Jihadist Attacks in the West: 2014-2022

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September 2022

Program on Extremism
THE GEORGE WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY

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The Program on Extremism at George Washington University provides analysis on issues related to violent and non-violent extremism. The Program spearheads innovative and thoughtful academic inquiry, producing empirical work that strengthens extremism work that strengthens extremism research as a distinct field of study. The Program aims to develop pragmatic policy solutions that resonate with policymakers, civic leaders, and the general public. The views and conclusions contained in this document are those of the authors and should not be interpreted as necessarily representing the official policies, either expressed or implied, of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security or The George Washington University. This material is based upon work supported by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security under Grant Award Number 20STTPC00001-01.

This report is released as part of The Global-Local Jihadist Nexus project (***Nexus***). ***Nexus*** draws on a global network of subject matter experts and locally-based researchers to monitor Islamic State and al-Qaida affiliates across the Middle East, Africa, and Asia, as well as their support and enabling networks in the West.

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Introduction

Jihadism in the West has a roughly four-decade long history. Its first, embryonal presence dates back to the 1980s, when scattered groups of Western-based volunteers traveled to Afghanistan to fight against the Soviet Union. Around the same time, a few Middle Eastern and North African jihadists fleeing their countries of origin received asylum in various Western countries. Since then, both Europe and North America have steadily been home to pockets of sympathizers of jihadist ideology.

These pockets have historically been extremely heterogeneous and have undergone huge changes over time. They have always varied in size and complexity; while some are relatively large and tied to established recruitment pipelines, others are more spontaneous, constituted by isolated individuals and small groups of friends who radicalize independently. Their composition has always been extremely varied, encompassing men and women, recent arrivals to the West from all over the world and Western converts, old and young, seemingly well-adjusted individuals and those living at the fringes of society, and so on. Moreover, pockets of jihadist sympathy have historically been geographically unevenly distributed, with some countries and regions experiencing a much larger presence than others.

Yet, irrespective of all these extremely important differences, it is fair to say that a jihadist scene is a permanent fixture in Europe and, to a lesser degree, North America. The vicissitudes of this scene are shaped by the interactions of two macro variables. The first is internal, and it is constituted by the characteristics of the Western jihadist scene, which is of course different from Western country to Western country. Various elements shape it, from the presence of radicalizing agents to the socio-economic marginalization of local Muslim communities, from the effectiveness of local counterterrorism efforts to migration patterns.

The second element, which plays a major role in determining the size and direction of the Western jihadist scene, is constituted by geopolitical developments taking place outside of the West. Historically, it has always been events such as the war in Afghanistan in the 1980s, the Bosnian war in the 1990s, the September 11th attacks and subsequent invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, and finally, the surge of the Islamic State (IS) and its June 2014 declaration of a caliphate that drove spikes in the numbers of jihadist sympathizers in the West, the activism of Western-based jihadist networks, and their mobilization choices.

In substance, the history of Western jihadism is characterized by ebbs and flows. There are moments, triggered largely by important events that take place outside of the West, in which the numbers of jihadist sympathizers swell and jihadists become more active. That increased activity, in turn, manifests itself in various ways, but principally in the form of travel to join jihadist groups abroad, and planning and execution of terrorist attacks. These moments are followed by others, generally corresponding to a lack of triggering events outside of the West, in which the Western

jihadist scene, while still active, no longer attracts large number of new sympathizers and its members mobilize (travel or plan attacks) with a lower degree of intensity.

These two phases have alternated multiple times over the last forty years, and it seems apparent that we are witnessing a phase of relatively low activity today. The period from 2011—when the popular protests in Syria degenerated into a conflict that saw jihadist groups occupy a prominent role and attract militants from all over the world—to the second half of the 2010s—when the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria lost all the territories it had previously controlled—unquestionably constitutes a phase of burgeoning jihadism worldwide and in the West. Over the last five years, however, Western jihadism has taken a downward turn.

Indeed, the relative decline of the Islamic State from its zenith in the mid-2010s is the main factor driving the decline of jihadist activities in the West, just as the advent of the Islamic State's caliphate triggered a surge. The group's successes in Syria and Iraq during this period is, from the jihadists' point of view, unprecedented and difficult to replicate. Various jihadist groups were fighting, at least at the onset of the conflict, a brutal enemy (the regime of Bashar al Assad) that was killing civilians and whose actions were easily frameable from a jihadist perspective as sectarian conflict. These jihadist groups operated across a territory that is extremely iconic—the historical heart of the Arab world—and logistically easily accessible. They exploited major social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter, which had still only recently gained global reach and were largely unprepared to moderate their platforms for extremist content. Moreover, the largest of the jihadist groups to operate in this favorable environment, IS, made the historical step of declaring a caliphate, an announcement that triggered a massive emotional response in Islamist circles.

In substance, the events that occurred in Syria and Iraq between 2012 and 2017—the year in which the liberation of Mosul epitomizes IS' downfall—was a jihadist's perfect storm. It is impossible to predict what geopolitical events might trigger similar environments ripe for jihadist exploitation in the near future, exactly like few in 2010 would have been able to predict that just two years later Syria would become a global jihadist hotbed. Nonetheless, a survey of the current geopolitical landscape produces no such environment that even closely mirrors the situation in Syria and Iraq over the last decade.

