Conceptualising and Addressing the Migration-Terrorism Nexus: Literature Review, Case Studies, and Policy Recommendations

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ICCT's work focuses on themes at the intersection of countering violent extremism and criminal justice sector responses, as well as human rights-related aspects of counter-terrorism. The major project areas concern countering violent extremism, rule of law, foreign fighters, country and regional analysis, rehabilitation, civil society engagement and victims' voices. Functioning as a nucleus within the international counter-terrorism network, ICCT connects experts, policymakers, civil society actors and practitioners from different fields by providing a platform for productive collaboration, practical analysis, and exchange of experiences and expertise, with the ultimate aim of identifying innovative and comprehensive approaches to preventing and countering terrorism.

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Acknowledgements

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Acronyms

AfD   Alternative for Germany (*Alternative für Deutschland*)

BAMF   Germany's Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (*Bundesamt für Migration und Flüchtlinge*)

BKA   Germany's Federal Criminal Office (*Bundeskriminalamt*)

BSW   Sahra Wagenknecht Alliance (*Bündnis Sahra Wagenknecht*)

CT   Counter-Terrorism

CUTA   Coordination Unit for the Threat Analysis

DGSE   France's Internal Intelligence Agency (*Direction générale de la sécurité extérieure*)

DGSI   France's External Intelligence Agency (*Direction générale de la sécurité extérieure*)

DRC   Democratic Republic of Congo

EASO   European Asylum Support Office

ECRIS-TCN European Criminal Records Information System - Third Country Nationals

ECTC   European Counter Terrorism Centre

EES   Entry-Exit System

ETA   Basque Homeland and Freedom (*Euskadi Ta Askatasuna*)

ETIAS   European Travel Information and Authorisation System

EU   European Union

EUAA   European Union Agency for Asylum

FARC   Colombian Revolutionary Armed Forces

FSA   Free Syrian Army

FSB   Federal Security Service

FSPRT   France's National Database for the Prevention of Radicalisation Leading to Terrorism (*Fichier des signalements pour la prévention de la radicalisation à caractère terroriste*)

FTF   Foreign Terrorist Fighter

GIA   Armed Islamic Group (*Groupe islamique armé*)

GCIM   Moroccan Islamic Combatant Group (*Groupe de combat islamiste marocain*)

IDP   Internally Displaced Person

IRA   Irish Republican Army

ISIS   Islamic State in Syria and Iraq

ISKP   Islamic State Khorasan Province

LKA   Germany's State Criminal Police Office (*Landeskriminalamt*)

LRA   Lord Resistance Army

LTTE   Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam

NATO   North Atlantic Treaty Organisation

NCTC   National Counterterrorism Center

PEGIDA   Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamisation of the West (*Patriotische Europäer gegen die Islamisierung des Abendlandes*)

PIRA   Provisional Irish Republican Army

PKK   Kurdish Workers Party

PLO   Palestinian Liberation Organisation

SIS II   Schengen Information System

VIS   Visa Information System

Glossary

- **Asylum seeker:** In the global context, a person who seeks protection from persecution or serious harm in a country other than their own and awaits a decision on the application for refugee status under relevant international and national instruments. In the EU context, a third-country national or stateless person who has made an application for protection under the Geneva Refugee Convention and Protocol in respect of which a final decision has not yet been taken.

- **Dublin regulation:** Regulation which lays down the criteria and mechanisms for determining the (EU) Member State responsible for examining an application for international protection lodged in one of the (EU) Member States by a third-country national or a stateless person.

- **Emigration:** In the global context, the act of departing or exiting from one state with the intention to remain abroad for a period exceeding one year. In the EU context, the action by which a person, having previously been usually resident in the territory of an EU Member State, ceases to have their usual residence in that EU Member State or another EU Member State for a period that is, or is expected to be, of at least 12 months.

- **Entry-Exit System (EES):** System which registers entry and exit data and refusal of entry data of third-country nationals crossing the external borders of the Schengen States.

- **Eurodac:** An informatic system of the EU, the purpose of which, via the collection, transmission, and comparison of fingerprints, is to assist in determining which EU Member State is to be responsible for examining an application for international protection lodged in a EU Member State by a third-country national or a stateless person.

- **European Criminal Records Information System – Third-Country Nationals (ECRIS -TCN):** Once set up, it will be a centralised system of the EU that allows Member State's authorities to identify which other Member States hold criminal records on the third country nationals or stateless persons being checked, for instance as part of an asylum procedure.

- **European Union Agency for Asylum (EUAA):** European Union agency tasked with ensuring the efficient and uniform application of EU law on asylum, international protection, and reception conditions in the EU Member States in a manner that fully respects fundamental rights, and with facilitating and supporting the activities of EU Member States in the implementation of the Common European Asylum System (CEAS).

- **European Union Agency for Criminal Justice Cooperation (Eurojust):** European Union agency that provides tailor-made support to prosecutors and judges from across the EU and beyond to fight a wide range of serious and complex cross-border crimes involving two or more countries, including terrorism, smuggling of migrants, and trafficking in human beings.

- **European Union Agency for Law Enforcement Cooperation (Europol):** The European Union's law enforcement agency which assists EU Member States' police forces in improving their cooperation on the prevention and fight against the most serious forms of international crime, such as terrorism, drug trafficking, and smuggling of migrants.

- **European Border and Coast Guard Agency (Frontex):** A European Union agency tasked with the implementation of the European integrated border management, the effective functioning of border control at the external EU borders in coordination with the national authorities of EU Member States and Schengen-associated countries (Iceland, Switzerland, Liechtenstein, and Norway) responsible for border management, the internal security within the European

Union, and migration management, including an effective return policy, while safeguarding the free movement of persons within the Union and full respect for fundamental rights.

- **European Travel Information and Authorisation System (ETIAS):** An automated online system for identifying irregular migration, security, or public-health risks associated with visa-exempt third-country nationals travelling to the EU prior to their arrival.

- **Forced migration:** A migratory movement in which an element of coercion exists, including threats to life and livelihood, whether arising from natural or man-made causes (e.g. movements of refugees and internally displaced persons, as well as people displaced by natural or environmental disasters, chemical or nuclear disasters, famine, or development projects).

- **Hotspot approach:** Approach where the EUAA, Frontex, Europol, and Eurojust work on the ground with the authorities of frontline EU Member States that are facing disproportionate migratory pressures at the external EU borders, to help them fulfil their obligations under EU law and swiftly identify, register, and fingerprint incoming migrants.

- **Immigration:** In the global context, the act of arriving in a state with the intention to remain for a period exceeding one year. In the EU context, the action by which a person establishes their usual residence in the territory of an EU Member State for a period that is, or is expected to be, of at least 12 months, having previously been usually resident in another EU Member State or a third country.

- **Internally displaced person:** A person or group of persons who has been forced or obliged to flee or to leave their homes or places of habitual residence, in particular, as a result of or in order to avoid the effects of armed conflict, situations of generalised violence, violations of human rights, or natural or human-made disasters, and who have not crossed an internationally recognised state border.

- **Migrant:** A person who is outside the territory of the state of which they are nationals or citizens and who has resided in a foreign country for more than one year, irrespective of the causes, voluntary or involuntary, and the means, regular or irregular, used to migrate.

- **Migration:** Movement of a person either across an international border (international migration), or within a state (internal migration) for more than one year, irrespective of the causes, voluntary or involuntary, and the means, regular or irregular, used to migrate.

- **Reception centre:** A location with facilities for receiving, processing, and attending to the immediate needs of refugees or asylum-seekers as they arrive in a country of asylum.

- **Refugee:** In the global context, either a person who, owing to a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, political opinion, or membership of a particular social group, is outside the country of nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail themselves of the protection of that country, or a stateless person, who, being outside of the country of former habitual residence for the same reasons as mentioned before, is unable or, owing to such fear, unwilling to return to it.

- **Schengen area:** A border-free area in which countries do not carry out checks at their internal borders, except in cases of specific threats, and carry out harmonised controls at their external borders, based on clearly defined criteria. The set of rules governing the Schengen area is called Schengen Borders Code.

- **Schengen Information System (SIS):** A joint information system that enables the relevant authorities in the border-free Schengen area, by means of an automated search procedure, to have access to alerts on persons and property for the purposes of border checks and other police and customs checks carried out within the country, in accordance with national law, and, for some specific categories of alerts (Art. 96), for the purposes of issuing visas, residence permits, and the administration of legislation on aliens in the context of the application of the provisions of the Schengen Convention relating to the movement of persons.

- **Sirene Bureau:** An administrative structure built to deal with the exchange of information supplementary to the Schengen Information System (SIS) alerts among countries participating in the SIS.

- **Visa Information System (VIS):** A system for the exchange of visa data between EU Member States, which enables authorised national authorities to enter and update visa data and to consult this data electronically.

Sources: European Migration Network, Asylum and Migration Glossary, 29 April 2024; EU-Lisa, ECRIS-TCN; Council of the European Union, The Schengen area explained, 2 October 2024.

Executive Summary

The nexus between migration and terrorism is a contentious subject. Attacks conducted by immigrants or by terrorists infiltrated within migration flows have raised legitimate concerns among the population and policy-makers. Yet, reductive narratives and political ideology have resulted in a simplistic and biased perception of this phenomenon. As a result, public immigration and counter-terrorism policies are poorly informed. This research, conducted by the International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT), seeks to offer a robust, evidence-based analysis of the migration-terrorism nexus. Through an interdisciplinary approach that integrates an extensive literature review, the analysis of an original dataset, semi-structured interviews, and detailed case studies, the report interrogates the multifaceted dynamics of this relationship. It aims to uncover the nuanced ways in which migration and terrorism intersect, providing a critical counterpoint to simplistic and politicised interpretations.

Large-scale quantitative studies reveal **no consistent causal link between migration and increased terrorism**. Instead, empirical data indicates that the overwhelming majority of migrants are not involved in terrorism, and that most terrorist attacks in the West are being perpetrated by homegrown actors, radicalised domestically. Some migrants have radicalised or committed terrorist acts, which justifies further investigation into this topic and adjustments of public policies. However, migrants are far more often victims of terrorism than perpetrators.

This report begins by examining how **terrorism can be a significant driver of migration**. Groups such as ISIS, Boko Haram, and al-Shabaab have conducted campaigns of mass violence, displacing millions as a direct consequence of their actions. While such displacement can be incidental, it is, in some instances, a deliberate strategy to enforce ideological control, extract financial resources, or destabilise state systems. Additionally, terrorism most often intersects with and exacerbates broader structural factors – i.e. protracted conflicts, economic hardships, poor governance, and political instability – thereby indirectly contributing to intricate patterns of forced migration. Moreover, heavy-handed counter-terrorism, state-sponsored violence framed as counter-terrorism, or terrorism exerted by states themselves often exacerbates instability and drives migration. The Syrian crisis illustrates this dual dynamic: while ISIS terrorised local communities, the Assad regime's widespread targeting of civilians, alongside Russia's air bombardments, significantly worsened displacement. These interwoven factors underscore the complex ways both non-state and state actors contribute to forced displacement.

Conversely, **migration has occasionally been exploited by terrorist actors** to further their agenda in various ways. Terrorist actors have exploited migration flows – both legal and illegal – for various purposes such as evading counter-terrorism authorities, seeking respite, obtaining logistical support, joining a terrorist group abroad, or planning attacks in third countries. While high-level incidents, such as the 2015-2016 Paris and Brussels attacks, demonstrated potentially devastating consequences of such opportunistic tactics, these cases remain exceptional. Terrorist actors have moreover sought to capitalise on the vulnerabilities of migrant communities, ranging from asylum-seekers to the broader diaspora communities, to recruit new members. Research also highlights a broader crime-migration-terrorism nexus, where terrorist groups leverage ties with criminal networks to exploit migration flows for operational or financial purposes. In contrast, migrants can also become victims of terrorism, notably in conflict-affected areas, but also in Europe and North America, where some have been targeted (rhetorically and physically) by far-right extremists.

