

The Islamic State's Lone-Wolf Era Is Over

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Articles & Testimony

Small-scale attacks by homegrown radicals are out, complex plots to maximize carnage are in, and the long-term domestic threat to Europe is stark.

The Brussels bombings have made it plain that the scale of the threat posed by the Islamic State to the West is far larger than most Westerners had previously thought. That threat is no longer limited to the radicalization of the approximately 5,000 European citizens who left the comfort and safety of their homes to fight alongside the Islamic State in Syria, Iraq and, more recently, Libya. Nor has it only expanded to include so-called "lone-wolf" plots - self-organized attacks carried out by homegrown radicals. The Brussels bombings have made it painfully clear that the Islamic State is determined to plan and direct attacks in the West that are far more sophisticated and lethal than such small-scale mayhem.

It would be understandable if the public expressed anxiety and dismay about this metastasized danger. But the West's counterterrorism officials are not entitled to feel surprise. For anyone paying close enough attention, the Islamic State's expanded capabilities have been evident for well over a year.

After the U.S.-led coalition began launching airstrikes against Islamic State targets in August 2014, the group's spokesman, Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, responded with a call for supporters to carry out lone-offender terrorist attacks targeting the West: "If you can kill a disbelieving American or European -- especially the spiteful and filthy French -- or an Australian, or a Canadian, or any other disbeliever from the disbelievers waging war, including the citizens of the countries that entered into a coalition against the Islamic State, then rely upon Allah, and kill him in any manner or way however it may be."

Since then, Islamic State supporters and sympathizers have tried to answer his call. The January 2015 attacks in Paris on the offices of the satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo* and a kosher grocery store caused some confusion because some operatives appeared to be tied to al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), while others were inspired

by the Islamic State. Looking back, however, it appears that these terrorist "frenemies" (the groups they respectively affiliated themselves with were fighting one another in a jihadi civil war back in Syria) were still part of the lone-offender phenomenon. They may have been inspired by groups based in the Middle East, but they were not directed by them.

Lost in the shuffle after the horror of those attacks was the critical turning point in Islamic State terrorism in Europe: the plots that were averted by raids in Verviers, Belgium, a week after the *Charlie Hebdo* attack. These raids were a watershed moment for European counterterrorism officials, and Belgian authorities in particular, who were acting on information that the cell was plotting imminent and large-scale attacks in Belgium. Police discovered automatic firearms, precursors for the explosive triacetone triperoxide (TATP), a body camera, multiple cell phones, handheld radios, police uniforms, fraudulent identification documents, and a large quantity of cash during the raid.

Information from European and Middle Eastern intelligence services indicated the raids thwarted "major terrorist attacks," most likely in Belgium, though the investigation into the group's activities spanned several European countries, including France, Greece, Spain, and the Netherlands. The leader of the plot, Belgian citizen Abdelhamid Abaaoud, directed the operation from a safe house in Athens, Greece, using a cell phone, while other group members operated in several other European countries, investigators determined. "Items recovered during searches of residences affiliated with the cell suggest the group's plotting may have included the use of small arms, improvised explosive devices, and the impersonation of police officers," according to an intelligence assessment by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security.

Authorities quickly began to appreciate that the threat facing Europe was no longer limited to lone offenders inspired by the group. It now included trained and experienced foreign terrorist fighters coordinating attacks, directed by the Islamic State, across multiple jurisdictions.

Authorities quickly honed in on the ringleader of the Belgium plots, Abaaoud, also known as Abu Umar al-Baljiki. But despite a Europe-wide manhunt, Abaaoud managed to elude authorities, escaping from Belgium to Syria, and then back. He later bragged about his escape in an interview with *Dabiq*, the Islamic State's propaganda magazine: "My name and picture were all over the news yet I was able to stay in their homeland, plan operations against them, and leave safely when doing so became necessary."

The threat to Europe slowly became clearer still. In April 2015, French authorities arrested an Islamic State operative who had called for medical assistance after accidentally shooting himself. In his apartment, authorities found weapons, ammunition, and notes on potential targets, including churches, which he had been told to do by someone inside Syria, according to Paris prosecutor Francois Molins. A U.S. intelligence bulletin reported the Islamic State operative had links to Abaaoud and had previously expressed interest in traveling to Syria.

