

FROM CRIMINALS TO TERRORISTS AND BACK?

QUARTERLY REPORT 2018

GERMANY



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Quarterly Report: Germany

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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: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. Foreign fighters: just criminal jihadists?

Starting our snapshot assessment on the most discussed topic, jihadi foreign fighters, which dominated the public discourse on jihadism in the last few years before attention switched to refugees and, unfortunately, still neglects the relevance of the local radical milieu, we recapitulate the results of a much broader analysis of German security institutions (police and intelligence agencies of all the federal states and the Federal Criminal Police Office). The sample analysed here includes the total of all known cases of foreign fighters (784 as of June 2016). In 2015, the year relevant to our project, departures as well as returns were declining (see

¹ University of Public Administration, Bremen and MPS Analysis.

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.

graph), but enough data could be analysed to draw some conclusions, especially about the crime-terror nexus, as represented in biographical data.³

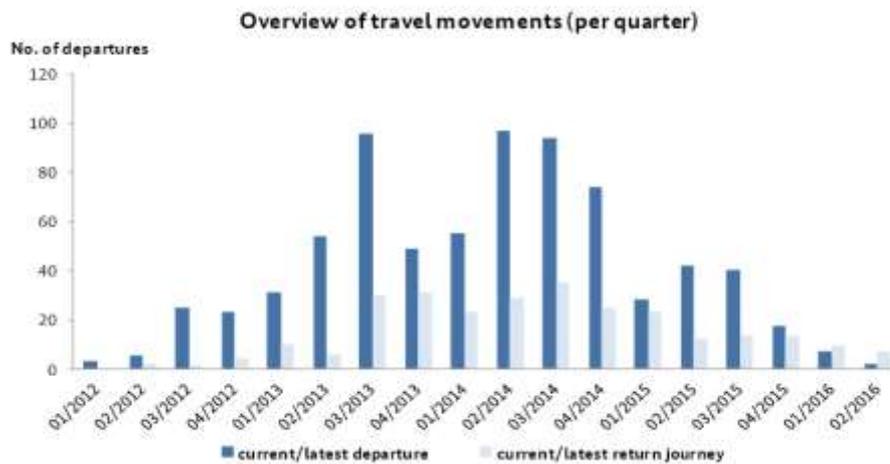


Figure 1: Overview of travel movements (source: see footnote 3)

Of those who left Germany to join jihadi groups in Syria and Iraq, 79% were male and 21% were female. At the time of (their first) departure, they were between 13 and 62 years old. The majority (322) were between 22 and 25 years old, with the next-largest group that of 18 to 21-year olds (164), followed by 26 to 29-year olds (143).⁴ It is striking that around two-thirds of those who left Germany were already known to the police: 26% for violent offences, 24% for property crime, 18% for politically motivated crime, and 10% for narcotics crime. Before becoming radicalised, these people were most often noted for property (62%) and violent (60%) crime, followed by narcotics crime (35%). Only about 4% were associated with politically motivated offences before becoming radicalised.

During the radicalisation process (be it primarily via group dynamics or through the exposure to radical ideology), however, the largest category of criminal offences was politically motivated crime (55%) while violent crime (47%), property crime (41%), and narcotics crime (14%) continued to represent a large share. For 189 of those associated with criminality before and during radicalisation, their offences before and during the radicalisation process were compared and showed that more politically motivated offences were recorded during radicalisation. At the same time, the share of all other offences decreased significantly during the radicalisation process. As shown in the following graphs with the rise of politically motivated crime from 2% to 27% during radicalisation, property crime declined from 29% to 20%, violent crime from 28% to 23%, sexual crime from 3% to 1%, narcotics crime from 17% to 7% and other crimes remained stable (from 22% to 21%).⁵

³ Federal Criminal Police Office, Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution, und HesseInformation and Competence Centre against Extremism. *Analysis of the background and process of radicalisation among persons who left Germany to travel to Syria or Iraq based on Islamist motivations. 2016 Update.* Berlin: 2017; p.6.

⁴ Ibid., p. 32.

⁵ Ibid., p. 18.