The report further explores how the migration-terrorism nexus is framed within **public, political, and terrorist discourses**. Research indicates that terrorist incidents can heighten hostility towards migrants, particularly those from different ethnic and religious backgrounds. Media framing,

moreover, plays a critical role, as media coverage portraying migrants as threats can further entrench negative public perceptions. Politically, while far-right leaders have long leveraged distorted narratives about the migration-terrorism connection to justify stricter immigration policies and rally support for nationalist agendas, this rhetoric has increasingly permeated mainstream politics, with more moderate political figures adopting similar narratives. Upholding such discourses may serve various political and electoral purposes, including strategically allowing politicians to "externalise" the terrorist threat, shifting blame for domestic challenges to immigration. Remarkably, terrorist groups themselves have sought to leverage the migration-terrorism nexus. Far-right extremists frequently use migration fears to advance divisive ideologies, such as the Great Replacement theory, to mobilise followers. Meanwhile, jihadi groups have capitalised on grievances related to perceived discrimination and stigmatisation of immigrants in the West to recruit, and explicitly encourage migration to territories under their control (*hijra*).

There have been significant policy developments over the past twenty years, in response to concerns about a potential migration-terrorism nexus, raising **operational, political, and ethical challenges**. Some operational challenges emphasised in the existing research include gaps in border security, database interoperability, and cooperation between immigration and counter-terrorism services, which have hindered the detection of potential threats. Measures such as the EU's centralised "hotspot" system and improved data-sharing protocols aim to address these gaps, but encounter capacity constraints and trust deficits. Additionally, migrants have been increasingly framed as potential security threats in developed countries' public policies, resulting in a securitisation of immigration policies, with far-reaching implications for border control, asylum procedures, and counter-terrorism operations. For instance, policies such as externalising border controls to third countries and reinforcing internal EU border checks have been criticised for prioritising short-term security and bearing risks of stigmatising migrant communities, violating human rights, and over-relying on surveillance technologies. Ultimately, while stricter policies may enhance security in the short term, they often raise proportionality and effectiveness questions and may inadvertently contribute to the very threats they seek to mitigate.

Dispatched throughout the report, **three detailed case studies** provide concrete insights into the challenges raised by the migration-terrorism nexus in specific cases of terrorist attacks perpetrated in the EU – namely the November 2015 Paris, December 2016 Berlin, and October 2023 Brussels attacks. Examining perpetrators' trajectories, radicalisation, and evasion of counter-terrorism efforts, they provide lessons to strengthen future strategies.

Building on key research findings, the report identifies critical **research gaps** and concludes with a series of **recommendations for European policymakers**. It calls for a nuanced understanding of the interplay between migration and terrorism to avoid misdirected efforts or over-securitising immigration policies. Key measures include notably the evaluation of existing policies, improved cooperation between counter-terrorism and immigration services, improved and interoperable databases to enhance information sharing across national and EU levels, enhanced training for front-line practitioners, as well as a better documentation and response to anti-migrant violence. These recommendations aim to balance security concerns with the protection of migrants' rights and inclusion.

Ultimately, the migration-terrorism nexus is not a straightforward cause-and-effect relationship but a complex and context-dependent phenomenon. Simplistic narratives and reactionary policies not only fail to address the underlying drivers of migration and terrorism but also risk exacerbating societal divisions and insecurity. This report provides a roadmap for navigating these challenges, offering a comprehensive and balanced framework for understanding and addressing the migration-terrorism nexus in all its complexity. By focusing on evidence and nuance, policymakers can craft responses that enhance both security and societal resilience.

Key Highlights

- The vast majority of migrants are not terrorists, and the vast majority of terrorists are not migrants.

- With millions displaced by terrorist violence, whether perpetrated by state or non-state actors, migration appears primarily as a consequence, rather than a cause, of terrorism.

- In Europe, the link between migration and terrorism has not grown as a threat over time. Following a peak in 2015-2016, the frequency of attacks perpetrated in the EU involving non-EU nationals and/or EU nationals returning from conflict zones using migration routes and/or posing as asylum seekers, have gradually declined.

- While terrorist operatives posing as asylum seekers to travel undetected have conducted some of the most devastating attacks in Europe's recent history, these incidents are statistically rare, with terrorists exploiting more often other, legal migration channels.

- Europe has not only been a destination for terrorist operatives but also a significant exporter of FTFs.

- The radicalisation and recruitment of migrants, asylum seekers, and refugees can occur at various points throughout the migration process, be voluntary or coerced, and driven by a complex range of social, economic, psychological, and identity factors, such as poor conditions in settlements, traumatic experiences, lack of opportunities, and discrimination faced in host countries.

- Diaspora communities find themselves in a particularly complex position, sometimes exploited by terrorist groups for financial support, propaganda, and intelligence gathering, used as a potential recruitment pool, while also being vulnerable to coercion and transnational repression from foreign regimes.

- The migration-terrorism nexus occasionally overlaps with the crime-migration-terrorism nexus, offering terrorist organisations opportunities to build on their connections with criminal networks to exploit migration flows for operational or financial purposes.

- Migrants are more likely to be victims of terrorism than perpetrators in their host countries, as refugees and asylum-seekers are frequently targeted by extremist groups, with the risk of victimisation rising in host countries where negative attitudes towards foreigners and xenophobia are more prevalent.

Introduction

On 23 August 2024, a Syrian national, reportedly known for radicalisation and under a deportation order, killed three people and injured eight others in a stabbing attack in Solingen, Germany.[1] The attack was later claimed by the Islamic State (ISIS). Just a few days after the attack, the German federal government announced a package of security measures, restricting criteria to obtain asylum and lowering thresholds for deportation of illegal migrants.[2] Earlier in the summer of 2024, from 30 July to 7 August, a wave of violent anti-migrant protests and riots erupted across the UK, resulting notably in attacks on homes and businesses owned by immigrants, as well as hotels housing asylum seekers.[3] Promoted and attended by known far-right activists, these events led to 1,280 arrests and 796 people charged as of late August.[4] More recently, in February 2025, a spate of attacks involving migrants took place, including a car ramming attack in Munich by a 24-year-old Afghan resident, a knife attack in Villach, Austria, by a 23-year-old Syrian refugee, and a stabbing attack in Mulhouse, France, by an Algerian irregular immigrant. These incidents, and the political responses that followed, illustrate how terrorism and migration can interact. Research exploring further such interactions appears highly timely and policy-relevant.

Background and Words of Caution

Concerns about migrants as potential terrorists are far from new. For instance, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, Italian migrants in Europe and North America were often stereotyped as criminals and anarchist terrorists, even resulting in public lynching in the US.[5] While the vast majority of Italian migrants were not criminals, some anarchists (including violent ones) were hiding in their midst. Indeed, some liberal countries, like Switzerland or the UK, became a refuge for persecuted exiled anarchists at the turn of the twentieth century.[6] The perception of the immigrant as a threat is, in fact, a recurrence throughout history.[7]

Furthermore, there is a long history of terrorist organisations and militants moving across borders to escape detection, mobilise support, organise operations, and launch attacks. There are many examples, including the Irish Republican Army (IRA),[8] the Basque separatist organisation ETA (*Euskadi Ta Askatasuna*),[9] the Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO), or the Colombian Revolutionary Armed Forces (FARC).[10] Similarly, other dynamics of the migration-terrorism nexus, such as the movement of foreign fighters, have long-standing historical precedents. Various conflicts throughout history, ranging from wars in Afghanistan, Bosnia, Chechnya, Iraq, Somalia, or Yemen, have attracted cohorts of foreign (terrorist) fighters, whereas the mobilisation of volunteers for foreign wars is a broader phenomenon that can be traced back to at least the late eighteenth century.[11]

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1 *Deutsche Welle*, "Germany: Cross-party Migration Talks After Solingen Attack," *Deutsche Welle*, 4 September, 2024; Elizabeth Schumacher, "Solingen Attack Sparks Debate on Germany's Deportation Laws," *Deutsche Welle*, 28 August, 2024.
2 Riham Alkousaa, "Germany Tightens Security, Asylum Policies After Deadly Festival Stabbing," *Reuters*, 29 August, 2024.
3 William Downs, "Policing Response to the 2024 Summer Riots," *House of Commons Library*, 9 September , 2024.
4 Ibid.
5 Chris Woolf, "A Brief History of America's Hostility to a Previous Generation of Mediterranean Migrants — Italians," *The World*, 25 November, 2015.
6 Richard B. Jensen, "Anarchist Terrorism and Global Diasporas, 1878–1914," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 27, no. 3 (2015): 441-453.
7 Leo Lucassen, *The Immigrant Threat* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2005). See also: Chris Millington, "Immigrants and undesirables: "terrorism" and the "terrorist" in 1930s France," *Critical Studies on Terrorism* 12, no.1 (2018): 40–59; Evan Smith, "Creating the National/Border Security Nexus: Counter-Terrorist Operations and Monitoring Middle Eastern and North African Visitors to the UK in the 1970s–1980s," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 31, no.3 (2017): 595–614.
8 Henry Patterson, "The Provisional IRA, the Irish border, and Anglo-Irish relations during the Troubles," *Small Wars and Insurgencies* 24, no.3 (2013): 493.
9 Marc Sageman, *Leaderless Jihad: Terror Networks in the Twenty-First Century* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), p.66.
10 Luis R. Martínez, "Transnational Insurgents: Evidence From Colombia's FARC at the Border With Chávez's Venezuela," *Journal of Development Economics* 126 (2017):138-153.
11 Nir Arielli, *From Byron to Bin Laden: A History of Foreign War Volunteers* (Harvard University Press, 2018); David Malet, *Foreign Fighters : Transnational Identity in Civil Conflicts* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2017).

While not new, the migration-terrorism nexus seems to be gaining prominence on the policy agenda and in public perception. Indeed, opinion polls in Europe and North America show that citizens are increasingly concerned about immigration, which they perceive as a security threat. A recent poll shows that a majority of Europeans are dissatisfied with the European immigration policy, with 59 percent of the respondents considering that the fight against illegal immigration should become a political priority, and 71 percent demanding stronger border controls.[12] In the US, polls suggest that half of Americans consider immigrants to be a "critical threat" to US interests, whereas a third of Americans would agree with the very extreme view spread by President Donald Trump, that undocumented immigrants are "poisoning the blood" of America.[13]

Reports and figures from counter-terrorism services in Europe confirm to some extent that there is an objective threat related to (illegal) immigration. For instance, in Germany, 138 (28 percent) out of 480 individuals, assessed as dangerous Islamist extremists (*Gefährder*), have no German passport, including 129 who are currently assumed to be in Germany.[14] In France, figures communicated by the Ministry of the Interior in 2023 show that of the 20,120 individuals listed in the national database for the prevention of radicalisation leading to terrorism (*fichier des signalements pour la prévention de la radicalisation à caractère terroriste*, FSPRT), 4,263 (21 percent) are of foreign nationality.[15]

Yet, it is important to note that these numbers also underscore that the majority of individuals monitored by the counter-terrorism services in France or Germany are nationals. Furthermore, asylum-seekers and illegal immigrants are far from representing the majority of the counter-terrorism workload in Europe. In fact, only 1,411 (7 percent) of the individuals monitored in France in 2023 were in irregular situation, and only 489 of them (2,4 percent) were still in France.[16] Similarly, in Belgium, only 77 individuals (11 percent) among the 700 listed by the Coordination Unit for the Threat Analysis (CUTA) in 2023 were in irregular situation, of which only 40 (5,7 percent) remained on Belgian territory.[17] A year later, that number was halved (see *Belgian case study*).

Indeed, research suggests that terrorism is primarily a homegrown problem. In France, a country significantly impacted by Islamist terrorism in recent years, Crettiez and Sèze found that 81 percent (285 individuals) of a sample of 353 individuals incarcerated between 2017 and 2021 for jihadist terrorism-related offences are French nationals (and 86% are Europeans).[18] Similarly, Hecker's analysis of 137 individuals condemned for jihadi terrorism offences in France between 2004 and 2017 found that the majority (69 percent) were French nationals, confirming that "the terrorism affecting France is essentially domestic (homegrown terrorism)."[19] One study found that 16 percent of Islamist terrorist plots and acts of violence in Europe between early 2014 and late 2017 involved refugees or asylum seekers (meaning in contrast that 84 percent did not).[20] A review of terrorist attacks in the US from 1975 to 2022 found that the annual likelihood of dying in a terrorist attack committed by a foreigner in the country is exceedingly low—at "1 in 4.3 million

12 Jorge Liboreiro and Vincenzo Genovese, "Half of Europeans Disapprove of EU Migration Policy and Demand Stronger Border Controls, Poll Shows," *EuroNews*, 26 March, 2024.

