Criminal Pasts, Terrorist Futures: European Jihadists and the New Crime-Terror Nexus

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Abstract

The prevalence of criminal backgrounds amongst European jihadists is remarkable. Whether amongst 'foreign fighters' that have travelled to Syria and Iraq, or amongst those involved in terrorism in Europe, criminal pasts are common. Yet, they remain unexamined. This article presents a unique empirical examination of 79 European jihadists with criminal backgrounds, examining the relevancy of their criminal pasts in relation to their terrorist futures. The results fall into four themes. Firstly, jihadism can affect a criminal's radicalisation process in two ways: it can offer redemption from past sins, or it can legitimise crime. Secondly, prisons offer an environment for radicalisation and networking amongst criminals and extremists. Thirdly, criminals develop skills that can be useful for them as extremists, such as access to weapons and forged documents, as well as the psychological 'skill' of familiarity with violence. Finally, white-collar and petty crime is often used to finance extremism. The results challenge conceptions on radicalisation, and can affect counter-terrorism responses.

Keywords: *Terrorism; Islamic State; radicalisation; crime-terror nexus; terrorist financing*

Introduction

On the morning of Wednesday, 31 August 2016, two plain-clothed police officers approached a suspected drug dealer in Christiana, an alternative life-style district in Copenhagen, Denmark. Without warning, the man opened fire at the police with a pistol and ran away. He was eventually tracked down and died from wounds that he received during a police shootout.[1] His name was Mesa Hodzic, a 25-year old Danish-Bosnian, who was known to the police as a drug dealer. Two days later, the jihadist [2] group Islamic State (IS aka ISIS, ISIL or Daesh) claimed responsibility for Hodzic's actions, proclaiming him a 'soldier' of the Caliphate.[3] It turned out that Hodzic was not just a prolific drug dealer, but also a member of a Salafist group who had expressed sympathies for the Islamic State and appeared in its propaganda videos.[4] At first, this appeared like a flagrant contradiction. Were jihadists not meant to be religious, and refrain from drug peddling and 'ordinary' crime? Yet his case demonstrates how blurred the lines between crime and extremism have become.[5] Was he a criminal, a terrorist, or both?

Mesa Hodzic was not a unique case. German Federal Police stated that of the 669 German foreign fighters about whom they had sufficient information, two-thirds had police records prior to travelling to Syria, and one-third had criminal convictions.[6] The Belgian Federal Prosecutor said that approximately half of his country's jihadists had criminal records prior to leaving for Syria.[7] A United Nations report suggests a similar pattern amongst French foreign fighters.[8] Officials from Norway and the Netherlands told us that 'at least 60 per cent' of their countries' jihadists had previously been involved in crime.[9] It is for this reason that Alain Grignard, the head of Brussels Federal Police, described Islamic State as 'a sort of super-gang'.[10]

This phenomenon may not be entirely new. In the mid-1990s, French newspapers referred to operatives of the Armed Islamic Group (GIA) as 'gangster terrorists' because many of its Algerian members had previously been involved in local gangs.[11] Likewise, several of the perpetrators of the Madrid train attacks in 2004 were former criminals, and financed their operation by selling drugs, among other sources of income.[12]

The merging of terrorism and crime is therefore not without precedent. However, we can offer no reliable statistics by just how much the share of 'gangsters' in terrorist groups may have risen. Yet it seems clear that their role has become more pronounced, more visible, and more relevant to the ways in which groups like

IS operate and frame their message. Furthermore, we believe that the crime-terror nexus has been under-researched, and that its political and practical implications have not been understood.

The purpose of this article is not to quantify this nexus, but to describe its nature and dynamics, and understand what it means for the terrorist threat and the ways it should be countered. How does criminality facilitate radicalisation and recruitment? What is the role of prisons? Do criminals possess skills that make them more effective as terrorists? How does the convergence between crime and terrorism affect the financing of terrorist attacks?

To help answer such questions, a multi-lingual team of ICSR researchers compiled a database containing the profiles of 79 recent European jihadists with criminal pasts. As far as we know, it is the first data collection that focuses on criminals who have become jihadists in the post-2011 period. By analysing their pathways, motivations and actions, we were able to establish some key factors and dynamics that define the terror-crime nexus in the context of the current jihadist threat.

Our conclusions are clear. The convergence of criminal and terrorist milieus – what we call the *new* crime-terror nexus – is real, and has profound implications for how jihadist groups in Europe operate. For the first time, there is complete alignment between a group like Islamic State and criminals who are attracted by its core counter-cultural message of redemption through strength, power, and violence. Rather than in universities or among religious students, Islamic State and/or its successors increasingly find recruits in European 'ghettos', in prisons, as well as among the European 'underclasses' and those who have previously engaged in violence and illegal acts. Those who are thus becoming part of the jihadist counter-culture can apply their criminal skills to terrorist purposes. Indeed, many individuals continue their involvement in crime whilst radicalising. This, we believe, should compel us to re-think long-held assumptions about radicalisation and how it needs to be countered.

