

'Jihadist Terrorism' and EU Responses: Current and Future Challenges

1. Introduction

The present research addresses the case of 'Jihadist Terrorism' on European Union (EU) soil, focusing on the actions of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) from 2015 on. Since the *Combined Joint Task Force - Operation Inherent Resolve* (CJTF-OIR), a military coalition led by the United States (U.S.), was launched against the organization in Iraq and Syria in September 2014, ISIL has lost most of its territories and sources of funding. In practice, the CJTF-OIR ended or at least postponed the ISIL's major goal of establishing an 'Islamic Caliphate'. As a response, the organization assumed the frontline of a trend called 'Jihadist Terrorism', using 'Internet Jihadism' as a tool to recruit individuals willing to carry out terrorist attacks deliberately targeting Western countries involved in the CJTF-OIR, as well as their citizens. In the EU, there were already incidents in Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Spain, Sweden and the UK. In mid-December 2017, a pro-ISIL social media profile posted the image of a banner where an individual is carrying a knife stained with blood in Vienna, Austria, which holds the UN and OSCE Headquarters and from where the present research is being published. In order to address such an urgent topic, first, the present research divides and describes the *modus operandi* of ISIL in two phases, one most prominent in Iraq and Syria between 2013 and 2015, and a second one in Western countries since 2015, to demonstrate the impact of the U.S.-led coalition on the *modus operandi* of the organization. Second, it presents a chronology of 'Jihadist Terrorism' on EU soil and the responses of the EU to these incidents. Third, it presents some current and future challenges that should be considered in fighting against 'Jihadist Terrorism'. Finally, it is concluded with a brief analysis of the situation and some recommendations to adequately fight terrorism.

2. The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL)

2.1. First Phase: Building an "Islamic Caliphate" (2013-2015)

Prior to 2013, ISIL – also known as the Islamic State, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) or *Daesh* – operated as a franchise of al-Qaeda in Iraq. This relationship between both organizations ended when ISIL disobeyed instructions from al-Qaeda to avoid civilian casualties.¹ Taking advantage of the chaotic situation set up by a civil war that involves multiple fronts,² the organization had expanded towards Syria by the end of 2014. Most recently, it has become the deadliest organization using terrorism³ as a strategy in the world.⁴

Since then, its structure was and still is led by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the self-proclaimed Caliph. His tasks include the upholding and spread of Islam; defense of the homeland; fortification of the fronts; preparation of the armies; implementation of punishments established by the Sharia; and enforcement of adherence of people to Sharia rulings and governing of global affairs. To support him there was a Delegated Committee, an administrative body to supervise the Committees and Offices dealing with issues such as migration, public and tribal relations, and other issues; the *Wilayat* regional divisions; and the *Dawawin* institutions dealing with matters such as education and health.⁵

During this period, its territorial possessions peaked with the takeover of Mosul (Iraq) in June 2014.⁶ Together with Mosul, Raqqa (Syria) was where most meetings and important decisions of the organization occurred. This led both to become the *de facto* capital of its 'Islamic Caliphate', announced a few days after Mosul was taken.⁷ The estimates are that, during its apogee, the organization was controlling about 90,800 km² of territory,⁸ encompassing about 10 million people.⁹ Putting this into perspective, Austria has 83,878

km² of territory and a population of about 8,773,686 people.¹⁰

Its funding mostly originated from gas and oil sales, taking advantage of the existing infrastructure in occupied regions, in addition to the extortion of individuals and businesses, the commerce of phosphate, agriculture, cement, collecting ransom and the trafficking of antiquities.¹¹

Such a structure demanded an increasing and strengthening of its human resources, including the recruitment of individuals willing to travel from various parts of the world to join the organization either in Iraq or Syria. These individuals are the so-called Foreign Terrorist Fighters (FTFs).