13 Emily Guski, "More Americans Call Volume of Immigrants a 'Critical Threat,' Poll Finds," *Washington Post*, August 2, 2024; Michael Sainato, "A Third of Americans Agree With Trump That Immigrants 'Poison the Blood' of US," *The Guardian,* October 18, 2024.

14 Frederik Schindler, "Die meisten islamistischen Gefährder sind deutsche Staatsbürger," *Welt,* 30 April, 2024; Spiegel, "35 ausländische »Gefährder« seit 2021 abgeschoben," 20 June, 2024.

15 Armêl Balogog, "La moitié des personnes suivies pour radicalisation sont-elles étrangères, comme l'affirme Jordan Bardella ?" *France Info*, 26 October, 2023.

16 Romain David, "Fiché « S », FPR, FSPRT... quels sont les différents fichiers de renseignement utilisés pour la lutte antiterroriste?" *Public Senat*, 16 October, 2023; Le Figaro, "Près de 500 «personnes étrangères dangereuses irrégulières sur le territoire», selon Darmanin," 16 October 2023.

17 Ugo Santkin and Véronique Lamquin, "Attentat à Bruxelles : combien de personnes en séjour irrégulier sont sur la liste de l'Ocam ?" *Le Soir*, 19 October, 2023.

18 Xavier Crettiez and Romain Sèze, "Sociologie du djihadisme français : Analyse prosopographique de plus de 350 terroristes jihadistes incarcérés." *Rapport de recherche pour la Mission de recherche Droit et Justice*, CESDIP, (2022): 38.

19 Marc Hecker, "137 nuances de terrorisme. Les djihadistes de France face à la justice." *Focus stratégique*, Ifri, no. 79 (2018): 23.

20 Robin Simcox, The Asylum-Terror Nexus: How Europe Should Respond, *Heritage Foundation, Backgrounder,* no. 3314 (2018): 2.

per year."[21] Different studies have shown that the vast majority of terrorist perpetrators in the US are either national citizens or permanent residents, even when focusing only on jihadi terrorists. While some attacks were committed by immigrants, the majority of them entered the US territory legally.[22]

Furthermore, studies consistently show that the overwhelming majority of migrants are not terrorists. The number of refugees involved in terrorism represents a marginal fraction of the overall refugee population. For instance, the Migration Policy Institute notes that only three out of 784,000 refugees having settled in the US between 9/11 and 2015 have been arrested for planning terrorist activities.[23] Mullins notes that only 36 among the 85,000 Somali refugees who arrived in the US in 2016 were suspected to have links to terrorism.[24] Similar trends have been observed in Europe, with only seventeen individuals among the 600,000 Iraqi and Syrian asylum seekers arriving in Germany in 2015 having been investigated a year later for having links to terrorist organisations.[25] Schmid argues that such figures "indicate that fears about refugee terrorists are largely unfounded."[26] According to one European expert, "the number of terrorists compared to the total number of immigrants is so marginal that it makes such correlation insignificant: the order of measurement is one unit per million immigrants."[27]

If anything, research shows that migrants are much more likely to be victims of terrorism than perpetrators. Data spanning from 1970 to 2020 reveal hundreds of attacks against refugees, refugee camps, internally displaced persons (IDPs), and asylum seekers globally, including in Europe, with particularly high incidences in Germany and Sweden.[28] Some of these incidents, frequently involving far-right groups, escalate to acts of terrorism, as when a 66-year-old man threw three petrol bombs against a Border Force centre for processing migrants in Dover, UK, on 30 October 2022, injuring two persons.[29] Research suggests that the contribution of migrant flows to the spread of terrorism more often takes the form of attacks against migrants than attacks committed by migrants themselves, thereby challenging prevailing perceptions of migrants as a primary source of insecurity.[30]

Research Aims

Although not a new phenomenon, as mentioned above, research into the nexus between migration and terrorism is relatively recent, with the large majority having been carried out over the past two decades.[31] Some numbers help illustrate this. A search in the archives of the academic publisher *Taylor and Francis*, using various combinations of keywords related to migration and terrorism,[32] returned only sixteen articles published between 1945 and 2000, whereas the same search returned 377 articles for the period 2001-2024, although the migration-terrorism nexus is only peripheral, if addressed at all, in the majority of these articles.

21 Alex Nowrasteh, "Terrorism and Immigration: A Risk Analysis," *Cato Institute*, (2016): 1.

22 Alex Nowrasteh, "Terrorism and Immigration: A Risk Analysis"; Peter Bergen and David Sterman, "Terrorism in America After 9/11," *New America*, April 23, 2025, https://www.newamerica.org/future-security/reports/terrorism-in-america/.

23 Kathleen Newland, "The U.S. Record Shows Refugees Are Not a Threat," *Migration Policy Institute*, October 7, 2015.

24 Mullins, "Terrorism and Mass Migration," p. 24.

25 Peter R. Neumann, "The refugees are not the problem," *The Security Times*, February 2016, 34.

26 Alex P. Schmid, "Links between Terrorism and Migration: An Exploration," *ICCT Research Paper* (2016): 44.

27 Claudio Bertolotti, "Terrorism and immigration: links and challenges," REACT, *Report on Terrorism and Radicalization in Europe* 2, no. 2 (2021): 43.

28 Ryan Hata et al., "Terrorist Attacks on Refugees, Internally Displaced Peoples, and Asylum Seekers," *Prehospital and Disaster Medicine* 38, no. S1 (2023): s7–s7.

29 "Dover attack on migrant centre driven by hate, say terror police," *BBC*, 1 November, 2022.

30 Christian Gineste and Burcu Savun, "Introducing POSVAR: A Dataset on Refugee-Related Violence," *Journal of Peace Research* 56, no. 1 (2019): 140-141; Sara MT Polo and Julian Wucherpfennig, "Trojan horse, copycat, or scapegoat? Unpacking the refugees-terrorism nexus," *The Journal of Politics* 84.1 (2022): 43.

31 Marc Helbling and Daniel Meierrieks, "Terrorism and migration: An overview," *British Journal of Political Science* 52, no. 2 (2022): 978.

32 The search used different combinations of the terms: terrorism, terrorist, migrants, immigrants, migration, immigration, refugees, asylum-seekers, asylum seekers, diaspora.

Academic and policy interest in the topic surged in the early 2000s, following the 9/11 attacks in the United States. It was further reinvigorated in the context of the combined crises of terrorism and immigration in Europe, in 2014-2016,[33] when a large number of individuals sought to escape war-torn Syria and Iraq to find refuge in Europe, in the years 2010, while thousands of European foreign fighters, and their families, travelled in the other direction, to join the Islamic State and other terrorist organisations. Concurrently, high-profile attacks in Paris and Brussels involved terrorist operatives who had infiltrated migrant routes to enter Europe undetected.[34] These phenomena combined raised serious concerns among policy-makers, security services, and citizens.

Nevertheless, the topic remains largely peripherical within terrorism studies,[35] whereas migration studies have only superficially studied the topic. To illustrate this, a manual search in the archives of the four main academic journals in terrorism studies (*Terrorism and Political Violence, Studies in Conflict and Terrorism, Critical Studies in Terrorism, and Perspectives on Terrorism*), identified only thirty-five relevant articles published after 2001, almost all of which were published after 2015. Furthermore, these articles cover very different aspects of the migration-terrorism nexus (such as the radicalisation of migrants, foreign terrorist fighters, the role of diaspora communities, etc.), and almost none of these articles refer to the migration-terrorism nexus as a concept or seek to address the nexus directly.

Perhaps one reason for this academic overlook is the perception of a certain taboo around this issue, widely perceived by academics as highly sensitive due to politicised and polarised societal debates. As sociologist Jean-Baptiste Meyer explains, studying the question can feel "embarrassing", with many researchers reluctant to address it "out of fear that xenophobic people will use it to smear the entire immigrant population."[36] Another expert notes that "on one end of the political spectrum, the threat has been greatly exaggerated, while on the other it has been summarily dismissed."[37]

Meyer and some other scholars argue that such neglect only increases the risk of biased and oversimplified narratives dominating public discourse, potentially playing in favour of those who aim to exploit such societal fears.[38] Failing to acknowledge complex realities can give undue credibility to those who distort the data.[39] Indeed, "the political discourse is as prolific as scientific material is scarce" when it comes to the nexus between migration and terrorism.[40] There is also another argument, which is that misunderstanding the nature and origin of the threat can be risky, as it could divert resources or attention away from actual threats, or lead to counter-productive responses.

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33 Jean-Baptiste Meyer, "Le lien entre migration et terrorisme. Un tabou à déconstruire," *Hommes & migrations*, no. 1315 (2016): 50.
34 Ibid.
35 Sajjan M. Gohel, "Prevention of Cross-Border Movements of Terrorists: Operational, Political, Institutional and Strategic Challenges for National and Regional Border Controls," in *Handbook of Terrorism Prevention and Preparedness,* (ed.) A. P. Schmid, (The Hague: ICCT Press, 2021), 475.
36 Julia Pascual, "Le lien entre terrorisme et immigration à l'épreuve des faits," *Le Monde*, 12 November, 2020.
37 Sam Mullins, *Jihadist infiltration of migrant flows to Europe: Perpetrators, modus operandi and policy implications* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), p.1.
38 Meyer, "Le lien entre migration et terrorisme," p. 49.
39 Ibid.
40 Pascual, "Le lien entre terrorisme et immigration,".

More research is, therefore, clearly needed. But also, arguably, better research. Indeed, the growing body of literature over the past few years has produced mixed—and often contradicting—results. Depending on the specific data analysed, some analyses find no evidence of a direct relationship,[41] while others suggest that the influx of migrants either lower[42] or raise the risk of terrorist activity in host countries.[43] There is no evidence "that immigration unconditionally promotes terrorism in receiving countries," but some studies have nonetheless highlighted some possible correlations under specific conditions.[44] These are related notably to the composition of the migrant flows (e.g. highly vs. low-skilled immigration),[45] the origin of migrants (e.g. from Muslim-majority, terrorist-prone, or conflict-ridden countries), or conditions in the host countries (e.g. cultural proximity between home and host countries, conditions in refugee camps, integration, etc.).[46]

Thus, current research does not allow for the establishment of a clear consensus on whether migration increases or decreases the risk of terror.[47] However, it suggests that the migration-terrorism nexus is highly contextual, and depends on several complex factors. Moreover, most existing research does not allow for distinguishing clearly between the effect of terrorist activity emanating from migrants themselves, and violence that may be perpetrated against immigrant communities. Thus, some studies showing a positive correlation between immigration and terrorism, actually reveal a rise in anti-migrants terrorism in host countries rather than a rise in terrorism by immigrants. Perhaps the best way to illustrate the complexity of the migration-terrorism nexus is to refer again to the 2024 attack in Solingen, carried out by Issa al-Hassan, a 26-year-old Syrian refugee who fled ISIS violence only to later end up committing a terrorist attack himself in his host country.[48]

Overall, this report, therefore, aims to critically analyse how migration and terrorism issues can interact in different contexts, with a view to inform the scientific debate and public policies with clear evidence, particularly in the field of counter-terrorism. To achieve this, this report aims to deconstruct the various components of the so-called "migration-terrorism nexus", in order to discuss findings in a structured manner, but also to contribute to a better understanding of the complex and multi-dimensional nature of the nexus.

