

# Program on Extremism

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THE GEORGE WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY

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## **Allies Under Attack: The Terrorist Threat to Europe**

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Chairmen, Ranking Members, and distinguished Members of the Committee, it is a privilege to be invited to speak on the threat international terrorism poses to Europe and the United States.

## **Overview of Threat in Europe and America**

Europe is facing a sustained and unprecedented threat from Islamic State (IS) as a group and from its sympathizers. It is estimated that more than 5,000 Europeans traveled to Syria to join IS. A recent study places the percentage of European foreign fighters who have returned to the countries of their departures as high as 30%.<sup>1</sup> In the United States, some 250 Americans have traveled *or attempted* to travel to Syria and Iraq. Of the 250, the Program on Extremism has identified more than 60 U.S.-based individuals who successfully migrated to Syria. Through interviews with small numbers of returnees, we have learned about the sophisticated bureaucratic nature of the Islamic State.<sup>2</sup>

One American militant told us of his experience in the Islamic State, which started with three weeks of religious training in a IS “sharia camp”, followed by three weeks of military training. A highly efficient and structured entity, IS required him to fill out detailed Microsoft Access questionnaires that allowed them to make decisions about his placement in the organization. The questionnaire asked for details which included general information such as his name, family background and blood type. The form asked the applicant to describe his prior work history and a job he would have liked to have in the Islamic State.<sup>3</sup> Should he have chosen to become a frontline soldier or suicide bomber, he was asked to note his next of kin, thereby ensuring notification of his death.

The American’s experience matches up with the accounts of European foreign fighters who have revealed the same ritualistic path into the Islamic State. Further details about the intake process are just as interesting; foreign fighters are separated, sometimes self-selected, into groups based on their native language. If a Westerner showed an interest in military operations, he would be allowed into what one American returnee described to us as “commando camps.” The commando camp provided the recruits with additional military training.

Another returnee explained how an IS wing focused on external plotting would encourage enrollment by making detailed presentations to Westerners to educate and encourage them to redirect their efforts from IS’ “nation building” efforts in Syria and Iraq to return to their home countries. The external plotting wing reportedly told foreign fighters from Western countries that they could better serve the Caliphate by carrying out attacks in their respective countries.

Until recently, IS operated a relative safe haven from which it could plot and plan attacks. Despite its recent territorial losses, it continues to maintain a cadre of sympathizers who feel an

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<sup>1</sup> Boutin, Berenice, Gregory Chauzal, Jessica Dorsey, Marjolein Jegerings, Christophe Paulussen, Johanna Pohl, Alastair Reed, and Sofia Zavagli. 2016. “The Foreign Fighters Phenomenon in the European Union: Profiles, Threats & Policies.” Eds. Bibi Van Ginkel and Eva Entenmann. ICCT Research Paper. The Hague, Netherlands: International Centre for Counterterrorism- The Hague. [https://www.icct.nl/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/ICCT-Report\\_Foreign-Fighters-Phenomenon-in-the-EU\\_1-April-2016\\_including-AnnexesLinks.pdf](https://www.icct.nl/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/ICCT-Report_Foreign-Fighters-Phenomenon-in-the-EU_1-April-2016_including-AnnexesLinks.pdf).

<sup>2</sup> Author’s ongoing research and interviews conducted with the Program’s Research Director, Dr. Alexander Meleagrou-Hitchens.

<sup>3</sup> Two examples of these forms can be found in the trial materials from USA v. Mohamad Jamal Khweis.

obligation to help the beleaguered Caliphate. This is one of the main factors that explain the wave of attacks, both thwarted and successful, that have hit Europe and the United States in recent months.

Since the announcement of the so-called Caliphate in June 2014, GW's Program on Extremism has identified 51 "successful" attacks in Europe and North America.<sup>4</sup> The vast majority of perpetrators were citizens of the country in which they committed the attack. Only five percent of those who carried out the attacks were refugees or asylum seekers. Most had a prior criminal past. Less than 10% were "directly ordered" by IS to commit an attack. In most cases, the attackers were IS-inspired or had some touchpoint with it, but no explicit direction.

About 20% of the attackers were returning foreign fighters, which is fewer than most analysts would have expected. But those who did return to commit attacks tended to be much more lethal in their actions.

