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Jihadi Attacks in Europe

Trends and features
2014-2022

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Quantifying Jihadism in Europe - Report series

This report is the first of a series based on an original dataset on the past nine years of jihadi terrorist attacks in Europe. The purpose of the analysis is to contribute to the debate about countering and preventing violent extremism in Europe by providing an overview of relevant quantitative data.

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1. Abstract

Based on an original dataset of jihadi terrorist attacks in Europe between 2014 and 2022, this report provides data on the temporal and spatial aspects of attacks, the weapon(s) used, target(s), the number of perpetrators, number of casualties (dead/injured), the perpetrators' terrorist group affiliation, the perpetrators' criminal record, authorities' knowledge about the perpetrators being potential threats, surveillance status, mental health conditions, asylum seeker status, age, convert status, citizenship, and employment.

A total of 105 jihadi terrorist attack in Europe were recorded during the covered period of 2014-2022, of which 10.5% were carried out by multiple perpetrators. These led to 3,089 people injured or dead. About 64% of the attacks were related to Daesh, one attack was claimed by al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), and the rest was not linked to any terrorist entity. European countries with a highly visible presence in the Global Coalition's military efforts in the Middle East, i.e. France, Germany, the UK, and Belgium, suffered the most attacks. This group of countries also stands out in terms of targets: their law enforcement agencies and members of armed forces were disproportionately targeted compared to other countries. As for the modus operandi, unsophisticated attacks using knives were the most prevalent (60%) in this period, followed by ramming, guns and improvised explosive devices (IEDs) (12% each).

The perpetrators were found to be highly diverse, with no common profile. A significant share (42.9%) of the perpetrators had a criminal record prior to the attack, and 10% of the attackers had even been convicted for terrorism-related crimes. Another noteworthy aspect is the high prevalence of mental health conditions (29.3%), particularly among the perpetrators of single actor attacks. Finally, the data on the perpetrators' nationalities underscores the increasingly homegrown feature of jihadism in Europe, while also highlighting the global aspect of the challenge, with 29 nationalities being represented in the sample.

In Germany, the 19 recorded attacks resulted in fewer casualties on average than the rest of the sample, likely due to the high share of unsophisticated attacks by single actors. The German perpetrator sample also stands out in three aspects: a notably higher share of perpetrators were mentally ill, asylum seekers, and unemployed, compared to the rest of the sample. The Austrian sample is too small to draw meaningful conclusions. However, compared to the rest of the sample, the perpetrators of Austrian jihadi attacks had a significantly lower share of mental health issues and asylum seeker status, but a higher percentage of terrorism recidivists.

Based on the findings, it is recommended to review and improve reintegration and disengagement efforts of convicted extremist offenders and to expand mental health services especially in the context of P/CVE.

2. Introduction

Between 2014 and 2022, Europe has been confronted with an unprecedented wave of jihadi terrorism. While at the moment this threat appears to be diminishing, as such but also relative to other types of terrorism, there are indications that singular attacks remain possible. Against this background, evidence-based counterterrorism and P/CVE policies should consider systematic analyses of terrorist activity in order to clarify facts, identify patterns, and learn important lessons. This report provides such a systematic, quantitative analysis with regard to a number of relevant aspects related to the jihadi terrorist activity in Europe, in particular attacks and perpetrators, and their main features. It furthermore situates its insights within current debates relative to the strategies of terrorist organisations, recruitment, and the effectiveness of counter-terrorism and P/CVE approaches.