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41 For instance, Forrester et al.'s quantitative analysis covering 170 destination countries from 1990 to 2015 found no evidence that increasing immigrant shares lead to higher terrorism rates. Similarly, Light and Thomas found no effect of undocumented immigration on terrorism, radicalisation, and terrorism prosecutions in the US from 1990 to 2014. Exploring the effect of migration on an earlier wave of terrorism, namely anarchist terrorism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Jensen finds that "emigration did not create radical terrorists" – with anarchist terrorists having almost always been radicalised before emigrating. Andrew C. Forrester et al., "Do immigrants import terrorism?" *Journal of Economic Behavior & Organization* 166 (2019): 529-543; Michael T. Light and Julia T. Thomas, "Undocumented immigration and terrorism: Is there a connection?" *Social science research* 94 (2021): 102512; Richard Bach Jensen, "Anarchist Terrorism and Global Diasporas, 1878–1914," *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 27:3 (2015): 441-453. See also: Cory Eybergen and Martin A. Andresen, "Refugees of Conflict, Casualties of Conjecture: The Trojan Horse Theory of Terrorism and its Implications for Asylum," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 34, no. 6 (2020): 1144–1161.
42 Bove and Böhmelt's analysis of migrant flows in 145 countries between 1970 and 2000 finds that immigration generally defined leads to fewer terrorist attacks. Vincenzo Bove and Tobias Böhmelt, "Does Immigration Induce Terrorism?" *The Journal of Politics* 78, no. 2 (2016): 102047.
43 Milton, Spencer, and Findley observe that as refugee flows increase, so does the likelihood of terrorism being perpetrated by individuals of the same nationality as the refugees against the host state. Choi and Salehyan also noted that hosting more refugees correlates with higher domestic and international terrorism risks. Dreher, Gassebner, and Schaudt's study finds that, as the number of immigrants from a specific country increases in a host country, the likelihood of someone from that group committing a terrorist attack also rises. Daniel Milton, Megan Spencer, and Michael Findley, "Radicalism of the hopeless: Refugee flows and transnational terrorism," *International Interactions* 39.5 (2013): 621-645; Seung-Whan Choi and Idean Salehyan, "No good deed goes unpunished: Refugees, humanitarian aid, and terrorism," *Conflict Management and Peace Science* 30.1 (2013): 53-75; Axel Dreher, Martin Gassebner, and Paul Schaudt, "The effect of migration on terror: Made at home or imported from abroad?" *Canadian Journal of Economics/Revue canadienne d'économique* 53, no. 4 (2020): 1703-1744.
44 Helbling and Meierrieks, "Terrorism and Migration".
45 Dreher, Gassebner, and Schaudt find that "highly skilled migrants are associated with a significantly lower risk of terror compared with low skilled ones." Axel Dreher, Martin Gassebner, and Paul Schaudt, "The Effect of Migration on Terror: Made at Home or Imported From Abroad?" *Canadian Journal of Economics/Revue canadienne d'économique* 53, no. 4 (2020): 1703.
46 Helbling and Meierrieks, "Terrorism and Migration", p. 981.
47 Graig R. Klein, "Reframing Threats from Migrants in Europe," Perspective, The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT), 13 December, 2021.
48 The Syrian Observer, "Family of Syrian Solingen Attacker Expresses Shock," 4 September, 2024.

Methodology

This project started with a preliminary review of the literature, followed by a mapping exercise to identify and discuss all the different dimensions that could potentially fit under the migration-terrorism nexus. This first step informed a more systematic review of the academic and grey literature, addressing (1) the reciprocal impacts of terrorism on migration, and of migration on terrorism, (2) vulnerabilities to radicalisation and recruitment among migrants, asylum seekers, refugees, and diaspora communities, (3) the use of migration flows by terrorist groups, including foreign terrorist fighters travelling to conflict zones or infiltrators posing as migrants to conduct attacks in third countries, (4) extremist violence against migrant communities, as well as (5) discourses and narratives around the migration-terrorism nexus, and (6) policies and operational challenges related to the migration-terrorism nexus. The inclusion of the last two categories is justified in two ways. First, it was considered that the public discourse on the nexus largely contributes to its actual reality, in line with discourse theory. Second, it was deemed necessary to look into key current policy challenges and responses, as this report intends to formulate some policy recommendations.

This report synthesises insights from a large number of academic and grey literature, and policy documents, published in English and French between 2001 and 2024. In total, 212 books, reports, and articles were reviewed for this report. The literature review was complemented with online searches to find complementary information or to identify concrete examples from the international press, when necessary.

One challenge identified in the course of the project was the lack of good and updated data. In order to be able to assess the relevance of the migration-terrorism nexus in Europe, we collected data on jihadist attacks in the EU between 2014 and 2024 involving non-EU nationals – including irregular migrants, regular migrants with a resident permit, asylum seekers, and refugees – as well as EU nationals who returned to Europe using migration routes and/or posing as asylum seekers. The resulting dataset offers some insights that complement findings from the existing literature.

Finally, a limited number of semi-structured interviews were conducted in September 2024, with representatives from counter-terrorism and immigration services, as well as from Europol. These meetings helped refine the findings from this report.

Drawing on these various sources, this report provides an overview of the potential intersections between migration and terrorism, along with the challenges they raise for counter-terrorism efforts.

Some limitations in our methodology should be highlighted. Although our literature review has a global geographical scope and, therefore, allows us to study the migration-terrorism nexus in various contexts, it is clear that our bibliography is largely dominated by scholars from developed countries. There is also a clear European bias in our dataset, in our selection of case studies, in our emphasis on the 2015/16 crises in the report, as well as in our focus on European policy challenges and responses. We acknowledge this bias, as an assumed choice to narrow down our research focus and to best inform our recommendations, although recognising that it limits the generalisation of our conclusions and applicability to other contexts. Finally, the study of the migration-terrorism nexus is complicated by the perennial difficulties in researching both topics separately, particularly with regard to data. Indeed, open-access data on terrorist incidents or radicalised individuals is limited and not always accurate, whereas data on migration is equally incomplete, as it generally does not include illegal migration.

Structure of This Report

The report explores all the different types of interactions between terrorism and migration, which collectively form the so-called migration-terrorism nexus. It first looks into the various impacts of terrorism on migration, as terrorism (and heavy-handed state counter-terrorism) can result in significant population displacements. Second, it looks into the reverse relationship, or how migration can trigger or exacerbate terrorism. This includes, notably, the infiltration of refugee flows by terrorist operatives, the radicalisation of asylum-seekers or diaspora communities, as well as terrorism *against* migrant communities. Third, in line with the assumption that reality is partly shaped by narratives and perceptions, this report contributes a brief analysis of references to the migration-terrorism nexus in public attitudes, political discourse, and terrorist narratives. Fourth, it looks into some of the key challenges faced by public authorities confronted with the nexus, in order to inform our policy recommendations. Finally, the report concludes with the identification of a number of research gaps and formulates some actionable policy recommendations. Figure 1 below highlights the various dimensions of the migration-terrorism nexus addressed in this report.

Furthermore, three case studies offer more insights into the materialisation of the migration-terrorism nexus in the context of specific terrorist attacks, highlighting concrete challenges and identifying some lessons learned. These case studies – i.e. the November 2015 Paris attacks, the December 2016 Berlin attack, and the October 2023 Brussels attack[49] – are spread across the report. Each investigates the individual trajectories of the perpetrators, clarifies their radicalisation process, and examines how they successfully escaped the attention of counter-terrorism services. Specifically, each case study aims to (1) explore the migration-terrorism nexus as it manifested in each instance, (2) highlight the key challenges faced by counter-terrorism services in detecting and preventing such attacks, and (3) extract actionable lessons learned.

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49 These specific case studies were selected for various reasons, notably: the attacks triggered significant debates on the migration-terrorism nexus in these countries, they each revealed different aspects of the migration-terrorism nexus, and they occurred in three different European countries with distinct political contexts and security cultures. Furthermore, our dataset indicates that these countries are the most impacted by attacks involving migrants, asylum seekers, refugees and/or EU nationals who returned to Europe using migration routes and/or posing as asylum seekers *(see below)*.

Figure 1: Visualisation of the key aspects of the migration-terrorism nexus

- **Terrorism as cause of Migration**
  - Direct cause: emigration to escape terrorism
  - Indirect cause: emigration due to a complex mix of reasons, including terrorism
  - State-related cause: emigration to escape state terrorism

- **Migration as cause of Terrorism**
  - Terrorists taking advantage of legal and illegal migration flows (immigration of terrorists)
  - Foreign Terrorist Fighters (emigration of terrorists)
  - Radicalisation of migrants, asylum seekers and refugees (in transit and destination countries)
  - Radicalisation and support from diaspora communities
  - Terrorist exploitation of migration for financial gains (crime-terrorism-migration nexus)
  - Migrant communities and supporters as target of terrorism

- **Perceptions and Narratives**
  - Impact of terrorism on public attitudes towards immigration
  - Political instrumentalization of the migration-terrorism nexus
  - Migration as a major them in terrorist ideology and narratives

(Counter-)Terrorism as a Source of Migration

Terrorism can trigger population displacements and transnational migration, as people seek to escape violence. However, very often, terrorism is also simply part of a broader set of problems plaguing a country or a region, including war and poverty, resulting in people's movements. Finally, state responses to terrorism, as well as state repression (or state terrorism), may sometimes exacerbate further insecurity and trigger, in turn, migration. This section looks into each of these dimensions.

Terrorism as a Direct Cause of Migration

As a tactic that employs violence to instil fear and create a pervasive sense of insecurity, terrorism can compel individuals to migrate. In the face of severe violence and its aftermath, people may choose to flee as a way to escape the immediate and collateral impacts of terrorism.

The links are most evident in instances where terrorist organisations' operations and territorial expansion directly force populations to flee from immediate violence. In a thorough review of the potential links between migration and terrorism, Schmid notably underscores that, following the Islamic State's proclamation of the so-called Caliphate in Mosul in mid-2014, "the majority of people fled and [Mosul's] population declined from 2.5 million to 1 million."[50] In subsequent years, many living in territories that gradually fell under ISIS's control also had to flee.[51] As a result, it is estimated that by the end of 2015, "between one and two million people from Syria, Iraq and other countries affected by armed conflict and other adversities had fled to Western Europe through Libya and Turkey."[52]

Yet, ISIS is not an isolated example. Similarly, the Lord Resistance Army (LRA) in Uganda is believed to have caused hundreds of thousands of displacements: "in 2006, some 1,700,000 people in northern Uganda [seeking] refuge in camps for internally displaced people."[53] In Somalia, al-Shabaab's violence led to "large refugee outflows, especially in the direction of Kenya where Dadaab, the largest refugee camp in the world (in fact a complex of three camps, with, as of 2016 330,000 refugees – down from half a million) was in existence since 1991."[54] Boko Haram's insurgency in Nigeria has also caused massive displacement, forcing millions to flee their homes and seek refuge in neighbouring countries. More recently, violence perpetrated by al-Shabab in Mozambique's Cabo Delgado province has internally displaced 850,500 people since 2017,[55] with a surge of violence in early 2024, causing a new wave of displacement of about 110,000 people.[56]

While migration and internal displacement can be "unintended by-products of insurgent terrorism," it can also be the results of "a deliberate policy."[57] Schmid argues that terrorist organisations may intentionally spur population movements either for ideological reasons, for instance, to uniformise territories under the group's control on a sectarian and ethnic basis, as exemplified by ISIS's deliberate tactic of systematically targeting entire communities, such as Yazidis, Christians, Shabaks, Mandeans, Shia, and Turkomans, or for material profit (*see the section on "Migration-Crime-Terrorism Nexus" below*).[58] Moreover, generating mass migration may serve

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50 Schmid, "Links Between Terrorism and Migration," p.26
51 Ibid.
52 Ibid., p. 8.
53 Ibid., pp. 21-22.
54 Ibid., p. 2.
55 UNHCR, "Mozambique", n.d.
56 IOM, "Over 110,000 Displaced in Mozambique Amidst Surging Violence as Needs Soar," *International Organisation for Migration*, 8 March, 2024.
57 Schmid, "Links Between Terrorism and Migration," p. 3.
58 Ibid., p.26.

terrorist organisations' agenda, especially in contexts where state authorities are overwhelmed and unable to effectively address them.[59] For example, research argues that Boko Haram's targeting of refugees and displaced populations may be part of a deliberate strategy consisting of "generating migration to overwhelm governments in an attempt to force them to submit to its demands."[60] This example suggests that "extremist groups' unique ability to control these flows may become increasingly valuable to these groups, as it could strengthen their bargaining positions."[61]

Terrorism as an Indirect Cause of Migration

The consequences of terrorism extend well beyond immediate violence. It undermines governmental stability and threatens peace, security, and economic development. These broader destabilising effects can also drive people to flee or emigrate.[62] Yet, terrorism is actually more often a symptom or a consequence of a broader set of problems, rather than the cause of a country's instability. According to the 2023 Global Terrorism Index, "98 per cent of terrorism deaths occurred in countries experiencing some level of conflict."[63] Moreover, terrorism disproportionally affects countries grappling with development challenges, as nine of the ten countries most impacted by terrorism in 2023 recorded medium to low development indexes, with four ranking among the world's ten least developed countries.[64] As a result, measuring the specific effects of terrorism's wider repercussions on migration patterns is rather complex, as terrorism often occurs in areas already facing myriad other issues, including ongoing conflicts and socio-economic issues that may also influence migration flows.

