“This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in the International Journal of Intelligence, Security and Public Affairs, on10th September 2020, available online: https://doi.org/10.1080/23800992.2020.1764240

The International Journal of Intelligence, Security, and Public Affairs

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--Manuscript Draft--

Manuscript Number:	IJISPA-D-20-00001
Full Title:	Down but not out? Revisiting the terror threat from Foreign Fighters
Article Type:	Original Article (double blind)
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Author Comments:	
Order of Authors Secondary Information:	
Keywords:	Terrorism, Iraq, Syria, ISIS

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Title Page

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Abstract

With the terrorist threat of jihadist returnees from the conflict in Iraq and Syria being frequently cited by Western political leaders, a question can be asked about how far this threat is manifesting itself when taking an empirical analysis of recent attacks in the West. In this paper, a detailed review is undertaken of 30 apparently jihadist-inspired attacks in Western countries in the 18-month period between the beginning of 2015 and the middle of 2017. The findings broadly support analysis of earlier conflicts, in that returnees represent a small proportion of overall attackers, but tend to be involved in more organised and lethal operations than other non-travellers. At the same time, low-sophistication attacks by non-travellers can be just as lethal if executed properly. It is also the case that conflicts in the Middle East may represent a long tail of risk for Western countries which reaches far into the future.

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Introduction

In Western counter-terrorism policy circles in recent times, the potential terrorist threat from returning jihadist foreign fighters (JFFs) who participated in the conflict in Iraq and Syria, has been repeatedly and loudly stated.[1] Despite recognition that very similar threats articulated in the period following the invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the complex insurgency that followed did *not* manifest themselves to any significant degree amongst the terrorism statistics subsequently, there is a suggestion that the more recent conflict in Iraq and Syria was different in important ways. To some extent, this hypothesis is based on solid logic. In the case of Syria in particular, geographical proximity to Europe and the relative ease in travelling to and from there via Turkey and other neighbouring countries, made accessing the conflict much more practical than was the case with Iraq past and present, or indeed other conflicts in which jihadists have featured, such as those in Chechnya, Somalia or Afghanistan. Combined with this factor, the deft way in which the ISIS organization mobilized social media among the global *ummah* to establish and rally around a physical Caliphate on the ground, proved to be a more compelling story for many than had been promulgated by Al Qaeda previously.

More recently, ISIS's territorial fortunes in the Middle East have collapsed as quickly as they arose. The death of the self-declared Caliph, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, in October 2019, underlined the apparent

demise of the erstwhile movement and raised questions about the longer-term threat it poses. The United Nations is among many to assess that the threat is far from over and could see a resurgence in activity (UNSC, 2019). Sporadic attacks still occur, such as the stabbing attack on London Bridge in November 2019 which killed two people. At the same time, the strategic picture at the time of writing is one of a decline in jihadist-inspired terrorist attacks since a peak in 2014, both globally, and, notably in Western countries. The Global Terrorism Index, for example, suggested that attacks attributed to ISIS declined by 63 per cent in the 2017-18 period, as the group came under mounting pressure on the ground in Iraq and Syria (GTI, 2019). In Europe, the number of deaths from all terrorist attacks declined from over 200 in 2017 to 63 in 2018.

This paper reflects on more than five years since al-Baghdadi declared himself the new Caliph of all Muslims in a Raqqa mosque, and the subsequent rise and fall of terrorist attacks in the West. A particular analysis is undertaken of a period between 2015 and 2017, when ISIS-inspired terrorist attacks in the West were at their height, to consider what can be learnt about the biographies of the attackers; about the degree to which the element of combat experience was significant in the attacks; and about what the picture tells us about the potential for future risk from JFFs. The analysis finds that motivations for attack remain many and varied, and – in the particular dataset in question – appear to relate more to a previous experience of violent criminality than to any other factor. General analysis about the impact of previous JFFs; namely that they represent a small proportion of terrorist attackers but are generally more lethal where they appear, are broadly supported by the dataset in question in this analysis. Finally, while jihadist-inspired terrorist attacks seem to have reduced sharply in number since ISIS's loss of territory in Iraq and Syria, it seems likely that the threat from JFFs will be present for some time to come and probably in unpredictable ways.

The JFF threat in the West

Adeptness at information and propaganda amongst jihadist groups coupled with basic practicality might explain why so many JFFs made the journey to Syria (and, to a lesser extent, Iraq), and made the conflict there the destination for the largest number of foreign fighters since the Spanish Civil War of the 1930s.

In terms of threat for neighbouring European countries, one could present a counter-argument to the threat hypothesis that the West was more of a casual bystander than an active participant in the Arab uprisings that swept the region from 2011 onwards, and which led to the intractable civil war in Syria. Thus, for the jihadists, the conflict in Iraq and Syria has always been more about Iraq and Syria themselves (and indeed about a putative Caliphate that could be formed there) than necessarily about Europe or the West more widely, unlike the conflict in Iraq after 2003. However, the ease with which

motivated militants ccould travel to Syria equates with the ease with which they can return to their homes in Europe, especially given freedom of movement across the EU. This feeds into the theory of renewed threat from battle-hardened and motivated militants with a general disdain for Western society.

Given the rather contrary experience of post-2003 Iraq, however, would it not be sensible now to view dire warnings about the contemporary threat from returnees with a degree of caution?