Literature

The concept of a crime-terrorism nexus is not new. It emerged in the early 1990s after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the birth of the Information Age. Amidst shifting geopolitics and newfound transnational reach, non-state actors adapted criminal *modus operandi* to further their aims. As early as the 1980s, during the rise of Pablo Escobar and the Colombian drug cartels, scholars tried to define 'narco-terrorism' and debated whether it represented a true case of blurring criminal-terrorist lines.[13] In more recent years, the term 'criminal insurgency' has been used to describe the way in which criminal organisations represent strategic security threats to states.[14] Moreover, it is no secret that the Taliban have taxed, organised, promoted, and protected Afghanistan's heroin production; that Hezbollah has invested into South America's illicit narcotics industry since the 1980s; and that groups like the Irish Republican Army (IRA) have been involved in smuggling petrol, cigarettes, and counterfeiting consumer goods.[15]

Despite these developments, the concept has not only failed to gain significant traction among scholars, many have dismissed it as being overly broad. Among its major deficiencies are the assumptions that terrorist or criminal groups operate as monolithic, hierarchically structured entities, and that ideological and criminal motivations are mutually exclusive.[16]

In our view, the crime-terror nexus is a useful concept, but its nature and dynamics are different from how it has traditionally been conceived. What we have observed in the case of jihadist recruits in Europe is not the convergence of criminals and terrorists as organisations but of their social networks, environments, or *milieus.* In other words: rather than being one or the other, criminal and terrorist groups have come to recruit from the same pool of people, creating (often unintended) synergies and overlaps that have consequences for how individuals radicalise and operate. This is what we call the *new* crime-terror nexus.

Database

To analyse this issue, a multi-lingual team of ICSR researchers compiled a database containing the profiles of 79 recent European jihadists with criminal pasts. As far as we know, it is the first database of its kind. While this is not a representative survey of European 'gangster' jihadists, it has provided the source material for the different dynamics and developments that follow. By analysing their pathways, motivations and actions, we were able to ascertain some characteristics that define the crime-terror nexus in the context of the current jihadist threat.

Our database only includes individuals who have: 1) travelled, or attempted travel, to a foreign 'battlefront' as a jihadist foreign fighter and/or have been involved in terrorism in Europe; 2) had a history of crime prior to their mobilisation into extremism; 3) been active as jihadists any time after the start of the current 'wave' in the year 2011.

All data was gathered from open sources, such as newspaper articles, court documents, and government reports. Having obtained ethical approval from King's College London, [17] we then conducted a series of interviews with current and former counter-terrorism officials, in order to assess the implications of the findings, and check database entries. This became necessary as information concerning criminal pasts is often unknown, incomplete, classified, or forthcoming. This also allowed a check on journalistic biases – where the most 'headline-worthy' criminal pasts receive the most attention. To prevent some cases from distorting the overall picture, we omitted individuals whose trajectories we judged to be too incomplete to allow for a systematic evaluation.

Data collection took place from March to July 2016, and the resulting database (n = 79) includes individuals from Belgium (13), Denmark (11), France (13), Germany (15), Netherlands (11), and the UK (16). For details, see Appendix to this article.

These profiles were then coded according to 30 variables which sought to capture three aspects of an individual's profile or pathway: (1) biographical information; (2) involvement in jihadism; (3) criminal history.

To assess individuals' criminal histories, we coded for time spent in prison (as well as the number of stays); criminal convictions; involvement with firearms; types of crime, such as violent (for example, assault, robbery) or petty crime (for example, trespassing, theft), drug dealing, trafficking, and white-collar crime (for example, identity theft or financial fraud).

These categories were sufficiently broad to mitigate the limitations of the data, which often did not allow for further sub-categorisation. For example, open-sources may disclose that an individual was *involved* in drugs but do not reveal his specific role (for example, user or dealer). As a result, it was difficult to analyse the range of criminality *within* particular categories. It was also often not possible to reconstruct exact dates and timelines, which makes it impossible to determine whether they ceased, continued, or escalated their criminality whilst radicalising in some cases.

Results

No uniform profile emerges from the sample, though it is possible to discern patterns. All individuals are male and predominantly young: the average (as well as median) age was 25. The high proportion of converts (19-22 per cent) is in line with estimates of converts amongst jihadist foreign fighters from the European Union.[18]

Of the 79 individuals, two-thirds (67 per cent) had travelled, or attempted to travel, to Syria as foreign fighters. Many of these also figured among the 38 percent involved in domestic plots. 9 percent were

convicted of terrorism-related offences without, however, having travelled to a jihadi zone of conflict or participated in a specific plot.

The intensity of criminality varies, from 'one-time' criminals, to repeat offenders, and more sustained 'career criminals'. Given the age of those involved, it is likely that many stood at the beginning of their criminal 'careers'. The vast majority are low-level, local criminals. There are very few that operated on a national or transnational level. Whilst the majority were at some point involved in petty crime (68 percent), the prevalence of violent histories (65 per cent) is notable.

Prisons play an important role, with the majority of the individuals in our sample (at least 57 percent) having been incarcerated on at least one occasion. In twelve cases (15 percent of the total, or 27 percent of those who spent time in prison), we are confident that individuals embraced jihadism in prison, though most of them continued (and intensified) their radicalisation after being released. Notably, seven of those individuals were subsequently involved in a domestic plot, which means that those who radicalised in prison are significantly overrepresented amongst those involved in domestic plotting.

Nearly 30 percent of the individuals in our sample had experience with firearms, while half of them subsequently became involved in domestic plotting. By contrast, 'white-collar crime' seems to be a marginal issue, with just 6 percent involved in this.

In the following sections, we will examine some of the key dynamics for which we have found evidence in our database: (1) recruitment and radicalisation; (2) prisons; (3) 'skills transfers'; and (4) criminal financing.

