analysis are not willing

³ See: L’Eco Di Bergamo, *L’imam di Zingonia arrestato: “Mi ha mandato qui Bin Laden”*, 25 April 2015, https://www.ecodibergamo.it/stories/Cronaca/limam-di-zingonia-arrestatomi-ha-mandato-qui-bin-laden_1117396_11/ (accessed 18.5.2018).

to share information on their military services as it is considered sensitive and classified. Regarding the radicalisation variables, there is a lack of public information on the personal lives of the individuals; open sources rarely state the origin or reasons for radicalisation, so to acquire more details it is necessary to contact family members (who are often either unwilling to answer our questions or claim to be unaware of any details or even of the radicalisation itself). The educational level of the individuals so far examined is very low. Finally, as to health/mental status and addictions, due to privacy restrictions it is very complicated to obtain such information unless it first appears in media reports or the court proceedings of a given individual are open.

A fundamental challenge related to our work in the broader *From Criminals to Terrorists and Back?* project is the reliability of the available open sources, usually media. To mitigate this, we have been in touch with the local press and court houses to seek information. This attempt does not always have a positive outcome and it tends to delay the process since feedback is often slow.

3. Thematic analysis

We have divided the cases into two categories: **propagandist** figures and **action** figures. The first category includes all those individuals involved in the dissemination of extremist material (written or oral) for propaganda and indoctrination. The second category includes all those individuals who expressed the will to act, either by perpetrating terrorist attacks, joining jihad abroad, or facilitating volunteers for warzones. It is necessary to underline that the action figures can also perform propagandistic actions.

As shown in the graph below (Fig. 1), **60% of the total cases were directly involved in action**, either by trying to join jihad abroad or trying to conduct attacks on Italian soil. In some cases, they acted as facilitators for others who wanted to join the jihad or attack somewhere. **The remaining 40% of the cases were only involved in the dissemination of extremist propaganda.**

As to the territory features, it is very interesting to see how 35 out of 57 cases were located in northern Italy and 13 in the centre. This element can be explained by the fact that since the central-northern part of the country is the industrial-economic engine, many immigrants, among them some of the 2015 terrorism arrestees, tend to travel to these areas to look for job opportunities but also to join the vast foreign communities already settled there. Interestingly, this migration pattern is visible among Italian citizens as well as the 2015 terrorism arrestees. Three of the individuals resided abroad but conducted extremist activities in Italy, hence they became target for deportation.

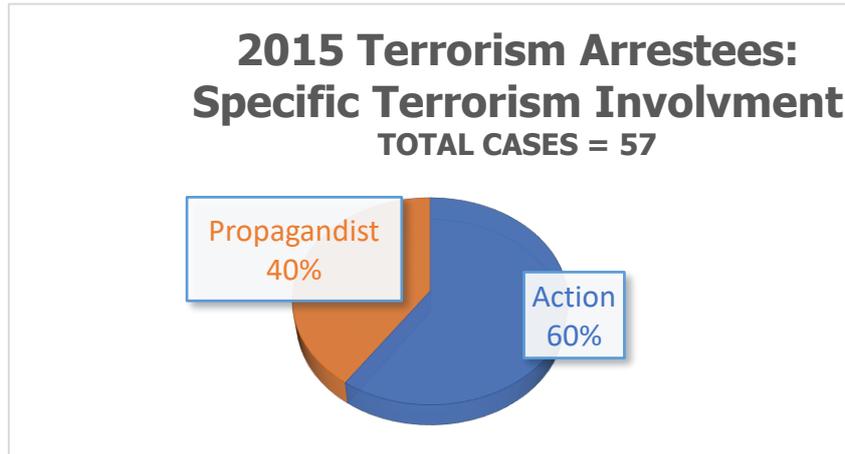


Fig. 1: Specific Terrorism Involvement.