3. Methodology

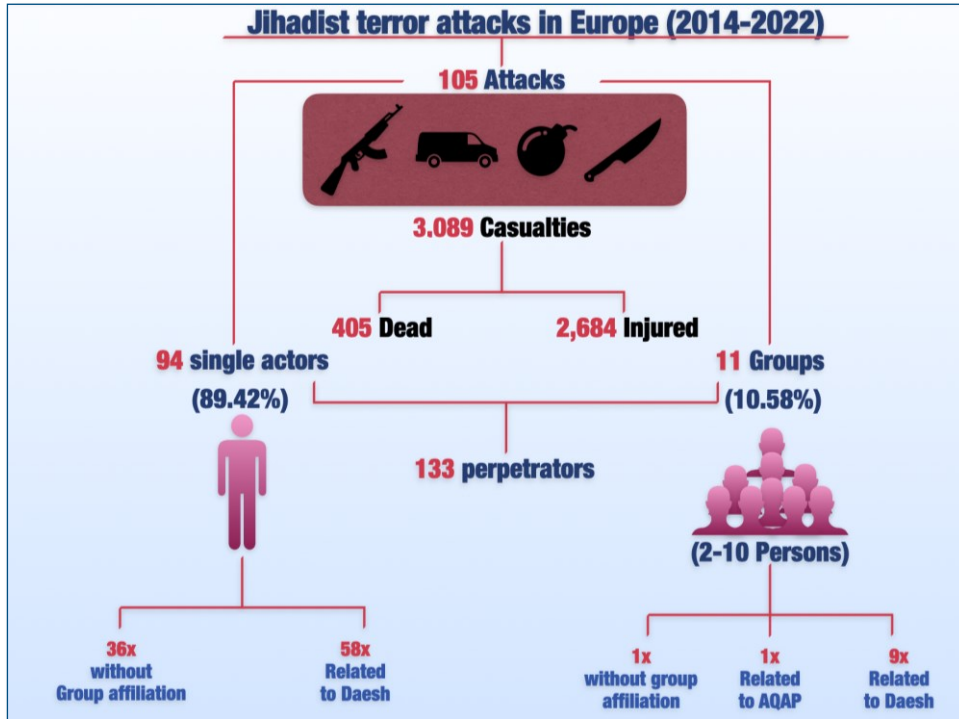
The report at hand is based on an in-house dataset of jihadi terror attacks in the European Union (plus UK, Norway, and Switzerland) between 2014 and 2022. The database was created using open-source data: primarily secondary sources (news articles, incl. in local languages; other publicly available datasets, e.g. Global Terrorism Database, reports by authorities [e.g. Europol's annual TE-SAT], press conferences, leaked investigation files), as well as primary sources if available (e.g. verified social media information).

The definition of terrorism has always been an intensively contested subject with a large variety of approaches, yet recent trends have made it even more challenging to distinguish terror attacks from violent criminality (murder, "amok"), particularly when mental health issues are also involved, such as for example in the case of the Würzburg attack in Germany on 26 June 2021. While acknowledging these discussions, this dataset uses broad inclusion criteria, considering the apparent shift in the nature of terrorism towards ideological flexibility and

leaderless resistance. It thereby also captures events that may not show up in the statistics of authorities due to these relying on narrower, legal definitions of terrorism. The dataset includes attacks if: the attack was declared as terrorism by authorities, AND/OR a terrorist entity claimed credit for the attack, AND/OR the perpetrator(s) expressed political/ideological motives (e.g. on social media, or during the attack) AND/OR the perpetrator(s) was proven to have consumed extensive amount of (jihadi) terrorist propaganda, AND/OR the weapon and target selection (e.g. consciously targeting certain groups in accordance with jihadi ideologies) are indicative of a terrorist motive, whereas the latter also requires that at least another criterion be met.