Firstly, both IS and al-Qaeda—the two brand names of global jihadism—are severely weakened. Both have suffered crippling blows to their leadership, and neither appears to have the stature, manpower, territorial control, and ability to operate on a global scale they had in their heydays. This does not mean that either group is vanquished, or that they cannot regain some of their former strength and stature. But as of late 2022, the almost universal assessment is that both IS and al-Qaeda currently face some of the most difficult challenges in their respective histories.

Both groups control a broad array of affiliates operating throughout the world. These affiliates have mixed fortunes. Interestingly, in various areas that have historically played a major role in global jihadism, such as Syria/Iraq and North Africa, many affiliates appear to be in relative disarray or are

otherwise unable to pose a major challenge to local regimes and are incapable of attracting large numbers of foreign fighters. Arguably, the epicenter of global jihadism has currently shifted to sub-Saharan Africa, with IS affiliates wreaking havoc in Nigeria and the Lake Chad Basin, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Mozambique. Similarly, al-Qaeda affiliate al-Shabaab, despite various setbacks, remains a sizeable threat in Somalia and, according to U.S. military intelligence, one that possesses the "capability to conduct high-profile attacks across the region, actively targets U.S. and regional forces, and exploits Somalia's political turmoil and security gaps."[1]

These regional affiliates receive the support of their respective parent groups and jihadist sympathizers throughout the world, including in the West. But it is difficult to think that any of them would have the ability to mobilize external supporters, particularly in the West, to the same degree that IS did almost a decade ago. Logistical difficulties in reaching those territories and a significantly less intense emotional appeal of their causes are important factors that make the jihads of Congo and Nigeria substantially less appealing to Western jihadists. In substance, there is no doubt that Western jihadists will express their sympathy for, for example, Boko Haram or the Islamic State in Central Africa. Some individuals will also attempt to travel to those areas to join local jihadist groups. However, it is unlikely that those groups will be able to mobilize, both in terms of foreign fighter fluxes and attacks, anything even remotely comparable to what IS did ten years ago.

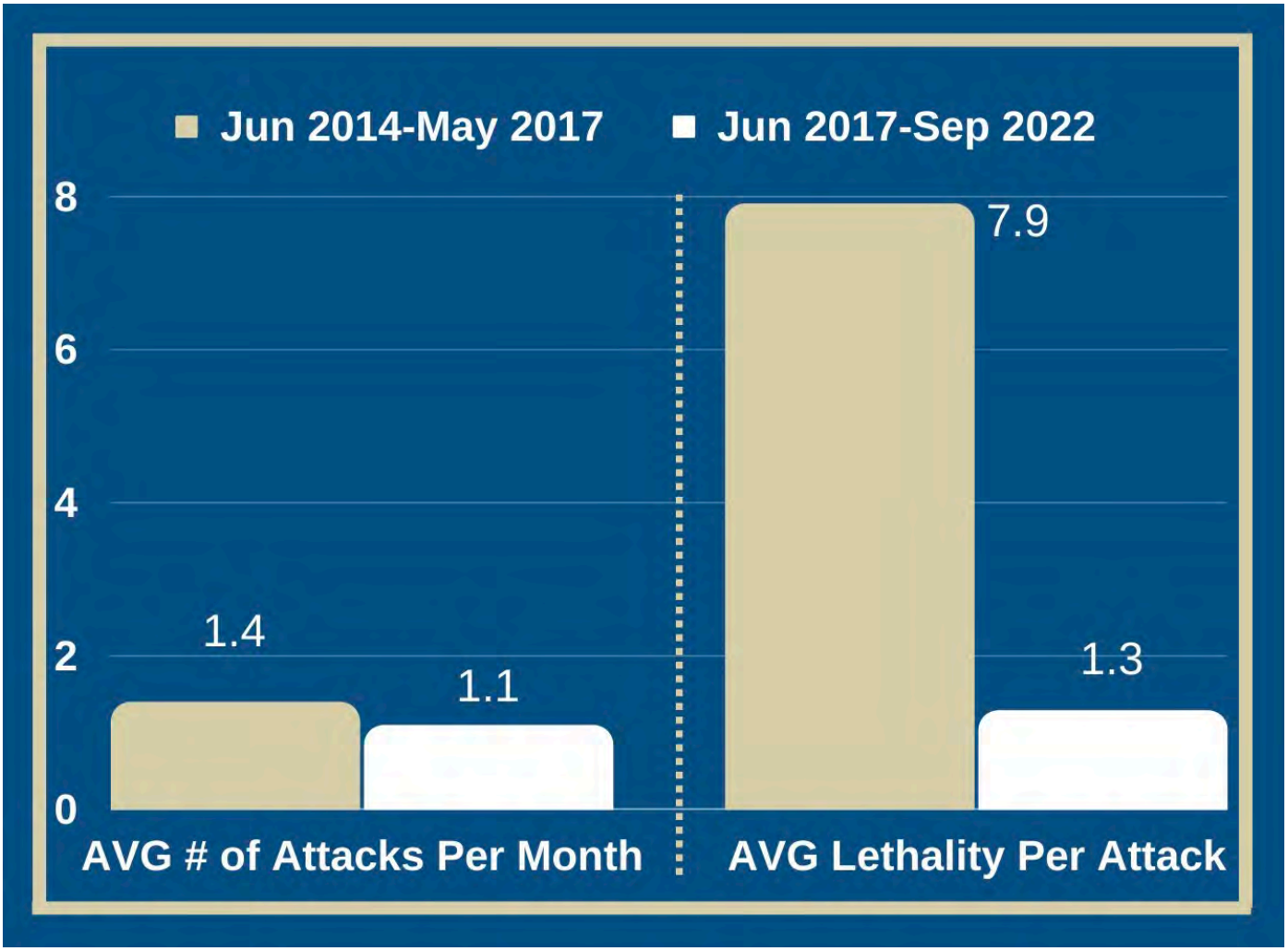
As a result, the Western jihadist scene currently appears to be in a phase of strategic confusion. Actors and networks that support jihadist ideology are still very much present in all Western countries, but they have not mobilized with the same intensity as in previous years. Travel to join groups abroad is not a feasible option for most, in part due to COVID-19 related restrictions. And while attacks in the West are still happening—albeit on a smaller scale than in the recent past—there is nothing resembling the constant call for attacks on Western homelands by well-known and charismatic jihadist leaders that characterized the previous decade. In substance, no jihadist group or geopolitical event today has proven capable of catalyzing and directing the enthusiasm of Western jihadists to a degree even remotely comparable to the IS surge.