2.1.1. Foreign Terrorist Fighters (FTFs)

By definition, FTFs are "individuals who travel to a State other than their States of residence or nationality for the purpose of the perpetration, planning, or preparation of, or participation in, terrorist acts or the providing or receiving of terrorist training, including in connection with armed conflict."¹² These individuals become an internal threat to the EU when its citizens or those who, at least, have the right to reside in one of the member states, go to places such as Iraq or Syria to join organizations such as ISIL, then return having acquired terrorist training and battlefield experience. According to The Soufan Group, there are about 5,723 FTFs from EU member states, among which 296 are Austrian citizens.¹³

Regardless of geographical distance or borders, organizations including, but not limited to ISIL, were able to communicate and recruit individuals through the 'Internet Jihadist'.¹⁴ It is usually made by uploading sophisticated videos mimicking Hollywood movies on social media, such as Facebook, Twitter, and others. These videos include special effects, Arabic songs, and narratives followed by translation into English and other European languages.¹⁵

Between 2013 and 2015, Quantum Communications conducted research with forty-nine FTFs, seeking to discover their motivations to join ISIL in Iraq and Syria. Among the nine Westerns (e.g., Americans and Europeans), 62% were classified as 'Identity Seekers'. These are individuals who felt socially displaced in their original environment and saw joining the "Islamic Ummah" as a solution. The most frequent reasons mentioned were assisting Muslim brothers (32%), rejecting Western culture (21%), supporting Jihad/Sharia Law (16%) and fighting the Assad regime (11%). Other minor reasons include finding a purpose in life, a brother's sickness, the persuasion by religious preachers and spreading freedom (5% Each).¹⁶ The Economist suggests similar factors:

"Poverty does not explain the lure of jihad for Western fighters [...]. Nor does a failure to integrate into the societies around them [...]. Nor does religious piety. [...] More plausible explanations are the desire to escape the ennui of home and to find an identity."¹⁷

Some of these individuals returned to their countries of residence or nationality to perpetrate terrorist attacks. Also, according to The Soufan Group, approximately 1,564 FTFs are from EU member states among which 90 are Austrian citizens.¹⁸ Ismaël Omar Mostefaï, Samy Amimour and Bilal Hadfi, born in France and Abdelhamid Abboud, born in Belgium, perpetrators of the attacks in Paris and Saint-Denis, France, in November 2015, had joined ISIL in Syria before returning to Europe and being guided by the organization to attack.¹⁹

2.2. Second Phase: A Revenge Against the West (2015 – Current Days)

A few months after the announcement of an 'Islamic Caliphate' by ISIL, former U.S. President Barack Obama announced the launch of an international military coalition against the organizations on September 10, 2014.²⁰ Under the leadership of the U.S., the CJTF-OIR also included sixty-nine other countries, among which twenty-seven are EU members. In addition, the European Union itself is one of the four institutions that are engaged in this coalition.²¹

According to the U.S. Department of Defense, as of August 2017, a total of 24,566 strikes (13,331 in Iraq and 11,235 in Syria) have been conducted through land and air on facilities of ISIL. Not all countries engaged in the coalition have been involved in these strikes. Some of those that are involved include Belgium, Denmark, France, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom.²² Some of them resulted in the loss of ISIL territory, including Mosul and Raqqa.²³

Regarding the funding of ISIL, according to the International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence (ICSR), the most significant sources of income (e.g., oil and extortion) were intrinsically attached to the size of its territory. As it has been decreasing since the launch of the CJTF-OIR, its funding has been diminishing too. From a revenue of \$1.9b in 2014, there was a decline to \$870m in 2016.²⁴

Regarding FTFs, according to Europol, there was a decrease in the number of this category of individuals traveling to join ISIL in Iraq and Syria in 2016 and an increase in the number of returnees is expected.²⁵

To cope with the obstacles the organization has been facing to continue operating, ISIL has been shifting its modus operandi from a pyramidal organization to a structure known as 'leaderless resistance'. Or at least a combination of both, since ISIL is still fighting for its 'Islamic Caliphate' in a few areas of Iraq and Syria. In practice, this means that individuals do not need to ask for instructions or report their actions to any central headquarters or leadership.

