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Terrorism in Europe

Current Trends

European governments and the European Union (EU) have grappled with domestic and foreign terrorist groups for decades, but a spate of recent attacks has renewed concerns about terrorism and violent extremism in Europe. Despite variances in how terrorist events are defined and tracked, studies indicate a considerable number of incidents over the last few years, as demonstrated by data from Europol (the EU's agency for police cooperation) in **Table 1**.

Table 1. Terrorism-Related Attacks in the EU
(includes failed, foiled, and completed attacks)

Year	Attacks (# of countries)	Deaths	Injuries	Arrests
2013	152 (5)	7	9	535
2014	201 (7)	4	6	774
2015	211 (6)	151	350+	1077
2016	142 (8)	142	379	1002

Source: Data taken from Europol's *Terrorism Situation and Trend Report* (TE-SAT) publications, 2014-2017.

Of primary concern to Europe is “violent Islamist” or “jihadist” terrorism. Since 2014, there has been an increase in attacks classified by Europol as “religious” or “jihadist” in motivation (see **Table 2**). Terrorism experts assess that the Islamic State organization (IS, also known as ISIS or ISIL) currently poses the most severe terrorist threat. Worries also persist about Al Qaeda and its affiliates and anti-Israeli groups, such as Hezbollah.

Table 2. Terrorist Attacks and Fatalities by Type

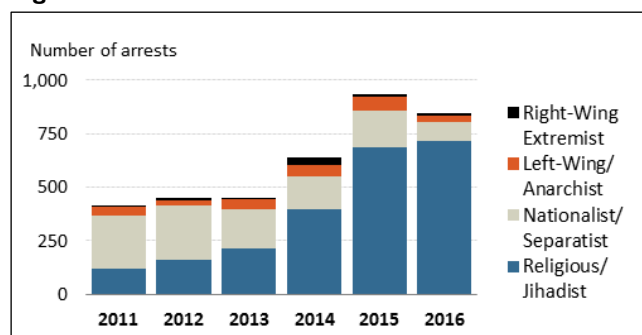
Type of Attack	2014 Attacks (Fatalities)	2015 Attacks (Fatalities)	2016 Attacks (Fatalities)
Religious/Jihadist	2 (4)	17 (150)	13 (135)
Nationalist/Separatist	67 (0)	65 (0)	99 (6)
Left-Wing/Anarchist	13 (0)	13 (1)	27 (0)
Right-Wing Extremist	0 (0)	9 (0)	1 (1)
Single-Issue	1 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)
Not Specified	116 (0)	107 (0)	2 (0)

Source: Europol's TE-SAT publications, 2015-2017.

Attacks by violent Islamist extremists have been much more lethal than other types of terrorism, accounting for nearly all of the recent fatalities and casualties. The four people killed in 2014 were shot at the Jewish Museum in Brussels, Belgium, by a suspect who reportedly spent a year fighting in Syria. In 2015, jihadist terrorism claimed the lives of 17 in the January attacks in Paris, France (including

on the *Charlie Hebdo* magazine and a kosher market); 2 in the February attacks in Denmark at a Copenhagen cafe and synagogue; and 130 in attacks in Paris in November. In 2016, fatalities from jihadist terrorism included 32 in the March bombings in Brussels; 86 in the July truck attack in Nice, France; and 12 in a December truck attack in Berlin, Germany. Authorities also report a steady uptick in arrests related to religious/jihadist terrorism (see **Figure 1**).

Figure 1. Terrorism-Related Arrests in the EU



Source: Europol's TE-SAT publications, 2012-2017.

Other types of terrorists remain active in Europe, as well. Most nationalist/separatist attacks in 2016 were attributed to dissident republican groups in Northern Ireland, while left-wing/anarchist attacks occurred in Italy, Greece, and Spain. Security services warn about right-wing extremism amid what some view as a rise in anti-immigrant and xenophobic sentiments in Europe; actions by right-wing extremists, however, often are classified as hate crimes rather than terrorism. Authorities in several European countries, including Germany, report an uptick in violent acts by members of far-right groups. In the United Kingdom (UK), a far-right, anti-immigrant extremist murdered a Member of Parliament in June 2016, and a man with alleged anti-Muslim views was charged with terrorism in a van attack outside a London mosque in June 2017.

The Islamic State and Europe

European policymakers are alarmed by the Islamic State's connections to and influence in Europe. Many assailants—including most of those responsible for the large-scale attacks in Paris and Brussels in 2015 and 2016—were European citizens who had trained and/or fought with the Islamic State in Syria and/or Iraq. Experts believe that these two attacks may have been steered by the Islamic State from Syria. Roughly 5,000 EU citizens have traveled to Syria or Iraq to become “foreign fighters” for the Islamic State or other groups since 2011. Studies estimate that roughly 30% of these fighters have returned to Europe. Over the past year, concerns have grown that the Islamic State also may be seeking to direct attacks from Libya given the group's presence and activities there.