All indicators confirm this assessment, starting with total arrests for individuals involved in jihadist activities. According to Europol data, total arrests in Europe went down from 687 in 2015 and then 718 in 2016, [2] to 254 in 2020 and then 260 in 2021.[3] Similarly, in the United States, 66 people were arrested for IS-related activities in 2015 and then 38 in 2016, but only 20 were arrested in 2020 and then 10 in 2021.[4] By the same token, the number of individuals departing the West to join terrorist groups abroad has dropped dramatically, and is now limited to a handful of individuals in all Western countries.

[1] Statement by Scott Berrier, Lieutenant General, U.S. Army Director, Defence Intelligence Agency, before the US Senate Armed Forces Committee, April 2021.
[2] Europol, TE-Sat 2020, page 33.
[3] TE-Sat 2022, page 21.
[4] Data kept by the Program on Extremism.

The decline in jihadist activities in the West is also evident from the drop in terrorist attacks on Western soil. In 2017, the authors of this report had published, together with Eva Entenmann, a report titled *Fear thy Neighbor: Radicalization and Jihadist Attacks in the West.*[5] The report tallied and analyzed attacks that took place in Western Europe and North America from June 2014, when the caliphate was declared, until May 2017. During that three-year period, 50 jihadist attacks were carried out (an average of 1.4 attacks per month) that caused the death of 397 people (an average of almost eight fatalities per attack), whereas from June 2017 to the present day, 68 attacks were carried out (an average of 1.1 attacks per month), claiming the lives of 90 victims (an average slightly above one fatality per attack). In substance, while the decline in the overall number and frequency of attacks is not that significant, their diminished lethality is quite remarkable.

Figure 1: The Relative Decline in Jihadist Attack Lethality



[5] The report was co-published by GWU's Program on Extremism, ICCT and ISPI. For more information about the research methodology and the definitions adopted, see Lorenzo Vidino, Francesco Marone and Eva Entenmann, *Fear Thy Neighbor: Radicalization and Jihadist Attacks in the West*, joint report by GWU's Program on Extremism, ISPI and ICCT - The Hague. June 14, 2017. Available at: https://icct.nl/app/uploads/2017/06/FearThyNeighbor-RadicalizationandJihadistAttacksintheWest.pdf

There is no question that the demise of the caliphate, the decline of both the Islamic State and al-Qaeda central, the relative absence of both groups' abilities to supervise external attacks, and the limited global appeal of even the most successful affiliates of the two groups have played primary roles in the decreasing number and lethality of attacks in the West. But another concurring factor should not be overlooked: the increased effectiveness of Western counterterrorism authorities. While degrees vary substantially from country to country, there is no question that in the early years of the IS-related mobilization, several countries lacked the resources and legal tools to confront the challenge. Over the last few years, however, most countries have implemented important changes to their counterterrorism apparatuses. From criminal measures that better fit behaviors currently adopted by jihadists to more substantial monitoring in online spaces, from increased manpower for law enforcement and intelligence agencies to better domestic and international information sharing, the measures adopted throughout the West have unquestionably improved most countries' abilities to confront jihadist networks.