The most immediate period of terrorist threat, particularly in Europe, is one in which violent jihadist-inspired attacks increased in number, and diversified in attack methodology (although it is worth noting that the number of plots that have failed as a proportion of total plots, has increased; Economist (2017)). The relatively large number of incidents and attacks in Western countries, particularly from early 2015 onwards, have delivered a growing dataset of militants, against the biographies of whom a renewed analysis can be undertaken of the importance of insurgency experience in Iraq and Syria to attack planning and execution. This can be applied to earlier analysis of conflicts in Bosnia, Chechnya, Afghanistan, Somalia and Iraq, to determine whether and how the threat from JFFs may be developing and transforming.

In this paper an empirical approach is taken, which takes a dataset of significant attacks in Western countries appearing to involve individuals inspired by a violent jihadist ideology from the beginning of 2015 to the middle of June 2017, when such attacks were particularly numerous and frequent. This delivers a set of 30 incidents across France, Belgium, Germany, Denmark, Sweden, the UK and the US, involving 54 individuals. The biographies of the perpetrators, derived from reporting in mainstream media sources, are then analysed to determine the extent to which experience of conflict in Syria or Iraq has been a factor in the planning and execution of the attack. Methodological issues are considered, such as the fact that not all attacks are reported fully or even at all in some cases; and that there is often ambiguity over whether specific attacks are really inspired by violent jihadist ideology or whether this cloaks a violent attack that might have been motivated at core by other factors. These caveats aside, the dataset under review here is considered to offer an important insight into a significant dataset of jihadist terrorists, and to shed further light on the challenge of understanding the motivations of the perpetrators and the role that jihadist travel might have played in their actions.

The conclusions are broadly that this attack period broadly supports the analysis carried out on the threat factor associated with JFFs in the pre-2010 period, as spearheaded by the work of Thomas Hegghammer (2013). It is significant to note that Hegghammer's earlier estimate of the number of returnees who will carry out attacks, namely one in nine (11 percent) has not yet manifested itself in

the post-2015 dataset. In the dataset under review in this analysis, it appears that only just over 1 percent of those who may have travelled from Western countries to fight for jihadist organisations returned to carry out attacks in Europe, and none in the case of the US. Such a low figure should be viewed with caution, however. In many ways, it is early days in the overall picture of post-conflict threat arising from Iraq and Syria, and many who have travelled may be yet to return from the combat zone. On the question of the effect of returning jihadists within the threat landscape, the functional observations made by Hegghammer (2013) that such returnees are generally more organised, violent and successful in the attacks they conduct, are broadly borne out. In the analysis of attacks undertaken in this paper, returning JFFs featured in three of the top five most violent attacks in terms of casualties (attacks which collectively killed more than 250 people and injured hundreds more), and hardly at all in the other low-sophistication attacks. This, in turn, suggests that the terrorist threat to the West from returning JFFs should continue to receive concerted policy attention.

At the same time, it is noted in this analysis that other factors in the supposed motivation for violent jihadist attacks are arguably more important to the overall picture than the question of combat experience for a jihadist organization. These include individual experience of violent crime in the past lives of the perpetrators, which applies to the vast majority of attackers in the period in question; and other ways in which relevant experience may be gained, particularly in the use of automatic weapons. It is suggested that these factors must not be overlooked in the overall policy response to terrorism in the West. It is also noted in this analysis that, while previous JFF experience can lead to a violent outcome, the second most murderous attack in the period under review in terms of casualties was carried out using very unsophisticated means, namely the use of a truck, as was the case with Mohamed Lahouaeij-Bouhlel's attack in Nice in July 2016, which killed 86 people. This incident demonstrated the bleak fact that sophisticated means and training are not necessarily needed to commit a very high-impact attack.

The Foreign Fighter phenomenon

In the most recent conflict in Iraq and Syria, it appears that approximately 31,000 fighters had travelled to the conflict in the 2011-15 period, from 86 separate countries (Soufan Group, 2015). The Middle East and Maghreb were, perhaps not surprisingly, the greatest source of foreign fighters, with just short of 60 percent of the total, within which Tunisia was the source of 6000 fighters alone (the single largest source of fighters by country). Western Europe was a smaller, but not insignificant source of fighters, contributing approximately 5000 in the period under review. Within this figure, however, four countries dominated the scene, namely the UK, Belgium, Germany and France, with the latter accounting for nearly as many travelling fighters (1700) as the other three European countries

combined (Soufan Group, 2015). This may be one factor in the observation in this paper that the most recent period of attacks was dominated by incidents in France, both large and small.

Trends over this period saw a sharply accelerating flow of fighters in the period from former Soviet republics, and an increase in the number travelling from Western Europe (albeit at a slower rate), particularly in the post-2014 timeframe. The number of travellers from the US, however, remained relatively small and static, possibly because of the greater distance away from the conflict and the difficulties in reaching it undetected. Meanwhile, while many travellers remained in the conflict zone or were killed in the conflict, the average rate of returnees to Western Europe between 2011 and 2015 was assessed by the Soufan Group to be between 20 and 30 percent. Not all of these, of course, would wish to carry out violent attacks back in their home countries and many would have become disillusioned with the path of conflict altogether. The question is how many others will wish to continue the fight.