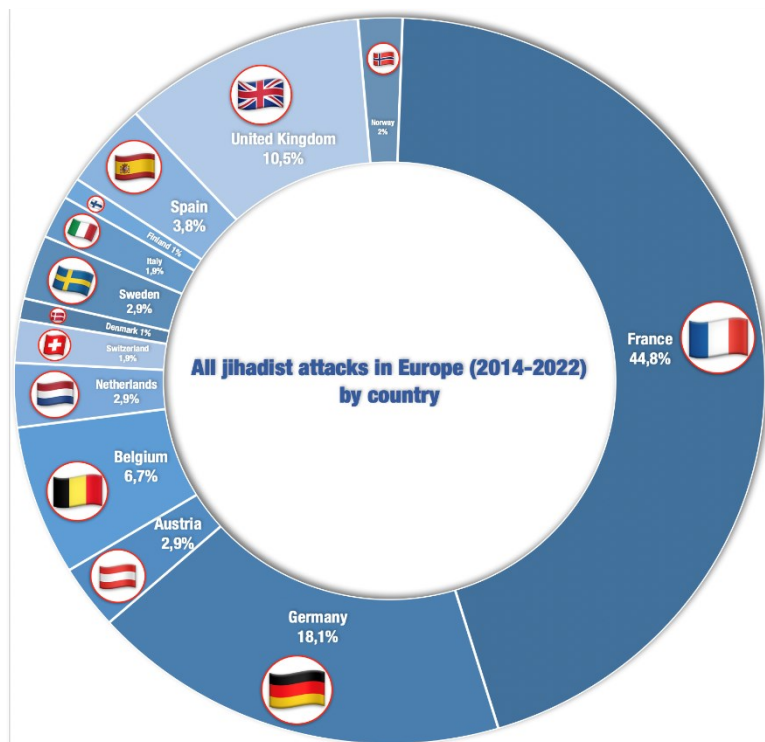
4. Overview

Within the covered period of 2014-2022, there were 105 jihadi terrorist attack in total that fulfil the dataset's scope and inclusion criteria. These attacks claimed 3,089 casualties (i.e. injured and dead) in total, of which 2,684 were injured and 405 passed away as a result of the attack. Although "only" 11 (10.48% of all attacks) of these were perpetrated by cells (2-10 terrorists), such coordinated attacks account for 1,013 (32.79% of all) casualties. The rest (94 attacks, 89.52% of total sample) were carried out by single actors. In terms of group affiliation, 67 (63.8%) attacks were related to Daesh, 1 (0.95%) attack was claimed by AQAP, and the rest 37 (35.23%) were not affiliated with any terrorist entity.



Almost half (44.76%) of jihadi terror attacks in Europe have targeted France, making it the main jihadist venue in Europe within the covered period. Further countries with a high number of attacks compared to others are Germany (18.1% of all attacks) and the UK (10.5% of all attacks), followed by Belgium (6.7% of all attacks). Notably, all four of these

countries have been actively and prominently involved in military efforts against Daesh.



A finding with extensive implications is the high share of attacks in which authorities had knowledge about the radicalisation and related terrorism threat of the perpetrator(s), considering their previous convictions, encounters with authorities, reports by citizens, or other suspicious activities. In France, for instance, authorities maintain a watchlist (known as the “fichier S”¹) of individuals that pose a potential terrorist threat, yet not every individual is under surveillance. In 14.29% of all attacks, (at least one of) the perpetrator(s) was under surveillance by the authorities. In another 27.62% of all attacks, (at least one of) the perpetrator(s) was known to the authorities as a potential terror threat. Thus, about 42% of attacks had a realistic chance to be thwarted, yet they were not.

5. Modus operandi: Weapons

Pragmatism has clearly been the decisive aspect in the choice of weapon in jihadi terror attacks in Europe. In the majority (60%) of the attacks, perpetrators chose to use knives or axes. There are multiple explanations for that:

- perpetrators might have had few resources for acquiring more lethal tools, whereas knives are easily accessible and cheap;
- some attacks were likely perpetrated impulsively without much planning, hence the preference for tools found in most households;
- stabbings do not require extensive training to be effectively used.

However, these unsophisticated weapons also have their tactical downsides. The 62 stabbing attacks analysed resulted in 3.79 casualties on average², which is significantly lower than other weapons.

While the easy-access and easy-to-use arguments also apply to vehicles, ramming (used in 12% of all attacks) were just as prevalently used as explosives (used in 12% of all attacks) and guns (used in 12% of all attacks), that are harder to access and take special skills to use. There is however a major difference in the outcome of these various means. Shootings resulted in 34.27 casualties on average, ramming led to 67.07 casualties on average, while improvised explosive devices inflicted the most damage with 110.60 casualties on average.³

Since the beginning of 2018, there has been a clear-cut trend in the type of weapon used by terrorists in Europe: 70% of the attacks have been stabbings (2014-2017: 41.6%). These unplanned, or at least unsophisticated plots with mostly mundane weapons are largely characteristic to the recent wave of lone-actor attacks, where there is not necessarily an overarching strategic aim behind the violence, such as political demands or maximizing suffering in a theatrical way to spread terror. Instead, these attackers are likely driven by personal motivations, e.g. taking revenge or fulfilling the perceived obligation of jihad in pursuit of reaching “heaven” — promised by jihadi propaganda — in the easiest and quickest way possible.