Only a limited amount of research has focused on the indirect effects of terrorism on migration. Among these is, notably, research conducted by Dreher, Krieger, and Meierrieks, analysing emigration from 152 countries to six countries, namely Australia, Canada, France, Germany, the UK, and the US, between 1976 and 2000.[65] This study finds that terrorism, while not robustly associated with average emigration, features among several possible 'push factors' of skilled migration.[66] It shows, notably, that "the effect of terrorism on migration depends on individual levels of education,"[67] with terrorism potentially affecting "the cost-benefit considerations of the highly educated in ways that make emigration more attractive."[68]

Another research examining the impact of terrorism on intentions to migrate in and from 133 countries between 2007 and 2015 finds that "terrorism increases intentions to migrate both internally and internationally, though the effects remain quite small"[69] and that "migration intentions are not necessarily responsive to the frequency of terrorist attacks, but rather to the intensity of these attacks in terms of the number of fatalities and wounded they bring about."[70] Moreover, it shows stronger effects for "high-skilled respondents" as well as for "former migrants" – i.e. individuals already residing in another country than the one where they were born – and "people living in urban areas."[71] The study also notes "differential impacts across countries, with significant effects appearing mostly in sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East, Southeast Asia,

59 Aimée-Noël Mbiyozo, "How Boko Haram specifically targets displaced people," *ISS Africa Policy Brief 109* (2017).
60 Ibid., p. 2.
61 Ibid.
62 Killian Foubert and Ilse Ruyssen, "Leaving Terrorism Behind? The Impact of Terrorist Attacks on Migration Intentions Around the World," *UNU Institute on Comparative Regional Integration Studies* (2021): 5.
63 Institute for Economics & Peace, Global Terrorism Index 2024: Measuring the Impact of Terrorism, IEP, Sydney (2024): 4.
64 UNDP, Breaking the Gridlock: Reimagining Cooperation in a Polarized World, Human Development Report 2023/2024.
65 Axel Dreher, Tim Krieger, and Daniel Meierrieks, "Hit and (they will) run: The impact of terrorism on migration," Economics Letters 113, no. 1 (2011): 42-46.
66 Ibid., p. 42.
67 Ibid., p. 45.
68 Ibid.
69 Foubert and Ruyssen, "Leaving Terrorism Behind?", p. 6.
70 Ibid.
71 Ibid.

and Europe."[72] It should however be noted, as acknowledged by the authors, that migration intentions "have been shown to be good predictors for actual migration [but] might not always materialise."[73]

A recent French study interestingly suggests that the indirect consequences of terrorism on emigration could also be at work in Europe. Research conducted between 2011 and 2023 revealed that a number of French nationals of Muslim culture or religion, most of whom are highly educated, have chosen to leave France due to the (perceived) discrimination and Islamophobia experienced in the country, and resettle in the UK, US, Canada, UAE, or Maghreb countries.[74] While the phenomenon remains unquantifiable, authors argue that "it has been exacerbated since the attacks of 2015, but also by the anti-Muslim rhetoric of certain politicians."[75]

State Repression as a Source of Migration

While migration flows can directly or indirectly result from terrorism, they may also arise as counter-productive effects of state and international forces' heavy-handed repression of (self-defined) terrorism, or even terrorism exerted by the state itself. As rightly underlined by Schmid, "the exact chain of causation leading to migration is difficult to establish when both state and non-state terrorism are involved simultaneously, with other factors like foreign military intervention also being present."[76] For instance, Schmid notes that "state terrorism has been a major and perhaps even the main cause of forced migration in the case of Syria," with the severe and deliberate targeting of civilians by the Assad regime having driven more displacement than ISIS.[77] Additionally, the Russian intervention in Syria exacerbated the crisis, with heavy air bombardments causing further displacement, including 75,000 people fleeing in February 2016 alone due to airstrikes.[78] This illustrates how foreign interventions can also make "bad situations worse", by prolonging conflicts, increasing violence and leading to more displacements.[79]

Similar patterns have emerged across the Sahel. In Burkina Faso, reports indicate that increasing numbers of internally displaced people (IDPs) have fled abuses committed by the Burkinabé military rather than threats from armed insurgents.[80] In Mali, indiscriminate violence against civilians and abuses committed as part of counter-terrorism operations, particularly since the army has been operating alongside Russian Wagner (renamed Africa Corps) operatives, have led to increased internal displacement and forced migration, including to neighbouring Mauritania.[81] Military operations launched in September 2023 by the Malian forces and their Russian allies to recover the UN peacekeeping mission's holdings in Northern Mali have reportedly emptied key cities, such as Kidal and Tessalit, of around 70 percent of their populations.[82]

Such dynamics are not restricted to conflict-affected contexts. The plight of the Uyghurs and other Turkic minorities in China's Xinjiang region clearly illustrates that, when using the label of "counter-terrorism" to justify extreme forms of repression against their own citizens, states create an environment of terror that may push people to flee. Under the guise of countering

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72 Ibid.
73 Ibid., p. 26.
74 Assiya Hamza, "La France, tu l'aimes mais tu la quittes" : pourquoi des musulmans surdiplômés choisissent l'exil," *France 24*, 18 May, 2024.
75 For this study, authors have been able to collect testimonies from 1,070 individuals through a call launched on Mediapart and conducted in-depth interviews with 139 individuals. See: Hamza, "La France, tu l'aimes mais tu la quittes," 2024.
76 Schmid, "Links Between Terrorism and Migration," p. 21.
77 Ibid., pp. 19-20.
78 Ibid., p. 31.
79 Ibid., p. 29.
80 Alexandra Lamarche, Burkina Faso and the Sahel's New Frontline: Responding to the World's Fastest Growing Displacement Crisis, Report, Refugees International, 11 February, 2020; Alexandra Lamarche, "Atrocities and Displacement in Burkina Faso," Issue Brief, Refugees International, 5 May, 2021.
81 Nick Roll, "Russia's Wagner Group in Mali spurs refugee spike in Mauritania," *Aljazeera*, 28 June, 2022; Héni Nsaibia, "The Sahel: A Deadly New Era in the Decades-Long Conflict," *ACLED Conflict Watchlist 2024*, 17 January, 2024.
82 OCHA, "Mali : Note d'informations humanitaires sur la Région de Kidal - Rapport de situation #1," *OCHA Mali,* 8 November, 2023.

alleged religious extremism and separatism, Chinese authorities have implemented increasingly repressive policies against Muslim minorities from Xinjiang, including mass surveillance, forced labour, family separation, arbitrary arrests and detention, enforced disappearances, and forced sterilisation.[83] Migration may also become part of repressive states' arsenals to undermine minorities, as, for instance, the massive influx of Han Chinese into Xinjiang, allegedly state-orchestrated, which has further marginalised Uyghurs and other Turkic Muslim minorities. As a result of these combined factors, many Uyghurs have fled the country, seeking refuge abroad. However, China's efforts to suppress dissent have even extended beyond its borders, notably pressuring foreign governments to forcibly return Uyghur asylum seekers, with some countries, such as Thailand, Afghanistan, and Egypt, having met Beijing's request and forcibly deported Uyghurs to China.[84]

Several other examples confirm that "where governments engage in state terrorism or other forms of violence we can expect refugees."[85] These include inter alia Myanmar's military repression of the Rohingya Muslim minority, which forced over 700,000 Rohingya to flee to neighbouring Bangladesh in mid-2017,[86] Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, which not only resulted in the displacement of millions of Ukrainians but led over 800,000 Russians to relocate abroad, adding to the thousands of Russian political dissidents who had previously fled the regime's repression,[87] or the repression of non-Hindu minority groups under Narendra Modi's government in India having led to a notable increase in refugee claims, particularly in Canada[88] and the US[89]

In conclusion, research underlines that "violent extremism is more likely to trigger migration than result from it."[90] Among the drivers of migration is not only non-state terrorism; they are also rooted in state violence, whether through heavy-handed counter-terrorism responses, repression, foreign interventions, or state terrorism. These factors often overlap, making it difficult to pinpoint the exact causes of forced migration.

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83 Elise Anderson, "Looking for Home Around the World: The Uyghur Diaspora and Its Needs," Perspectives, *Freedom House,* 11 January, 2024; Human Rights Watch. "Break Their Lineage, Break Their Roots': China's Crimes against Humanity Targeting Uyghurs and Other Turkic Muslims," *HRW*, 19 April, 2021.

84 Human Rights Watch, "We Will Find You': A Global Look at How Governments Repress Nationals Abroad," *HRW,* 22 February, 2024.

85 Schmid, "Links Between Terrorism and Migration," p. 19.

86 UNRIC, "Far from the Headlines: Myanmar – The Rohingya crisis," *UNRIC*, 3 May, 2024; Andrew Selth, "Myanmar's Armed Forces and the Rohingya Crisis," *USIP,* 2018.

87 Yan Matusevich, "Uncertain Horizons: Russians in Exile," *Mixed Migration Centre*, 12 February, 2024.

88 Jorge Barrera, "Indian Refugee Claims in Canada Began Rising After Prime Minister Modi Took Power, Data Shows," *CBC,* September 30, 2023.

89 Singh Ahluwalia, "Indian Nationals Seeking Asylum at U.S. Border in Record Numbers," 31 May, 2023,

90 Barbara H. Sude, "Prevention of Radicalization to Terrorism in Refugee Camps and Asylum Centres," in Alex. P. Schmid (ed.), *Handbook of terrorism prevention and preparedness*. International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT), 2021, p.240.

Case Study 1: The November 2015 Paris Attacks

On 13 November 2015, a series of coordinated terrorist attacks in Paris and Saint-Denis targeted the Stade de France, the Bataclan concert hall, and several café and restaurant terraces. The operation included a mix of shootings, hostage-taking, and suicide bombings, by a commando team of ten members. It resulted in the death of 130 civilians and hundreds of injuries, the deadliest terrorist attack in French history. These assaults dramatically shifted public perception of the threat associated with refugee flows.