Of course, not everyone who travelled to the conflict in Iraq and Syria did so to join the jihadist movement. Many travelled to fight for opposing forces, such as the Kurdish Peshmerga or YPG/YPJ militants. In the broader historical context, Malet reminds us that only about half of all foreign fighters in major conflicts in the modern era have been "Islamists" (Malet, 2015). In total numbers, the Spanish Civil War of 1936-39 remains the largest destination for foreign fighters, with between 30,000 and 60,000 joining the conflict, the vast majority of whom fought for various International Brigades opposing the Fascists (Malet, 2015: 10). At the same time, the post-war period of insurgency in the Muslim world, and particularly various episodes of conflict in Afghanistan since the Soviet invasion in 1979, and the insurgencies in Iraq and Syria thereafter, are finding themselves firmly in second place in the league table of foreign fighter-fuelled conflicts.

A further consideration is the fact that defining a "foreign fighter" is perhaps not as easy as it first seems, and this can be an issue for policy-makers in deciding what, if anything, to do about people who have travelled abroad to participate in conflicts. In the 1930s, there were generally no laws concerning participation in foreign conflicts, and no action was taken against those that returned home afterwards. In many countries in the modern era, this remains the case, although the International Centre for Counter Terrorism in The Hague (ICCT) suggests that the general trend in recent times within EU countries has been towards a greater criminalisation of foreign fighters. This has included use of a range of legislative tools, such as those concerning the financing or membership of proscribed terrorist organisations, and the receipt or delivery of terrorist recruitment or training (ICCT, 2016: 6). Calls by many for deprivation of citizenship of travelling militants have proved more complicated because of commitments under international law and conventions to not make people

stateless, although many countries have a provision to remove citizenship from those who hold dual nationalities.

By focusing on terrorist legislation, states can attempt to differentiate between those who have travelled to fight for violent jihadist organisations, and those who might have travelled to fight for other groups such as the Free Syrian Army (FSA) or Kurdish militias (who are not deemed to be "terrorists" in the West). Most of those who travelled for fight for the latter organisations might be presumed to offer no threat on their return, other than the generalised threat of violent conduct by people who may have become psychologically disturbed by their experience of war. In a 2017 study by the BBC in the UK, which, the broadcaster claimed, was "the most comprehensive public record of its kind", it was found that just over 100 of the suspected 850 individuals who had travelled to Iraq and Syria to work with jihadist groups had been arrested and charged with terrorist offences on their return (BBC, 2017). Just over half of these had been charged with "preparing for acts of terrorism", which became an offence with the UK's updated Terrorism Act of 2006. Other charges include funding terrorism, and disseminating terrorist publications; the latter also a relatively recently instituted offence in the UK. The UK government said that a further 600 individuals had attempted to travel to the conflict but had been intercepted en route (BBC, 2017). The vast majority of these travellers had the intention of joining ISIS, although some were travelling to find other extremist Sunni groups in the conflict, such as Ahrar-al Sham, and the Al Qaeda offshoot, the al-Nusra Front.

In general terms, this analysis adopts the notion of the Foreign Fighter as being a person who – using Hegghammer's typification – affiliates themselves to an irregular militia for ideological reasons rather than for money (cited in Malet, 2015: 4). Hegghammer excludes travellers from immediately neighbouring countries who participate in a civil conflict, who could be labelled as "local rebels" (Malet, 2015: 4), although this is not problematic when considering travellers from Europe to Iraq and Syria. The "jihadist" label is applied here to individuals who have travelled to fight with violent jihadist groups such as ISIS and Al Qaeda affiliates, although it is recognised that the definition and use of terms such as jihad and jihadism are not without their complications and controversies. Such debates are acknowledged but will not be explored further here.

Who are the JFFs?

As with many questions within terrorism studies, such as how and why "radicalization" occurs, some have questioned the problematic paucity of empirical work leading to the formation of theories (Githens-Mazer, 2012: 558). In many cases, the problems arise from researchers not having easy access to the subjects in question, which is largely unavoidable in many cases with this particular field of study. Conversely, however, a growing number of studies are managing to develop empirical

datasets on who joins extremist movements and their possible motivations for so doing, as the study by McGilloway, Ghosh and Bhui demonstrates in its extensive survey of empirical academic outputs on the radicalization of Muslims in the West up to 2012 (McGilloway et al, 2015).

In the area of JFFs and their motivations for joining the fight in the recent conflict in Iraq and Syria, a number of interesting studies are emerging which examine the thoughts and attitudes of actual and potential travellers, both in oral and social media contexts. At King's College in London, the International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation (ICSR) has been involved in a project to profile and analyse Western foreign fighters travelling to Syria, through a combination of extensive social media analysis and interviews with fighters in and around the border between Syria and Turkey[2]. This has led to a number of reports about the fighters themselves, but also about policy responses in Western governments.

As described earlier, the British broadcaster, the BBC, was also engaged in a project to amass evidence about the biographies of British foreign fighters, analysing who they were and their stories (BBC, 2017). This includes a macro-level analysis of the trends and statistics, and a case-study approach focusing on as many individual cases as can be achieved with the availability of reported biographical details. Specific details of the stories of more than 200 individuals, from amongst the estimated 850 Britons who have travelled to the conflict, were collected and scrutinised. The study identified, among other things, that threats from returnees are mitigated by the high mortality rate in theatre: just under a third of the focused dataset of travellers under examination were believed to have died in the conflict. Meanwhile, nearly a half of the others were convicted of terrorist offences on their return, reflecting a concerted and robust law enforcement effort being applied to the problem.