In 8 cases (7.6% of all attacks), perpetrators used a variety of other means to carry out an attack, such as a bow and arrow, arson, and sabotage.

6. Modus operandi: Targets

Indiscriminate attacks on civilians accounted for 48.57%⁴ of all jihadi attacks in Europe in the period of 2014-2022. Civilians are generally considered to be the easiest targets to hit, as the likelihood of them being able to defend themselves is low. At the same time, this

¹ FRANCE24 (2018): What is France's 'fichier S' watchlist – and does it work? (<https://www.france24.com/en/20181212-france-terror-watchlist-fichier-security-attack>)

² In some attacks, multiple weapons were used (e.g. ramming using a vehicle, then stabbing). The dataset differentiates between casualty numbers resulting from particular weapons when such numbers are available (e.g. 2015 Paris attacks), but

this is not always the case. The averages should thus be seen as rough estimates.

³ These averages are largely affected by a few outliers (i.e. complex and highly lethal yet rare attacks, e.g. Paris 2015, Manchester, Nice) that significantly increase the average.

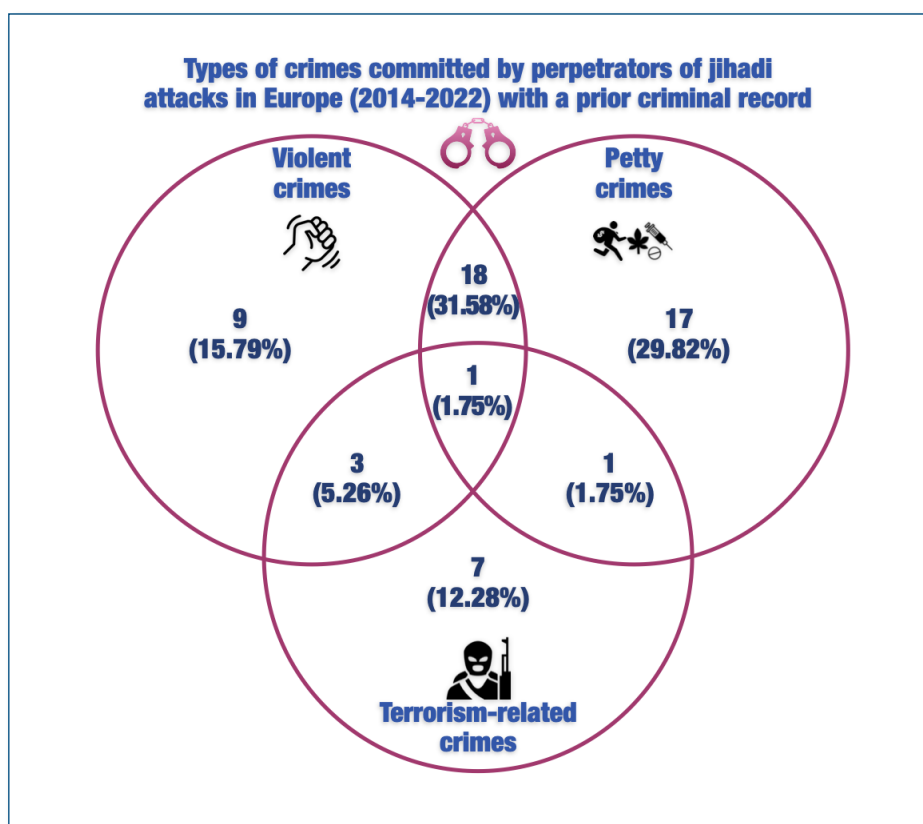
⁴ Some attacks had multiple targets. The percentages were calculated using the total number of attacks, not targets, i.e. the listed percentages add up to more than 100%.

randomised target selection also serves the purpose of terrorists by spreading fear in society.