The majority of the perpetrators pledged allegiance to IS before or after their attack. In turn, IS took credit for nearly 40% of the attacks. France has experienced the highest number of attacks (17), followed closely, and perhaps surprisingly, by the United States (16). Attacks in the United States have tended to be significantly more unstructured and spontaneous than in Europe, even though some of them (Orlando, San Bernardino) have been no less deadly.

According to the most recent data from Europol, there were 395 jihadist-related arrests in 2014, 687 in 2015 and 718 in 2016.<sup>5</sup>

Numbers are much lower in in the United States, where eighteen individuals were arrested for terrorism-related offenses in 2014, 75 in 2015, and just 36 in 2016.

There appears to be no discernable profile of an American IS recruit. However, American IS supporters tend to be young, with the average age being 27. But in 1/3<sup>rd</sup> of the cases, the supporter was 21 years or younger.<sup>6</sup>

Their profiles vary in socioeconomic background, age, geographical location, and degree of understanding of their faith. Nearly half were arrested because they sought to travel to Syria or Iraq to join the Islamic State.

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<sup>4</sup> Vidino, Lorenzo, Francesco Marone, and Eva Entenmann. 2017. "Fear Thy Neighbor: Radicalization and Jihadist Attacks in the West." Milan, Italy: Joint Program on Extremism, ICCT-The Hague, ISPI Report. <https://extremism.gwu.edu/sites/extremism.gwu.edu/files/FearThyNeighbor%20RadicalizationandJihadistAttacksintheWest.pdf>.

<sup>5</sup> "2017 EU Terrorism Report: 142 Failed, Foiled and Completed Attacks, 1002 Arrests and 142 Victims Died." 2017. Europol. June 15. <https://www.europol.europa.eu/newsroom/news/2017-eu-terrorism-report-142-failed-foiled-and-completed-attacks-1002-arrests-and-142-victims-died>.

<sup>6</sup> Vidino, Lorenzo, and Seamus Hughes. 2015. "ISIS in America: From Retweets to Raqqa." Washington, D.C.: Program on Extremism. <https://extremism.gwu.edu/sites/extremism.gwu.edu/files/downloads/ISIS%20in%20America%20-%20Full%20Report.pdf>.

American IS supporters do not tend to be radicalizing in large clusters, as many of their counterparts in Europe do.

Unlike Europe, the United States does not seem to possess extensive homegrown militant organizations that can provide in-person ideological and logistical support to individuals attracted to IS. In contrast, many European countries have militant Salafist organizations that provide individuals undergoing the radicalization process with ideological underpinnings and, in many cases, also with concrete help that facilitates their travel to Syria or Iraq.

Additionally, U.S. legislation, namely the material support statute, has given authorities more flexibility to prosecute terrorism cases aggressively. American law enforcement agencies dedicate a significant amount of financial and technical resources to thwarting the travel of American militants to territories occupied by the Islamic State. Many European countries do not possess comparable resources to address the numbers of foreign fighters that are considerably larger than the U.S.

Yet it could be argued that the prosecutorial effectiveness of the material support to terrorism statute may have indirectly stunted the development of long-term radicalization prevention programs in the United States.

Conversely, because of the comparatively short prison sentences and fewer available law enforcement tools, European nations have been forced to develop counter-radicalization strategies which include ground-breaking intervention programs. These programs promote disengagement and de-radicalization efforts in the community.

### **Social Media/ IS Virtual Entrepreneurs**

A synergistic fusion between social media and encrypted technology has fueled one of the most recent developments in the terrorist threat to the West: the rise of “IS virtual entrepreneurs.”<sup>7</sup> A handful of IS-inspired attacks in America, Europe, and South Asia, which were initially believed to be the work of lone actors, were subsequently discovered to be planned and coordinated over the Internet by agents based in IS’ territories in Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, and even Somalia. The Islamic State’s use of social media and online tools to radicalize and recruit Westerners has become a subject of great debate between policymakers, researchers, and intelligence officials. Recently, attention has focused on the group’s use of its English-speaking members, primarily