David Malet asserts that detailed scholarly analysis of the phenomenon of foreign fighters has only really emerged since the turn of the twenty-first century, as interest in the rise of JFFs has grown (Malet, 2015: 454). One of the more influential studies has been that of Thomas Hegghammer (2013), which examined variations in the decisions by would-be militants to travel to conflicts abroad rather than remain at home. The study focused on jihadists in the US, Western Europe and Australia in the 1990-2010 period, which encompassed conflicts in Bosnia, Chechnya, Somalia, Afghanistan and Iraq. Hegghammer's judgement is that "militants usually do not leave intending to return for a domestic attack, but a small minority acquire that motivation along the way and become more effective operatives on their return" (Hegghammer, 2013: 1). As will be discussed, this general point about effectiveness is supported by analysis of the 2015-17 dataset of jihadist attacks in Western Europe examined in this study. At the same time, Hegghammer's assessment that broadly one in nine militants who had travelled abroad to fight became involved in attacks at home (Hegghammer, 2015:

7), has not yet manifested itself in the figures when examining the most recent wave of attacks in Western Europe.

One of the most significant contributing countries to the JFF phenomenon in recent times has been Belgium. Bakker and de Bont (2016) conducted an empirical study of 370 cases of JFFs across Belgium and the Netherlands in the 2012-15 period. The study utilised various open-source reports concerning the cases, including media and court reporting, in addition to interviews with family members and associates of the travellers. Bakker and de Bont's study focused on the profiles of the JFFs and their possible motivations for travelling to the conflict. They found trends which they believed to be indicative of norms across Western European sample sets, namely that the majority of travellers are young adults (averaging 23.5 in age); are mostly from migrant families, with 46 percent of Moroccan heritage in their particular study; and are mostly at the lower end of the socio-economic scale (Bakker and de Bont, 2016: 850-1). Women constituted a significant proportion of the cases studied, forming 24 percent of the Dutch sample and 16 percent of the Belgian sample of JFFs (Bakker and de Bont, 2015: 842), although their roles in the conflict zone appear to very rarely involve actual combat. On the key question of motivations for travelling, the assessment was similar to that put forward by many, including the author, about general motivations for joining violent extremist groups. This is the hypothesis that motivations are many and varied and are often as much about individual circumstances as about any grand ideological narrative (Richards, 2017: 220).

Similarly, while noting that good empirical data on JFF pathways are difficult to unearth, van Zuijdewijn and Bakker noted in a study of the Afghanistan, Somalia and Bosnia conflicts, that "it is clear there is no standard foreign fighter. They differ very much in background, motivation and what they do after the fighting is done"(van Zuijdewijn and Bakker, 2014:9).

As Mia Bloom has identified, not only are women potentially significant to the operations of jihadist organizations such as ISIS (even if they are generally not involved in frontline combat operations), with up to a quarter of all jihadist travellers in some Western cases being female,[3] but so also are children (Bloom, 2015). The "Cubs of the Caliphate" are not just propaganda tools, showing others who may be vacillating about joining jihad just how extreme and committed is the organization; but are also being trained as young killers in many instances. Just as is the case with child soldiers in civil conflicts, reintegrating such children after the conflict into mainstream society may be an extremely complicated process, and may involve many years of risk from brutalised and psychologically disturbed individuals.

Reynolds and Hafez (2017) focused on a similar 2012-15 period as the Bakker and de Bont study, looking at a sample of 99 German JFFs through an analysis of their social media traffic. Germany is

believed to have contributed just short of 800 foreign fighters to the conflict in Iraq and Syria up to 2015; a number similar to the UK (Soufan Group, 2015: 8). Again, the focus of the Reynolds and Hafez study was mainly on motivations for joining the jihad; and on the process through which individuals were mobilised to fight. The "integration deficit" hypothesis, commonly assumed to be a key driving factor for pushing individuals along extremist pathways, was found to be a weak factor in the German dataset. Meanwhile, the study accorded with some of the findings of Bakker and de Bont on the question of how individuals became drawn into militant milieux, noting that face-to-face peer-group socialisation was potentially as important as any other factor, including social media (Reynolds and Hafez, 2017: 685). Indeed, three cities in the North Rhine-Westphalia region (Bonn, Solingen and Dinslaken) appeared to have contributed more than half of all identified German JFFs. This may explain why certain very specific districts, such as the Molenbeek region of Brussels; or parts of the Hague in the case of the Hofstad Group in the Netherlands, appear to have been so significant in the stories of recent terrorist attacks in Europe.

In Sweden, Nilsson adopted a smaller dataset but a deeper narrative approach, interviewing eight JFFs, half of whom had travelled to Syria while the others had been involved in conflicts in Bosnia and Afghanistan (Nilsson, 2015). The interviews were conducted in the 2013-14 period in Gothenburg, which, like the places identified above in the context of their countries, is identified as a "hotspot of the Swedish jihadi movement" (Nilsson, 2015: 347). Nilsson's conclusions were threefold: that local conflicts have become increasingly articulated as global struggles; that participation in violent jihad has become "normalized" through the Iraq and Syria conflict, in the sense that it can become almost a way of life for some individuals; and that the notion of *takfir* (a violent rejection of any creeds other than an extreme Salafi interpretation, including those of other strands of Sunni Islam) is becoming increasingly important to the narrative (Nilsson, 2015: 355). While the dataset in this study is obviously quite small, these findings are potentially highly significant, and provide a further reason for hypothesising that the contemporary Iraq and Syria conflict could become more dangerous for the West than previous, more localized conflicts, such as those in Bosnia, Afghanistan or Somalia. If ISIS can manage to develop a narrative of a millennial and global struggle to apply a violent *takfirism* to those around them, especially in a period where geographical territory on the ground has been largely retaken and the movement may transform itself back into an Al Qaeda-style ephemeral, ideological movement, then the portents for Western security could be grave in the longer term.

