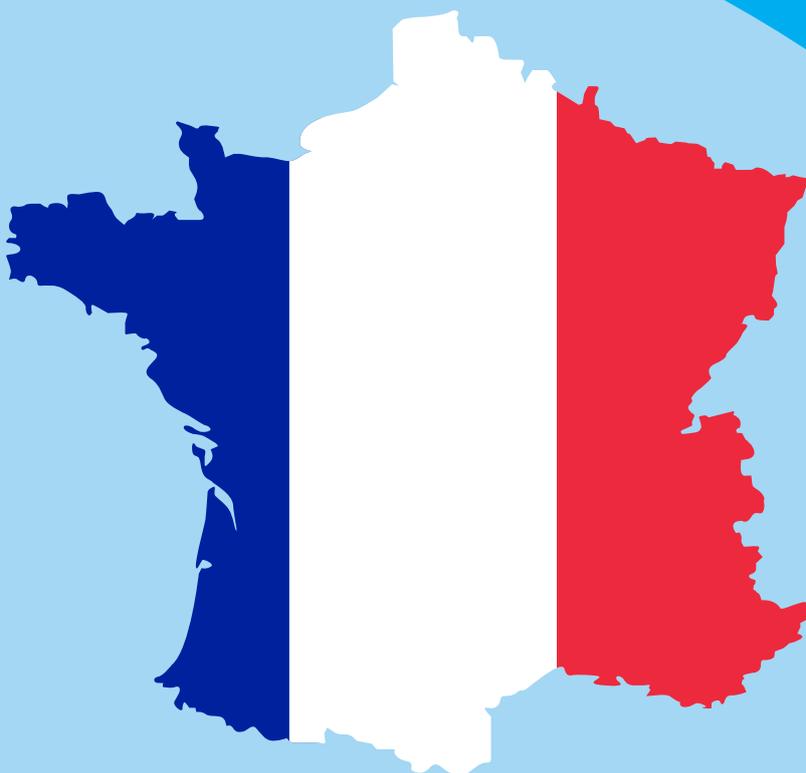


FROM CRIMINALS TO TERRORISTS AND BACK?

Quarterly Report: France



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QUARTERLY REPORT: FRANCE

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The worse ISIS terrorist atrocities in Europe, including the 2015 Paris and 2016 Brussels attacks, were undertaken by individuals who had been involved in criminality and illegal trade before they joined the ranks of the world's most dangerous terrorist organisation. It is no longer widely assumed that Europe's terrorists are radicals first and foremost: the bulk of them are criminals who turned to political violence along the way. The threat of a "crime-terror nexus" therefore hangs over Europe. In view of this, GLOBSEC – an independent, non-partisan, non-governmental organisation aiming to shape the global debate on foreign and security policy – has developed a research and advocacy project aimed at addressing the "crime-terror nexus" in Europe. Titled From Criminals to Terrorists and Back?, the remit of the project is to: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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INTRODUCTION

The French research team has studied data from 20 cells, with 78 individual cases currently included in the database.

- ▶ Buttes-Chaumont
- ▶ Lunel
- ▶ Nice
- ▶ Bruxelles
- ▶ Magnanville
- ▶ Brittany
- ▶ Normandy
- ▶ Fort Béar
- ▶ Orléans
- ▶ Albertville
- ▶ Artigat
- ▶ Toulouse
- ▶ Champigny
- ▶ Roubaix
- ▶ Nîmes
- ▶ Pontcarré
- ▶ Group affiliated with November 2015 Paris attacks
- ▶ Group affiliated with Samy Amimour
- ▶ Group affiliated with Tewfik Mohamed Bouallag
- ▶ Group affiliated with Djebri Amara