Other perpetrators of recent attacks in Europe are believed to be “lone wolves” motivated by Islamic State propaganda. The Islamic State encourages followers in Western countries to murder “disbelievers,” offers detailed instructions, and promotes methods for carrying out attacks, including the use of large vehicles as weapons. The Islamic State claims that those responsible for attacks are its “soldiers,” but there is often little to suggest that such individuals are acting under direct orders from or with the assistance of the Islamic State. Authorities note that the Islamic State has heightened calls for its followers to attack in Europe amid territorial losses in Syria and Iraq and as travel to these conflict zones has become more difficult.

European officials remain concerned that Islamic State terrorists could enter Europe as part of the recent refugee and migrant flows. Two of the November 2015 Paris attackers may have entered Europe by posing as refugees with fake Syrian passports. Also, several “lone wolf” attacks have elevated fears that some refugees or migrants (especially youths) could be particularly vulnerable to radicalization due to feeling marginalized or dislocated.

Selected Terrorism Incidents in 2017

Various incidents in 2017 reinforced concerns about the Islamic State’s ability to direct or inspire attacks in Europe. The selected events below are drawn from media reports.

March 22, UK: A British citizen drove a car into a group of people on Westminster Bridge in London, outside of Parliament, and stabbed a police officer. Five people died (including one American), and roughly 50 were injured. The Islamic State claimed the assailant was its “soldier,” but authorities believe he acted alone.

April 7, Sweden: An Uzbekistan national drove a truck into a crowd in a Stockholm shopping area, killing 5 and injuring 14. Swedish police asserted that the assailant expressed sympathy for the Islamic State, and Uzbek officials claimed he was recruited by the group.

April 20, France: A French citizen fatally shot a police officer and wounded three other people on the Champs-Élysées boulevard in Paris. The Islamic State claimed responsibility. The attacker was known to French security services but was not viewed as an imminent threat.

May 22, UK: A British citizen (of Libyan descent) carried out a suicide bombing after a music concert in Manchester, killing 22 and wounding over 500. The Islamic State claimed responsibility. Some reports suggest that the bomber was in contact with Islamic State fighters in Libya.

June 3, UK: Three men drove a van into pedestrians on London Bridge and then attacked people with knives in the Borough Market area, killing 8 and injuring 48. The attackers were inspired by the Islamic State, which claimed that the men were its fighters. At least one—a Pakistani-born British citizen—was known to UK security services.

June 6, France: An Algerian man attacked police officers with a hammer at Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris, wounding one. The assailant claimed allegiance to the Islamic State but was likely self-radicalized.

June 19, France: A French-born man (of Tunisian descent) drove a car with guns and explosives into a police vehicle on the Champs-Élysées in Paris. The assailant—the only person killed—was on a French security watch list and reportedly had pledged allegiance to the Islamic State.

June 20, Belgium: A Moroccan national detonated a small explosive device at a Brussels train station, killing only himself. The Islamic State claimed responsibility, but authorities assessed that the bomber acted alone.

August 17-18, Spain: Twelve men, most of Moroccan origin, carried out several attacks in and around Barcelona, killing 16 people (including one American) and injuring over 100. Most fatalities were due to a van attack on Las Ramblas Boulevard. The Islamic State asserted that the assailants were its “soldiers.”

August 18, Finland: A Moroccan asylum-seeker killed two and injured eight with a knife in Turku. Charged with committing these acts with terrorist intent, the suspect appears to have been inspired by the Islamic State.

August 26, Belgium: A Belgian citizen (of Somali descent) injured three soldiers in Brussels in a knife attack. The Islamic State claimed the perpetrator was its “soldier.”

August 26, UK: A UK national (of Bangladeshi descent) attempted to attack police officers with a sword outside Buckingham Palace in London. The perpetrator has been charged with terrorist intent, and reports suggest he may have been inspired by Islamic State propaganda.

September 15, UK: An 18-year-old Iraqi asylum-seeker was charged with planting a bomb that partially exploded on a subway train at Parsons Green station in London, injuring 30. The Islamic State claimed responsibility, but authorities doubt that the group was directly involved.

October 1, France: A Tunisian national fatally stabbed two women at a train station in Marseille. The Islamic State claimed the assailant acted on its behalf.

European Responses and Challenges

European governments have employed various measures to combat Islamist terrorism and foreign fighters, including increasing surveillance and prohibiting travel, and they have thwarted a number of plots. The EU has sought to enhance intelligence sharing among national and EU authorities, strengthen external border controls, and improve counter-radicalization efforts, especially online and in prisons. Nevertheless, challenges persist. Law enforcement and intelligence capacities vary across Europe. Authorities have encountered difficulties monitoring a growing number of potential assailants amid budgetary and personnel constraints. National sovereignty concerns and civil liberty protections also may impede information sharing among European countries and, at times, have slowed EU-wide antiterrorism initiatives. Also see CRS Report RS22030, *U.S.-EU Cooperation Against Terrorism*.

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