The Migration-Terrorism Nexus

The Stade de France attackers included two Iraqi nationals who had entered Europe posing as refugees and using fake Syrian passports, one of which was found near their bodies after the attacks. The remaining assailants were European citizens – French and Belgian nationals – most of whom had travelled to Syria to join ISIS before returning to carry out organised attacks against their home countries. Amid the hundreds of Europeans who had joined the terrorist organisation in Syria, this French-Belgian network is notable for being "the only one to have developed a plan for large-scale reprisals against its countries of origin."[91]

These attacks, as well as the subsequent Brussels bombings in March 2016, were the results of ISIS' strategy to leverage the ongoing refugee crisis as a cover to discreetly dispatch operatives into Western Europe (*see section on Terrorist Infiltration of Migration Flows in this report*).[92] The operations were indeed planned and coordinated from abroad – initially from Syria, where the team was formed, "sometimes building on kinship that pre-dated the Syrian jihad,"[93] and from Belgium, where the operatives later regrouped. Most operatives were trained and provided with "false passports, communication devices, contacts with facilitators and smugglers, and money"[94] by services in charge of ISIS' external operations in Raqqa prior to leaving for Europe. Once in Europe, they maintained contact with their handlers in Syria, including with Belgian national Oussama Atar, alias Abou Ahmad, who is believed to have coordinated operations remotely.[95]

Nearly all Paris attackers "came back to Europe using forged Syrian passports and infiltrated the refugee flow."[96] They arrived in small groups between August and October 2015.[97] Crucial to their ability to exploit migration routes was the logistical support received from various facilitators, including "smugglers, counterfeiters established particularly in Turkey and Greece."[98] A key enabler of their infiltration was Bilal Chatra, an Algerian smuggler commissioned by the operation's ringleader, Abdelhamid Abaaoud.[99] Chatra had met Abaaoud in a Turkish refugee camp in late 2014,[100] and was tasked with scouting the 'Balkan route.' He travelled for a month across Turkey, Greece, Macedonia, Serbia, and Hungary, providing constant updates to Abaaoud about "any open border crossings, waiting times, and arrival and departure routes."[101] Using the same route, Abaaoud himself managed to re-enter Europe in the summer of 2015.[102] While

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91 Assemblée Nationale, *Rapport N° 3922 fait au nom de la commission d'enquête relative aux moyens mis en oeuvre par l'État pour lutter contre le terrorisme depuis le 7 janvier 2015*, 5 July 2016, p.139.
92 Jean-Charles Brisard and Kevin Jackson, "The Islamic State's External Operations and the French-Belgian Nexus. " *CTC Sentinel 9*, no. 11 (2016): 8-15.
93 Brisard and Jackson, "The Islamic State's External Operations," p.8.
94 Ibid.
95 Soren Seelow, "Comment les terroristes des attentats de Paris et de Bruxelles se sont infiltrés en Europe," *Le Monde*, 12 November, 2016.
96 Brisard and Jackson, "The Islamic State's External Operations," p.12.
97 Ibid.
98 Assemblée Nationale, Rapport N° 3922, p.150.
99 Matthieu Suc, *Les espions de la terreur* (HarperCollins, 2018) p.249; Mullins, *Jihadist infiltration of migrant flows*, p.50.
100 Suc, *Les espions de la terreur,* p.249; Mullins, *Jihadist infiltration of migrant flows*, p.50.
101 Suc, *Les espions de la terreur*, p.249; Brisard and Jackson, "The Islamic State's External Operations," p.12.
102 As explained further below, Abdelhamid Abaaoud was located in Athens in January 2015, from where he managed to escape and is believed to have left for Syria again.

European intelligence services believed he was still in Syria, Abaaoud crossed the Serbia-Hungary border at Röszke to reach Budapest on 1 August 2015.[103] He later drove through Austria towards Brussels, from where he coordinated the arrival of other operatives.[104]

Fellow members of the Paris-Brussels network closely followed.[105] Bilal Hadfi and Chakib Akrouh both arrived in Kirkorös, Southern Hungary, on 25 August 2015.[106] The Bataclan attackers, Ismaël Omar Mostefaï, Samy Amimour, and Foued Mohamed-Aggad, followed a similar path, entering Budapest on 9 September 2015.[107] Finally, the two Iraqi attackers of the Stade de France arrived by boat on the Greek island of Leros, along with "198 people claiming to be Syrian refugees" on 3 October 2015.[108] While a report suggests that the two individuals "were not seriously questioned" by Frontex and Greek authorities,[109] both men were reportedly photographed and had their fingerprints taken.[110] Despite travelling with fake Syrian passports under the names of Ahmad Al Mohammad[111] and Mohammad Al Mahmod, they were able to continue their journey to Western Europe. Following the flow of migrants, the two operatives reportedly travelled to Serbia by land, where they registered at a refugee camp in Presevo on 7 October,[112] before crossing Austria and Germany, to finally reach their hideout in the suburbs of Brussels.[113]

Only the two Abdeslam brothers did not infiltrate migration flows.[114] While Salah Abdeslam never went to Syria, his brother Brahim is believed to have pretended a tourist trip to Turkey to briefly travel to Syria between late January and early February 2015. As part of this short stay in ISIS-held territories, he reportedly underwent military training and met with his childhood friend Abaaoud.[115]

Once inside Europe, the operatives' movements were facilitated by Salah Abdeslam, who acted "as a key logistical conduit for the Syrian veterans in Europe."[116] Between August and October 2015, the latter made four roundtrips from Belgium – three to Hungary and one to Germany – to pick up ISIS operatives and assemble the Paris attack team.[117] Attackers moreover benefitted from the support provided by "a Belgium-based jihadist network deeply tied to the mother organization in Syria [which] dealt with facilitation and material support for the terrorist campaign to come."[118] Individuals such as Najim Laachraoui, Mohamed Abrini, Ibrahim and Khalid el-Bakraoui, Ahmed Dahmani, and others played key roles in procuring weapons, explosives, vehicles, and safe houses.[119]

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103 Seelow, "Comment les terroristes".
104 Seelow, "Comment les terroristes"; Suc, *Les espions de la terreur*, p.252.
105 Ismaël Omar Mostefaï, Samy Amimour, and Foued Mohamed-Aggad, respectively, travelled under the names of Salah Jamal, Husein Alkhlf, and Fooad Moosa. Similarly, Mohamed Belkaïd and Najim Laachraoui travelled under false identities, respectively calling themselves Soufiane Kayal and Samir Bouzid; Seelow, "Comment les terroristes".
106 Seelow, "Comment les terroristes".
107 Ibid.
108 Ibid.
109 Anthony Faiola and Souad Mekhennet, "Tracing the path of four terrorists sent to Europe by the Islamic State," *The Washington Post,* 22 April, 2016.
110 Mullins, Jihadist infiltration of migrant flows, p.3.
111 He was later identified as Ammar Ramadan Mansour Mohamad al-Sabaawi born in 1993 in Iraq. "Attentats du 13 novembre : un kamikaze du Stade de France identifié," *France 24*, 18 January, 2017.
112 Faiola and Mekhennet, "Tracing the path of four terrorists sent to Europe by the Islamic State."
113 Suc, *Les espions de la terreur*, p.256.
114 Soren Seelow, "'Pourrais-tu me rassurer que ces dossiers sont traités ?': le récit des ratés de la police belge avant les attentats du 13-Novembre," *Le Monde*, 28 August, 2021.
115 Ibid.
116 Brisard and Jackson, "The Islamic State's External Operations," p.13.
117 Salah Abdeslam first travelled to Kiskorös, in Southern Hungary, to pick up Bilal Hadfi and Chakib Akrouh on 30 August. He then made two roundtrips to Budapest – the first one to get Najim Laachraoui and Mohamed Belkaid on 9 September, and the second to bring the three Bataclan attackers – Sami Amimour, Ismaël Omar Mostefaï, and Foued Mohamed-Aggad – on 17 September . He finally travelled to Ulm Germany to pick up Osama Krayem, Sofiane Ayari, and Ahmed Alkhald on the night of 2 and 3 October. Brisard and Jackson, "The Islamic State's External Operations," p.13; Seelow, "Comment les terroristes".
118 Brisard and Jackson, "The Islamic State's External Operations," p.13.
119 Ibid.

Only the day before the attacks would the members of the commandos finally enter France, staying overnight in a rented apartment in Bobigny, in the suburbs of Paris, before launching their operations the next day.[120] Nearly all the attackers died on 13 November. Abaaoud and Akrouh were killed in a police raid on their hideout in Saint-Denis, on 18 November 2015.[121] After a four-month-long manhunt, Salah Abdeslam was arrested in Molenbeek, Belgium, on 18 March 2016.[122] He was sentenced in 2023 to life imprisonment for his participation in the Paris attacks.[123]

The challenges of the nexus for the authorities

The 2015 Paris attacks tragically demonstrated ISIS's ability to exploit the refugee crisis as a cover to infiltrate operatives in Europe. These events, and the parliamentary investigation that followed, exposed significant gaps in national and European capacities to detect and counter such threats.

French intelligence officials admitted to widespread failures. The head of the French internal intelligence agency (DGSI) referred to the attacks as "a global failure of intelligence"[124] – a sentiment echoed by the head of the French external intelligence agency (DGSE), who also admitted to "a failure of external intelligence" in preventing attacks that had been orchestrated from abroad.[125] Many of the perpetrators were indeed known to authorities and had been under various types of surveillance prior to the attacks, being "registered, monitored, listened to or imprisoned at some stage in their journey from delinquency to violent radicalisation."[126] They still managed to travel to and back from Syria to conduct "the deadliest attack in modern French history."[127]

A notable example was Samy Amimour, one of the Bataclan attackers, who managed to go to Syria in 2013 albeit being under judicial supervision and banned from leaving France.[128] Similarly, his travel companion and fellow Bataclan attacker Ismaël Omar Mostefaï was monitored by the intelligence services for his radicalisation ("fiché S") when he joined ISIS in Syria.[129] The third Bataclan attacker, Foued Mohamed-Aggad, was, according to French journalist Matthieu Suc, already mentioned in a DGSE note from mid-2014, listing French nationals susceptible to conduct, or coordinate from abroad, an attack in the country.[130]

Perhaps more strikingly, Abdelhamid Abaaoud, described in the parliamentary inquiry as "the blind spot of European counter-terrorism,"[131] managed to travel back and forth to Syria on multiple occasions prior to the Paris attacks.[132] After initially travelling to Syria in February 2013, he first returned to Belgium in September that year, only to depart once more in January 2014, this time with his 13-year-old brother. Soon after, he began appearing in brutal propaganda videos and became the subject of an international arrest warrant issued by Belgium in August 2014.[133] Yet, he successfully re-entered Europe later in 2014, transiting through Edirne in Turkey, and was

120 Assemblée Nationale, Rapport N° 3922, p.150; Suc, *Les espions de la terreur*, p.269.
121 Suc, *Les espions de la terreur*, p.282.
122 Ibid., p.304.
123 Le Monde/AFP, "Attentats du 13-Novembre : Salah Abdeslam a été transféré de la Belgique vers la France pour y purger sa peine," 7 February, 2024.
124 Assemblée Nationale, *Rapport N° 3922*, p.137.
125 Ibid., p.137.
126 Ibid., p.145.
127 Brisard and Jackson, "The Islamic State's External Operations."
128 Despite being stripped of his identity papers, he successfully had them replaced, claiming that they had been lost. The parliamentary enquiry notes that, while any request for new identity papers normally triggers consultation of the national wanted persons file (FPR) in which exit bans are recorded, it would appear that this consultation is not systematic. *Assemblée Nationale, Rapport N° 3922,* p.148.
129 Assemblée Nationale, *Rapport N° 3922,* p.13.
130 Suc, *Les espions de la terreur*, p.187.
131 Assemblée Nationale, Rapport N° 3922, p.151.
132 Ibid; Mullins, Jihadist infiltration of migrant flows, p.34.
133 Sarah Leduc, "Abdelhamid Abaaoud, un terroriste trop médiatique," *France 24*, 20 November, 2015.

located in Athens in early 2015, from where he was believed to be coordinating a terrorist cell hiding in Verviers, Belgium.[134] When intelligence services intercepted conversations indicating the Verviers cell was planning an imminent attack, it was dismantled in a police operation on 15 January 2015. However, in the rush of the operation, Greek authorities were not informed in time to prevent Abaaoud from escaping,[135] allowing him to travel back to Syria. Convicted in absentia by a Belgian court in July 2015, he managed to re-enter Europe, blending in with refugees fleeing Syria in the second half of 2015, eventually making his way to Belgium undetected. The parliamentary inquiry concluded that "evidently, the European Union's external borders are no longer an obstacle to terrorists coming from Iraq and Syria, who can then, like Abdelhamid Abaaoud, move around Europe with disconcerting ease."[136]

The Paris attacks indeed demonstrated how terrorist networks could exploit vulnerabilities in Europe's border management. The parliamentary inquiry pointed to "weaknesses in the control systems within the Schengen area"[137] and noted that "the terrorists who struck in 2015 demonstrated their ability to take advantage of the laxity of the European area."[138] Although returnees from conflict zones were already at the time "at the top of Europe's threat list,"[139] attackers faced little trouble entering and travelling across Europe, benefitting from weak controls at EU external borders amid the unprecedented refugee flows of 2015.[140] For example, security experts estimate that, in Greece, "border guards were only able to conduct thorough screening — meaningful questioning, running fingerprint and database checks — on a third of the arrivals at most."[141] Although no open-source evidence confirms that any of the Paris attackers directly benefitted from it, Macedonia's decision in June 2015 to grant migrants 72-hour transit permits facilitated entry to Europe via the "Balkan route."[142]