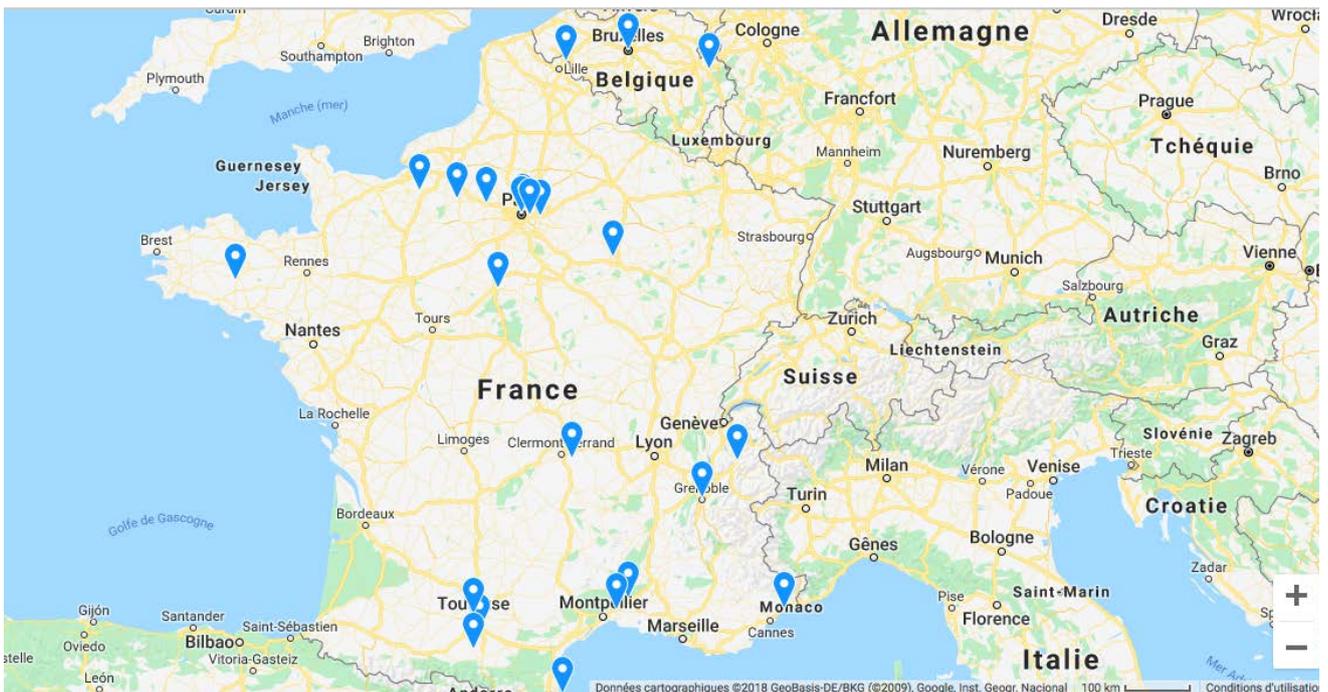


Figure 1: Mapping of terrorist cells

4) FROM CRIMINALS TO TERRORISTS AND BACK?

On a national level, terrorist groups are concentrated in the **northernmost** and **southernmost** parts of France, with significant hubs revolving around **Paris** and **Toulouse** (see **Figure 1**). Most of these groups settled in **peri-urban areas** (such as the Champigny-sur-Marne and Pontcarré in the Paris area, the Mirail in the Toulouse area, Lunel in the Montpellier area) and **small rural villages** (such as Artigat). Although these areas are usually **poorer** and **less educated** than larger cities – with economic deprivation and low human capital both enabling conditions of radicalisation – **few examined individuals** from these areas actually come from markedly poor families and environments.

(e.g., savings from social benefits). The Pontcarré group, on the other hand, was composed of four individuals, among which **three had a previous criminal record**. The group decided to resort to **robbery and extortion** to fund their departures, thus leveraging the many skills (e.g., violent behaviour, use of a gun and taser, theft and concealment of goods) they had acquired along their criminal careers.

In addition, many individuals became affiliated with Salafi-jihadi ideology and grew more violent **many years** before being arrested for terrorist activities (more than 5 years before the arrest). This variable underlines the importance of collective Salafi networks as a radicalisation factor. in parallel



63%

of terrorism arrestees had high school as the highest level of their education



56%

of terrorism arrestees were unemployed at the time of the arrest

It is also worth noting that not all territories have the same **history** of jihadism, which explains the over-representation of jihadists in some cities and villages than in others. Roubaix, a very poor city, has hosted recruiters and jihadists for much longer than Albertville or Orléans. The first Roubaix group (or “Roubaix Gang”), which involved criminals turned terrorists, was already active in the 1990s in relation to Bosnian jihad. Artigat was already active within Algerian jihad. All these cells, which had supposedly stopped operating after they were disbanded by the police in the 2000s, actually maintained an influence throughout in some radical communities.

All cells are shaped by **strong group dynamics** that buttress their beliefs, favoured means of action and sources of funding (whether legal or illegal). The French sample makes clear that terrorists with a criminal past have easier access to forgeries, weapons and illegal sources of funding than terrorists with no criminal record.