This overall improvement has manifested itself in various ways, including in the prevention of terrorist attacks. Over the last few years, in fact, and particularly in various European countries, authorities have been able to thwart terrorist attacks in ways that were arguably not possible in previous years. A better understanding of jihadist networks, more resources to monitor and penetrate them, and the availability of more stringent legal tools to charge them have allowed European law enforcement and intelligence agencies to foil a substantial number of attacks in various stages of their planning. Tellingly, in 2019, according to Europol, the 14 foiled attacks in Europe were "double that of completed and failed attacks."[6]

Western authorities' ability to thwart attacks is substantially greater when it comes to sophisticated plots. Plans that involve multiple persons and frequent communications with jihadists across multiple countries incur in more chances of detection, and over the last few years authorities throughout Europe have detected several plots with these characteristics. Attacks carried out by a lone perpetrator, on the other hand, are often much more difficult to detect, as they often lack most or any of the preparatory and communication aspects that characterize more complex attacks. While European authorities have foiled several complex attacks, all successful attacks over the last two and a half years have been carried out by lone actors.

Attacks and Attackers

Following the model of *Fear thy Neighbor: Radicalization and Jihadist Attacks in the West*, this report identifies all jihadist terrorist attacks that were successfully executed in North America (United States and Canada) and Europe (referred to here as the 27 Member States of the European Union in addition to Norway, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom) between June 29, 2014, the date of the self-proclamation of the Islamic State's caliphate, and September 11, 2022. The report proceeds to

[6] TE-SAT 2020, page 33.

analyze the demographic profiles and connections to jihadist organizations of the individuals who perpetrated these terrorist attacks.

This study is based on an original dataset built in 2016 that has since been regularly updated by the authors. Information and data collection is based largely on open-source material (including available official documents, scientific literature, news reports) in different languages, at times supplemented by interviews with government officials.

Needless to say, this sort of empirical analysis is inevitably affected by research limitations. In particular, although the authors took every effort to ensure that the dataset was as accurate and complete as possible, the use of open-source material may pose some limitations in terms of amount, consistency, and reliability of information. As a result, some misrepresentations or mistakes may be present in the dataset.

The Attacks

In the more than eight years since the proclamation of the Islamic State's caliphate in June 2014, a total of 118 attacks were successfully carried out by individuals motivated by jihadist ideology in North America and Europe.

Country

These 118 attacks occurred in less than half of the countries studied (15 out of 32). The country with the largest number of attacks was France (39, 33% of total attacks), followed by the United States (22), the United Kingdom (17), Germany (13), Belgium (6), Canada (5), the Netherlands (4), and Spain (3). 91 attacks were carried out in Europe (77%), and the remaining 27 were carried out in North America (23%). This noticeable gap between the two sides of the Atlantic grew over time; in fact, after 2017, only 8% of attacks occurred in North America (i.e., four out of the 51 attacks in that period, three in the United States and one in Canada).

Location

Many attacks occurred in urban centers, including large cities.[7] The city that suffered the greatest number of attacks was Paris (11 attacks, with six additional attacks in its immediate vicinities). 32 of 118 attacks (27%) occurred in capital cities, which in addition to Paris, included London (8 attacks), Brussels (4), Berlin (3), Amsterdam (1), Copenhagen (1), Oslo (1), Ottawa (1), Stockholm (1), Vienna (1). On the other hand, some terrorist attacks have hit small towns and rural areas.

Date

The historical evolution of jihadist terrorist attacks follows a nonlinear trajectory, instead ebbing and flowing over time. With regards to distribution of attacks over the observed period, the first peak occurred in 2017 (26 attacks, six of which were carried out in June alone). After a subsequent decline that culminated in a low of 8 attacks in 2019, a second peak occurred in 2020 (20 attacks). In many respects, this is fairly surprising, particularly considering the dynamics outlined above such as the introduction of national lockdowns and other restrictions in various Western countries due to the COVID-19 pandemic.[8]

[7] Cf. H.V. Savitch, *Cities in a Time of Terror: Space, Territory, and Local Resilience*. London: M.E. Sharpe, 2007.
[8] Francesco Marone, "Hate in the time of coronavirus: exploring the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on violent extremism and terrorism in the West." *Security Journal*, Vol. 35; No. 1, 2022: 205-225.

Victims

In total, the 118 attacks caused 487 deaths and at least 2,534 physical injuries, excluding the perpetrators. While the combined average number of fatalities is little more than four per attack, the level of lethality varied considerably from one attack to another. The November 2015 Paris attack was the most lethal (130 fatalities, 90 of which occurred at the Bataclan theatre). Eight additional attacks resulted in at least 10 victims: Nice in 2016 (86 fatalities), Orlando in 2016 (49), Brussels in 2016 (32), Manchester in 2017 (22), Barcelona and Cambrils in 2017 (16), San Bernardino in 2015 (14), Berlin in 2016 (12), and Charlie Hebdo in Paris in 2015 (12). In total, these nine attacks were responsible for 373 out of the 487 deaths (77% of the total).