In 20% of the cases, specific civilians were targeted on purpose (e.g. Samuel Paty), mostly due to ideological reasons. This type of target selection is a conscious decision, oftentimes with the purpose of taking revenge on particular individuals that are seen to be important enemies of the respective terrorist ideology on the one hand, while also sending a clear message to others belonging to the same group on the other. Among others, Jewish people, Christians, journalists that have published cartoons on Islam, and even members of the LGBTQ community were specifically targeted by jihadi perpetrators within the past nine years in Europe.

Authorities (police, soldiers) were chosen as targets in 39% of cases overall. Interestingly, this type of attacks almost exclusively took place in France, Germany, Italy, and Belgium.

In France, Belgium, and Italy they make up a strikingly high share of attacks. Over half of all attacks (58.69%) in French territory targeted authorities, whereas Belgian police officers and soldiers were targeted in 57.17% of all attacks in the country. Both attacks recorded in Italy targeted authorities. A possible explanation for this may lie in the strategic communication of Daesh. About 60% of the attacks targeting authorities were Daesh-related. Police and soldiers are often perceived as symbols of the state, whereas all three of these states were also actively involved in the Global Coalition against Daesh, participating in military operations in the Middle East. In addition, France and Belgium even had a highly visible presence in air strikes against Daesh in Syria and Iraq. Daesh thus explicitly called for attacks targeting not only members of the global coalition, but specifically their authorities.⁵ Some attackers⁶ explicitly justified their act as a retaliation for operations against Daesh.



⁵ Levine, Mike; Margolin, Josh (2015): ISIS Renews Previous Calls for Attacks in West as Police Remain Vigilant (<https://abcnews.go.com/US/isis-renews-previous-calls-attacks-west-police-remain/story?id=28151629>)

⁶ see e.g. <https://www.start.umd.edu/gtd/search/IncidentSummary.aspx?gtdid=201605260031>

7. Perpetrator profiles

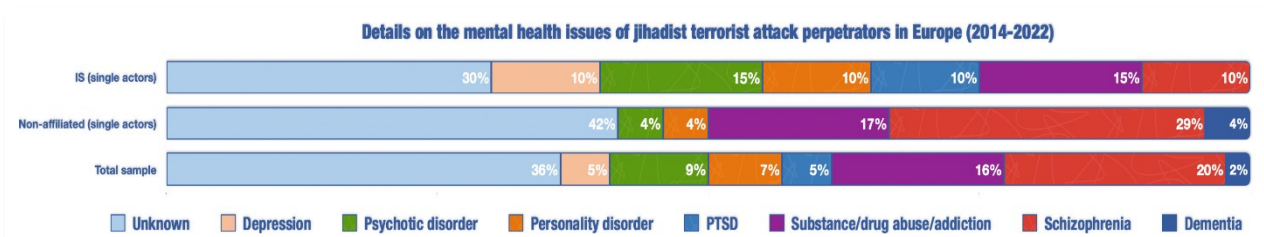
The 133 perpetrators included in this sample were 28.2 years old on average, whereas the perpetrators of single actor attacks were five years older on average (29.6 years) than those that acted in groups (24.6 years on average).

In total, 42.86% of the perpetrators had a criminal record prior to carrying out a terror attack (for the distribution of the types of crimes among those perpetrators with a criminal record, see chart below), yet only 9% of the total sample had already been convicted for an offence related to terrorism. The rate of having a criminal record is consistent when differentiating between perpetrators acting alone (43.62% of them had a criminal history) and perpetrators acting in groups (41.03% of these had a criminal history). However, if we only take terrorism-related criminal record into account, perpetrators acting in groups are somewhat more likely to have such a prior conviction (12.82%) than single actors (7.45%).

Looking at all perpetrators, 29.32% had a diagnosed mental health issue. However, there is a stark contrast between single actors and those operating in cells: not a single member of the 11 groups had a known mental health condition, as opposed to 41.49% of single actors. A theory explaining this relies on the assumption that multi-perpetrator operations are (tactically) more complex and require complete mental fitness — among other aspects — in order to carry out sophisticated plots without making mistakes in advance that would lead to tipping off authorities. Such attacks have a higher resemblance to “classic” terrorism, with elaborate plots, than the recent wave of single actor attacks that are rather unsophisticated.