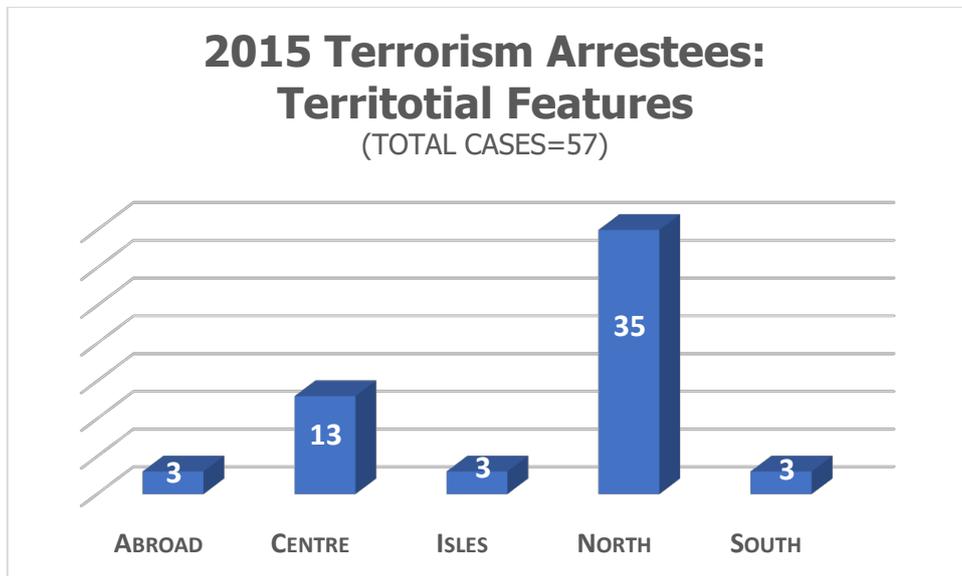


Fig. 2: Territorial features.

We were able to establish the ages of 51 out of the 57 individuals in our sample. The oldest was 61 while the youngest was 19; the approximate average age is around 35 years. The blue line is not continuous at some points because age information was not available in six cases.

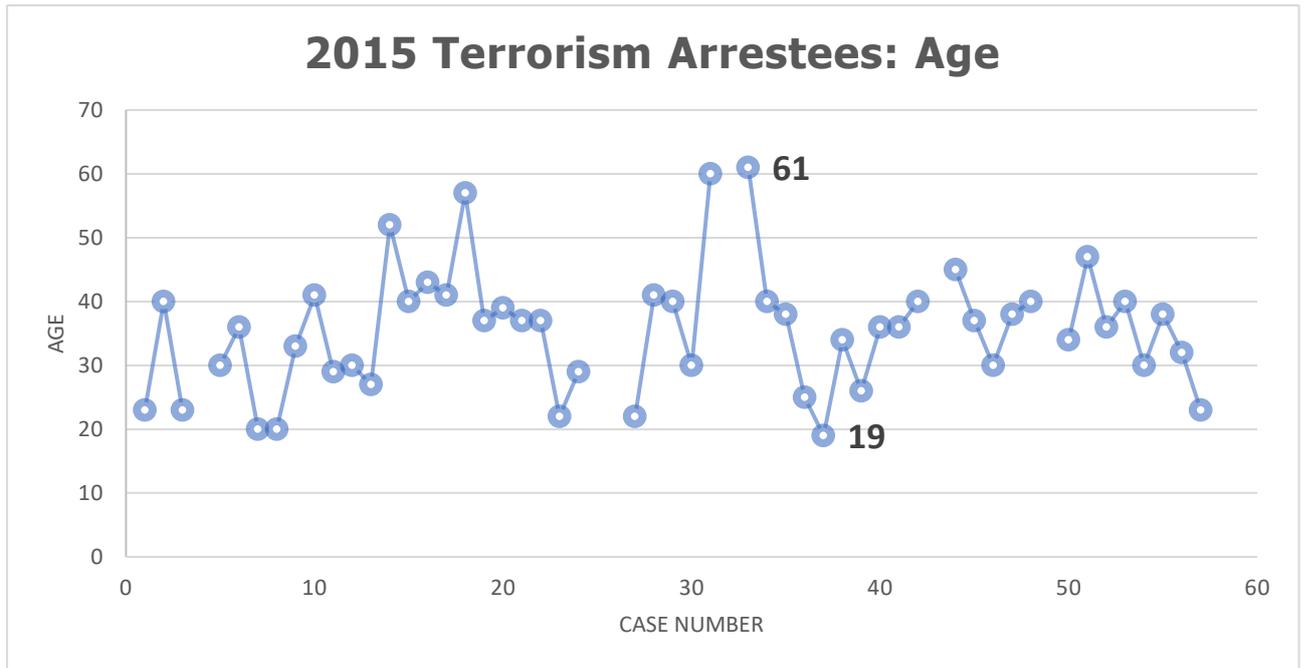


Fig. 3: Individuals by age.