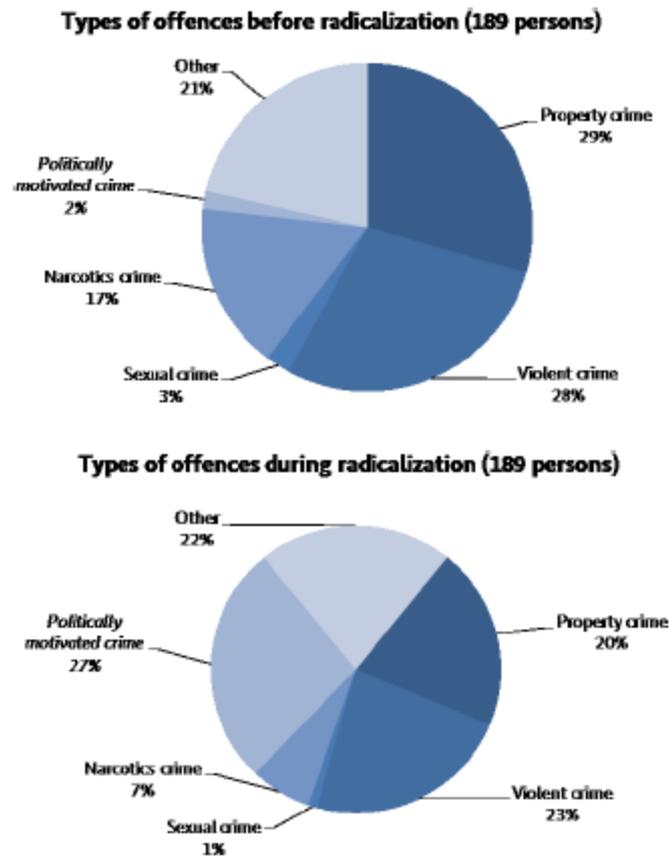


Figure 2: Types of offences (Source: See footnote 3)

Information on the number of offences was available for almost all those people known to police (504).⁶ Of these, 53% were associated with three or more offences and 32% with six or more. This confirms the trend outlined by German security authorities in an earlier analysis of foreign fighter biographical backgrounds as well as the new crime-terror nexus hypothesis underlying our current research. Data show that most of those with a criminal record who left Germany had committed multiple offences.

Concerning the radicalisation process, the security authorities have information on 572 of those who left Germany. Here, we learned that for 311 of them, friends represented a relevant factor at the start of their radicalisation (54%), followed by contacts at (relevant) mosques (48%), the internet (44%), so-called Islam seminars (27%), Koran distribution activities such as the “Read!” campaign (24%), family members (21%), so-called fundraising activities (6%), contacts at school (3%), and contacts in penal institutions (2%).⁷

⁶ The authors of the study note, that “the number of offences is based on the information available in police systems at the cut-off date for collecting this information. Owing to data protection law (e.g., deadlines for deleting data), these systems may no longer have information on older offences, so a person’s ‘criminal career’ can no longer be fully reconstructed at a later date. As a result, the average number of offences given here may actually be higher in some cases.” See: note 5.

⁷ That group dynamics play a major role is also visible in the fact that of the current 274 returnees, most had originally left Germany with friends (53%), about 28% of them travelled alone, and 22% travelled with family members. See: *Ibid.*, p. 24.

More than half (477) of the 769 so-called foreign fighters (to join IS or other jihadi groups in the Syrian/Iraqi conflict zone) were German citizens, with the rest children of immigrants and had spent most of their lives in Germany. Around 20% were women. The youngest was a 13-year-old teenager. We also found around 25 former German soldiers who wanted to bring their fighting experience to global jihad.

These results lead to the assumption that the current jihadi narrative (redemption narrative),⁸ as well as the operational networks on the ground – intentional or not – attracted and recruited many young people from criminal milieus to join the jihadi cause in Middle Eastern battlefields. This pattern could be representative of a general change in the recruitment patterns of the current jihadi movement, but it could also represent only the rather mobile and militant part of it, that is, those who could be mobilised to leave the country. Therefore, further research is needed focusing on the whole movement, including the local milieu that stayed in Europe.

Still, most of our 12 biographical profiles of 2015 German terrorism arrestees analysed in qualitative detail to now support the hypothesis of a crime-terror nexus. Here, not all of the analysed cases were related to jihadi groups in Syria and Iraq, and we also have the case of a homegrown, thwarted attacker and a person who seems to have been radicalized because he was related to a victim of the right-wing terrorist group NSU (Nationalsozialistischer Untergrund).

Our analysis found very diverse profiles: from a 58-year-old ringleader of a broader network that was deeply involved in the recruitment processes and the transfer of goods and even vehicles to Syria, to a man with psychiatric problems who had attempted an attack with a homemade bomb at a bicycle race. Also, there is the paradigm crime-terror nexus case of a young man who was sentenced to prison for committing burglary but then became more radical during this prison setting and left to Syria to join the Islamic State.

All profiles analysed until now represent males. With the exception of one rather successful school boy—probably self-radicalised and diagnosed with Asperger's syndrome who returned from Syria completely disillusioned—most of them had a challenging socio-economic background in which violence and criminality were both known and oft-accepted patterns in the broader social context.

We began the coding for this project with people belonging to different networks (Berlin, Bremen, Cologne, Dinslaken and other), hoping to then slowly get a better picture of the relational networks during the coding procedure when adding people arrested around these individuals. The idea behind this methodological network approach is to see the individuals as knots in the broader network around which clusters of people are connected, maybe knowing each other before radicalising, maybe radicalising together, or maybe having met abroad in a jihadi training camp or similar circumstances.

The 12 profiles analysed so far confirm the broader assessments that in a certain segment of the Salafi-jihadi scene, a person with a criminal background being radicalised is becoming a common pattern. Still, the intensely intertwined crime-terror biographies seem to be

⁸ Basra, Rajan, Peter Neumann, und Claudia Brunner. *Criminal Pasts, Terrorist Futures: European Jihadists and the New Crime-Terror Nexus*. London: ICSR, 2016, p. 24.

especially relevant to the lower ranks of the jihadi movement. Of the 12 analysed profiles, most are related to the flow of foreign fighters towards Syria and Iraq and the support of jihadi groups in the same region.

Most of those we looked at were returnees in their 20s who had left Germany individually or in groups to fight alongside different jihadi groups (GER-1, GER-4, GER-8, GER-9, GER-10, GER-11, GER-12). But there were also cases of older people, such as a well-known Islamist (GER-5), who had been involved in confrontational violence and tried to leave to the conflict zone but was arrested beforehand, the bomb-maker (GER-3), preparing an attack at a cycle race, the radical imam (GER-6) and his financier (GER-7) of the Berlin Fussiliet mosque, which was frequented by the attacker of the Berlin Christmas market 2016, and the ringleader of a broader radical network (GER-2).

While for some, joining the jihadi movement with its strict religious rules and regulations seems to have been a crime-avoidance strategy (that would explain the changing crime patterns before and during radicalisation as described above), others justified their continued criminal acts as a tribute to a higher cause. The now-emerging patterns might change when more data is analysed, as we cannot assume these early findings to be representative.

The judges who led the trial and journalists who attended describe this group as young people joining gangs at an early stage and then adopting a ruthless, gullible, self-centred attitude.⁹

The main crimes we see in their criminal records are fraud, theft, burglary, and drug dealing, as well as sometimes robbery and handling of stolen goods accompanied by a violent attitude. Some already have spent time in prison, be it before, during, or after their radicalisation. There are also cases in which the crimes were perpetrated to support the terrorist group or, in a broader sense, the radical network.

Early cases of this phenomenon appeared already during the first wave of German foreign fighters who left for the Afghan-Pakistani border region, such as a later member of the German Taliban Mujaheddin, who made sales on eBay of goods he did not possess to generate the means for his jihad in Waziristan. Therefore, after his return he was not only tried for joining a terrorist organisation but also for internet fraud.¹⁰

In our starter sample, the most disturbing case might be the network of a 58 year old man whose network of about 40 supporters helped several people to leave Germany for Syria and celebrated even the death of his own son in Iraq (calling it martyrdom). He was involved in recruitment, financing, and the organisation of the trips. He gave tips on how to stay low key, travelled himself several times to the region, and transferred between 15 vehicles, mainly ambulances. His facebook-page through which he was collecting donations, had more than 15 000 likes. Another case in our sample, (GER-10)¹¹, was also involved in this finance-generating network before he left for Syria and there joined the IS secret police.

⁹ At the same time, they seem to be craving recognition, which makes them easily manipulated and, to a certain point, naive. It seems as if especially the younger ones were more influenced by peer groups than by their parents or the broader society. They seem to be adapting a gangster attitude as propagated by popular media and pop culture, such as gangster rap for example, that extol the ideal of violent masculinity as a gang member.

¹⁰ Steinberg, Guido. *German Jihad*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2013, p. 152.

¹¹ The Lohberger Brigade (as they called themselves) was a group of around 25 young Salafi jihadis from Dinslaken-Lohberg. At least 12 of them left to Syria and some returned and then faced trial; interestingly, some had been

But donations were not the only sources of finance. Several members faced another trial with him for robberies of churches (money and precious objects) and schools (laptops and cash cards), a pattern that reminds us that terrorist groups can generate their own capabilities of low-level organised crime.

2. Crime-terror nexus – only a temporary phenomenon?

As mentioned above, a criminal past has ambivalent links to jihadism, since conversion and radicalisation also promise a radical exit from a life of crime.¹² Compared to Salafis of older generations, the new generation of Jihadis seem to more rigidly neglect tradition and accept only their own authenticity and their own interpretation of Islam. Here, their very rudimentary religious knowledge merges with a certain gang-like subculture.¹³

Today, we have the aggravating circumstance that often terrorists have to generate the means for their involvement by themselves, instead of expecting support from a broader organisation. This is especially relevant to the new decentralised form of jihadism. For example, the 9/11 attacks in 2001, before Al Qaeda transformed into a looser network, were financed from a **centralised position (“headquarters”)**. **Today’s terrorists have to be far more creative and autonomous and use their own networks and resources to finance their violent acts.** That might also be the reason why we can observe a rise in low-cost attacks (ordinary kitchen knives, stolen cars, etc.) **and the ongoing decline in terrorists’ capabilities. These individualised forms of jihad need other forms of financing than hierarchical, centrally planned, commanded, and implemented attacks.**

Still, both formats—top down and bottom up financing of attacks—seem to exist at the same time, while the cost of an attack itself is always quite low. Higher costs emerge in the ideological and practical education of the perpetrators and the maintenance of radical networks. Local terrorist groups operating in conflict settings even have to pay fighters, often at least support for the families of fallen recruits, and are therefore more interested in maintaining welfare systems and broader social infrastructure.

A literature review shows that terrorist groups and networks use different financial sources¹⁴ such as state-sponsors or donations. IS, for example, has been intensively and professionally using social media to acquire donations (propagated as a special form of jihad). They also might get single donations from wealthy individuals or by engaging in semi-legal businesses, taxing conquered territories, etc.

Classical criminal activities for financing terrorism are the drug trade and hijacking. The recently observable overlap of the radical and criminal milieus in Germany are illustrated by some examples not covered in our 2015 sample:

radicalised in Germany in Turkish right-wing circles. Flade, Florian. *Dschihad-Rückkehrer Teil 6 – Der Jäger*. <https://ojihad.wordpress.com/2015/08/18/dschihad-rueckkehrer-teil-6-der-jaeger/>, 2015.

¹² Rekawek, Kacper et al., *From Criminals to Terrorists and back? Kick-off report*. Bratislava: Globsec, 2017, p. 11.

¹³ On the other hand, this attitude attributed to “generation ISIS” is not that new—the Dutch Hofstadgroup already discussed in the 1990s halal and haram in the context of robbery, murder, and manslaughter.

¹⁴ Napoleoni, Loretta. „The New Economy of Terror: How Terrorism is Financed.“ *UN Forum on Crime and Society*, 4:1/2, 2004: 31-48; Oftedal, Emilie. *The financing of jihadi terrorist cells in Europe (FFI-rapport 2014/02234)*. Oslo: Forsvarets Forskningsinstitutt, 2014; Ranstorp, Magnus. *Microfinancing the Caliphate: How the Islamic State is Unlocking the Assets of European Recruits*. CTC Senitel, May 25, 2016; Shelley, Louise. „The Unholy Trinity: Transnational Crime, Corruption, and Terrorism.“ *Brown Journal of International Affairs*, 2005: 11(2): 101-111.

- An Islamist cell that tried to obtain €4 million through a life-insurance fraud scheme, staging a death in an accident to finance different terror scenarios;
- The perpetrator of the Christmas market attack of December 2016 in Berlin, Anis Amri, was involved in drug dealing as well as in radical Salafi networks while he was being monitored (his drug dealing might have led to the false assumption that the risk of an attack perpetrated by him was not probable; the cases GER-6 and GER-7 in our sample, were contacts of Amri);
- In Kassel, during a raid of the Medina mosque, not only was jihadist propaganda found but also drugs.
- When police searched the flat of a 28-year-old man in a small city in Hesse suspected of drug dealing, they found besides drugs also a Kalashnikov and jihadist propaganda. It turned out that the suspect had just returned from Syria.

Our research will show if this combination of terrorism and ordinary or organised crime is part of the implementation of a broader strategy (as elaborated below) or just a logical consequence of the union of the two phenomena. As many recruits of terrorist groups have a criminal background, they bring in old contacts and networks into the radical milieu. These can be used for the jihadi cause by reframing their criminal energy in a sacral setting as a resource for worshipping god and their cause.

3. Future of crime-terror nexus – more of the same or a new black hole?

Contact between the criminal and organised crime milieu are not only seen as useful to the jihadi recruitment base but also are explicitly addressed in several instructions and strategic writings of Al Qaeda and IS. Here, it is being emphasized that the cells may do anything to damage the enemy societies. In this sense, criminal acts per se can be classified as a certain kind of jihad. The strategic book *Idarat at-Tawahosh* (“**The Management of Savagery**”)¹⁵ as well as the Al Qaeda manual¹⁶ describe in great detail the installation and financing of terrorist cells. Precise instructions are given about different leader and member profiles as well as recommendations for the recruitment of agents, members, or other useful persons, the procurement of data, and the use of weapons. Besides these, another special focus is put on smugglers.

That also corresponds well with the individual motivational setting of a redemption narrative¹⁷, as elaborated by Basra et al. and could in the future create what Makarenko called a “**Black Hole Syndrome**”¹⁸, i.e., organisations—nowadays rather networks—transforming from purely criminal entities towards pursuing political goals via violent terrorist means.

Organised crime is best described as collective criminal offences following economic motivations that provide a long-term structure for generating financial gains through the committing of crimes. Traditionally, activities associated with organised crime include prostitution, the drug trade, blackmail, and extortion. Current manifestations of organised crime

¹⁵ See: Abou Bakr an-Naji, *Idarat at-Tawahhush (The Management of Savagery: The Most Critical Stage Through Which the Oumma Will Pass)*, Combatting Terrorism Centre, 2006.

¹⁶ See: Jackson, Brian A., Loidolt, Bryce, “Considering al-Qa’da’s Innovation Doctrine: From Strategic Texts to “Innovation in Practice,” *Terrorism and Political Violence*, Volume 25, 2013 (2): 284-310.

¹⁷ Basra, *op. cit.*, p. 24.

¹⁸ See: Makarenko, Tamara, “The Crime-Terror Continuum: Tracking the Interplay between Transnational Organized Crime and Terrorism,” *Global Crime*, 2004: 6(1): 129-145.

in the era of globalisation are also relating legal with semi-legal and illegal business in a de-territorialised manner.

For terrorists, involvement in organised crime also makes sense, and organised forms of theft, fraud, blackmail, and smuggling, as well as drug dealing and counterfeiting, have already been observed in this field. The crimes were either committed by members of terrorist groups or on behalf of them by their supporters. On Makarenko's terrorism crime continuum, this is described at the right side of the continuum as "criminal activities for operational purposes" and ad hoc "alliances with criminal organisations" for the purpose of money laundering, acquisition of weapons, smuggling of group members, etc..¹⁹

All this is not new, as we can read in the testimonial of Marwan Abou-Taam for the investigation committee on the terrorist attack in Berlin, 19th December 2016,²⁰ that some Jihadis responsible for the Madrid attack used drug smuggling routes to transport weapons from Morocco to Spain, and it seems as if the attacker of the Jewish museum in Brussels also got his Kalashnikov from a person with good contacts in the illegal weapons trade. In Germany, we see that Salafis sometimes engage people related to clans known for being involved in organised crime as security. It is not known yet if this might be the first bridging of the two milieus.

Smuggling and counterfeiting have been relevant in criminal circles for decades. In the 1990s, the smuggling of cigarettes and weapons boomed, but we now see new dimensions, for example, the cocaine trade from South America often takes place via Western Africa, with terrorist groups often controlling the smuggling routes.

At the local level, petty criminals play a major role, since de-centralisation and flattened hierarchies require self-financing, be it via drug dealing, theft, and fraud—especially welfare and internet—the most common crimes.

As the transnational repressive and regulatory countermeasures have been imposed on terrorism, local networks are more and more cut off from global money transfers and financially powerful terrorist groups and donors. Therefore, for many groups, investment in local criminality is the next best solution to remain operational.

We hope that with the analysis of our next batch of profiles—together, we expect it will be around 100—that most of them probably will be similar to those already analysed. We will be able to better describe and analyse whether the criminal background of many members of the jihadi milieu will allow the jihadi movement to develop the capabilities of organised crime groups. Or, if on the other side of the continuum, we will see a proliferation of violence-prone and experienced personnel from the terrorist spectrum in existing organised-crime organisations, making them more powerful and dangerous than they already are.

¹⁹ Sirseloudi, Matenia, *Terrorism Financing in the Balkans. Old or New Terror Crime Nexus?*, European Expert Network on Terrorism paper based on findings of ISF-funded project "Terrorism Financing. Impacts and Developments regarding Radicalisation and Terrorism in the Western Balkan Region," 2017.

²⁰ See: Abou-Taam, M. *Stellungnahme zur Anhörung am 26. April 2018 "Gewaltbereiter Islamismus und Radikalisierungsprozesse,"* Berlin: Deutscher Bundestag, Erster Untersuchungsausschuss der 19. Wahlperiode, 2018.