Overall, there is a wide range of mental health issues with highly different implications and symptoms. The concrete diagnoses remain unknown in 36% of the cases, and even among the known cases, there are no strikingly prevalent conditions (see chart below). Among those perpetrators with a mental health condition, 20% were reported to have suffered from schizophrenia, as the most frequent of all conditions. Another 16% were dealing with the issue of substance addiction or abuse. Further reported conditions were psychotic disorder (9%), personality disorder (7%), PTSD (5%), depression (5%) and dementia (2%).

Still, even when some details are known, information is often vague. For instance, the term “psychotic disorder” — one of the most prevalent categories among Daesh-attackers — covers a variety of conditions, such as schizophrenia, delusional disorder, substance abuse, or induced psychotic disorder, among others. Most importantly, mental health issues have not been proven to directly cause terrorism. They might be contributing factors, yet their role is still highly disputed among experts and more research is needed to draw conclusions. Another variable with a high rate of unknowns is (un)employment: while 19.55% of all perpetrators were reported to be unemployed at the time of the attack, the employment status of perpetrators could not be determined in 48.88% of the cases. As for the rest, 10.52% were students, and 21.05% were employed, the latter including traineeships and internships. With the high share of unknowns, no far-reaching conclusions can be drawn. With at least every fifth attacker however having no stable employment, violent extremist groups and preachers may easily exploit this and turn terrorism into an



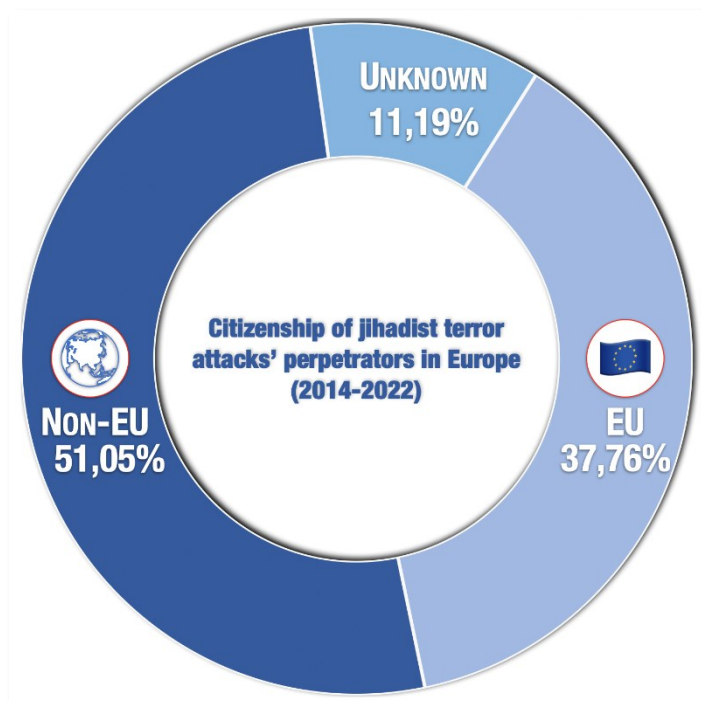
occupation. This may also correlate with the high levels of crime in the sample and has also been recognized by Daesh as a lucrative target group for recruitment.⁷ Yet another frequently discussed aspect in the context of the recent wave of jihadi terrorism in Europe is the role of asylum seekers. Out of all perpetrators, 23.31% were asylum seekers, 41.93% of which had their request for asylum rejected by authorities prior to the attack. When differentiating between single actors and perpetrators acting as a cell, the share of asylum seekers is noticeably higher among single actors (29.79%) than among members of groups (7.69%).