*"Since the entire purpose of **Leaderless Resistance** is to defeat state tyranny [...], all members of phantom cells or individuals will tend to react to objective events in the same way through usual tactics of resistance. Organs of information distribution such as newspapers, leaflets, computers, etc., which are widely available to all, keep each person informed of events, allowing for a planned response that will take many variations. No one need issue an order to anyone. Those idealists truly committed to the cause of freedom will act when they feel the time is ripe, or will take their cue from*

others who precede them." [emphasis in the original]²⁶

2.2.1. 'Jihad Wolves'

In the cases of some organizations, namely Hamas, Hezbollah and, more recently, al-Qaeda and ISIL, these individuals can be called 'jihad wolves'. This category of individuals needs to be understood as individuals willing to perpetrate terrorist attacks inspired by organizations that present a mindset predominantly permeated by religious arguments. The adoption of 'jihad wolf', instead of 'lone wolf', intentionally refuses the idea that these individuals are acting in complete isolation because there is something "above" them, inspiring them and providing them with guidelines to attacks.²⁷

It is illustrated in a video released by ISIL on 22 September 2014. Only a few days after the CJTF-OIR was launched, Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, spokesman of ISIL at the time, called people to attack whenever, wherever and howsoever possible.

"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. [...] Do not ask for anyone's advice and do not seek anyone's verdict. Kill the disbeliever whether he is civilian or military, for they have the same ruling. Both of them are disbelievers."²⁸

Regarding the targeting of Western countries and their citizens, it is possible to identify a primary and secondary motivation for this deliberation. Primarily it is the engagement of Western countries in the CJTF-OIR, which suggests that terrorism is not the sole objective of the organization, but a component of a strategy to liberate regions of interest from external intervention. Secondly, there is an argument that Muslims and Westerners are religiously incompatible, which is why the latter are referred to as disbelievers.

Nowadays, it is also possible to see more clearly that this rhetoric was not only an attempt to call for action but also an indication that the *modus operandi* of the organization was about to shift from a pyramidal to a 'leaderless resistance' structure.²⁹ What differentiates them from FTFs is the fact that 'jihad wolves' have not been in direct contact with an organization.

3. EU Counter-Terrorism Responses

The current EU Counter-Terrorism Strategy is a response to the landing of 'Jihadist Terrorism' on EU soil. In March 2004, al-Qaeda planted and synchronously exploded four bombs on a train in Madrid, Spain, killing one hundred and ninety-two people and wounding another one thousand four hundred.³⁰ So far, it is the deadliest terrorist attack related to 'Jihadist Terrorism' in an EU member state. In the following year, in July 2005, four suicide bombers blew themselves up in different subway stations in London, U.K., killing fifty-two people and wounding another seven hundred and seventy.³¹ In response, the Council of the European Union elaborated and adopted the EU Counter-Terrorism Strategy on November 30, 2005. It is based on four pillars: prevention, protection, pursuit and response. For each of them, the EU has been implementing specific policies.³²

Following the implementation of the EU Counter-Terrorism Strategy, the Solidarity Clause was adopted in December 2007. It aims to commit the EU member states to cooperate, even with military resources, with its peers in case of a terrorist attack.³³ Complementarily, the 2014/41 directive was adopted in April 2014, aiming to increase cooperation and access to information between authorities.³⁴ Also, the Integrated Political Crisis Response (IPCR) arrangements were implemented in June 2014, providing new tools to support the Council of the European Union to respond crises. For example, it created a Central IPCR 24/7 contact point that supports monitoring and alerting functions for IPCR purposes.³⁵

Before the involvement of the EU and its members states with the CJTF-OIR and

the speech of al-Adnani in September 2014, there were only a few other cases of 'Jihadist Terrorism'.³⁶ None of them were as lethal as those in Madrid in 2004 and London in 2005.

