SECURITY POLICY BRIEF

Europe's "new" jihad: Homegrown, leaderless, virtual

Thomas Renard

Recent terrorist attacks in Europe were committed by homegrown radicals, mostly by loners with limited ties to the Islamic State, if any. Many observers agree that the jihadi threat is indeed changing, but the nature of these changes is often exaggerated or misconceived. As a result, our capacity to craft effective counter-terrorism policies is hindered, despite their urgent necessity. This policy brief seeks therefore to better understand the key elements and drivers of the new jihadi threat in Europe – and indeed to determine what is actually new about it – while offering some recommendations.

Oussama Zariouh, the perpetrator of the failed terrorist attack in Brussels central station on the 20th June has become the new face of jihad in Europe. All we know at this stage of the investigation, is that he acted alone without direct orders or links to the Islamic State (ISIS) – although claiming to act on their behalf. He was a "homegrown" terrorist who arrived in Belgium from Morocco in 2002, at the age of twenty. A loner and homegrown, that was also the profile of the perpetrator of the failed attack on the Champs-Elysées in Paris, earlier in June, while the attackers in London and Manchester were equally homegrown.

Media reports often emphasise the profile of these terrorists as something new. Yet, a recent study found that 73% of the attacks in Europe and North America, over the past three years, were committed by homegrown terrorists, and another 14% involved citizens from neighbouring countries.[1] These findings confirmed those from earlier studies. Over the past decades, the vast majority of attacks in Europe and North America have been committed by "homegrown" terrorists.[2] Thus, nothing new.

This does not mean that the threat is not changing, however. In this policy brief, I argue that the jihadi threat in Europe is indeed entering a new phase, even if there is much continuity with previous jihadi waves. I start by comparing the "new" threat of homegrown terrorists with that of "foreign terrorist fighters", highlighting similarities and differences between these two categories. Then, I explain how the evolution of the jihadi threat is the result of strategic thinking by ISIS' leadership, changing circumstances, and opportunity. Finally, I draw the contours of the new jihadi threat in Europe and offer some recommendations in order to cope with it.

HTF VS. FTF

Since 2012, Western intelligence services had feared that young Europeans travelling to Syria

and Iraq would return home and pose a security threat. Now, security officials confess that what worries them most is unidentified homegrown radicals, initiating a killing spree with an everyday weapon, such as a knife or a car – or even homemade explosives, such as in Brussels recently.[3] The threat perception across Europe is arguably sliding from a focus on "foreign terrorist fighters" (FTF) to an obsession with "homegrown terrorist fighters" (HTF). US scholar Brian Jenkins describes this evolution in the following manner: until just recently, youngsters wanted to be part of a jihadi group which ordered them to kill; now, they seek to kill in order to be part of the jihad, even if posthumously.[4]

Such evolution calls for the development of new counter-terrorism measures, and the adjustment of existing ones. The problem is, however, the amount of confusion around the concepts of HTF/FTF, as well as what, precisely, they mean and encompass. For instance, the Belgian joint intelligence database on FTF includes five categories: individuals in Syria/Iraq; those on their way to Syria/Iraq; individuals that have come back (the *returnees*); those who have failed to reach Syria/Iraq (the "frustrated of the jihad"); and those who have the propensity to travel. But how much difference is there really between individuals in the two latter categories (who did not travel) and a HTF (for which a new category was created in the Belgian database last April)? What actually defines a HTF? What type of behavior or action justifies inclusion in that precise category? And, more fundamentally, how do we identify and stop them?

All these questions are not asked in order to, solely, feed brilliant academic debates. They, also, have major policy relevance. Many legal and operational counter-terrorism measures implemented over the past years in Europe targeted specifically (potential) FTF, and more measures will likely be adopted in the future to cope with (potential) HTF. Yet, here's the

tricky question: how is one able to design effective measures, and evaluate them, with only a partial understanding of the problem? This is why it is so crucial to understand the differences, similarities and interplay between FTF and HTF.

Travel (or the absence thereof) is, of course, the main distinction between foreign and homegrown fighters. As nuanced above, however, some FTF have not actually been able to travel, while some HTF may in fact have been radicalised on the occasion of a trip abroad. There is, thus, a vast grey zone between HTF and FTF which cannot be ignored, touching to the very essence of the FTF category, i.e. the notion of travel.