Radicalisation and Recruitment

The recent mobilisation of foreign fighters for the conflict in Syria has been extraordinary: over the past five years, an estimated 5,000 Western Europeans have travelled to the Middle East, joining jihadist groups such as the Islamic State and Jabhat al-Nusra. No other conflict involving jihadists has attracted as many foreigners.[19]

Both 'returnee' fighters and 'stay-home supporters' have played a prominent part in the recent 'wave' of terrorist attacks throughout Europe, and both groups include a significant number of people with criminal pasts. One of the most compelling questions, therefore, is how criminal pasts contribute to processes of radicalisation, that is, the personal circumstances, experiences, narratives, networks and other factors that explain an individual's involvement in extremism and their mobilisation to engage in violence.[20]

The profiles and pathways that emerge from our database offer some tentative answers. They suggest that the jihadist narrative is surprisingly well-aligned with the personal needs and desires of criminals, that it can offer 'redemption', and can also license criminality. There is only sporadic evidence, however, that jihadists groups are reaching out to criminals as a deliberate strategy.

The Redemption Narrative

Recurrent among criminals in our database was what we termed the 'redemption narrative'. These were criminals who had experienced what Quintan Wiktorowicz termed a 'cognitive opening', a shocking event or personal crisis that prompted them to re-assess their lives and become open to a radical change of values and behaviour.[21] In our case, they realised a need to break with their criminal past, and make up for their 'sins'. This then provided the rationale for their turn to religion and justified the involvement with jihadist groups.

That they sought redemption in jihadism instead of other, more mainstream forms of religion or spirituality, may be explained by the strong alignment of needs and narratives. In other words: involvement in jihadism

offered redemption from crime while satisfying the same personal needs and desires that led them to become involved in it. Just like the criminal gangs of which they used to be members, jihadist groups offer experiences of power, violence, adventure, and provide them with a strong identity, and – not least – a sense of rebellion and being anti-establishment. This made the 'jump' from criminality to terrorism smaller than is commonly perceived – especially when considering that, unlike al-Qaeda, Islamic State requires practically no religious knowledge or learning, and – at least in the recruitment phase–cares less about the complexities of theological discourse. For a criminal with a guilty conscience, the jihadism of the Islamic State could seem like a perfect fit.

Among the most prominent examples is Abderrozak Benarabe, locally known as 'Big A', a long-time criminal from Copenhagen who decided to turn to jihadism after his brother had been diagnosed with cancer. When explaining why he became a foreign fighter, he immediately referred to his criminal past: '… some people have died of my hands. This is a big problem when I meet Allah … It's not good enough just praying with all the shit I've done'.[22]

Legitimising Crime

While the jihadist narrative can be a source of redemption, it may also serve as to legitimate crime. This is nothing new. Anwar al-Awlaki, the influential radical cleric, repeatedly told his followers that 'stealing from your enemies' in the dar al-harb ('lands of war') is permitted, and, in certain cases, obligatory.[23] This has the potential to be enormously effective because it offers criminals an opportunity for 'redemption' without requiring any change of behaviour.

The most prominent example is the network around Khalid Zerkani. Born in Morocco in 1973, Zerkani moved to Belgium as an adult. Whilst he had engaged in petty crime and shoplifting, his greatest talent was as an Islamic State recruiter. He encouraged young men, mostly with Moroccan backgrounds, to commit petty crimes and robberies in Brussels.[24] This was justified on religious grounds: as a witness in his trial testified, Zerkani reassured recruits that 'to steal from the infidels is permitted by Allah'.[25] The proceeds were then redistributed amongst the group, leading to Zerkani's nickname of Papa Noël (Father Christmas).[26]

Prior to his 2014 arrest, Zerkani had become a hugely influential figure within the Brussels jihadist scene, being responsible for the mobilisation of up to 72 foreign fighters.[27] His most infamous protégé was Abdelhamid Abaaoud, a key coordinator of the network that carried out the high-casualty attacks in Paris in November 2015 and Brussels in March 2016. More than any other example, how he operated illustrates the idea behind the new crime-terror nexus, because it produced a near-perfect merging of the two milieus.

Recruitment

Does this mean that criminals are deliberately targeted and recruited by extremists? The evidence for this remains sporadic, with terrorist propaganda specifically targeting criminals being relatively rare. Rayat al-Tawheed, a group of British jihadists that joined the Islamic State in 2014, is the only jihadist group which has consistently adopted this tactic. The group used the slogan 'sometimes people with the worst pasts create the best futures', alongside text explaining that 'jihad is a purification no matter who you are or what sins you have, no good deeds are needed to come before it'.[28] Despite these attempts, it is unknown how effective they were, given that all the Rayat al-Tawheed supporters we know of were recruited through real-world clusters.[29]

When it comes to face-to-face engagement, the research sample yields limited examples beyond the Zerkani network. The case study of Shiraz Tariq, leader of the Danish Salafist group Kaldet til Islam (Call to Islam), is indicative.[30] He would write letters to imprisoned members of immigrant gangs in Copenhagen, appealing

to their guilty consciences. The group's Facebook page publicised their prison outreach, writing that Muslims in prisons '[are] getting off track, so we thought we could write letters to [them] and remind them of Allah. They have plenty of time to read'.[31] While it remains unknown how effective this was – the group did also see non-prison recruits travel to Syria – it marks a novel attempt at reaching out to criminals.