Research method and sources

In this study, a period of 18 months is taken from the beginning of 2015 to the end of June 2017. Within this period, a set of apparently jihadist-inspired terror attacks in Western countries are

analysed for the significance of the role of combat experience in the biographies of the perpetrators. This delivers a dataset of 30 separate attacks across seven countries (France, Belgium, Germany, Sweden, Denmark, the UK and the US); committed by 54 individuals.

It is recognised that this should not be taken as a definitive dataset of attacks in Western countries over this particular period, for a number of reasons. First, the focus here is on attacks inspired by a violent jihadist narrative, since it is the factor of militants travelling to fight for jihadist groups in Iraq and Syria and the threat they may represent on their return that is under examination. It is recognised that various other terrorist attacks have occurred in Europe over the same period, notably those involving separatist groups and Far Right extremists to name but two. The intention is not to suggest that such attacks are any less serious than those under examination here, but involve different processes and considerations.

Secondly, the dataset under analysis in this paper is derived from biographical details reported in the mainstream media following the attacks, where these give some indication as to whether the perpetrators had travelled abroad to fight for a jihadist group. In some cases, the mainstream media picked up details of the identities of the perpetrators from local media sources and reported them as such. In all cases, the reported identities and associated biographical details are assumed to be correct.

Some difficulties were presented by these criteria. In some cases, it was unclear whether those identified as the perpetrator in an attack had previously travelled as a JFF or not. An example is the case of Tarek Belgacem, who was shot dead in Paris on 7 January 2016 when he approached a police station wearing a fake suicide vest. It transpired that Belgacem, a Tunisian, had a long and complicated history of crime and multiple identities, and may well have spent time in a combat zone abroad, but this cannot be verified at the time of writing with any certainty (Spiegel, 2016). A similar ambiguity over previous movements applies to Salman Abedi, the author of the Manchester bombing attack on 22 May 2017. Abedi had clearly travelled to Libya in the months prior to the attack and appears to have had links with militants there, but whether he personally fought for jihadist groups in Iraq or Syria remains uncertain at the time of writing (Doward et al, 2017). Similarly, in the case of Ayoub el-Khazzani, who attempted to carry out a gun and knife attack on a train travelling between Amsterdam and Paris on 21 August 2015, it has been alleged by prosecutors that he may have travelled previously to Iraq and Syria. But el-Khazzani denied this, and the truth remained unclear (BBC, 2015). It may be that such details emerge later in the course of the trial of such individuals, where they survived the attack in question, or in post-attack investigations. Where the attackers died themselves in their attacks, however, it may forever be a mystery as to whether they previously travelled as JFFs.

In total, of the 16 perpetrators in the dataset who may have travelled as a JFF, five appear to have varying degrees of doubt around their previous travel, and are identified as "possible JFFs". This leads to a range of between 20 and 30 percent of individuals involved in the dataset of attacks under examination in this paper as having previously been JFFs, with the lower number relating to those cases about which there is more certainty over their previous travel to combat zones.

In a small number of cases, details of the perpetrator of an attack have not been revealed at all in any openly identifiable source by the time of writing, and these cases have been excluded from the list.

A further complication in establishing a definitive list of recent jihadist-inspired attacks is that the authorities will sometimes deny that an incident or attack is of a terrorist nature, even if the perpetrator has shouted "Allahu Akbar" during the attack or otherwise suggested that it might be motivated by a jihadist ideology. There are numerous examples of this, an interesting cluster of which concerns a spate of attacks in Germany during July 2016. On 18 July, for example, a young Afghan refugee named Muhammad Riyadh (also known as Riaz Khan Ahmadzai) went on the rampage with a machete on a train in Würzburg, injuring five people, two of them critically. There had been reports by some eye-witnesses that he had shouted "Allahu Akbar" during the attack, but the authorities remained circumspect about the motives, eventually reporting them as being "ISIS incited" rather than directed by the jihadist group. (Osborne and Worley, 2016. ISIS released a video after the attack purporting to show the man they called Riyadh and claiming he was one of their "soldiers", but the Bavarian interior minister, Joachim Herrmann, insisted there were "no signs" of any substantive connection with jihadist groups (BBC, 2016).) Similarly, a shooting of a doctor in a Berlin hospital a week later was quickly reported by the authorities of "showing no signs at all" of being linked to terrorism (Osborne, 2016a).

In September 2016, a shooting in the Christiania district of the Danish capital Copenhagen, which injured two police officers, was robustly dismissed by local police as being a terrorist attack, despite the fact that ISIS publicly claimed responsibility and said that the perpetrator, a former Bosnian national called Mesa Hodzic, was a "soldier of Islam" (Dearden, 2016). In attributing the shooting to the authorities' struggle with organised drug crime, a Danish MP, Rasmus Nordqvist, said it was "despicable" and "desperate" that ISIS should claim responsibility for something in which it had no involvement (Dearden, 2016).

In another case in France a year earlier, in which an individual named Yassin Salhi kidnapped and beheaded a colleague at the company where he worked, and then rammed his truck into a chemical installation in the Lyons area, the motives for the attack remain similarly unclear. Despite dressing-up his attack as being inspired by extreme Islamist ideology, and having come under the interest of

counter-terrorism forces for a period in his past, Salhi appears to have acted entirely on his own and may well have been inspired as much by problems at home and with his victim - his former boss at the company where he worked - as by any jihadist organisation or ideology (Guardian, 2015).