The comparison between the Roubaix and the Pontcarré groups is telling in this respect. The Roubaix group was composed of three individuals, among which only **one** had a previous criminal record. The group being loosely structured, all members undertook to fund their departures on their own, and all three resorted to **legal means**

with the use of criminal activities. These results go against the idea often conveyed in the public debate that a form of “**express radicalisation**” exists. On the contrary, these processes of radicalisation happen in the longer term.

NATIONALITY, ORIGINS AND TRANSNATIONAL NETWORKS

Of the 78 individuals analysed, 59 were French nationals. 3 had dual citizenship combined with French nationality (French-Belgian, French-Dutch, and French-Tunisian). In addition, there was 1 Belgian-Moroccan, 2 Moroccan nationals, and 1 Tunisian national.

The French case is symptomatic of the issue posed by transnational networks. French terrorist groups have strong ties with **Belgium**. It is common for French jihadis or future jihadis to travel to Belgium in preparation of their *hijra* (migration to a territory deemed truly Islamic) to meet with other recruits, discuss matters, exchange contacts, plan their departures, acquire weapons, or as the first step in their trip to Syria through Turkey. Brussels and Anderlecht are frequent ports of call, with the **Molenbeek** neighbourhood in Brussels very present in the cases analysed. For French nationals who became influential figures in jihadi networks,

Molenbeek appears to have represented a live-size territorial experiment: a jihadi “avant-garde” that should be replicated in the French banlieues. Bassam Ayachi, a French naturalised citizen of Syrian origin (previously a Muslim Brotherhood activist in the 1980s from the Hama region), visited many French neighbourhoods to set up his “Islamic centre”, before finally deciding to base it in Molenbeek. He described this particular neighbourhood as early as the 1990s as a milieu where Islamists of all tendencies (Muslim Brotherhood, Salafists, jihadists) could prevail.

The migration factor cannot be analysed in France as there is a lack of official data. Aside from general numbers on foreign-born individuals living in France, no official census that seeks to identify the portion of second- and third-generation individuals. Second- and third-generations are considered French nationals like any other and by virtue of French republicanism and universalism. As a result, this information is not mentioned in court proceedings.

The “**conversion**” phenomenon (ethnic French who converted to Islam through a Salafi-jihadi ideology and network) is a relevant issue. In the French jihadist milieu, one-third of the sample might be considered relevant to this phenomenon. Amongst converts are to be found a lot of top jihadist recruiters and intellectuals (Jean-Michel Clain, his brother Fabien, his sister Anne-Diana Clain, and Thomas Barnouin, a prominent “intellectual” activist who studied over three years at the Islamic University of Medina where he received his bachelor’s degree).

This implies however that two-thirds of French jihadists are of foreign descent. Most of these jihadists come from three distinct countries, each part of the former French colonial empire: Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia⁵. These three countries themselves have faced with jihadist issues since the 1990s and are marked by a larger Islamist milieu⁶.

In **Algeria**, jihadist networks started establishing their power in 1989 with the creation of the Islamic Salvation Front and the Armed Islamic Groups with the beginning of the Algerian Civil War (1992). In France, at the time, most French-Algerians were first- or second-generation migrants and very reluctant to join the fight. France, at the time, was considered a “sanctuary” by most Islamist activists. However, some terror attacks did occur: a series of bombings or attempted bombings in France

in 1995 by the Algerian Islamic Armed Group (GIA), or an attempt on the Strasbourg Christmas Market in 2000 by individuals with connections to the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC) of Algeria.. At the end of the Algerian jihad period, a number of Algerian Islamists become active within French territory, where they want to pursue the fight—Algeria being “at peace”, France would become the new jihad territory where the former colonial persecutions were to be avenged. Toulouse and Roubaix are two territories where most Muslims are of Algerian descent. Mohammed Merah, in March 2012, aims for this goal: he perpetrated his first killings on the anniversary of the Evian Accords of March 1962, which had put an end to the Algerian liberation war.

Tunisia is also important when looking at migration issues in relation to the jihadist milieu. The first Islamist activist who declared France as Islamic territory (“Dar al-Islam”) in 1989 was Rached Ghannouchi, the leader of the Tunisian Islamist party Ennahda. The French department of Alpes-Maritimes has the second highest number of departures to Syria and Iraq. Most French Muslims in this area are of Tunisian descent, mostly from the south and eastern coast of Tunisia, which is the most struck by poverty and Islamism. One of the individuals in the database, the French-Tunisian terrorist who perpetrated the Bastille day attacks in Nice (Alpes-Maritimes), was born in the Tunisian city of M’saken, where drug dealers and petty criminals maintain good relations with the Islamist milieu.