Overall, therefore, extremists' efforts to target criminals – whether through propaganda or via direct face-to-face engagement – appear limited, and there is no evidence as to how successful such approaches have been. This suggests that the outreach isn't systematic but – rather – results from the (mostly unintended) merging of criminal and jihadist milieus and narratives. Both criminals and jihadists are recruited from the same demographic milieu – and often in the same places.

Prisons

For nearly a decade, European prisons have been in the spotlight as places where extremist radicalisation, recruitment, and – in some cases – operational planning have taken place.[32] That prisons are significant meeting places for people with criminal pasts is all too obvious. 57 percent (45 out of 79 profiles) in our sample had been incarcerated for a variety of offences prior to their mobilisation, with sentences ranging from one month to over ten years. More significantly, at least 27 percent of those who spent time in prison (12 out of 45 profiles) radicalised there, though – in the majority of cases – the process continued and intensified after their release. Given the recent surge in terrorism-related arrests and convictions, and in the light of the rapidly expanding number of convicted terrorists in custody, prisons are likely to become more – rather than less – significant as centres of gravity for the jihadist movement. By extension, prisons are also likely to become more relevant as places where criminals and terrorists mix.

The cases in our database highlight different ways in which prisons matter. First, they are places of vulnerability in which extremists can find plenty of 'angry young men' with criminal pasts who may experience cognitive openings and are, therefore, 'ripe' for extremist radicalisation and recruitment. Second, prisons bring together criminals and terrorists, and therefore create opportunities for collaboration and 'skill transfers'. And finally, they often leave people who have served their sentences with few opportunities to re-integrate into society and become productive citizens, creating yet more opportunities for continued involved in crime and radicalisation.

Vulnerability

For many new inmates, the very fact of imprisonment is a personal crisis, which raises profound questions about their lives while providing ample time to search for meaning. They are cut off from their immediate family, friends, and wider society, while finding themselves in an environment which is often hostile, unfamiliar, and tribal in nature, with divisions along religious or ethnic lines. Prisons are places in which new inmates are mentally and physically vulnerable, and where they experience 'cognitive openings'–the willingness and desire to identify with new ideas, beliefs, and social groups.[33]

For the same reason, jihadist recruiters view prisons as places of opportunity. Not only are inmates vulnerable and experience cognitive openings, and thereby making them receptive to jihadist ideas, they also tend to be part of the demographic that jihadist groups are keen to attract: young men, from Muslim backgrounds (but rarely practicing), who are impulsive and willing to take risks, and have already been in conflict with established authorities.[34] Far from being an obstacle, their criminal pasts have desensitised them to law-breaking and violence, and may, in fact, have provided them with useful skills for a terrorist career. From the jihadists' perspective, prisons are the perfect 'breeding ground'.

One of the principal difficulties for prison authorities is to 'spot the signs' and distinguish between (legitimate) religious conversion and (potentially problematic) radicalisation. This is especially complicated given that the outward signs can be similar or – indeed – are the same. Harry Sarfo, who travelled to the Islamic State from Germany in April 2015, exemplifies this. His journey towards extremism began in prison, of which he said: 'Remembering Allah (SWT), reading Qur'an and praying salah, got me through my prison time in Germany. The time in prison as a Muslim brought me closer to my creator'.[35]

Sarfo's own account of his prison radicalisation emphasises the importance of belief, yet omits the face-to-face socialisation with René Marc Sepac, a German jihadist, that was pivotal. Sepac gave him Salafist books to read and sat down with him every day, working through the material. 'The books explained everything', Sarfo told his police interrogators: 'Very precise and to the point…. And I thought, wow, I didn't know any of this stuff. I hadn't had any knowledge [prior to meeting Sepac]'.[36]

His actions, once he had left prison, further underline the importance of social dynamics: he regularly visited a small radical mosque in Bremen, as part of a clique that eventually sent at least 27 people to Syria in 2014. Whilst prison marked the beginning of his radicalisation, it is important to point out that Sarfo required interactions outside of prison to solidify the process.

Networking

Unless extremists are entirely separated from the rest of the prison population, which may be neither possible nor advisable, prison environments have the potential to institutionalise a nexus between terrorists and criminals. This is of greater benefit to the extremists than the criminals: not only do they get access to potentially fruitful opportunities and targets for radicalisation, they can also take advantage of the criminals' skills and underground connections, facilitating access to forged documents, weapons, money, goods, or even safe houses. More so than anywhere in the outside world, prisons are places where criminal and terrorist milieus converge.

The most significant example is that of Chérif Kouachi and Amedy Coulibaly. The pair first met inside the Fleury-Mérogis prison near Paris in 2007 and formed a friendship after spending seven months on the same wing.[37] Coulibaly had a history of armed robberies, and was imprisoned for aggravated theft, receiving stolen goods, and using false number plates.[38] Kouachi, meanwhile, was awaiting trial over a 2005 attempt to travel to Iraq to become a foreign fighter.[39] The pair – one an 'ordinary' criminal, the other an extremist – were then mentored and (further) radicalised in prison by Djamel Beghal, an al-Qaeda recruiter.[40] In other words, prison allowed the initial network to be established, which culminated in Kouachi and Coulibaly coordinating the January 2015 Paris attacks, killing 17 people.