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<sup>7</sup> Meleagrou-Hitchens, Alexander, and Seamus Hughes. 2017. “The Threat to the United States from the Islamic State’s Virtual Entrepreneurs.” CTC Sentinel 10 (3). <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/the-threat-to-the-united-states-from-the-islamic-states-virtual-entrepreneurs/>; Callimachi, Rukmini. 2017. “Not ‘Lone Wolves’ After All: How ISIS Guides World’s Terror Plots From Afar.” The New York Times, February 4, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/04/world/asia/isis-messaging-app-terror-plot.html>; Gartenstein-Ross, Daveed, and Madeleine Blackman. 2017. “ISIL’s Virtual Planners: A Critical Terrorist Innovation.” War on the Rocks. January 4. <https://warontherocks.com/2017/01/isils-virtual-planners-a-critical-terrorist-innovation/>; Moreng, Bridget. 2016. “ISIS’ Virtual Puppeteers.” Foreign Affairs, September 21. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2016-09-21/isis-virtual-puppeteers/>; Joscelyn, Thomas. 2016. “Terror Plots in Germany, France Were ‘remote-Controlled’ by Islamic State Operatives.” FDD’s Long War Journal. September 24. <http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2016/09/terror-plots-in-germany-france-were-remote-controlled-by-islamic-state-operatives.php>.

based in Syria and Iraq, to virtually connect with Europeans and Americans and often encourage them to commit terrorist attacks within their own countries.

IS virtual entrepreneurs represent a natural progression of the IS threat to the West. As military pressure has squeezed the group from its territory in Iraq and Syria, and governments have largely staunched the flow of foreign fighters from their shores, the group has sought to exploit its online reach to maintain a presence. In total, these virtual entrepreneurs were involved in at least 21 percent of IS-inspired domestic plots and attacks in the United States. The involvement of virtual entrepreneurs is even more pronounced in Europe. 19 out of 38 IS-linked plots in Europe between 2014 and 2016 involved some form of online instruction.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, IS virtual entrepreneurs present such a threat that many have been individually targeted and killed in anti-IS coalition airstrikes.

Jihadist propaganda has been and is easily accessible through various online platforms over the last decade, and has played a role in radicalizing Westerners. Now, with the advent of numerous social media applications (many of which use encryption technology), a would-be recruit can access real-time support and have a stronger sense that they are part of the wider movement. This online support sustains and encourages the recruit's continued participation in the Islamic State.<sup>9</sup>

In response to concerns about violent extremists' use of digital communications technology, several Western governments, including the U.S. and the U.K., have leaned heavily on social media companies. In the U.S. for example, an initiative colloquially known as the 'Madison Valleywood Project' encouraged technology, advertising, and entertainment companies to assist the fight against terrorism with counternarratives and stringent enforcement of their respective terms of service.<sup>10</sup> The precise impact of such attempts is difficult to quantify. Even so, it is crucial to review the various methods tech companies use to counter violent extremism in the digital sphere.

The most prevalent approaches fall into two camps: content-based regulation and counter-messaging. Existing policies range from stand-alone initiatives by one company to collaborative engagement by several. Most social media companies' efforts fall into content-based regulation and account suspension.<sup>11</sup> According to the company's latest *#Transparency Report*, Twitter "suspended a total of 636,248 accounts" for the promotion of terrorism between August 1, 2015 and December 31, 2016.<sup>12</sup> Twitter's suspension strategy only goes so far. An IS sympathizer whose account is suspended simply starts over with a new Twitter account.

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<sup>8</sup> Nesser, Petter, Anne Stenersen, and Emilie Oftedal. 2016. "Jihadi Terrorism in Europe: The IS-Effect." *Perspectives on Terrorism* 10 (6), p.9. <http://www.terrorismanalysts.com/pt/index.php/pot/article/view/553>.

<sup>9</sup> See also, Alexander, Audrey. 2017. "How to Fight ISIS Online." *Foreign Affairs*, April 7. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/middle-east/2017-04-07/how-fight-isis-online>.

<sup>10</sup> Kang, Cecilia, and Matt Apuzzo. 2016. "U.S. Asks Tech and Entertainment Industries Help in Fighting Terrorism." *The New York Times*, February 24. <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/25/technology/tech-and-media-firms-called-to-white-house-for-terrorism-meeting.html>.