Particularly, the attacks exposed the limits of European information-sharing systems. For example, an Austrian police stop of a car carrying Salah Abdeslam, Mohamed Belkaïd, and Najim Laachraoui, on 9 September 2015 failed to trigger any investigation, although all three individuals were known to authorities. Laachraoui was the subject of an international arrest warrant, Belkaïd was known to Swedish intelligence for his ties to extremism, and Abdeslam was the subject of an alert in the Schengen Information System (SIS II). It remains unclear whether the Austrian officers failed to search or find Abdeslam's name in the SIS database or did not adequately respond to the alert, but "Belgian authorities [who had issued the SIS II alert] only learned about the stop months later while investigating the Paris attacks."[143]

Again, on 14 November 2015, the morning after the attacks, French gendarmes stopped Salah Abdeslam – whose name was not yet associated with the dramatic events – while he was on his way to Belgium with two accomplices. Following the course of action indicated in the SIS II alert, they discreetly gathered information on the vehicle and its occupants, and shared it through the dedicated EU-wide information exchange system "SIRENE".[144] By the time French authorities were informed by their Belgian counterparts that Abdeslam was a radicalised individual and "a candidate for jihad in Syria,"[145] the gendarmes had let Abdeslam go, allowing him to evade capture for another four months. The parliamentary inquiry ultimately concluded that "SIS II, in

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134 Suc, *Les espions de la terreur,* p.163.
135 Ibid., p.165.
136 Assemblée Nationale, *Rapport N° 3922*, p.24.
137 Ibid., pp.294.
138 Ibid., pp.149-150.
139 Griff Witte and Loveday Morris, "Failure to stop Paris attacks reveals fatal flaws at heart of European security," *The Washington Post,* 28 November 2015.
140 Assemblée Nationale, *Rapport N° 3922*, p.149.
141 Sebastian Rotella, "How Europe Left Itself Open to Terrorism," *ProPublica and Frontline*, 18 October, 2016.
142 Suc, *Les espions de la terreur*, p.250; Brisard and Jackson, "The Islamic State's External Operations," p.12.
143 Rotella, "How Europe Left Itself Open to Terrorism".
144 According to the parliamentary inquiry, Abdeslam was controlled at 9:10 and information about his profile was received by France at 10:45. Assemblée Nationale, *Rapport N° 3922*, pp.300-301.
145 Assemblée Nationale, *Rapport N° 3922*, pp.300-301.

the aftermath of the worst terrorist attack in France's history and despite presidential orders, was powerless to provide the French gendarmerie with the information it needed, forcing it to let the jihadist go free."[146]

This specific event has been a matter of significant debates between French and Belgian authorities, with three main points of argument. The first challenge highlighted in the French parliamentary inquiry stemmed from the procedures for the processing of alerts, which relies on bilateral communication between national SIRENE offices, with a positive hit prompting the exchange of inter-state information 'forms'. This procedure can create important delays in the exchange of critical information. In this case, however, the exchange proceeded relatively quickly, despite brief delays on both sides, allegedly primarily on the French side.[147]

The second relates to the conditions for the entry of alerts for discreet checks in SIS II, which can be issued either "for the purposes of prosecuting criminal offences and for the prevention of threats to public security"(Article 36-2 of Council Decision 2007/533/JHA) – which was the case for Abdeslam – or to prevent "serious threats to internal or external national security" (Article 36-3).[148] Belgium was criticised for not having given Abdeslam higher priority on the watchlist despite knowing about his radicalisation and ties to violent extremist networks.[149] In response, the Belgian parliamentary inquiry specified that "although France issued all alerts relating to foreign terrorist fighters under Article 36(3) of the SIS II Decision, [...] this was a departure from the policy followed until recently in other EU Member States," revealing contrasting practices between EU Member States.[150]

Thirdly, the French parliamentary report regretted that Abdeslam's SIS II file "had not been fed by the Belgian intelligence services with information relating to his radicalisation."[151] In that regard, the Belgian inquiry underlined that "it was not yet technically possible" to add information about an individual's terrorism-related activities in the SIS II when the initial alert was issued on 9 February 2015.[152] Yet, recognising that this became possible just later that month, it appears it did not lead to an updating of the initial alert.[153] Moreover, the Belgian parliament inquiry highlighted that Salah Abdeslam had not only been registered in SIS II, but had simultaneously been registered in Interpol's database in early 2015.[154]

Beyond challenges related to EU databases, the failure to utilise other international law enforcement databases to their full extent further hindered the early identification of key Paris attackers. Reports indicate that the Syrian passport found outside the Stade de France after the attack had been recorded in Interpol's database in April 2014 "as part of a batch of 1,450 stolen blank Syrian passports."[155] According to Interpol officials, "it was well-known that ISIS had stolen or acquired such passports *en masse*" upon conquering new territories.[156] Although consulting this database might have allowed the detection of the Iraqi operatives' fraudulent documents, "Greek authorities were not regularly using it."[157] Compounding these issues was poor intelligence-sharing with third countries. Following the attacks, Greek authorities ran additional checks and

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146 Ibid., p.301.
147 Nicolas G. Verheyde, "Abdeslam's failed arrest in 2015. Belgians dispute any mistake," *Bruxelles 2*, 14 November, 2017; See also Assemblée Nationale, *Rapport N° 3922*, pp.300-301; Laurette Onkelinx et al., "Derde Tussentijds Verslag Over Het Onderdeel 'Veiligheidsarchitectuur'", 15 Juni, 2017, pp. 479-481.
148 Council of the European Union, "Council Decision 2007/533/JHA of 12 June 2007 on the establishment, operation and use of the second generation Schengen Information System (SIS II)", 12 June, 2007.
149 Rotella, "How Europe Left Itself Open to Terrorism".
150 Onkelinx et al., "Derde Tussentijds Verslag," p.481.
151 Assemblée Nationale, Rapport N° 3922, p.16.
152 Onkelinx et al., "Derde Tussentijds Verslag ," p. 479.
153 Ibid., p.479.
154 Onkelinx et al., "Derde Tussentijds Verslag," p.481.
155 Rotella, "How Europe Left Itself Open to Terrorism".
156 Ibid.
157 Ibid.

identified two individuals who had registered in Leros on 3 October 2015 – the same day as the Stade de France kamikazes. All four individuals travelled with falsified passports. While the two Stade de France Iraqi attackers' fake documents went undetected, allowing them to join the rest of the commando, the ones carried by these two additional individuals were detected. The first, Adel Haddadi, an Algerian national, was unable to answer basic questions about his alleged birthplace, Aleppo.[158] The second, Mohamed Usman Ghani, a Pakistani national, could not speak fluent Arabic.[159] Likely assumed to be economic migrants, they were briefly detained until 28 October, then resuming their journey through Macedonia, Serbia, Croatia, Slovenia, and Austria, where they claimed asylum on 4 December 2015.[160] They were later arrested in a refugee centre in Austria on 10 December 2015. Investigations revealed that they were also meant to take part in the attacks, but were too late to join the commando.[161] The French parliamentary inquiry reported that it was only after their arrest that Greek authorities received critical intelligence from an unnamed third country, including a photograph showing all four foreign ISIS operatives together.[162] Had it been shared earlier, this might have helped Greek authorities identify all four individuals attempting to enter under false asylum claims.

A final challenge that emerged from the November 2015 Paris attacks was the conflation of terrorism and immigration in the public and political debates.[163] The European Commission quickly moved to address this misconception, emphasising the importance of distinguishing terrorism from migration and reminding member states of their responsibilities toward refugees. European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker, speaking at the G20 on 15 November 2015, stressed the need to avoid conflating terrorists with those seeking international protection, affirming that "those who perpetrated the attacks are precisely those whom the refugees are trying to flee."[164] Despite these clarifications, EU policymakers soon faced the challenge of addressing security gaps that enabled the attackers to operate within Europe, all while balancing security imperatives with the safeguarding of core EU principles on the free movement of persons, and the legal standards surrounding privacy and civil liberties.[165]

Lessons learned

The November 2015 Paris attacks exposed several vulnerabilities in Europe's capacity to prevent terrorist networks from exploiting migration flows to conduct large-scale attacks on its soil. The ease with which the Paris attackers were able to (re-)enter Europe despite most of them being known to intelligence services underscored the need for more robust, coordinated border management and information-sharing systems that prevent the infiltration of terrorist operatives, while safeguarding fundamental rights, democratic rule of law, principles of free movements within the EU, and the rights of genuine asylum seekers in need of protection. Some key lessons were drawn as a result of the attacks.

- **Improve monitoring of radicalised individuals:** The parliamentary inquiry identified intelligence gaps that allowed individuals under surveillance or judicial supervision to travel to Syria and return to launch attacks. The report highlighted an overly complex, fragmented intelligence network with insufficient information-sharing, each service relying on its own databases.[166] It notably underlined that the only common database – the FSPRT (*fichier des signalés pour la*

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158 Faiola and Mekhennet, "Tracing the Path".
159 Ibid.
160 Ibid.
161 Seelow, "Comment les terroristes".
162 Assemblée Nationale, *Rapport N° 3922*, pp. 286-287.
163 Didier Bigo et al., "The EU and its counter-terrorism policies after the Paris attacks," CEPS Paper in Liberty and Security in Europe no. 84 (2015).
164 Ibid.
165 Didier Bigo et al., "The EU and its counter-terrorism policies after the Paris attacks," 2015.
166 Assemblée Nationale, Rapport N° 3922, pp.12-13.

prévention et la radicalisation à caractère terroriste) put in place earlier in 2015 – includes radicalised individuals present on the national territory – i.e. not individuals having travelled to join terrorist organisations abroad.[167] While the departure of individuals already registered in the FSPRT is flagged to relevant services, particularly the DGSE, the database is not aimed at registering individuals located abroad.[168] It thus recommended expanding FSPRT to include overseas threats, creating a centralised counter-terrorism agency modelled after the US National Counterterrorism Centre (NCTC), involving academics and think tanks for broader threat analysis, and strengthening the enforcement of administrative measures, such as exit bans and judicial oversight.

- **Address resource gaps for more effective controls at EU external borders:** Besides the two Iraqi attackers having reportedly been controlled and registered in the Eurodac database, there is no open-source evidence that other members of the commando were checked upon entry. While initial responses to the attacks emphasised the need for collecting more data on incoming individuals, the incident primarily underscored a significant resource gap in processing a high volume of new arrivals effectively. Observers note that "more data without the necessary human resources and better cross-border operational cooperation among the law enforcement authorities of EU member states is not an efficient policy response."[169] Notably, the parliamentary inquiry recommended increasing Europol's presence in hotspot areas like Greece to support Frontex in processing arrivals and alleviate pressure on national border authorities.[170]

- **Ensure more consistent use of existing EU databases, including SIS II:** The effectiveness of EU information-sharing systems depends heavily on a more consistent usage across member states. Following the Paris attacks, reports indicated significant discrepancies in both how frequently EU Member States input data into SIS II and how often they consult it.[171] Without consistent input, systematic checks may yield incomplete results, potentially requiring individuals to undergo redundant checks against an incomplete database.[172] Beyond the *quantity* of data input by member states, arguments between French and Belgian authorities on the specific ground on which Salah Abdeslam's SIS II alert should have been issued also revealed national differences in *how* they input data, particularly with regards to (suspected/aspiring) FTFs. This has changed as a result of the Paris attacks, with EU Member States being required to systematically enter data on all suspected FTFs based on Article 36-3 (threats to national security).[173] Moreover, it underscored issues related to the insertion of certain details and adequate updating of alerts.