Of course, we have to consider the potential element of politics in these cases, in that the authorities may be at pains to underplay the significance of the jihadist terror threat and to de-link it from controversial policies such as an open-door to refugees, particularly in the German context. There may also be a desire to avoid a sense of panic in the population, or indeed to avoid falling prey to accusations of making too many assumptions about an incident before all the details have emerged.

For the purpose of this analysis, educated judgements have been made in these cases as to whether they constitute terrorist attacks per se. In the aforementioned case of Yassin Salhi, for example, the perpetrator's previous involvement with Islamist extremists and the fact that he had been under police surveillance for a period in 2006, is taken to mean that his attack should be on the list of relevant potential JFF attacks. Similarly, claims by ISIS of their direction of Riyadh and Hodzic (the Copenhagen attacker) are taken to mean that they should be included in the list, even if such claims may be spurious. But there is no definitive method for establishing an appropriately failsafe list of such attacks in terms of their motivation. In a sense, this speaks to the larger debate over the drivers and motivations for terrorism more generally, and whether they are driven by top-down processes of ideology and organisational recruitment; or by bottom-up factors of identity and individual experience. Probably, the answer is a complex interplay of the two, but the importance of personal identify factors will mean that many terrorist attacks have non-ideological motivations at their root and could just as easily be described as crime, rather than terrorism.

Findings

With all of these caveats in mind, a number of interesting observations emerge from a detailed analysis of the 30 incidents and 54 individuals judged to be associated with violent jihadist terror attacks in the period under review. It is worth noting that the list of attacks can be broken down into particular categories of attack methodology. A great majority of the incidents under analysis comprise fairly low-sophistication attacks, using primitive methods such as knives, machetes or vehicles to inflict casualties, and were usually perpetrated either by lone actors or by pairs of people appearing to act largely on their own. Such attacks comprised 80 percent (24 incidents) of all attacks in the period under analysis.

A considerably smaller category concerns the much better organised and more ambitious type of attack, of which three examples stand out during the 18-month period in review: the Paris attacks of

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28 29 30 31 32 33 34 35 36 37 38 39 40 41 42 43 44 45 46 47 48 49 50 51 52 53 54 55 56 57 58 59 60 61 62 63 64 65

13 November 2015, including the attack on the Bataclan concert hall, which collectively killed 130; the coordinated bombings in Brussels on 22 March 2016, which killed 32; and the bombing of a music concert in Manchester on 22 May 2017, which killed 22 people aside from the attacker himself. In two of these cases (Paris and Brussels), several people were involved and a number of separate attacks were coordinated together at different points in the city, within a short space of time, suggesting a high level of planning and direction. Conversely, Salman Abedi's suicide bombing in Manchester appears to have been a lone-actor attack in its execution, but the sophistication of the explosive device suggests that the attack should be viewed in a different category from the low-sophistication attacks that characterise the period. It also suggests that a wider jihadist organisational involvement in the planning and preparation of the attack seems likely.

A third category of attack is a type commonly referred to as a "swarm" attack (Atran, 2003), in which a small group of individuals will attempt to overwhelm the security authorities by carrying out a sustained attack on civilians or security personnel, often coordinating an initial vehicle attack or explosion with a subsequent rampaging shooting or knife attack. The objective is generally to inflict the maximum amount of casualties using relatively low sophistication and a small group of highly committed militants, who are usually expecting to be killed at the culmination of the attack. Such incidents have more commonly been seen in the past in non-Western contexts, notably in Iraq, Somalia, Afghanistan, Pakistan and India, and remain very rare and somewhat more difficult to achieve in more securely policed Western contexts. Notable historical examples outside of Europe include the Mumbai attacks of November 2010; the Westgate shopping mall attack in Nairobi in September 2013; and the Taliban attack on a hospital in Kabul in March 2017, to name but a few.

In the period under review from the beginning of 2015 onwards, the major attack in Paris in November 2015 was a classic example of a swarm attack to rival the examples mentioned above in terms of execution and lethality. Similar in essence although less lethal in terms of overall casualties was the San Bernadino shooting attack of 2 December 2015, in which a husband and wife (Rizwan Farook and Tashveen Malik) went on the rampage in a community centre and killed 14 people. Aside from these incidents, the London Bridge attack of 3 June 2017, which was undertaken by three individuals using a vehicle and knives; and the gun attack on the Charlie Hebdo magazine offices in Paris on 7 January 2015, undertaken by two attackers, could reasonably be described as swarm attacks, albeit relatively limited ones.

Security officials have sometimes warned about the particular danger of such mass-casualty attacks in Western contexts, sometimes linking it to particular crowded environments such as hospitals. Such was the warning issued by the UK's National Counter Terrorism Security Office in June 2017 (Zatat,

2017), probably with the Taliban's Kabul attack of three months previously in mind. Analysis of the recent period suggests that such attacks remain very rare in the West, possibly because acquiring and arming automatic weapons is more difficult in Europe than is the case in other regions, although this is no predictor of the shape of future incidents.