Like regions with “Algerian” and “Tunisian” background in France (see definition above), territories like the Haute-Garonne department have a very large Muslim population of Moroccan descent. Regarding the French-Belgian networks specifically, who are the most developed ones, the link with **Morocco** is very important (most jihadists are of Moroccan origin in these cases). However, not all regions in Morocco are concerned. Most French and Belgian jihadists from these networks belong to families of the Rif and the Souss regions, which are “affected” by many problematics (international drug trafficking, political Islamism, and ethnic Berber irredentism). Belgium is highly concerned by the “Rif problematics”: out of the 700 000 Muslims who live in Belgium, 500 000 of them belong to families from the Moroccan Rif. Abelhamid Abaoud chose his jihadi name in relation to his family’s origin in the Souss region: “Abou Omar al-Soussi” (Abou Omar from the Souss).

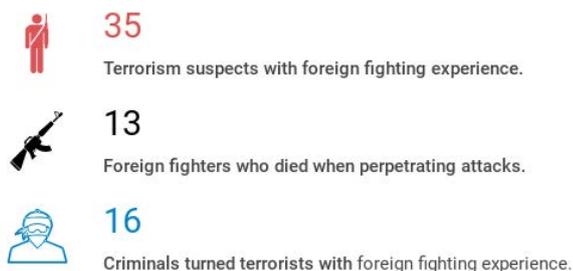
5 Some French jihadists also are of Sub-Saharan African ascent, but we lack sufficient data in to explain this adequately.

6 It may seem of minor importance, but there has been no case to date of French jihadists of Turkish descent. The Turkish diaspora in France is also marked by a very important Islamist network, but it is a much less important community in terms of estimated demographics.

FOREIGN FIGHTERS

Within the database, **35 out of 78** individuals have had experiences as **foreign terrorist fighters**. Of these, **8 are characterised as fugitives (in 2015); 13 have died perpetrating attacks. Among the criminals turned terrorists are 16 individuals with experience fighting in Syria.**

French foreign fighters joined paramilitary groups affiliated with **Hayat Tahrir al-Sham** (formerly the Al-Nusra Front **Al-Qaeda**, and the **Islamic State**. Some were not officially members of any paramilitary group but did their *Bay'a* (i.e., pledged allegiance) to ISIS right before committing their terrorist acts. In the early 2000s, French jihadis usually joined Al-Qaeda and fought in Iraq. After the advent of the Islamic State, French jihadists usually fought within ISIS's ranks in Syria—and sometimes in Iraq as well—and in a few occurrences, they joined Jabhat Al-Nusra.



Many individuals stayed **more than two years** in Syria or Iraq before either going back to France, getting killed or captured). Some individuals **stayed** in Syria or Iraq either as **fighters, recruiters**, or members—sometimes high-ranking—of the administration. Positions within the administration vary from **communicants** and **propagandists** (such as radio commentators, videographers) to **executive positions** (such as head of operations).

Conversely, there are no cases of criminals turned terrorists who ran from the police by travelling to Syria. Nor is there any record of any of them using the migration crisis in 2015 to travel back to Europe.

SOCIO-DEMOGRAPHIC VARIABLES

The gender breakdown within the database is **73 males (93%) to 5 females (7%)**. The average age of the total dataset is slightly above **28** (28.5 years). The youngest individuals were **18** and the oldest was **48** years old. The median age is **28**.

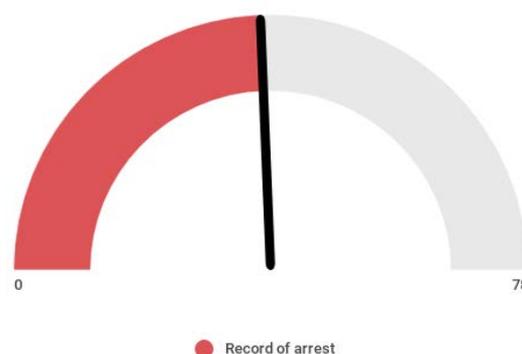
The gender ratio calculated is consistent with

other similar studies, such as that of Marc Hecker⁷: 131 of individuals were male (**95%**) and 6 were females, with an average age of **26 years**. Overall, the socio-demographic variables point toward **low-educated, unemployed** or **at-risk** individuals. Similarly, 40% of Hecker's sample come from deprived neighbourhoods, 47% have **no diploma**, 36% were **unemployed** and 22% occupied **precarious jobs**.