Another issue of contention is the level of risk. FTF are usually considered to be more dangerous, as they have been further radicalised ideologically and have received military training, or perhaps even participated in military operations and violent actions. This makes them more "professional" terrorists. They may also have developed particular skills or competences that could be used in a terrorist plot at home, such as bomb-making. Homegrown terrorists are, by contrast, more often labelled as "amateurs". Without specific training, they are more likely to commit mistakes while planning an attack, possibly leading to the plot's failure. Some recent attacks in Europe were strikingly amateurish. A number of studies suggest that attacks by homegrown terrorists are more likely to fail or to have little impact, whereas plots involving foreign fighters are more likely to succeed, with a higher degree of sophistication.[5] There are notable exceptions, however. For instance, Mohamed Lahouaiej-Bouhlel, a Tunisian-born who had lived in France for more than 10 years, killed 86 persons, whilst injuring more than 400, in Nice in July 2016.

Next to their skills and commitment, FTF are also traditionally perceived as more connected

to a structured terrorist organisation or network. Indeed, foreign fighters have established very formal ties with the terrorist group they joined, and with its leadership. Some FTF have been sent back to Europe with a clear mandate to conduct operations in the name of the Islamic State. By contrast, homegrown terrorists are often described as "lone wolves", self-radicalised on the internet, with absolutely no link with any member of a terror group. Yet, these clear-cut distinctions do not reflect the wide scope of ties that can exist between a radicalised individual and a group. Not every HTF is a "lone wolf". Some have established physical ties with members of a terrorist organisation in Europe, or virtual ones via internet or social media. A recent study highlighted the role the Islamic State's so-called "virtual planners", who recruit young Europeans via the internet and entice them to mount an attack, offering tactical and technical guidance to anyone interested.[6] Moreover, not every returnee is a ticking bomb. Some were ready to fight the defensive jihad in Syria, but not to strike their homeland; some deserted ISIS, leaving terrorism behind out of disillusion, more notably. Some foreign fighters may also honestly seek redemption and reintegration into the society, before falling back into violent extremism years later – would that still be considered as a case of FTF, or HTF? Eventually, the FTF/HTF categories tell us less than we think they do about the degree of autonomy of an individual from a terrorist organisation.

Beyond all of the differences, there is also one undeniable similarity: FTF and HTF are all homegrown. All European foreign fighters are…Europeans (citizens or residents), who mostly radicalised in Europe. Of course, this can hide different realities, different senses of "belonging". Some (potential) terrorists were born and raised in Europe, others arrived at an early age, whereas others arrived after their adolescence (like Oussama Zariouh or Mohamed Lahouaiej-Bouhlel). This makes any generalisation on their profile or trajectory almost impossible. Nevertheless, this observation is fundamental, because it indicates that the roots of the current threat, and its solutions, are to be found domestically in the first place.

Finally, it is crucial to recognize that FTF and HTF are not hermetic groups. They interact in many ways. Foreign fighters can play a major role in radicalising and recruiting new members, from Syria (through the internet, as in the case of virtual planners) or after their return home (including in prison, where a number of returnees are engaged in active proselytism). Foreign fighters have a charisma that gives them magnetic power. They can also share their skills and know-how with inexperienced fighters. The so-called "veteran effect" has been well-documented.[7] Moreover, FTF and HTF can operate together in a same cell, or network. That was the case, for instance, of the network behind the Paris (November 2015) and Brussels (March 2016) attacks, where "veterans" Abdelhamid Abaaoud and Najim Laachraoui conspired with Salah Abdeslam and Khalid el-Bakraoui, who never went to Syria. And there is nothing new there. A decade earlier, the cell that prepared the Madrid bombings (March 2004) also comprised veteran foreign fighters and homegrown terrorists.