On this factor, a small difference between the environment in different Western countries should perhaps be mentioned. In the case of the US, for example, where weapons including automatic rifles are relatively easy to acquire, the threat from rampaging gun attacks remains the most likely in the modern period. Of the four cases involving the US in the dataset examined here, all involved the use of automatic weapons. While none of them involved former JFFs (although, in the case of the Curtis Culwell Center attack of May 2015, one of the attackers, Elton Simpson, had previously tried to travel to the conflict in Somalia), training by the perpetrators in how to use guns was easy to obtain, and such small-signature attacks can deliver devastating results. The Orlando nightclub shooting of June 2016, committed by Omar Mateen, for example, killed 49 people and injured a further 58 (Tsukayama et al., 2016): a tally higher than two of the major organised attacks in Europe (Brussels and Manchester) in the same period. Conversely, in a country such as the UK, where automatic weapons and their ammunition are much more difficult to acquire, none of the four attacks in the period under review involved automatic weapons.

In general terms, several of the key conclusions from Hegghammer's work on previous JFFs are borne out by the sample analysed in this paper (Hegghammer, 2013). More specifically, returning JFFs remain a relative minority within the overall population of individuals carrying out terrorist attacks, but where they are involved, they tend to be better-organised, and to deliver more lethal results than in other attacks (with one or two exceptions). Of the 54 individuals analysed here, all but three of those who definitely or possibly had experience as JFFs (just over 81 percent of the JFF sample) were involved in three of the five most lethal attacks in the period, namely those in Paris, Brussels and Manchester (although in the case of the latter, as discussed, Abedi's previous experience in a combat zone is not certain). In all of the other attacks, only three (11 percent of the sample) possibly involved former JFFs. These comprise Ayoub el-Khazzani's attempted attack on a Paris-bound train in August 2015; Tarek Belgacem's attack on the Goutte d'Or police station in January 2016; and Mohammed Daleel's suicide bombing attack outside a wine-bar in Anspach, Germany, in July 2016, which succeeded in killing only the perpetrator. As discussed, the veracity of the first two individuals' combat experience is under question, while ISIS claimed that Daleel did indeed fight for them and had received instruction in Syria on how to construct his explosive device (Osborne, 2016b). That his attack largely failed was probably more by chance than design, and he could have inflicted a large number of casualties had he detonated his device at the right time.

In two of the most lethal and well-organised attacks in the period (Paris and Brussels), a large number of JFFs were involved: 9 out of the 11 individuals who appeared to be involved in the Paris attacks (two of whom are in the “possibly JFF” category); and three of the five involved in the Brussels bombings. (Conversely, the second and third most lethal attacks in the period - the Orlando nightclub shooting and Nice truck attack – each involved one lone attacker who appears not to have been a JFF.)

An interesting twist to these statistics arising from analysis of the 2015-17 period is that, of the individuals who carried out attacks without having identifiable previous experience as JFFs, a number had attempted to join the conflict in Iraq or Syria but been interdicted and returned before they reached the battlefield, usually while passing through Turkey. This appears to have been the case with 8 individuals in the non-JFF sample, representing approximately 21 percent of that group. In one or two other cases there appeared to be contact with those facilitating JFFs, even if the perpetrators of the attacks had not yet attempted to travel themselves. This was notably the case with two of the three perpetrators of the attack on the Charlie Hebdo offices in Paris in January 2015, while the third attacker in that incident, Cherif Kouachi, had tried to travel to Syria himself to join ISIS but been interdicted en route. Unusually, one individual had tried to travel not to Iraq or Syria, but to Pakistan. This was Larossi Abballa, who stabbed to death a police officer and his partner in their home in Magnanville in June 2016. Similarly, one of the Curtis Culwell Center attackers in the US, Elton Simpson, had previously attempted to travel to Somalia.

A number of important factors flow from this observation. Firstly, the terror threat from JFFs may be wider than just the threat from specific individuals who have managed to travel and return. Just as significant may be the threat from individuals who have attempted to travel but failed, and generally from those involved with facilitating organisations and groups. In the case of the London Bridge attack in June 2017, for example, Khuram Butt had a clear and long association with the group formerly known as Al Muhajiroun (Booth et al., 2017), whose former leader, Anjem Choudary, spent a period in jail on terrorism charges for urging physical and material support for ISIS. Similarly, the aforementioned Larossi Abballa had previously been convicted for involvement with a group that had been facilitating the flow of fighters to Pakistan and Afghanistan (Chrisafis and Willsher, 2016). In the case of Lahouaeij-Bouhlel, meanwhile, who committed the second most lethal attack in the dataset under review – the July 2016 truck attack in Nice – the lone perpetrator is not believed to have travelled as a JFF himself but appeared to have connections with a known al-Nusra Front militant, Omar Diaby (Chazan et al., 2016). Thus, the whole process of recruitment of JFFs is a major threat, including those who physically fight in the combat zone but also those who support and associate with them.

Secondly, a particular paradox is thrown up for the policy-makers, in that successfully preventing individuals from travelling to the combat zone as JFFs may lead to some of them becoming determined to carry out an attack back home instead. This may have been the case with Cherif Kouachi, one of the Charlie Hebdo attackers; and appears to be more clearly the case with Adel Kermiche and Abdel Malik Petitjean, who murdered a priest in a Normandy church in July 2016. It appears that both of the latter had tried to travel to Syria but been interdicted and returned; twice in the case of Kermiche. In this way, preventing an individual from becoming a JFF may, in some cases, actually increase the threat of an attack back home. This may be especially so when one considers not only the high mortality rate of JFFs in theatre, but also the fact that many who travel to fight for jihadist organisations overseas will not necessarily be interested in carrying out an attack at home, or even of ever returning home at all (Byman and Shapiro, 2014:1).