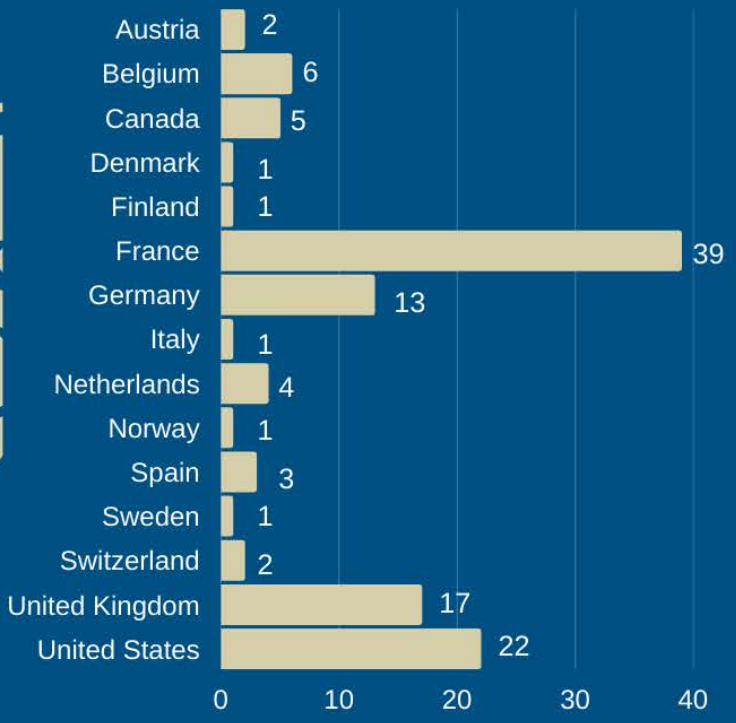
After 2017, attack lethality decreased considerably. In particular, the average number of fatalities exceeded 12 in 2015 and still exceeded eight per attack in 2016 before falling to three in 2017 and then definitively stabilizing at little more than one fatality per attack from 2018 until today. After 2017, the deadliest attack was the Strasbourg attack on December 11, 2018 (5 fatalities). Over the entire period examined in this report, 64 attacks out of 118 (54%) caused no death (again, excluding of the perpetrators, which at times were the only casualty). Overall, attacks in France claimed the largest number of victims (265 out of 487, 54%), followed by the United States (89 fatalities, 18%).

Claim of Responsibility by a Jihadist Organization

For the purpose of this study, if a jihadist organization declared that perpetrators were supporters of, or inspired by, the organization either immediately after the attack or later via its official media outlets (news agencies, bulletins, online magazines, etc.), the attack was considered "claimed."[9] As such, according to our dataset, 34 out of 118 attacks (29%) were claimed by a jihadist organization, with a significant decrease over the observed period. While more than half of the attacks in 2016 were claimed (12 out of 22 attacks that year, 55%), this proportion dropped significantly to 10% in 2020 (2 out 20) and then 0% in 2021 and 2022.

[9] To be sure, it is well understood that jihadist organizations can claim acts of violence that they have not actually orchestrated. See, for example: Joseph M. Brown, "Terrorist Peer Review: Which Autonomous Attacks Does ISIL Accept for Publication?" *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, online first, 2021; see also Erin M. Kearns, Brendan Conlon, and Joseph K. Young, "Lying about terrorism." *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, Vol. 37, No. 5, 2014: 422-439.

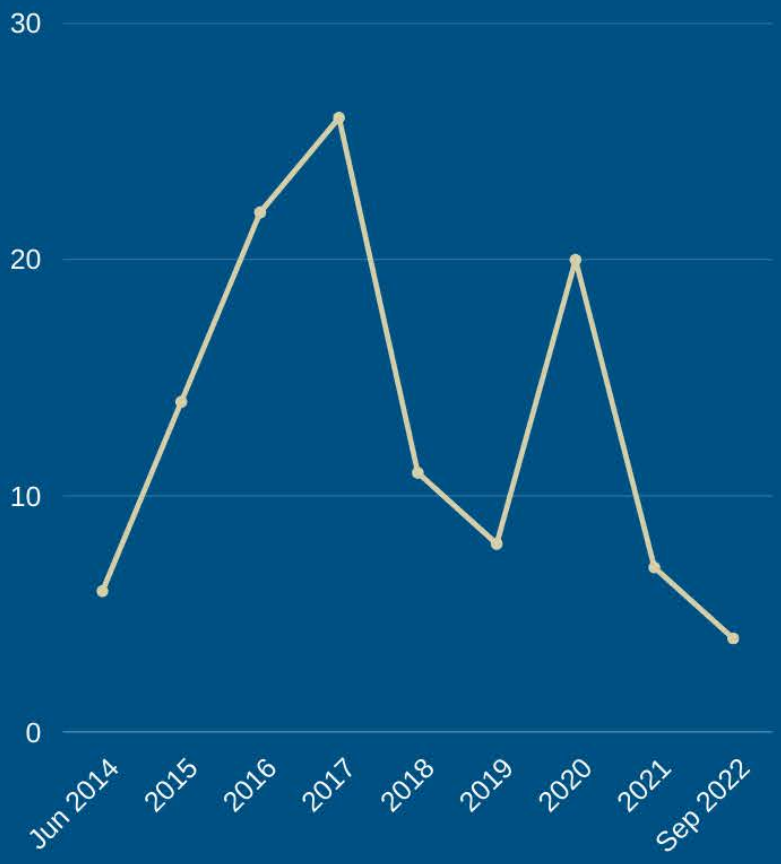
Jihadist Terrorist Attacks in the West Since 2014: The Attacks



Examining the Attacks

118	141	487	2534	34
ATTACKS	ATTACKERS	FATALITIES	INJURIES	CLAIMED

Attack Frequency



The Attackers

This section analyzes the individual profile of the 141 attackers included in the original dataset.