By May 2015, U.S. law enforcement concluded that a sea change had decisively occurred in the nature of the Islamic State terrorist threat. While threats remain from Islamic State-inspired lone offenders, the U.S. intelligence assessment concluded that future Islamic State operations would resemble the elaborate disrupted Verviers plot. The multi-jurisdictional nature of that plot cemented for European and U.S. counterterrorism officials the importance of information sharing across national agencies, but implementing the necessary reforms would be slow in coming.

The pace of the Islamic State's foreign-directed plots sped up in the summer of 2015. In mid-August, a man was arrested while attempting to carry out an attack on a concert in France. The man, who had only recently returned from a six-day trip to Syria, told police he was ordered to carry out the attack by a man fitting Abaaoud's description. Later that month, off-duty U.S. servicemen managed to subdue a gunman attempting to carry out an attack on a Thalys train traveling from Amsterdam to Paris.

Luck ran out when terrorists struck Paris on Nov. 13, 2015. These multiple coordinated attacks marked a departure from past Islamic State plots in the level of training and degree of operational security executed by the attackers. According to the U.S. intelligence bulletin, using an acronym for the Islamic State, the November Paris attacks "demonstrated a greater degree of coordination and use of multiple tactics, resulting in higher casualties than has been seen in any previous ISIL Western attack." The tactics, techniques, and procedures used in the attacks were quickly identified by law enforcement as the type of attacks the West should be expecting from now on.

According to the latest EUROPOL counterterrorism report, the Paris attacks and subsequent investigations demonstrate a shift by the Islamic State toward "going global" in its terrorism campaign. The Islamic State has developed an "external action command," EUROPOL notes, which "trained for special forces style attacks in the international environment." The police organization's warning for Europe was stark: "There is every reason to expect that [the Islamic State], [Islamic State]-inspired terrorists or another religiously inspired terrorist group will undertake a terrorist attack somewhere in Europe again, but particularly in France, intended to cause mass casualties amongst the civilian population."

If the evolution of the Islamic State threat to Europe was not yet perfectly clear after the Paris attacks, it has become so in the wake of the Brussels bombings. And yet, while Europe is now fully aware of the scope of the threat, it remains unprepared to cope with it. This includes shortcomings in both the counterterrorism capabilities of European states as well as their efforts to integrate immigrant communities into the larger European societies in which they live.

The counterterrorism challenges were underscored by the inability of security services to find Salah Abdeslam for some four months after the November Paris attacks. More broadly, the latest report by the European Union's counterterrorism coordinator revealed that not all member states have established electronic connections to Interpol at their border crossings. The report was uncharacteristically blunt, finding that "information sharing still does not reflect the threat." In one glaring example, the European databases have recorded only 2,786 verified foreign terrorist fighters despite "well-founded estimates that around 5,000 EU citizens have traveled to Syria and Iraq to join ISIL and other extremist groups," the report said. Worse still, more than 90 percent of the reports of verified foreign terrorist fighters came from just five member states.

But the social integration challenges are more daunting still. In Belgium particularly, governance is complicated by the extremely federal system of government, divided not only across local, regional, and federal levels of government, but also by geography, language, and culture. But across Europe, solving the long ignored problem of disenfranchised immigrant communities is going to take both time and money, both of which are in short supply.

And these two sets of challenges -- counterterrorism and intelligence on the one hand, and social and economic integration on the other -- are intricately interconnected. The economic factors are not a primary factor of radicalization, Belgian officials told me, but they are a powerful reinforcing factor feeding an identity crisis centered on lack of opportunity, broken families, psychological fragility, and cultural and religious tension. With an unemployment rate as high as 30 percent, it should not be surprising that the vast majority of Belgian recruits to the Islamic State are small-time criminals. One Molenbeek recruiter, who is now in jail, approached local youth in the neighborhood's ubiquitous storefront mosques and convinced them to donate some of the proceeds of their petty crime to fund the travel of foreign fighters to Syria.

Today's petty criminals are now tomorrow's potential suicide bombers. And they will not be carrying out their attacks in faraway war zones but rather in the heart of the countries in which they grew up. The U.S. intelligence assessment written after the November Paris attacks presciently warned that "the involvement of a large number of operatives and group leaders based in multiple countries in future ISIL-linked plotting could create significant obstacles in the detection and disruption of preoperational activities." That is certainly the case, but it is only half the

problem. The still greater challenge European countries now face is contending with the European Islamic State terrorists being groomed today within their own borders.

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