The turning point was in January 2015 when the world attention turned to Paris, France.³⁷ Two gunmen opened fire in the office of Charlie Hebdo, killing twelve people. Later, al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) released a video claiming responsibility for the attacks.³⁸

The world attention had not gone far when it turned back to France on November 2015,³⁹ after eight coordinated terrorist attacks occurred in Paris and Saint-Denis. One of these became the second deadliest in EU history. Three gunmen killed eighty-nine people who were watching a concert in Bataclan.⁴⁰ ISIL claimed responsibility for the attacks in a communiqué published in Arabic, English and French on the pro-ISIL profiles on Twitter and Telegram.⁴¹

Ten days later, ISIL released a video titled "Paris Has Collapsed", where it is said that the French government is the one responsible for the warfare and, because of this, all its citizens will have to face the consequences, feeling unsafe walking on the streets and even in their rooms. The narrative was in Arabic with French subtitles. It endorses the argument that terrorism is a strategy to liberate regions of interest from external intervention.⁴²

Some EU ministers⁴³ signed a Joint Statement stressing the urgency to implement the PNR (Passenger Name Record) framework at an institutional level.⁴⁴ For instance, Abdelhamid Abaaoud, planner of the attacks in November 2015 in Paris, returned from Syria using land routes followed by immigrants.⁴⁵ Only after the attacks, Belgian and French authorities found that Abaaoud was also listed as a threat by both states, highlighting the lack of cooperation between EU member state authorities.⁴⁶

To pursue the suspects, prevent and respond to future incidents and increase cooperation between EU member state

authorities, Europol created the European Counter Terrorism Centre (ECTC) in January 2016, its role is to map terrorist networks.⁴⁷ In the case of the attacks in November in France, the ECTC established the *Taskforce Fraternité*, assigning sixty officers to establish a full timeline analysis of the attack. It included investigative analysis of the attack details; compilation of full financial intelligence; determination and analysis of relevant online communication; and identification of intelligence gaps and counter-terrorism policy implications.⁴⁸ Earlier that year, Europol had already created the European Union Internet Referral Unit (EU IRU) in July 2015. Its role is to combat terrorism and its online propaganda.⁴⁹ The EU IRU then became subordinated to the ECTC after it was created.

Investigators found that the guns used for the shootings were bought and brought illegally from the Western Balkans.⁵⁰ However, the strengthening over the control of the acquisition and possession of firearms was made by the adoption of the 91/477/EEC directive on April 25, 2017.⁵¹ By that time, three other shootings had already occurred in various locations of Copenhagen, Denmark in February 2015.⁵²

Suicide bombing was reintroduced in the attacks in Paris in November 2015, for the first time since those in London in 2005. In five out of the eight incidents, the perpetrators blew themselves up, killing one person.⁵³ In March 2016, fatalities were much higher in Brussels, Belgium. Three suicide bombers killed sixteen people at the International Brussels Airport (Zaventem) and another sixteen in Maelbeek metro station, near several EU buildings.⁵⁴

The PNR directive was adopted after the attacks in March 2016 in Brussels. However, it will only be transposed to the national laws of the EU members states two years from the time of the adoption. Then, it will oblige airlines to provide data about its passengers to the states. The purpose is to support authorities in the identification of individuals who represent potential risks to security.⁵⁵ Only in February 2017, the PE-CONS 55/16⁵⁶ reinforced checks at external borders of the EU.⁵⁷ *Taskforce Fra-*

ternité has produced a massive amount of data that supported Belgium and French authorities to arrest the suspects of both the attacks.⁵⁸

Back in December 2014, a ‘Jihad Wolf’ stabbed and injured three police officers in Joué-lès-Tours, France.⁵⁹ Since then, this tactic was used in several other incidents. In France, it occurred in Nice in February 2015,⁶⁰ Marseille in January 2016, Magnanville in June 2016,⁶¹ and Paris in February 2017.⁶² Only a few days before the present research is being published, a pro-ISIL social media profile threatened to use the same tactic in Austria,⁶³ suggesting a perception of success in using this tactic and a consequent willingness to use it again.