The citizenship of perpetrators highlights the global dimensions of the challenge posed by jihadism in Europe. In total, citizens of at least 29 nations are among the perpetrators; whereas the citizenship of over 11% of the perpetrators remains unknown, the number is likely even higher. About every fifth perpetrator (20.98%) was a French citizen⁸, making up by far the largest group of all

nationalities in the sample. Further nationalities of perpetrators that stand out due to their higher-than-average share are Moroccans (10.49%), Algerians (6.29%), British (5.59%), Belgians (5.59%), Iraqis (4.90%), Germans (4.20%) and Syrians (4.20%). These insights also demonstrate that jihadism in Europe is increasingly becoming a homegrown issue, especially when taking into account that a large share of Moroccans and Algerians were dual citizens that were mostly born and raised in Europe. With that in mind, one might also expect a high rate of converts among perpetrators. This, however, does not appear to be the case: only 6.77% of 133 perpetrators were reported to be converts.

8. Zooming in: Austria and Germany

By comparing attacks and perpetrators in Austria and Germany specifically with the rest of the sample, a number of noteworthy differences can be observed. Austria has suffered three jihadi attacks in the covered period; with a sample size that small, no valid



⁷ PISOIU, Daniela (2021): Loser's Jihad – The new faces of Islamist terrorism in Europe (<https://www.scenor.at/post/loser-s-jihad-the-new-faces-of-islamist-terrorism-in-europe-1>)

⁸ In more than 10 cases, perpetrators had dual citizenship. In such cases, both nationalities were counted.

conclusions can be drawn. However, the findings for Germany, with its 19 attacks (and thereby the second most frequently targeted country by jihadi terrorism in Europe in the period of 2014-2022), might have considerable implications for their P/CVE strategy in terms of which aspects to focus on.

The three attacks in Austria resulted in 29 casualties (6 killed, 23 injured). The average number of casualties per attack (9.6) is thereby significantly lower compared to the average of the rest of the sample (30). The perpetrators were all single actors (rest of the sample: 89.21%), with one attack (33.3%) having been claimed by Daesh (rest of the sample: 64.7%), and the rest not being related to any recognised terrorist entity. Looking at the targets and weapons used, one attack was a stabbing and arson targeting specific civilians, another targeted authorities with a knife, and the third one was a shooting against civilians. The profiles of the three perpetrators stand out in three aspects: none of the Austrian perpetrators had diagnosed mental health conditions (rest of the sample: 30%), none were asylum seekers (rest of the sample: 23.84%), but one out of three (33.3%) was a terrorism recidivist (rest of the sample: 8.46%). However, as mentioned before, the small sample size does not allow reasonable comparisons.

Out of the 19 attacks carried out in Germany, 13 (68.42%) were connected to Daesh while the rest had no relation to recognised terrorist entities. Only one of these (5.27%) was carried out by multiple perpetrators. These numbers match the average of the rest of the sample with minor deviations. The attacks led to 136 casualties (19 dead, 117 injured), resulting in an average of 7.15 casualties per attack, which is — similarly to Austria — significantly lower than the average of the rest of the sample (34.33). At this point, it is important to note that one particular attack (the ramming in Berlin 2016) significantly bumps up the average, without which the difference to the rest of the sample's average would be even higher. This hints at a

strikingly low complexity of attacks in Germany, that are mostly ineffective in terms of casualties. With regard to targets, authorities were targeted in 20% of the attacks, civilians in 60% of the attacks, while the rest of the attacks (20%) consciously targeted specific individuals or groups. Adding to the previous assumption of attacks in Germany being unsophisticated, 57.89% of the perpetrators used knives or axes, which almost perfectly matches the average of the rest of the sample. The rest of the attacks used IEDs (21.05%), sabotage (10.52%), arson (5.25%), and vehicles (5.26%).

Comparing the profiles of these perpetrators to the rest of the sample, there are four unique features of the German attackers that may provide some explanation for the low complexity of the operations, as well as hint at aspects to focus on in P/CVE approaches. 45% of the attackers had a mental health condition compared to 26.55% of attackers in other countries. Marking another major difference, 60% of the perpetrators in Germany were asylum seekers (rest of the sample: 16.81%), half of which had their asylum request rejected by authorities prior to the attack, as compared to 36.84% among the rest of the perpetrator sample. Finally, 35% of the attackers in Germany were reported to be unemployed at the time of the attack, compared to 16.81% in the rest of the sample. To interpret these insights, three contextual factors should be considered. With the high share of unknown employment statuses across the entire sample, the unemployment numbers are to be taken with a grain of salt. The difference between the German sample and the rest in this regard may partially result from more detailed reporting on the perpetrators in Germany. Moreover, the large percentage of asylum seekers among perpetrators may also contribute to explaining the above average in unemployment: asylum seekers in Germany are only allowed to work if they fulfil certain criteria, which can take months.⁹ Thirdly, the dataset has a broad inclusion criteria, with some incidents being

⁹ Bundesministerium für Arbeit und Soziales (2020): Arbeitsmarktzugang für Flüchtlinge (<https://www.bmas.de/DE/Arbeit/Fachkraeftesicherung->

und-Integration/Migration-und-Arbeit/Flucht-und-Aysl/arbeitsmarktzugang-fuer-fluechtlinge.html)

included that are subject to debates on whether they can be classified as terrorism or are better described as amok. As mentioned in the description of the methodology, the inclusion of incidents does not necessarily require a legal classification of the act as political violence/terrorism, not least due to the subtle yet still existing differences across national legislations as well as the changing nature of contemporary terrorism. This may explain the higher rate of mental health issues. Finally, Germany has one of the largest refugee population per capita in Europe¹⁰, which somewhat relativises the above average rate of asylum seekers among perpetrators.

9. Conclusion & Recommendations

As jihadism appears to be on the decline in Europe, a number of conclusions can be drawn based on the data from the past decade, allowing the relevant stakeholders to learn key lessons, improve strategies and become better prepared for future challenges posed by terrorism. Looking at the bigger picture, while military counter-terrorism efforts were crucial in defeating Daesh in Iraq and Syria, thereby also weakening their external operational capabilities, this may have come with a cost. European countries actively – and visibly – participating in the Global Coalition against Daesh recorded the highest numbers of jihadi attacks since 2014. At the same time, their law enforcement agencies and members of armed forces were disproportionately targeted compared to other countries. Despite a few complex plots utilising IEDs and guns earlier, unsophisticated attacks by single actors relying on knives are the most characteristic for this last wave of jihadi terrorism in Europe, in particular for the past years. Such perpetrators are not only harder to find and more unpredictable, but the resources of European law enforcement and intelligence agencies appear to be insufficient to effectively deal with the sheer amount of individuals classified as potential threats. As for the 133 perpetrators, no clear terrorist profile could be

determined. Statistics however suggest that the terror-crime nexus is still highly relevant, with almost every other attacker having had a criminal record, and about every tenth perpetrator being a terrorism recidivist. A further insight drawn from the data is the growing prevalence of mental health issues among perpetrators, which comes amidst a possible shift away from “traditional” group-based terrorism pursuing strategic, political goals, towards an ideologically flexible and largely individualised struggle incited by (increasingly online) propaganda. Lastly, statistics highlighted the continued global dimension of the challenge posed by jihadism with perpetrators being citizens of at least 29 countries, yet the numbers hint at the issue increasingly becoming homegrown in Europe.

Based on these findings, several recommendations can be made:

- 1) Given the high rate of (terrorism) recidivists as well as the proneness of surveillance to fail, CVE strategies should review and improve their reintegration and disengagement efforts.
- 2) Considering the mental health issues among the jihadi population: a stronger emphasis should be put on psychological and psychiatric services in the context of P/CVE; policy and analyses should also capture grey zones between terrorism and amok.
- 3) As the modus operandi of jihadi terrorists tends towards simplicity and unaffiliated actors, the whole of society approach to P/CVE should be reinforced.
- 4) On the background of a continuing prevalence of the crime-terror nexus, applying insights and tools developed in the context of crime prevention more broadly seems justifiable.
- 5) Finally, efforts to capture the evolution and manifestation of online propaganda within online subcultures need to be reinforced. □

¹⁰ Der Standard (2020): Welche Länder global die meisten Flüchtlinge aufgenommen haben (<https://www.derstandard.at/story/2000115372396/welche->

laender-global-die-meisten-fluechtlinge-aufgenommen-haben)