Gender

Traditionally, the role of women in jihadist extremism,[10] while important, has been largely limited to non-combat activities, such as recruitment, logistics, and support or advocacy for terrorist activity. This dynamic is reflected in the number of women perpetrators in this study. Only four out of 141 perpetrators (3%) were women: Tashfeen Malik, who carried out the San Bernardino shooting with her husband, Syed Rizwan Farook, on December 2, 2015; Safia S., who injured a police officer with a knife at a train station in Hanover on February 26, 2016; Hanane Aboulhana, who launched an attack inside the Conde-sur-Sartre prison in France with her partner Michaël Chiolo on March 5, 2019; and an unnamed Swiss woman who injured two people with a knife in a shopping center in Lugano, Switzerland, on November 24, 2020.

Age

In recent years, media and academic discourse has frequently highlighted the declining age of individuals attracted to jihadist ideology. While this is not completely incorrect, when it comes to attacks, the data show that the average attacker is not unusually young: the average age is almost 28-years-old, with a median age of 27 and a mode of 24. More than half of the perpetrators (74 out of 140, 53%) were in the 20-29 age bracket.[11] Only six of the attackers (4%) were under 18-years-old at the time of attack, all of whom acted in Europe (France, Germany, and Spain) between 2016 and 2017. On the other hand, over one-quarter of the perpetrators (39 out of 141) were above the age of 30 at the time of attack.

[10] Among many others, Audrey Alexander, *Cruel Intentions: Female Jihadists in America*, Program on Extremism, The George Washington University, Washington D.C., November 2016; Nelly Lahoud, "Can Women Be Soldiers of the Islamic State?" *Survival*, Vol. 59, No. 1, 2017: 61-78; Joana Cook, "Women and Terror after 9/11: The Case of Islamic State." In: David Martin Jones et al. (Eds.): *Handbook of Terrorism and Counter Terrorism Post 9/11.* Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2019: 143-159; Europol, *Women in Islamic State Propaganda: Roles and Incentives,* Europol Specialist Reporting, 2019, https://www.europol.europa.eu/sites/default/files/documents/women_in_islamic_state_propaganda.pdf.

[11] Information was unavailable for one case.

Immigration Status

The relationship between terrorism and migration is a complex one that has been at the center of extremely polarized political debates.[12] Our dataset confirms that jihadist terrorism in the West today is mostly a homegrown phenomenon. In fact, the majority of attackers (78 out of 141, 55%) were citizens of the country in which they committed the attack (in some cases, they were dual citizens of another country), and 19% were legal residents. Only a minority of the attackers were irregular migrants (10%), asylum seekers or refugees (9%), and visitors from abroad (6%).[13]

However, these trends in attacker immigration status were not uniform. While more than 50% of all attackers each year from 2014 to 2020 held citizenship status in the targeted country (with the exception of 2017), that proportion fell to less than one-third of the cases in both 2021 and 2022.

Religious Conversion

Several studies suggest that converts to Islam have been overrepresented in jihadist militancy when compared to the relatively small share they make up in Western societies.[14] The information in our dataset shows that 14% of all perpetrators (20 out of 141) were converts. This proportion is much higher in North America (33%) compared to Europe (8%).[15]

Criminal Background

Many facets of the complex relationship between crime and terrorism have received considerable attention in the context of radicalization patterns in the West.[16] Our dataset, despite some substantial challenges in uncovering detailed information, found that at least 50% of the attackers (71 out of 141) had a prior criminal background.

[12] In particular, Alex P. Schmid, *Links between terrorism and migration*. ICCT Research Paper, The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism - The Hague, 2016; Marc Helbling and Daniel Meierrieks, "Terrorism and migration: An overview." *British Journal of Political Science*, online first, 2020.
[13] Information was unavailable for one case.
[14] For example, Bart Schuurman, Peter Grol and Scott Flower, *Converts and Islamist Terrorism: An Introduction*, ICCT Policy Brief, 2016.
[15] See also Sam Mullins, "Re-Examining the Involvement of Converts in Islamist Terrorism: A Comparison of the U.S. and U.K.", *Perspectives on Terrorism*, Vol. 9, No. 6, 2015: 72-84
[16] For example, Alexander Kupatadze and Javier Argomaniz (eds.), "Special Issue – Understanding and conceptualizing European jihadists: Criminals, extremists or both?." *European Journal of Criminology*, Vol. 16, no. 3, 2019.