During a celebration of the Fall of the Bastille in July 2016, another ‘Jihad Wolf’ drove a truck into crowd, killing eighty-four people.⁶⁴ Since then, it has been the most used tactic by ‘Jihad Wolves’. Other similar incidents occurred in December 2016 at a Christmas Market in Berlin, Germany, killing twelve people,⁶⁵ and in August 2017 at La Ramblas street in Barcelona, Spain, killing thirteen.⁶⁶

In some cases, both tactics are combined. After no longer being able to advance with their vehicles, the perpetrators who attacked the Palace of Westminster in London, U.K., left their car to stab people on the street in March 2017.⁶⁷ The same occurred less than four months later at the London Bridge, but the vehicle used this time was a van.⁶⁸

In May 2015, the 2015/849 directive was adopted, aiming to pursue potential sources of financing for terrorism.⁶⁹ It may be effective to prevent potential perpetrators from having access to heavy firearms, however, there are cases, such as the attacks on the London Bridge, that the perpetrators bought knives from Lidl for £ 4 each.⁷⁰ It demonstrates that radicalized individuals, even with restricted financial resources are still able to perpetrate terrorist attacks. Furthermore, the use of stabbings and vehicular attacks as tactics on EU soil in various occasions demonstrates a substantial success of the call made by al-Adnani in September 2014.⁷¹

4. Current and Future Challenges

4.1. Perceived Link between Immigration Fluxes and Terrorism

The peak of immigration flux to Europe registered in 2015⁷² coincided with an increase in the number and frequency of ‘Jihadist Terrorism’ on EU soil. This simultaneously led part of the population to associate migration with terrorism⁷³ and the immigrational flux to be perceived as a process of ‘Islamization’ of Europe that needs to be stopped.⁷⁴

Consequently, a fertile environment for right-wing organizations has been created. Essentially driven by xenophobia and islamophobia, *Gruppe Freital*⁷⁵ in Germany is an example of this typology of terrorism.

This kind of mindset has been endorsed among some politicians too. Furthermore, there were political slogans and campaigns in some European countries (e.g. Hungary, Austria etc.) aimed at defending European Christianity against Muslim refugees⁷⁶ or the islamization of Europe.⁷⁷ However, even though there was the case of Abdelhamid Abaaoud, who used land routes followed by immigrants to enter in the EU, according to Europol:

*“There is no concrete evidence that terrorist travellers systematically use the flow of refugees to enter Europe unnoticed. A real and imminent danger, however, is the possibility of elements of the (Sunni Muslim) Syrian refugee diaspora becoming vulnerable to radicalisation once in Europe and being specifically targeted by Islamic extremist recruiters.”*⁷⁸

Furthermore, the EU needs immigrants for its own sustainable future. Because of lower birth rates and higher life expectancy than in previous years, the EU population is aging and this immigration influx is perceived by a number of experts as an opportunity rather than a problem.⁷⁹

4.2. Multiple Typologies of Terrorism

Although ‘Jihadist Terrorism’ is currently the main concern regarding terrorism,

there are other typologies of terrorism in EU member states. For instance, Europol found activities of the *Euskadi Ta Askatasuna* (ETA)⁸⁰ in Spain, classified as “ethno-nationalism and separatism”; the *Federazione Anarchica Informale* (FAI)⁸¹ and the *Fronte Rivoluzionario Internazionale* (FRI)⁸² in Italy, classified as “left-wing and anarchist”; *Gruppe Freital*⁸³, in Germany, classified as “right-wing” and, not restricted to, but most prominently, the Animal Liberation Front (ALF), which fights for animal rights and is mentioned as an example of a “single-issued” organization^{84, 85}

4.3. ‘Brexit’

In June 23, 2016, the majority of the UK population decided to leave the EU, giving birth to what has been commonly called ‘Brexit’.⁸⁶ Following the referendum, in March 29, 2017, UK Prime Minister Theresa May⁸⁷ addressed a letter to UK President Donald Tusk, triggering Article 50 of the Lisbon Treaty, the legal basis for any country to leave the EU unilaterally.⁸⁸ In these circumstances, after March 29, 2019, both the UK and the EU will be facing the same threat of ‘Jihadist Terrorism’, but no longer being part of the same agencies, such as Europol. Therefore, ‘Brexit’ has the potential to undermine current efforts of information sharing between intelligence services of the EU member states.

According to Andrew Parker, Director-General of the MI5 (British Security Service), the approximate number of 3,000 individuals willing to support what he called ‘Islamic Extremism’ is posing the highest threat to the UK in the 34 years of his career at MI5.⁸⁹ It would be negligent to assume that any of those individuals will no longer be a problem to the EU once the UK leaves the bloc. Gilles de Kerchove, EU Counter-Terrorism Coordinator, is optimistic that there will be a “[...] very quick operation agreement between Metropolitan Police and Europol”.⁹⁰ However, as the negotiations over the terms by which the UK will leave the EU are ongoing, it remains a challenge to be managed.

5. Conclusion

'Jihadist Terrorism' will remain posing a threat to the EU member states in the following months, maybe years, which will require quick responses from the EU. As previously demonstrated, there are only a few days between the announcement of the CJTF-OIR and the response from ISIL, in the form of a call to deliberately attack Americans and Europeans. On the other hand, almost more than one year after the attacks involving FTFs in France in November 2015 and in Belgium in March 2016, the EU reinforced checks at its external borders. To cope with the ability that organizations, such as ISIL, have to quickly adapt to obstacles, such as the CJTF-OIR, the EU must encourage the strengthening and expansion of the existing cooperation between its member states while managing current and future challenges. More than ever, the EU will have to demonstrate that "United in Diversity" is more than just its motto.⁹¹

6. Recommendations to the European Union and its Member States

- ★ Prioritize the elaboration and implementation of an inclusive approach towards individuals vulnerable to "Jihadist Propaganda", aiming to prevent radicalization. The root cause of 'Jihad Terrorism' is the perceived clash between the identity of an individual and his or her environment, not exposure to "Jihadist Propaganda" in and of itself. If this were the case, Terrorism scholars would become FTFs or "Jihad Wolves" at high rates. Even if all the "Jihadist Propaganda" was censored, 'Identity Seekers', the biggest category of individuals radicalized, would still seek an identity that they believe to be lacking, and this may not necessarily be less violent than the identity offered by joining ISIL. Therefore, the emphasis should be on reducing the vulnerability of individuals in relation to "Jihadist Propaganda".
- ★ Strength security apparatuses in public spaces of high rates of circulation and concentration of people, mainly during

holidays, aiming to prevent high numbers of casualties if a terrorist attack occurs. Some EU member states authorities have been placing barricades at Christmas Markets to avoid incidents, such as the one in December 2016 in Berlin.⁹² Its effectiveness has not been tested by the time the present research is being published, however, ISIL already dismissed this measure affirming that it does not prevent people to attack on foot.⁹³ Therefore, even with barricades that prevent vehicles from plowing through crowds, security apparatuses should be strengthened in these spaces.

- ★ Publicize information on the disconnection between the immigration flux with terrorism⁹⁴ and the benefits of immigrants, aiming to prevent the rise of xenophobia and islamophobia. Research has already been conducted, demonstrating that there is no relation between immigration and terrorist attacks. Secondly, if humanitarianism is not reason enough for people to not discriminate others, utilitarianism could help them to have a more receptive attitude toward foreigners. By making this information widespread, the EU and its member states could prevent the rise of xenophobia, islamophobia and the potential emergence of right-wing organizations, such as *Gruppe Freital*.
- ★ Expand the scope of the PNR from air routes to land and maritime routes, observing the human rights principles, mainly concerning equality and non-discrimination, aiming to pursue FTFs. Since the PNR only covers air routes, it will not effectively address the challenge of an expected increase in the number of FTFs returning to EU soil, when it is enforced from April 2018 on. In addition, there is a general awareness of the increased security apparatus in airports. However, criticism has been already directed to the PNR, regarding its diminishing consequences on the anti-discriminatory framework of the EU.⁹⁵ Therefore, although an expansion of the PNR is necessary, its application

should be consistent with human rights principles.

- ★ Continue strengthening cooperation among intelligence services, aiming to increase their effectiveness in not only 'Jihadist Terrorism', but other typologies too. If the terrorist attacks in November 2015 in France highlighted the lack of cooperation between EU member state authorities, the *Taskforce Fraternité* demonstrated a substantial effectiveness in fighting when cooperation is fostered. In a moment when the UK, a nation with highest numbers of FTFs and radicalized individuals in the EU, is about to leave the EU, the sharing of information between intelligence services must be fostered.

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Endnotes

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