Despite this, it took more than eight years after their first encounter for them to engage in terrorist violence. In the meantime, many other events furthered their radicalisation: they continued to meet with Beghal on a regular basis after they had been released; [41] became involved in a planned jailbreak of a jihadist prisoner in 2010; [42] and Chérif Kouachi, along with his brother Saïd, travelled to Yemen in 2011, and received training in a camp run by al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP).[43] No doubt, therefore, that the developments after their release were just as crucial as those that came before.

Post-Release

In all the relevant cases in our sample, processes of radicalisation that started during stays in prison did not end there. In four cases, individuals had been 'flagged' for radicalisation by the prison authorities but somehow neither police nor intelligence agencies managed to follow up these warnings.

Particularly noteworthy is the case of Omar el-Hussein, who was involved in deadly shootings at a cultural centre and a synagogue in Copenhagen in February 2015. As a teenager, el-Hussein joined the Brothas gang in Mjølnerparken, Copenhagen, and was involved in burglaries, petty crime, and drugs.[44] In November 2013, he stabbed a man in an unprovoked attack, for which he received a two-year sentence.[45] In prison, he openly spoke of his desire to fight in Syria, prompting the authorities to flag him as potentially radicalised.[46] He was reported on three occasions, but none of these alerts were investigated.[47]

When el-Hussein was released at the end of January 2015, he was given no access to probation services because of a technicality (the prosecution was appealing the sentence while he was technically on parole). Homeless and jobless, he appeared at the local municipal centre, asking for a place to stay and something to do.[48] They could not accommodate his request, and scheduled a new meeting for 12 February. Instead of showing up, he carried out his attack on 14 February – just two weeks after he had been released.

El-Hussein's rapid mobilisation demonstrates how potentially 'explosive' the convergence between criminal background and jihadist motivation can become. Prisons are the place where the two milieus are at their closest, and where all the phenomena and social dynamics referenced in this article are most likely to manifest themselves. With increasing numbers of terrorists receiving sentences and becoming incarcerated, these problems are likely to become more pronounced.

Skill Transfers

One of the most disturbing aspects of the new crime-terror nexus is the potential for criminal 'skills' to be transferred to terrorists. Indeed, there are many possible skills that a terrorist with a criminal past may have developed, though our database illustrates three themes: first, that individuals with a criminal past tend to have easier access to weapons; second, that many are adept at staying 'under the radar' while planning new crimes; and third, that their experience and familiarity with violence lowers their (psychological) threshold for becoming involved in terrorist acts.

Weapons

As early as 2013, the Danish intelligence service warned that the strong presence of criminals amongst Danish jihadists would lead to the proliferation of firearms among them.[49] Two years later, the warning became true. Between Omar el-Hussein's two shootings, he went to his neighbourhood of Mjølnerparken and gave the M95 rifle that he had used during the first attack to a former fellow gang member for disposal.[50] This rifle had been stolen during a home robbery in 2013.[51] He also met with several other former gang associates, one of whom was in possession of the same ammunition that el-Hussein used in the second attack, making it plausible that he had supplied him with new ammunition. In short: without his gang connections, el-Hussein would have found it much harder to acquire the means with which he carried out his attacks.

The same is true for Amedy Coulibaly. Upon seeing the media reports that followed the attacks in January 2015, the arms dealer that sold Coulibaly his weapons pre-emptively turned himself in to the police, and confessed to supplying Coulibaly with Skorpion submachine guns, a rocket-propelled grenade launcher, and the two AK-47s that the Kouachi brothers had used.[52] He calculated that the jihadist attacks would eventually have led the police to him anyway. Had he known Coulibaly's true intentions, he might have been more hesitant in supplying the weapons.

The Islamic State itself has acknowledged the value of their operatives appearing like 'ordinary' criminals. In the July 2015 issue of Dar al-Islam, their French language magazine, the group advised operatives to conceal all external displays of religiosity when acquiring weapons, and instead, adopt the look of a jeune de cité (a

man from the estate) who is 'looking to make a robbery with a weapon'.[53] This advice has proved to be unnecessary, as many of their supporters – including el-Hussein and Coulibaly – genuinely fit this profile.

Staying 'Under the Radar'

In addition to procuring firearms, access to criminal skills makes it easier for terrorists to 'stay under the radar'. This includes, for example, the use of fake documents and access to safe houses, which enable terrorists to evade the authorities, and therefore increase the likelihood of a plot turning into a successful attack.

What matters in this regard are not specific abilities that former criminals may (or may not) possess themselves, but – rather – their access to (criminal) networks through which these tools can be acquired. The production of forgeries, for instance, is difficult for terrorists to develop in-house. Indeed, our database contains only three criminals who used identity theft prior to their radicalisation.[54] Instead, it is more likely that terrorist networks would 'outsource' this task to people who are experts – and who can typically be found in criminal milieus.

The Paris and Brussels network, that carried out attacks in November 2015 and March 2016, frequently used forged documents throughout their attack planning. This allowed the network to: wire money, travel between countries, rent cars, and – crucially – acquire safe houses.[55] For example, Khalid el-Bakraoui used forged identification papers– adopting the name 'Ibrahim Maaroufi' – to rent an apartment in Charleroi, which was subsequently used by at least two of the Paris attackers.[56] Another apartment in Schaerbeek – rented under the pseudonym 'Fernando Castillo' – was used as a bomb factory to manufacture the TATP explosives and suicide vests used in the Paris attacks.[57]

Rather than becoming forgers themselves, the terrorists who launched attacks in Paris and Brussels used their contacts within the criminal milieu to reach out to forgers who serviced people traffickers. This is how they came across Djamal Eddine Ouali, an Algerian who ran a forgery operation in Brussels. The supposed 'profit vs. ideology' dichotomy, which is debated in the academic literature, [58] was no barrier in this case. There is no evidence that Ouali knew of their true intentions, or was even interested in them. Instead, they likely appeared as 'ordinary' customers from a criminal milieu. As the Belgian investigator in charge of Ouali's case said: '[He] was a professional document falsifier whose main goal was to make as much money as possible from his business'.[59]

Familiarity with Violence

These practical and logistical skills are supplemented by a more intangible 'skill': that of familiarity with violence. 65 percent of the individuals in our database were involved in violent crime. Among the 30 individuals who were involved in domestic plotting, this figure rose to 80 per cent.