In short, it is very difficult to create clear-cut categories for wannabe terrorists. Thinking in terms of FTF and HTF has a logic to it, but it may also be counter-productive if we do not accept that these categories share fundamental similarities and overlap. FTF and HTF are, in fact, the two faces of the same coin; they belong to the same jihadi wave.[8]

THE ARMY OF ONE
The HTF-FTF dynamic is dependent upon the Islamic State's own strategy and, perhaps even more fundamentally, on circumstances and opportunities. First, it is important to recognise

that terrorist organisations are adaptive. More than a decade ago, the al-Qaeda scholar, of Syrian origin, Abu Musab al-Suri argued that Ben Laden's hierarchically structured organisation was vulnerable following the US invasion of Afghanistan, since Western counter-terrorism operations focused on targeting its leadership.[9] In his 1,600-page book entitled *The Call to Global Islamic Resistance*, which was published in December 2004, al-Suri proposed that al-Qaeda should evolve from a central *structure* to a decentralised, leaderless *movement*. That global movement would be united by a shared aim and ideology rather than command, and would take different military forms, ranging from local insurgencies to small or individual cells comprised of veteran fighters and/or lone wolves which would be self-recruited, self-radicalised and self-sustained. A doctrine that came to be known as the "army of one".

After initially rejecting al-Suri's proposed strategy, al-Qaeda's leadership eventually embraced it. In the 2000s, al-Qaeda opened franchises worldwide and sought to inspire homegrown terrorism in the West, notably through its own English-speaking glossy magazine called…*Inspire.* Anwar al-Awlaki, a Yemeni-American cleric, who was extremely popular on the internet and social media, co-founded the magazine. A key figure in the evolution of the jihadi doctrine himself, he actively and repeatedly encouraged isolated actions in the West. According to some, he may be related to more than 30% of the jihadi plots in the United States between 2009 and 2016.[10]

The Islamic State, like al-Qaeda before, is evolving towards a form of leaderless jihad. In fact, the evolution of the two jihadi organisations is strikingly similar. From a highly centralised, hierarchical structure, culminating with the proclamation of the caliphate in 2014, the Islamic State is quickly morphing into a decentralised, leaderless movement. From Asia to Africa, a number of regional groups have already pledged allegiance to ISIS, while autonomous cells and "lone wolves" are acting on its behalf in Europe, North America, Australia and elsewhere. The "army of one" had already been called upon by the group's official spokesman Abu Mohammad al-Adnani, in September 2014, during the heyday of the caliphate, emphasizing once again that FTF and HTF are complementary categories, rather than surrogates. But what was only one option among several offered to jihadi candidates in 2014, has now become the dominant and only strategy. Jihad in Europe seems today more a matter of visibility than effectiveness; where *quantity* outweighs *quality*.

The importance of certain strategists should not, however, be exaggerated. The evolution of the jihadi threat in Europe is largely dictated by circumstances and opportunities. Circumstances have fundamentally changed over the past couple of years. The accumulation of military defeats and the death of some senior members have forced the group to loosen control over its territory and networks. The Syrian jihad has lost its appeal, while the adoption of more stringent measures across Europe to prevent people from travelling to the region have largely contributed to the erosion of the FTF phenomenon. ISIS now has no other choice than to increasingly rely on homegrown fighters worldwide. For al-Suri himself, the leaderless jihad was a strategy of last resort, when all other options had failed.

It should further be recognised that the Islamic State had a unique opportunity to shift towards a leaderless jihad, one that it had largely created for itself. Never before had any other jihadi group succeeded in attracting so many militants and followers worldwide. From this unprecedented pool of "sympathizers" to the

jihadi cause, an unprecedented number of homegrown terrorists could emerge. In short, ISIS relies more on homegrown fighters because it *must*, but also because it *can*.

THE VIRTUAL CALIPHATE

ISIS is losing ground, but is not dead yet. Possibilities exist for the group to survive and even re-emerge in some parts of Syria and Iraq, perhaps under a new name. Senior leaders could alternatively decide to migrate to other, more permissive jihadi theaters to rebuild what has been lost. More fundamentally, however, the jihadi threat in Europe will not vanish miraculously following the fall of the caliphate, or the death of its leaders.

The jihadi movement will survive ISIS anyway. A *virtual caliphate* is already emerging on the ruins of the caliphate in the Levant. It is virtual in the sense that it does not require any physical territory. The jihadi ideology focuses on the conquest of vulnerable minds, not lands. It is also virtual for it relies on the internet and social media to propagate its ideas, recruit new militants, connect them together, and encourage or even guide violent actions. This is not to say that the jihad is about to become online-based only, but rather that the internet is playing a growing role in it. Should we still be surprised that the Manchester attacker (and possibly the Brussels one) learned how to build bombs on the internet?