CRIMINAL HISTORIES

CRIMINALS TURNED TERRORISTS

38 out of 78 individuals (49%) in the database have had record of previous arrest.



In total, 28 of the individuals were convicted before 2015, 27 of them served time in prison and 12 radicalised in prison. Of the 78, 38 (48.7%) individuals have a record of previous arrests. Their prior criminality concerns mostly **petty crimes** of the **violent yet non-lethal type** (i.e., theft, assault, robbery, fencing of stolen goods). Theft is the most prevailing. There are also a few occurrences of **involvement in illicit trade**, mostly fencing of stolen goods and drug trafficking. Such criminals are mostly at the beginning of their criminal careers. Most of them are “one-timers,” some are “repeat petty offenders,” and very few are “career criminals”, despite a few occurrences.

Crime is generally committed **alone** (in the case of violence or theft), although there are cases of **collective assault and/or robbery** (e.g., Ibrayma Sylla, Pierre Roubertie, Roushdane Kelani and Emmanuel Nsomoto). There also a few striking occurrences in which criminals who committed collective crimes **radicalised in the process**. Generally, individuals developed a “**delinquency of habit**” prior to embracing the Jihadi ideology. It is interesting to note, even though half of the

⁷ See : 137 nuances de djihadisme : Les djihadistes de France face à la justice.

individuals within the sample did not have a previous criminal record, they were **close to criminal spheres**. A few groups, whose members were lacking criminal skills, **outsourced some of their activities, notably forgery and fraud, to criminal milieus**.

Up to now, we can see that the “criminals turned terrorists” phenomenon is much more prominent in areas and neighbourhoods where criminal networks had already developed before the appearance of Salafi-jihadi recruiters. In some



49%

38 out of 78 individuals arrested for terrorism in 2015 charges have had previous record of arrest.



15

Criminals turned terrorists were multiple offenders - have had record of multiple arrests.

areas, 100% of these jihadists were former criminals (that is the case of Molenbeek in Belgium) and in other cases, the number is much lower (in Artigat and Toulouse, few jihadists had a petty criminal past). We can, therefore, conclude at the current stage of this study that the jihadist phenomenon, despite being a transnational and de-territorialised ideology, **hybridises itself to a pre-existing social environment**. When this environment is marked by criminality, Islamists target these individuals because they are part of the territory/neighbourhood targets. When a territory is not necessarily struck by criminality and does not host criminal networks (such as Alpes-Maritimes or Artigat), the criminal-terrorist hybridisation is less important because other individuals are targeted (white middle class, civil servants' families, students, etc.)

There are recurrent radicalisation agents: **Recruiters, prison and initiatory trips**. Radicalisation is not a linear and vertical process along which isolated events accumulate but a dynamic horizontal “**puzzle**” in which **personal events, interpersonal ties and encounters, and more diffuse social and spatial dynamics, either hostile or supporting** (e.g., school, family, prison), **intersect**. Most individuals' radicalisation occurs at the intersection between personal tragedies, enabling or hostile family circles, and the influence

of a new acquaintance and cannot be reduced to a result from either one of them.

It is hard to understate the importance of **groups** in radicalisation. Most of them are composed of individuals who had long known and liked each other before their radicalisation. They usually revolve around **charismatic recruiters and preachers** who shape members' collective identities, thus creating **strong networks bound by loyalty**. These groups often undertake their *Hijra* together or strike together in terrorist attacks.

It is also interesting to note the **family dynamics of radicalisation**, where siblings embrace the ideology together. There is a specific **gender dimension** to it, for it is often mothers, sisters or concubines helping by undertaking financial assistance of their sons, brothers, and companions in their endeavours.

A report published by GLOBSEC in September 2018 looking at the time at 197 European jihadis also confirmed that **European jihad is a family or collegial affair**, with 26% (52 out of 197) of the individuals in the cases inducted into jihadi networks via friends or family. At the same time, the dataset shows that friends of the European jihadis are more active radicals than the jihadis' immediate families. In 107 cases (54%), friends were either involved in terrorism activities themselves (105 cases) or were only aware of their associates' terrorism involvement (2 cases).