Even if adequately populated with information, failures to consistently *consult* a database or *act upon* alerts also weaken the system's effectiveness – as illustrated in Salah Abdeslam's check on 9 September 2015. This episode showed that, rather than systematic procedures, the operationalisation of EU information systems often depends on the vigilance of individual end-users.[174] Furthermore, more consistent use of the Interpol database could have made it more difficult for the attackers to enter Europe – as shown by the missed opportunity to detect Stade de France attackers' fake Syrian passports registered in the Interpol database since 2014. The attacks highlighted the need for a unified approach to data entry and

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167 Ibid, p.183.
168 Ibid, p.183.
169 Didier Bigo et al., "The EU and its counter-terrorism policies after the Paris attacks," 2015.
170 Assemblée Nationale, *Rapport N° 3922,* p.296.
171 Niovi Vavoula, "Detecting foreign fighters: the reinvigoration of the Schengen Information System in the wake of terrorist attacks", *Eu Migration Blog,* n.d.
172 Ibid.
173 Onkelinx et al., "Derde Tussentijds Verslag," p.481; General Secretariat of the Council, "Conclusions of the Council of the EU and of the Member States meeting within the Council on Counter-Terrorism," 20 November, 2015.
174 Rotella, "How Europe Left Itself Open to Terrorism".

consultation, along with enhanced awareness raising and training for end-users on database functionalities, querying, and information-sharing procedures.[175]

- **Enhance the interoperability among relevant EU databases:** Even if the Paris attackers had been registered in Eurodac, this would unlikely have triggered any immediate results due to their use of false alias-identities, and the absence of connections between Eurodac and other EU databases, such as SIS II. According to Rob Wainright, former Europol Executive Director, the greatest lesson from the Paris attacks was the need for "a much more systematic, better hooked-up, centralized system."[176] The Paris attacks were indeed a major trigger point for new regulations at the European level, and notably inspired efforts to enhance the interoperability of EU databases. Once completed, these reforms might help close some critical gaps, for instance, allowing border agents registering an asylum seeker in Eurodac to be alerted of any positive hits in connected databases.

- **Allow for timely operationalisation of SIS II alerts and exchange of information:** The exchange of additional information following the 'positive hit' in SIS II for Salah Abdeslam on 14 November 2015 was relatively quick, despite later critics. However, this episode drew considerable attention to the SIS II system and its operational challenges, revealing broader issues with the general speed of alert processing. As one Belgian counter-terrorism official pointed out in reference to Abdeslam's first control by Austrian police officers in September 2015, "even if they got a hit, it only gets communicated to us by fax after a while. [...] And it may take weeks for such information to reach the appropriate unit of the Belgian counterterrorism police, if it reaches them at all."[177] Since then, new EU regulations were introduced, requiring all Member States to establish a single point of contact, responsible for coordinating and facilitating the exchange of information, that "carries out its tasks 24 hours a day, 7 days a week."[178] Time limits under which information requested should be provided have also been specified, depending on the urgency of the request and accessibility of the information.[179]

- **Increased access to SIS II for Europol:** One key weakness of SIS II noted in the parliamentary inquiry into the Paris attacks was related to "the administration of the alert by the issuing State alone."[180] The report regretted "the absence of a supranational body with access to all the information and threats"[181] able to have a comprehensive overview of and capacity to flag potential needs to update the database. It thus recommended "to provide Europol with full access to the Schengen Information System (SIS II) for consultations, searches, and alerts."[182] The ongoing reform of the EU information-sharing architecture provides Europol with full access to SIS II and stipulates that member states should send a copy of any requests for information or information provided pursuant to such requests to Europol for any bilateral exchange involving serious crimes or terrorism.[183] Moreover, Europol will now be able to suggest (not to issue) an alert for further information to a Member State.

- **Enhanced Europol's role in supporting operational cooperation:** In the aftermath of the Paris attacks, France decided to hand over to Europol the analysis of a large amount of data collected

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175 Rocco Bellanova and Georgios Glouftsios, Controlling the Schengen Information System (SIS II): The Infrastructural Politics of Fragility and Maintenance, 2022.
176 Rotella, "How Europe Left Itself Open to Terrorism".
177 Rotella, "How Europe Left Itself Open to Terrorism".
178 European Parliament and the Council of the EU, "Directive (EU) 2023/977 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 10 May 2023 on the exchange of information between the law enforcement authorities of Member States and repealing Council Framework Decision 2006/960/JHA," 10 May 2023.
179 Ibid.
180 Assemblée Nationale, Rapport N° 3922, p. 302
181 Ibid., p. 302
182 Ibid., p.294.
183 Interview at Europol, 21 October 2024.

as part of the investigation.[184] The parliamentary inquiry noted that "beyond its usefulness to the investigation, Europol's strong mobilisation has real symbolic significance,"[185] translating a greater willingness to overcome deeply rooted resistance among national services to disclose information and collaborate in the investigation of serious crimes and terrorism. Steps have been taken in that direction, with, for instance, the creation of a European Counter Terrorism Centre (ECTC) at Europol in January 2016, in charge of providing tailor-made operational support to EU Member States' counter-terrorism authorities.[186]

184 Assemblée Nationale, *Rapport N° 3922*, p.135.
185 Ibid., p.136.
186 Europol, European Counter Terrorism Centre, n.d.

Migration as a Source of Terrorism

The idea that "terrorists know no borders" is a common observation. In the context of this chapter, we specifically analyse how migration can facilitate or exacerbate terrorism. This includes the deliberate exploitation of migration routes by terrorist groups for operational purposes, the transnational movement of foreign terrorist fighters to join ongoing conflicts, as well as the risk of radicalisation among migrants, asylum seekers, refugees, and diaspora communities. Furthermore, the reality that migration flows can also lead to increased terrorist violence *against* migrants, rather than violence committed by them, should be considered as part of a nuanced and holistic review of the migration-terrorism nexus – and is therefore also covered in this chapter.

Terrorist Use of Legal and Illegal Migration Flows

Contemporary research exploring the links between migration and terrorism has notably focused on the risk of terrorist operatives deliberately using migrant routes to infiltrate and conduct attacks in third countries. There have been historical precedents of terrorists having posed as asylum seekers with the specific intent of conducting attacks in the host country, as illustrated by the World Trade Centre bombing in 1993, which claimed six lives and injured over a thousand people.[187] Ramzi Yousef, the mastermind behind the attack, had entered the US six months earlier with fraudulent documents, but was allowed in the country pending a hearing after having made a claim for political asylum.[188] Similarly, research has also underlined Boko Haram militants' tactic of disguising themselves as refugees and internally displaced people (IDP) to avoid detection,[189] notably across borders or to discretely purchase supplies in local villages. For example, in July 2017, "at least nine insurgents and 100 accomplices" were identified among a group of refugees returning from Cameroon to Nigeria.[190] The group has moreover resorted to similar tactics to execute attacks, with, for instance, in October and November 2015, two suicide bombings carried out in Nigeria by women who posed as IDPs only to detonate their explosives amongst groups of displaced women and children fleeing Boko Haram assaults, together resulting in at least nineteen deaths.[191]

The threat posed by terrorist infiltration of migration flows became a major source of concern in the context of the unprecedented refugee flows from war-torn Syria. Particularly in Europe, this concern only grew in the aftermaths of a series of terror plots and lethal attacks involving jihadists having posed as refugees to (re-)enter Europe undetected between 2013 and 2016. Sam Mullins provides a comprehensive analysis of the profiles, travel routes, and operational activities of jihadist terrorists having infiltrated Europe under the guise of refugees between 2011 and 2018. The author identified 144 individuals, referred to as "terrorist asylum-seekers".[192] Their travel patterns have largely "mirrored the broader flow of migrants," since their intention was precisely to enter Europe clandestinely. Half of them arrived in Europe at the peak of the migrant crisis in 2015,[193] and their journey typically started in Syria or Iraq, passing through Turkey, entering Europe via Greek islands, and continuing along the so-called "Balkan route".[194] The same applies to their methods of travel. As for genuine refugees, their travel was facilitated by smugglers, often

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187 Mullins, *Jihadist infiltration of migrant flows*, p.7.
188 National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, The 9/11 Commission Report: Final Report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, Official Government Edition, (July 22, 2004): 72.
189 Mbiyozo, "How Boko Haram specifically targets displaced people," p. 5.
190 Ibid.
191 News Wires, "Female suicide bombers strike fleeing villagers in northeast Nigeria," *France 24*, 19 October, 2015; Aminu Abubakar, "Eight killed in NE Nigeria suicide bombing: relief agency," *Relief Web*, 22 November 2015.
192 Among the 144 jihadist terrorists analysed, 38% were members of foreign terrorist organisations prior to entering Europe but without committing further offenses after arrival, while 35% (re-)entered Europe with the specific intent of carrying out terrorist activities, including support roles. About 13% conducted attacks in Europe, with a total of twelve completed attacks, and another 28% were involved in planning 23 thwarted and aborted plots. Sam Mullins, *Jihadist infiltration of migrant flows*, pp. 67-68.
193 Ibid., p. 46.
194 Ibid., pp. 43-45.

involving the use of false documents and facing substantial hardships, although a few managed to travel by plane directly from places like Damascus to Rome, or from Morocco to Portugal.[195]

French investigative journalist Matthieu Suc highlights that the Paris-Brussels attacks were the culmination of ISIS' deliberate strategy to build capacities for external operations, and to strategically exploit migration flows to conduct attacks in Europe.[196] Testimonies from European hostages reveal that ISIS had been gathering intelligence on asylum procedures as early as 2013, suggesting the organisation was already considering exploiting refugee flows.[197] Since at least mid-2014, ISIS had been establishing organisational structures to recruit and train European operatives, plan attacks, and provide logistical support and operational guidance to operatives tasked with carrying out operations in their home countries.[198] These efforts were orchestrated by the organisation's secret services, the *Amniyat*, particularly its clandestine operations branch, the *Amn al-Khajri*, allegedly headed by Belgian national Oussama Atar, alias Abou Ahmed.[199] By mid-2015, ISIS capitalised on the refugee crisis to covertly deploy operatives disguised as refugees on migration routes often using forged documents.[200] For instance, Mullins estimates that "including Abaaoud, at least twenty-seven ISIS operatives connected to the Paris attacks network [...] managed to infiltrate Europe posing as refugees."[201]

There are good reasons to believe that terrorist organisations continue to opportunistically exploit migration flows. This is notably the case of the Islamic State in the Khorasan Province (ISKP), which has reportedly taken advantage of the Russian invasion of Ukraine to infiltrate the massive flow of Ukrainian refugees to Europe. More than six million Ukrainians have sought protection in Europe since 2022, whereas Poland alone registered more than 25 million border crossings from Ukraine between February 2022 and October 2024.[202] In July 2023, the German authorities arrested seven individuals and the Netherlands two persons, who were suspected of preparing a "high profile attack" in Germany.[203] It is possible to assume that these individuals were already members of ISKP before infiltrating Europe, shortly after the Russian invasion in 2022, since they almost immediately started to collect money for the terrorist group in April 2022. Indeed, the head of the German intelligence services claimed that ISIS had infiltrated Europe via the flow of refugees from Ukraine.[204] In June 2024, the US authorities arrested eight Tajik nationals, suspected of membership to ISKP, who had entered US territory via the border with Mexico.[205]

Yet, it is crucial to recognise that despite these documented cases of terrorists infiltrating refugee flows, the evidence suggests that these instances are highly exceptional. As already stated in our introduction, terrorism remains predominantly a homegrown challenge, whereas refugees are statistically immensely more likely to flee terrorism than to be involved in terrorist activities. Our dataset (*see below*) further confirms that terrorist infiltration of refugee flows to plot an attack in Europe is a very rare – and declining – phenomenon.

In addition, as underlined by Koser and Cunningham, determining the scope of the instrumentalisation of migrant flows by terrorist organisations is further complicated by the fact that it is often unclear "whether these individuals were already radicalised to violent extremism

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195 Ibid., p. 43.
196 Suc, *Les espions de la terreur*.
197 Suc., *Les espions de la terreur*, pp. 186-187.
198 Brisard and Jackson, "The Islamic State's External Operations," p. 9.
199 Suc. Les espions de la terreur, pp. 196-198.
200 Brisard and Jackson, "The Islamic State's External Operations," p. 12.
201 Mullins, *Jihadist infiltration of migrant flows,* p. 4.
202 Operational Data Portal, "Ukraine Refugee Situation," n.d.
203 Deutsche Welle, "Germany Arrests 7 Suspected Members of Islamist Terror Group," 6 July, 2023.
204 Kyiv Post, "Germany Fears Moscow-Style Attack Against EURO 2024," 19 June, 2024.
205 Josh Campbell, "8 Tajikistan Nationals Arrested in Los Angeles, New York and Philadelphia. Some May Have ISIS Ties, Sources Say," *CNN*, 12 June, 2024.

when they arrived, became radicalised subsequently, or whether they were deliberately sent."[206] Analysing plots involving refugees or asylum seekers in Europe from early 2014 to late 2017, