



## The Threat of Further ISIS Terrorism in Europe

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*ISIS is threatening new terrorist attacks in Europe. These could be carried out by terrorists still on the run and previously involved in the preparation of the last Paris and Brussels attacks. Belgium and France are the most threatened, however, ISIS is also calling on its European followers to stage individual attacks. It mostly counts on the 1,500 or more of its fighters who have returned to Europe from Syria. Any individual actions would not likely match the ferocity of the attacks staged directly by ISIS in Europe between 2015 and 2016; nonetheless, the lone and spontaneous character of such acts could pose a bigger challenge to security services than well-planned attacks.*

**The Threat of Further Attacks in Europe.** After the March 2016 and November 2015 attacks in Brussels and Paris, Belgium and France remain the primary targets of ISIS (IS, ISIL). Both attacks were carried out by French-speaking ISIS fighters, French and Belgian citizens who had returned to Europe. Their ability to stage further attacks has been seriously hampered but one cannot rule out the existence of other groups of terrorists lying in wait after trekking back from Syria. They could jump into action, especially during the Euro 2016 football tournament now being held in France.

Other EU Member States previously not targeted by the Belgian-French ISIS cell are in a slightly better situation. Nonetheless, the British, German and Swedish security services have uncovered links between the Paris and Brussels attackers and citizens of their countries. In April, the UK saw the arrest of five individuals connected to the ISIS attackers. Similar arrests in connection to the Brussels attacks were made in Germany. A Swedish citizen, a former ISIS fighter in Syria, was arrested on 8 April in Belgium and is suspected of involvement in the bombing of the Maelbeek metro station in Brussels. These arrests indicate that ISIS could have been preparing the next wave of attacks that would take place outside Belgium and France. However, the continuation of ISIS's European campaign is conditioned on its ability to replenish its human resources in Syria. This is, in turn, dependent upon the organisation's capability to recruit and train European citizens in the Middle East before sending them on terrorist missions to Europe. Given this context, the diminishing numbers of foreign volunteers joining ISIS in either Syria or Iraq limits the organisation's ability to stage terrorist attacks in Europe.

**ISIS Veterans.** Regardless of whether ISIS is prepared to ship members from Syria to Europe, the organisation could successfully inspire attacks by its former fighters or sympathisers who are already in Europe. Such attacks likely would be less spectacular, less well-prepared and often carried out by individual terrorists. Their frequency, however, could top these directly prepared by ISIS.

The scale of the threat is impressively high. Between 2012 and 2016, about 5,500 men from 15 European countries (Albania, Austria, Belgium, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Denmark, Finland, France, Holland, Italy, Kosovo, Macedonia, Germany, Spain, Sweden, UK) travelled to Syria to fight in that country's civil war, mostly in the ranks of ISIS. At least 600 died but about 1,500 have returned to Europe, including 100 to Belgium and 300 to France. Due to a lack of evidence that they committed crimes outside their home countries, most of the ISIS and other Syrian rebel returnees are not threatened with arrest. Their numbers, however, overwhelms the European security services' capacity to effectively monitor them.

Finland, Italy and Spain find themselves in the best situation here, as they saw relatively few (80, 90 and 150 people, respectively) of their citizens travel to Syria. Thus, their security services face few issues in monitoring returnee

foreign fighters. The UK, Germany and Holland, with foreign fighter populations of 800, 850 and 240, respectively, fare worse in this respect. Moreover, all three of these countries had radical Islamist organisations on their territories prior to the civil war in Syria. These outfits recruited potential fighters for the war effort while in these countries. Some of their members were arrested but some reached the Middle East and could come back with the intention of staging terrorist attacks. Denmark also has suffered from similar problems but the effectiveness of its security services and police, coupled with a simultaneous push to develop social de-radicalisation and anti-extremist programmes, diminishes the threat of terrorism in this country from ISIS veterans.

Sweden, Belgium and France are all in the worst situation with respect to other European states. Swedish foreign fighters in Syria comprise the second-largest group per capita for European countries at 30 fighters per million inhabitants (about 300 individuals in total). The Swedish security sector is, therefore, hardly able to monitor the travels of Swedish citizens to the Middle East. So far, the country has made only one preventive arrest of an individual attempting to join ISIS. Moreover, the country lacks information about 140 returnees who are already back in Sweden. Belgium, with the largest per capita foreign fighter population—40 per million inhabitants, or 450 individuals in total and 120 returnees—is in a comparable position to Sweden. The returnees are at liberty, relatively few are being monitored around the clock by the security services. In addition to that, more than 200 Belgians are still present in the war zone in Syria. France has a better understanding of the threat from returnee foreign fighters. At least 1,200 of its residents left the country for Syria (the biggest non-Russian European foreign fighter population in the Middle East). Of these, 300 have already returned to France, which is criminalising association with ISIS and uses arrests to attempt to weaken its recruitment networks in the country. This has led to the opening of 1,100 judicial procedures against individuals suspected of recruiting others into ISIS, membership of the organisation, and fighting in its ranks in Syria. Such a high number of suspects, however, makes France, despite its active counterterrorism policy, a primary ISIS target for both its current members, veterans or sympathisers not connected to the cell responsible for the attacks in Paris and Brussels.

**Conclusions.** The threat of radical Islamist terrorism in Europe takes two parts. Its first element is the possibility of an ISIS Belgian-French cell, weakened but still operational, staging more attacks. The second element is returnee ISIS foreign fighters or veterans of other terrorist organisations who are resurfacing in Europe. The combination of these two elements makes new attacks in Belgium and France highly likely. Both countries are still threatened by the older cell and have high numbers of former ISIS fighters on their territories. Germany, Sweden and the UK, connected to the activities of the Belgian-French ISIS attack cell in Europe, could become the next targets, especially as they also—although to a lesser extent in per capita terms—have large foreign fighter contingents in Syria. However, due to arrests and suicide attacks, the diminishing numbers of Europe-bound ISIS fighters seriously limits this organisation's ability to stage spectacular terrorist attacks akin to those on Paris or Brussels. Similarly, ISIS veterans would also find copying such attacks beyond their capabilities, and their efforts, although potentially numerous, would pale in comparison to activities directly led and ordered by the organisation from Syria.