Jihadi movements rely on three constituents: the hard core, comprising the organisation's central leadership; a network of "veteran fighters" who socialised with the hard core before returning home to build local franchises or cells; and a wider militant base, encompassing the broader pool of "sympathizers" and potential "homegrown terrorist fighters", only connected to the hard core by aim and ideology.[11] If the first of these constituents seems weakened today, the network of fighters and the militant base remain unaffected. If anything, more

foreign fighters are expected to return home in the coming months, while the militant base has stabilised at significant (and concerning) numbers, and is possibly still expanding. In Belgium, for instance, prevention workers have identified a growing problem of radicalisation and support for the jihadi ideology in 2016.[12]

The contours of the new jihadi threat in Europe will therefore be determined by the interplay between veteran fighters, acting as new hubs or ringleaders; the militant base, as supporter and cannon fodder; and the internet, as facilitator and echo chamber. There is much similarity with al-Qaeda's threat in the 2000s, and there are, thus, also lessons to be drawn from previous successes and failures. The main, albeit fundamental difference comes from the fact that there are now more veteran fighters than ever before, a broader and growing militant base, and a more omnipresent internet.

The implications of this new threat for our counter-terrorism approach are numerous, but I focus on four main ones. First, returnees are likely to play a key role in the recruiting and training of the next jihadi wave. It is therefore imperative to monitor them very closely, and seek to limit their influence as much as possible. That work starts imperatively in prison, where a number of them are already detained or heading in that direction. Prisons have always been an incubator for radicalisation and violence, but there are many indications that the problem is growing out of proportion. Some recruiters seem to see jail as "jihadi universities", while programmes focusing on counter-radicalisation, de-radicalisation or disengagement remain underdeveloped in prison. Mentoring, as well as rehabilitation and reintegration programmes, should also be imperatively implemented. Overall, there is still a need for a thorough response to returning fighters.

Second, if homegrown terrorism is considered a key threat, then more efforts should be invested in prevention work. While the fall of the caliphate has affected the attractive power of the jihadi adventure (the main "pull factor"), the root causes of radicalisation (the so-called "push factors") remain largely unaddressed in our Western societies. As long as we do not work on these "push factors" and on the conducive environment to violent extremism, there will be a pool of candidates available to jihadi recruiters. An effective counter-terrorism response should therefore focus on all prevention aspects: primary prevention (focusing on the whole population), secondary prevention (focusing on vulnerable individuals and communities), and tertiary prevention (focusing on individuals already in the process of radicalisation). A consistent approach to the issue of HTF is needed, which can only be a comprehensive one. There is still a tendency to frame our counter-terrorism response in overly security terms. While the strengthening of security apparatus is required in some countries, such as Belgium, that neglected it for too long, that approach is only part of the answer. You cannot face an "army of one" with just one army. Hard security only constitutes the last line of defense **against** violent extremism.

Third, since the internet is playing a growing role in the virtual caliphate, our counter-terrorism response should also increasingly be focused online. While a lot of efforts have been developed in order to take online jihadi contents down, more can still be done in partnership with internet companies. Counter-messaging and alternative messaging campaigns should also be promoted. If radicalisation, recruitment and training increasingly take place on the web, intelligence services must also significantly strengthen their online presence.

Finally, while terrorism and radicalisation must, first and foremost, be addressed domestically, we should not entirely close our eyes on the international dimension of this challenge. On the one hand, more cooperation is required at the European and global levels to address a phenomenon that is indeed transnational. Each country dealing with this unprecedented challenge is learning by doing. More exchanges of good practices should therefore be encouraged and facilitated. On the other hand, we should keep in mind that the jihadi movement will likely seek to upgrade itself again in more hospitable territories, in the Middle East or elsewhere. If circumstances allow, there is no doubt that a new hard core structure will seek to emerge in order to, once again, upgrade the virtual caliphate into a physical one. Preventing this, should also be our priority.

Endnotes

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[3] Interview with a counter-terrorism police officer, Brussels, 25 March 2017.

[4] B. Jenkins, "The Islamic State's Disposable Army", The Rand Blog, 20 June 2017.

[5] L. Vidino, F. Marone and E. Entenmann, op. cit.; T. Hegghammer and P. Nesser, "Assessing the Islamic State's Commitment to Attacking the West", *Perspectives on Terrorism*, 9(4), 2015.

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