3.1. Prior crimes, illicit trade, and convictions

As already stated in the introduction, a group of 10 people, all members of an Al Qaeda cell, was involved in human trafficking and in the planning of a terror attack on Italian soil. They were also linked to the cell that attacked the Peshawar street market in October 2009.

Among the cases already analysed, one Moroccan citizen had been arrested for drug trafficking and human smuggling. One Tunisian citizen had been arrested for possession and manufacture of false IDs; in addition, he was also charged with entering Italy illegally, in September 2015 after having been expelled.

3.2. Education and career

The careers of the individuals studied are mostly linked to *manual labour*. Several of the subjects examined were reported as unemployed. Regarding education, all of the cases so far examined, except for one, were below a high-school degree.

3.3. Ideology and conversion issue

Italy's 2015 terrorism arrestees are radical Islamists. It is difficult to ascertain the degree of one's religiosity or whether it reached radical or fanatical levels. Obtainment of such data necessitates contacting acquaintances or relatives of the individuals in question and that was only possible in two cases so far. Such an approach allowed us to gather more specific information on the single conversion case in the sample.

3.4. Foreign Fighters, lone wolves, and financing of terrorism

Among the cases examined to this point there has been no sign of involvement in any type of foreign fighting activities nor any individual ready to commit lone-wolf terror attacks. Although three individuals were arrested and accused of trying to reach IS-controlled territory in Syria, they had already been operating for the organisations while in Italy.

Regarding the previously cited Afghani/Pakistani cell operating between Sardinia and continental Italy, the cell leader was managing various commercial activities in Olbia and Rome, and through such activities he was financing Al Qaeda cells. The revenues were obtained in two ways: first, by illegally smuggling Pakistani and Afghani immigrants (for each, the price they had to pay was between 6,000 and 7,000 Euros); second, by soliciting money for humanitarian causes by collecting money from zakat in local Islamic musallat to be sent to terror organizations in Pakistan through the Hawala system.

4. Conclusions

As already stated above, the research is still at the beginning stage, the information so far acquired is incomplete, several of the 14 cases examined are still pending, and others still need to be analysed. It is legitimate to provide an initial trend but keeping well in mind that the information is still “raw” and yet to be completed.

So far, we have not identified a pronounced crime-terror nexus link in Italy (only present in two out of the 14 cases analysed). Second, 2015 saw the quick conversion and radicalisation of an ethnically Italian family, performing this process in connection with another, Albanian family. Such cases clearly emphasize the importance of the family/clan connection, also in relation to the links with jihadi/criminal organisations in Albania, the country of origin of the latter family. Family bonds also played a role in the construction of the aforementioned Pakistani cell smuggling immigrants illegally into Italy.

The territorial findings also deserve attention, as 35 out of the 57 cases for the year 2015 were located in northern Italy and 13 in the centre.

The northern part of Italy can indeed be considered a hot spot for Islamist extremism for the following reasons:

1. The presence of a vast and rooted Islamic community (with all its ethnic and national differences);
2. The north is more industrially developed and there are more job opportunities;

3. The north of Italy is closer to other European areas where radicalism is active (France, Germany, Austria, Belgium) and where the individuals involved might have network connections. (It is important to recall that Anis Amri was killed by Italian authorities in Sesto San Giovanni while reaching the Milano area from France/Belgium).

Once again, it is important to keep in mind that with further analysis involving the remaining cases as well as the ones currently pending it will be possible to acquire much more information that will enable the researchers to provide a more complete and detailed picture with specific recommendations.