This does not mean that criminals are necessarily using the same types of violence as terrorists: a terrorist using a knife does not always correlate to that person using a knife as a criminal tool. What we are suggesting is that routine engagement in violence as a criminal can lower the (psychological) threshold for becoming involved in violence as a terrorist. For someone who is familiar with violence and has become desensitised to its use, the 'jump' to committing an act of terrorism may be smaller, and the process of mobilisation, therefore, quicker and less difficult.

The argument is hard to substantiate based on individual trajectories alone, given all the other potential influences that may have caused a person to engage in terrorism. Nevertheless, our database shows that the period of mobilisation – that is, the time between joining a jihadist group and becoming involved in violence – among the 30 individuals involved in domestic plotting was often extraordinarily short, often less than four months or even just a few weeks. Furthermore, while there was no 'like-for-like' use of violence, the terrorist

use of violence was always more violent than someone's criminal use of violence. These findings support the idea that familiarity with (criminal) violence produces terrorists that are more volatile as well as more violent.

The case of Mohammed Merah – who killed 7 people, including three Jewish children, near his hometown of Toulouse in March 2012 – illustrates the often extreme histories of violence we found among the former criminals in our database. Merah was killed after a 30-hour standoff, during which he told police that he regretted 'not having claimed more victims'.[60] It was the culmination of a life story characterised by routine violence, which involved two stays in prison, and 18 convictions for assaults, robberies, and thefts.[61] As a teenager Merah was reported at least 15 times for acts of violence, and was described as having 'a violent profile from childhood and behavioural troubles'.[62] This would continue into adulthood: in 2006 after his uncle asked him to stop making noise with his quad bike, Merah beat him in the face with a fire extinguisher.[63] In 2010 he left a teenage girl blind after assaulting her.[64] By the time Merah had radicalised and received terrorist training in Waziristan in 2011, no one needed to 'persuade' him that the use of violence could be justified.

Financing

Just as criminal pasts facilitate access to weapons, help obtain forged documents, and lead to familiarity with violence, it is no surprise that they also enable terrorist financing. Solid empirical examinations of this phenomenon are surprisingly rare, though two recent studies have started cataloguing the funding of jihadist activities in Europe. A report by Magnus Normark and Magnus Ranstorp focuses on how European foreign fighters funded their travels to Syria. It was found that in addition to loans, private donations, bank fraud, and business fraud, they consistently emphasised the role of petty crime.[65] Emilie Oftedal's study examined the financing of 40 jihadist plots between 1994 and 2013: though nearly three-quarters generated at least some of their income from legal sources, [66] she shows that criminality played a significant role, with nearly 40 percent of the plots drawing on the proceeds of crime.[67]

It can be argued that funding through crime will become more important. Our argument consists of three inter-related points. First, the vast majority of terrorist attacks in Europe do not require large sums of money. Second, jihadists have encouraged the use of 'ordinary' criminality to raise funds. Combined with the large numbers of current jihadists with criminal pasts, this will make financing attacks through crime not only possible and legitimate but, increasingly, their first choice. Finally, our database suggests that jihadists continue to do what they are familiar with, and therefore terrorist funding by criminal means is likely to become more important as the number of jihadists with criminal pasts is increasing.

Strategy

For more than a decade, jihadist groups have encouraged their Western supporters to self-finance, while simultaneously promoting types of attacks that are cheap and easy to carry out. In the early 2000s, al-Qaeda's leading strategist Abu Musab al-Suri proclaimed the idea of 'individual terrorism jihad', with individuals and small cells raising their own money and operating 'completely and totally separated from each other'.[68] Al-Awlaki's Inspire magazine regularly provided instructions for what the magazine termed 'open source jihad' – teaching readers how to 'build a bomb in the kitchen of your mom'.[69] The Islamic State is not different: it has promoted loose networks, cell structures and 'low-cost' attacks among its supporters abroad. This is reflected in Oftedal's analysis, which found that 90 percent of jihadist plots in Europe involved 'an element' of self-funding, with nearly half being entirely self-financed. Jihadist groups are trying to keep financial barriers to entry low, making it possible for all their supporters – no matter how poor – to become involved.

This strategy works because jihadist activities in Europe are not expensive. Becoming a foreign fighter requires little more than buying an airline ticket to Turkey. An AK-47 machine gun can be acquired for less

than €2,000, and a pistol for less.[70] The costs of buying a knife or renting a vehicle are negligible. Oftedal's study found that three-quarters of European plots between 1994 and 2013 cost less than €9,000.[71] Even coordinated attacks are relatively inexpensive: the French Finance Minister stated that the November 2015 Paris attacks were financed by a 'sum not exceeding €30,000'.[72] These are amounts that do not usually require external funding or a dedicated terrorist fundraising operation; such sums of money can be raised from personal assets and savings, legitimate sources such as work or loans, or small-scale criminal activities that jihadists with a criminal past are already used to make their living with.

Ideology

For many would-be terrorists, it would not be necessary to become involved in crime to afford the (relatively modest) cost of travelling to Turkey or funding a terrorist attack. Yet curiously, jihadist groups often encourage their followers to do so.

This relates to an ideological doctrine which states that stealing from 'unbelievers' is not only permissible but worthy of commendation. Theft is equated with ghanimah, which translates as 'the spoils of war'. As mentioned earlier, al-Awlaki justified this notion in his 'Ruling on Dispossessing the Disbelievers', which sanctioned the use of crime for the sake of 'jihad' – 'whether by means of force or by means of theft or deception'.[73] He went as far as saying that living off ghanimah was preferable to seeking a regular salary, which would involve paying taxes to the 'disbelievers' and thereby funding their wars and oppression of the Muslim world.[74] The Islamic State shares this doctrine, and has turned it into practical advice by telling operatives to use forged documents to obtain cash. Its French-language magazine, Dar al-Islam, states: 'You should (if possible) try to obtain false documents, in order to reap the easy spoils, such as opening a bank account and paying by cheque in societies with low restrictions'.[75] Far from considering such offenses a sin, some jihadists actively encourage crime.

Our database contains examples where crime was explicitly justified in religious terms. The most prominent one is the Zerkani network whose 'godfather', Khalid Zerkani, encouraged young Moroccans to steal from 'disbelievers' by saying that doing so was permitted for the sake of 'jihad'. Reda Kriket, a French 'returnee' who was arrested in March 2016 whilst planning a terrorist attack, was 'living off ghanimah' by stealing jewellery.[76] And another Frenchman, who planned on travelling to Syria and had used false payslips to open bank accounts, tried to explain his actions by stating: 'Those are the spoils of war. And it is halal [permitted], you see!'.[77]

Continuity

A principal difficulty in detecting crime as a method of terrorist financing is that it does not involve a change of behaviour but merely one of purpose: individuals with criminal pasts often continue what they were doing in their earlier lives, except that the profits are used to finance terrorist attacks or trips to Syria. As a result, it can be difficult to separate funds that were raised for terrorism from money that is spent on other, often entirely mundane purposes.

Saïd Kouachi, for example, sold counterfeit goods and received money from AQAP. Not all of this money went into the funding of the Charlie Hebdo attack, but some of it did.[78] How is it possible to distinguish one from the other? Did Kouachi, in his own mind, separate the different streams of income?

Amedy Coulibaly, on the other hand, was selling drugs only a month before the attacks, in addition to being owed street debts worth €30,000.[79] Notably, he and his wife raised funds via two consumer loans: €6,000 from Cofidis in December 2014, and €27,000 from Financo in September 2014.[80] The Financo loan was used to purchase a car, which was then exchanged for weapons.[81] Though Coulibaly provided genuine ID

for the Cofidis loan, he used a forged payslip listing a monthly income of €2,978 at a company called Naxos. This is a well-established criminal tactic, and even a cursory check could have raised suspicions: publicly available records showed that Naxos had no employees, and that the phone number provided was not in use. [82]

The convergence of criminal and terrorist milieus, together with the self-financing of attacks, makes it hard to maintain traditional notions of terrorist financing. Rather than focusing on terrorism alone, it might be more useful, therefore, to concentrate on individuals, their backgrounds and financial histories. Indeed, the fundraising methods of many of the individuals in our database typically mirrored their criminal pasts. If Kouachi made money by selling counterfeit trainers, and still had the connections and ability to continue this trade, why would he not do the same to fund his attacks? Similarly, a group of would-be foreign fighters from the German city of Hamburg supplemented donations by stealing copper from a construction site, because that's where they worked.[83] In all of these cases, the common thread was not any particular source of funding (be it counterfeits or copper) but personal continuity. If today's jihadists are former criminals, we should not, therefore, be surprised if proceeds of crime are used to finance their 'jihad'.

Conclusion

The convergence of criminal and terrorist milieus – the *new* crime-terror nexus – is real, and has profound implications for how jihadist groups in Europe operate. For the first time, there is complete alignment between a group like Islamic State and the people who are attracted by its core counter-cultural message of redemption through strength, power, and violence. Rather than in universities or among religious students, the Islamic State increasingly finds recruits in European 'ghettos', in prisons, as well as among the European 'underclasses' and those who have previously engaged in violence and other illegal acts. Those who are become part of the jihadist counter-culture can use their criminal skills for terrorist purposes, circumventing the supposed 'profit v ideology' dichotomy.

As a consequence, terrorism coincides – and draws from – the existence of 'ghettos' and a 'Muslim underclass' in the big European cities. Countering terrorism, therefore, needs to address this social aspect of the problem. However, more attention also needs to be paid to prisons and to countering 'petty' and organised crime (as well as the people engaging in it). Institutional silos – for example, the separation between countering crime and countering terrorism, or between counter-terrorism and 'criminal' police, customs, and other agencies – need to be broken down. There may also be a case for more collaboration between security agencies and local authorities, as well as the private sector, for example in public-private partnerships.

Not least, many assumptions about radicalisation need to be reconsidered, e.g. that a pious person is not likely to be also a criminal or that someone 'acting like a gangster' cannot possibly be also involved in terrorism. With criminal and terrorism milieus merging, the fight against crime has become – to a significant extent – a national security issue.

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Appendix: Indicating a Crime – Terrorism Nexus (Simplified Database)

#	Name	Country	Involved in plot	Foreign fighter	Time in Prison	Radicalised in prison	Involved in firearms	Violent crime	Petty crime	Trafficking	White collar crime
1	Ayoub El-Khazzani	BEL / FRA	X	X	X				X		
2	Reda Kriket	BEL / FRA	X	X	X		X	X	X	X	
3	Salah Abdeslam	BEL / FRA	X		X				X		
4	Brahim Abdeslam	BEL / FRA	X		X		X	X	X	X	X
5	Mohamed Abrini	BEL / FRA	X		X		X	X	X	X	
6	Sofiane Amghar	BEL	X	X	X			X	X		
7	Khalid Ben Larbi	BEL	X	X				X	X		
8	Khalid Zerkani	BEL							X		
9	Abdelhamid Abaaoud	BEL	X	X	X			X	X	X	
10	Ibrahim El Bakraoui	BEL	X	Attempted	X	X	X	X		X	
11	Khalid El Bakraoui	BEL	X		X	X	X	X		X	
12	Fouad Belkacem	BEL							X		
13	Osama Krayem	BEL / SWE	X	X					X		
14	Moez Saleh	DEN			X					X	
15	Abderrozak Benarabe	DEN		X	X		X	X			
16	Cevdet Onurlu	DEN							X		
17	Ahmed Samsam	DEN		X	X		X	X		X	
18	Hamza Samsam (Andres Vo Riis)	DEN		X				X			
19	Ali Sakandar Malik	DEN		X	X		X	X	X	X	
20	Abdul-Magid Fadel al-Ali	DEN		X					X		
21	Omar Abdel Hamid el-Hussein	DEN	X		X	X		X			
22	Michael Chau	DEN		X	X	X		X	X		
23	O.S.	DEN		X	X	X	X	X			
24	(Name Unknown)	DEN	X	X	X			X			
25	Salim Benghalem	FRA		X	X	X	X	X	X		
26	Mohamed Merah	FRA	X		X		X	X	X	X	X
27	Flavien Moreau	FRA		X	X			X			
28	Mehdi Nemmouche	FRA	X	X	X	X		X	X		
29	Omar Osmen	FRA		X	X	X	X	X	X		
30	Kevin Chassin	FRA		X					X		
31	Alexandre Dhaussy	FRA	X				X	X			
32	Ismaël Omar Mostefaï	FRA	X	X				X	X		
33	Amedy Coulibaly	FRA	X		X	X	X	X	X	X	
34	Chérif Kouachi	FRA	X		X				X	X	
35	Moussa Coulibaly	FRA	X						X		
36	Larossi Abballa	FRA	X		X			X	X		
37	Mohammed Lahouaiej Bouhlel	FRA	X					X			
38	Walid D.	GER		X			X	X	X		
39	Ebrahim H. B.	GER		X					X		
40	Marco René Gäbel	GER	X		X			X	X		
41	Samir A.	GER		Attempted				X	X		
42	Nils D.	GER		X	X			X	X		
43	Denis Cuspert	GER		X	X		X	X	X		
44	Emrah Erdogan	GER		X	X	X		X	X		

#	Name	Country	Involved in plot	Foreign fighter	Time in Prison	Radicalised in prison	Involved in firearms	Violent crime	Petty crime	Trafficking	White collar crime
45	Salim O.	GER						X	X		
46	Mustafa K.	GER		X					X		
47	Murat K.	GER	X		X			X	X		
48	Sebastian B.	GER		X					X		
49	Ismail Issa	GER		X					X		
50	Halil Ibrahim D.	GER	X				X	X	X		
51	Aria Ladjevardi	GER		X				X	X		X
52	Harry Sarfo	GER		X	X			X	X		
53	Mohamed Aden	NED		X	X		X	X			
54	Reda Nidalha	NED		X				X		X	
55	Abdellah Rahmani	NED		X					X		
56	Choukri Massali	NED		X					X		
57	Mourad Massali	NED		X				X	X		
58	Soufian El Fassi	NED		X				X	X		
59	Benyamine Fadlaoui	NED		X					X		
60	Nourredin Benzouagh	NED		X					X		
61	Az Eddine Benaissa	NED		X					X		
62	Jordi de Jager	NED		X					X		
63	Rudolph Holierhoek	NED			X			X			
64	Jermaine Grant	UK	X		X	X	X	X			
65	Hamayun Tariq	UK		X	X		X				X
66	Ali Almanasfi	UK		X	X			X	X		
67	Mohammad Emwazi	UK		X					X	X	
68	Mohammad El Araj	UK		X	X			X	X	X	
69	Choukri Ellekhlifi	UK		X				X	X		
70	Michael Adebowale	UK	X		X			X	X		
71	Michael Adebolajo	UK	X					X			
72	Aine Davis	UK	X	X	X	X	X				
73	Mohommod Nawaz	UK		X	X			X			
74	Ondogo Ahmed	UK		X	X			X			
75	Junaid Hussain	UK		X	X			X			
76	Imran Khawaja	UK		X	X				X		
77	Abdullah Deghayes	UK		X				X	X		
78	Daha Essa	UK		X	X				X	X	X
79	Brusthom Ziamani	UK	X		X			X			

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