Finally, one of the most significant findings of the 2015-17 dataset under analysis is that there is one factor that is much more prevalent across all of the attackers' biographies than whether or not they have combat experience with a jihadist organisation. While a maximum of 34 percent of attackers in this sample may have been JFFs, more than 90 percent have had problems with involvement in violent crime prior to deciding to carry out a terrorist attack. In several cases, this includes experience of using firearms. The case of Omar Abdel Hamid el-Hussein, for example, who carried out a shooting attack in Copenhagen in February 2015 which killed two people, is indicative among many. Danish police indicated that el-Hussein had a history of involvement with violent gang-crime, and this proved to be the most important factor in his ability to use a firearm in an apparently jihadist attack (Green and Orange, 2015).

This latter factor may take us back to the wider question of motivations for becoming a terrorist, and to a suggestion that specific individual identity factors and biographies may be just as important if not more so than grand ideologies. The great majority of individuals who carried out attacks in the period under review appear to have been troubled members of society with persistent prior involvement in sometimes violent crime, before they became demonstrably involved in any jihadist ideology or sentiment. This, in turn, may mean that societal problems such as socio-economic marginalisation, or periods of time spent in the criminal justice system, may be much more important security priorities than involvement with jihadist groups in the longer term structural struggle against terrorism. It could also mean that a focus on "radicalization" processes within the justice system should remain a key policy priority.

Conclusions

Analysis of recent apparently jihadist-inspired terrorist attacks in Western Europe suggest that the threat from individuals who have returned from fighting with jihadist groups in Iraq or Syria should continue to be seen as one of the highest security priorities for Western governments. Just short of a third of all jihadist terrorist attackers in Western countries in the 2015-17 period had recent experience of fighting with jihadist groups in combat zones, or of being trained by them to assemble explosives. Collectively, all relevant attacks in this period killed more than 250 civilians and injured hundreds more. The threat is serious, and extends beyond actual JFFs themselves, encompassing their sympathisers, facilitators and associates. It is also the case that a number of Western men, women and children who have travelled to the combat zone may present threats in the future, not so much from hands-on experience of how to use firearms or explosives necessarily, but from general psychological problems arising from having been exposed to extreme violence and brutality. Similarly troubling is the generalized anti-Western *takfirist* turn that extreme Salafi ideology has taken in parts of the Middle East region in recent years, which widens the narrative out from the Levant itself and towards the West.

As with analysis of the pre-2010 period, before the more recent conflict in Iraq and Syria, while JFFs are a smaller part of all terrorists committing attacks in the West (up to approximately 30 percent in this sample), where they are involved, they tend to be more organised and more lethal than most other attackers without their experience of the combat zone. This lends further weight to the notion that such travellers should be a particular focus of attention and a particular concern for security agencies, despite the fact that the experience of the post-2003 period in Iraq showed that such fears about JFFs were largely unfounded. With that said, attacks not involving those with experience as JFFs but nevertheless displaying adeptness at using other methods such as automatic weapons, can be just as devastating as the more organised and directed attacks. It is also worth noting that the Nice truck attack of July 2016, which did not involve a JFF or any particularly sophisticated methodology, nevertheless delivered devastating results, killing 86 people and injuring hundreds more. In this sense, low-signature "lone actor" attacks should continue to be seen as a potential major threat over and above that from returning foreign fighters.

With all of that said, however, there are a number of caveats which suggest that a certain perspective needs to be maintained when considering this bleak horizon. As Byman pointed out, it remains the case that "most foreign fighters do not become terrorists or otherwise go on to pose a threat when they return" (Byman, 2015:587). Indeed, this analysis has shown that previous personal problems with socio-economic marginalisation and involvement with the criminal justice system are much more widespread issues for the population of terrorist perpetrators than any involvement in conflict overseas. This may provide clues for policy-makers in considering the best strategies for dealing with

terrorist threat in the longer, structural context. Indeed, it may be the case that these problems presage involvement with jihadist groups and should be seen as the most critical upstream area of attention.

It is also the case that the 2015-17 period was one in which the conflict in Iraq and Syria was at an extremely heightened level. While the conflict is far from being resolved at the time of writing, ISIS has largely disappeared as a territorial entity in Iraq and Syria, and its erstwhile leader, Al-Baghdadi, is dead. Terrorist attack statistics involving jihadist groups and ideologies have shown a marked decline since the period under review, if not a terminal one. All of this is likely to mean that JFF numbers will fall away considerably in the coming years, as will, presumably, the threat from returnees. It is also the case that intensive intelligence collection and sharing between agencies across Europe to identify, interdict and prosecute those with violent jihadist intentions (notwithstanding disruptions such as Brexit), may gain greater traction and start to lessen the threat yet further. All of these scenarios are entirely possible and indicate that predicting terror trends remains far from an exact science.

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Notes

[1] See for example a recent statement agreed at the G7 summit in Italy, in which the threat of returning foreign fighters was identified as becoming potentially more grave as jihadist groups lose ground in the conflict in Iraq and Syria, and fighters disperse. *Reuters*. Retrieved 17 July 2017 from: http://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-g7-summit-britain-idUKKBN18L2SG

[2] See *ICSR*, https://icsr.info/our-work/foreign-fighters-and-the-returnee-threat/ Retrieved 21 January 2020.

[3] In the aforementioned analysis of UK jihadists by the BBC, the proportion of female travellers was assessed to be just over 11 percent in 2017. *BBC (2017).*