Prison Experience

Evidence from most Western countries has frequently shown prisons as conducive environments for radicalization, a place where committed militants can spread extremist ideas, indoctrinate and recruit others in custody, and connect with like-minded individuals.[17]

Roughly one-third of the perpetrators in our dataset (44 out of 141) had, at some stage in their lives, been imprisoned before their (first) attack. The majority of attackers had not been imprisoned for their extremist commitment, but rather for common crimes. However, a not-insignificant number of jihadist attackers had been in prison for extremism-related or even terrorism-related offences,[18] including Usman Khan, the perpetrator of the 2019 London Bridge stabbing attack.

Additionally, a notable number of attacks were carried out directly inside prison facilities. For example, on September 4, 2016, in the prison of Osny, France, Bilal Taghi, a 24-year-old French citizen who had attempted to travel to Syria in 2015, attacked two prison guards with a knife in the name of the Islamic State. Similarly, on February 17, 2021, Gökmen Tanis, the man who was responsible for a jihadist lethal shooting on a tram in Utrecht, Netherlands, in March 2019, stabbed a prison guard inside the Rotterdam penitentiary where he was serving a life sentence.

Connections to Local Jihadist Networks

Although open-source information surrounding local jihadist networks—which we define as not internet-based—is at times partial and conflicting, according to our original dataset, nearly half of the perpetrators (62 out of 141; 44%) had a known connection to a physical, in-person local network (e.g., a localized violent extremist network, a radical preacher or mosque, etc.), either near the place of attack or of nearby residence. This finding suggests that, despite the obvious importance of the internet and the increasing interconnectivity between online and offline dynamics, "radicalization by contact" in the context of territorial "hubs" still accounts for a significant number of cases.[19]

According to available information, connection to a local jihadist network was particularly prevalent in 2015 and 2016, comprising the majority of attackers in both years (72% and 54% of all cases, respectively).

[17] For example, Mark S. Hamm, *The Spectacular Few: Prisoner Radicalization and the Evolving Terrorist Threat*. New York and London: New York University, 2013; Andrew Silke (ed.). *Prisons, Terrorism and Extremism*. Abingdon: Routledge, 2014.
[18] See, among others, Thomas Renard, "Overblown: Exploring the Gap Between the Fear of Terrorist Recidivism and the Evidence." *CTC Sentinel*, Vol. 13, Issue 4, 2020; Robin Simcox and Hannah Stuart, "The Threat from Europe's Jihadi Prisoners and Prison Leavers." *CTC Sentinel*, Vol. 13, Issue 7, 2020.
[19] *Fear Thy Neighbor*, especially chapter 4.

Foreign Fighter Experience

Foreign fighters have proven one of the key challenges posed by jihadism in the West. In addition to their role in conflict areas, some of these fighters may return to their home countries or to third countries and carry out or support terrorist attacks by taking advantage of the experience and skills, social connections, and status they gained in conflict areas abroad.[20]

According to our data, there are clear indications of prior foreign fighter experience for 16 individuals out of 141 (11%), who were involved in nine attacks, all of which carried out in Europe (France, Belgium, Germany, and the U.K.).

Prior foreign fighter experience skewed heavily towards the early years of the caliphate, so much so that in 2015, at the time of the coordinated Paris attacks, no less than 40% of all attackers that year were former foreign fighters (10 out of 25). This proportion dropped substantially to 5-10% in 2016 and in 2017, and finally either approached or reached 0% every year since.

In addition, after 2017, with the decline of the territorial caliphate in Syria and Iraq and increase in Western countries' surveillance and intervention capabilities, a substantial number of "frustrated travelers"—individuals who, not being able to join jihadist groups abroad, demonstrate their commitment to the cause by planning and even executing acts of terrorism in their own country—[21] plotted and carried out attacks in their home countries. According to available information, "frustrated travelers" were behind several successful terrorist attacks in the West, such as the 2020 Vienna shooting.[22]

Operational Connection to an Established Jihadist Organization

For the purpose of our analysis, an operational connection entails actual membership in the organization and/or regular communications, including conversations on operational matters (so-called "virtual entrepreneurship"),[23] with a member of the organization. According to our data, around one-quarter of the perpetrators (36 out of 141) had a known operational connection to an established jihadist organization, most often the Islamic State. Apart from three cases, all 36 carried out their attack before 2018.

[20] See, among others, Alexander Meleagrou-Hitchens, Seamus Hughes, Bennett Clifford, *The Travelers: American Jihadists in Syria and Iraq*, PoE GWU, 2018; Francesco Marone and Lorenzo Vidino, *Italy's Foreign Fighters*, ICCT – PoE-GWU - ISPI, 2019.
[21] Among others, Robin Simcox, "When Terrorists Stay Home: The Evolving Threat to Europe from Frustrated Travelers." *CTC Sentinel*, Volume 12, Issue 6, 2019.
[22] See Johannes Saal and Felix Lippe, "The Network of the November 2020 Vienna Attacker and the Jihad Threat to Austria." *CTC Sentinel*, Vol. 14, Issue 2, 2021.
[23] In particular, Alexander Meleagrou-Hitchens and Seamus Hughes, "The Threat to the United States from the Islamic State's Virtual Entrepreneurs", *CTC Sentinel*, Vol. 10, Issue 3, 2017.