<sup>11</sup> "Partnering to Help Curb the Spread of Terrorist Content Online." 2016. *Twitter Blogs*. December 5. <https://blog.twitter.com/2016/partnering-to-help-curb-the-spread-of-terrorist-content-online>. Government TOS Reports - July to December 2016." 2017. <https://transparency.twitter.com/en/gov-tos-reports.html>.

<sup>12</sup> "Government TOS Reports - July to December 2016." 2017. <https://transparency.twitter.com/en/gov-tos-reports.html>. Please note that these accounts hailed from multiple extremist persuasions but an official blogpost

Google's Jigsaw, a 'technology incubator,' strives to counter online extremism by implementing the so-called Redirect Method, which diverts supporters to "curated YouTube videos" that confront IS's recruitment themes.<sup>13</sup> Facebook launched a new measure employing artificial intelligence software with efforts targeting image matching, language understanding, removing terrorist clusters, and cross-platform collaboration.<sup>14</sup> While in its infancy, the artificial intelligence component of Facebook's approach is promising as it allows the approach to more effectively recognize emerging trends.

Multilateral and multi-directional partnerships between the U.S., E.U., and global tech companies must remain vigilant of the shortcomings of social-media-centric approaches to countering violent extremism. First and foremost, states cannot dictate the cooperation of tech companies; even if they could, IS adherents and other violent extremists would continue to adapt to developing pressures. The private interests of media tech companies do not always align with the security interests of Western states (or any country for that matter). As Pavel Durov, the creator of Telegram explained, "that privacy... and our right for privacy is more important than our fear of bad things happening, like terrorism."<sup>15</sup> Again, though well-meaning, the current approaches by Twitter, Google, Facebook, Microsoft, and YouTube, may not necessarily permeate the types of encrypted channels now commonly frequented by violent extremists.

Moving forward, policy-makers and practitioners need to reconfigure the approach to countering organizations like IS in the digital domain, and better traverse the liminal space between the virtual and the physical. Even though the 'online radicalization' phenomenon receives a lot of attention, a substantial body of research highlights the enduring relevance of the physical world and interpersonal dynamics that affect radicalization and recruitment. Perhaps more than the U.S., physical networks in Europe remain of paramount importance to many violent extremists. Such dynamics are best illustrated by "hubs" of jihadist mobilization in places like Lunel, France, Molenbeek, Belgium, and Portsmouth, UK.

## **Reciprocal Radicalization**

Finally, it is important to note a concerning trend. Far right movements have taken advantage of the recent wave of IS-inspired attacks in Europe to mobilize old and new followers. These groups tend to ignore any distinction between Islam, Islamism, and jihadism, seeing all Muslims as a threat. This narrative has taken hold among a growing number of people on both sides of the Ocean. It has triggered indiscriminate attacks against innocent Muslim communities. These episodes feed into IS' narrative, which tells Western Muslims that the West is waging a war

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asserted that suspensions were "primarily related to ISIS." *Combating Violent Extremism.* 2016. *Twitter Blogs*. February 5. <https://blog.twitter.com/2016/combating-violent-extremism>.

<sup>13</sup> "The Redirect Method - Jigsaw." 2017. <http://redirectmethod.org>.

<sup>14</sup> "Hard Questions: How We Counter Terrorism | Facebook Newsroom." 2017. Newsroom. June 15. <https://newsroom.fb.com/news/2017/06/how-we-counter-terrorism/>.

<sup>15</sup> Kaplan, Sarah. 2015. "Founder of App Used by ISIS Once Said 'We Shouldn't Feel Guilty.' On Wednesday He Banned Their Accounts." *Washington Post*, November 9. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2015/11/19/founder-of-app-used-by-isis-once-said-we-shouldnt-feel-guilty-on-wednesday-he-banned-their-accounts/>.

against Islam. Thus, we have seen how both extreme movements feed off of each other and use this to assist in their recruitment efforts. This perverse dynamic of ‘reciprocal radicalization’ between jihadist and far right extremism is a troubling trend that needs to be monitored., Any prevention program developed both in the United States and Europe should seek to address all forms of extremism, lest we get caught up in a never-ending cycle of polarization and violence.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify before you. I welcome your questions.