Pledge of Allegiance to a Jihadist Organization

Even though available information on jihadist supporters' pledges of allegiance is often limited and ambiguous, our data indicate that 65 perpetrators (46%) had explicitly pledged allegiance to a jihadist organization—almost always the Islamic State—during or before their attack. Interestingly, this practice became less and less common year after year, from at least 64% of total cases in 2015 and 38% in 2016 to no recorded cases in 2022.

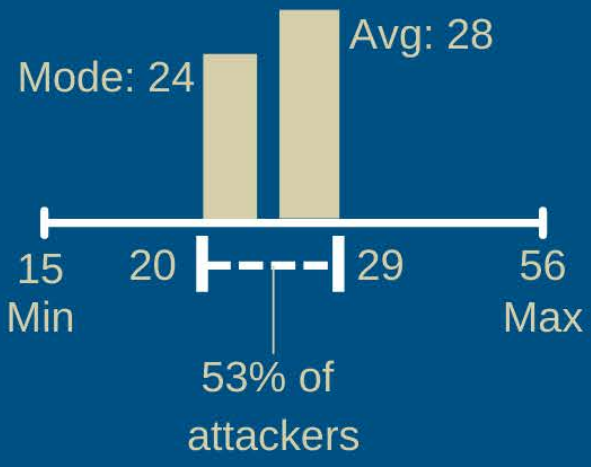
Fate of the Attacker

A slight majority of perpetrators (74 out of 141; 52%) lost their lives during the commission of their attacks. Most of them died in the course of "high-risk missions";[24] in other terms, the perpetrator's death could have been (and likely was) foreseeable, but it was neither certain nor necessary for the successful completion of the attack. 66 attackers (47%) were apprehended at the crime scene or directly afterwards. As with other data points observed above, this trend was not uniform over time. While 80% of attackers in 2015 did not survive their attack, that figure fell to 20% in 2020.

[24] Diego Gambetta (ed.), *Making Sense of Suicide Missions*, expanded and updated edition, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006; see also Teun van Dongen, *The Fate of the Perpetrator in the Jihadist Modus Operandi: Suicide Attacks and Non-Suicide Attacks in the West, 2004-2017*, ICCT Research Paper, 2017.

Jihadist Terrorist Attacks in the West Since 2014: The Attackers

Attacker Age



97% Male

52% Killed

14% Converts

Background

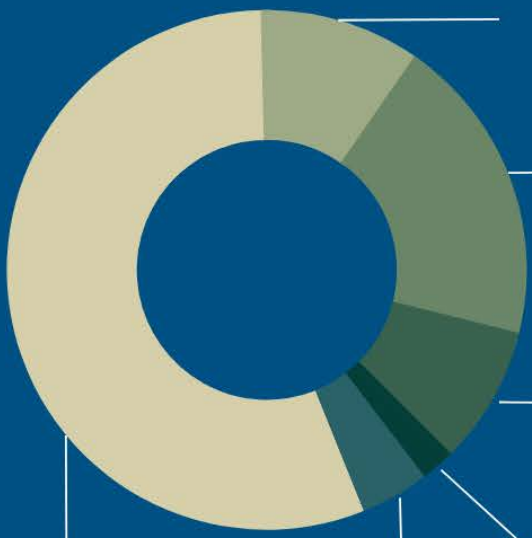
44% of attackers were **known** to authorities **prior** to the attack

31% served time in **prison**

50% had a **criminal** background

11% had **foreign fighter experience**

Immigration Status



Illegal resident 14

Legal resident 27

Refugee or asylum seeker 12

Visitor from outside the region 3

Visitor from within the region 6

Citizen 78

Connections

26% had an **operational connection** to a terrorist group

44% connected to **local jihadist network**

46% **expressed loyalty** to a terrorist group

Conclusion

The data provided in this report seems to confirm the assessment held by most counterterrorism practitioners that while the jihadist threat in the West has decreased, it has not vanished. Three reliable, empirical indicators point to this conclusion. Whereas travel to join jihadist groups abroad has almost disappeared and total arrests have significantly decreased, the decline in attacks has not been very marked. What has substantially declined is the average lethality per attack, which is arguably a consequence of the diminished involvement of Islamic State-linked operatives. It should also be highlighted that authorities, particularly in Europe, have achieved substantial successes in thwarting attacks compared to just a few years ago, and especially with regards to sophisticated plots.

As for the profiles of jihadist attackers in the West, not much has changed over the last few years when it comes to demographic aspects such as age, gender, and criminal background. Two important developments are the increase in attacks carried out inside prisons, and the fact that—despite predictions to the contrary—so far there has not been a surge of attacks carried out by returning foreign fighters.

In substance, the picture that can be gleaned from the data is that of a Western jihadist scene in transition, still very much active but abandoned by the large jihadist outfits that have historically motivated, emboldened, and directed it.

Program on Extremism

THE GEORGE WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY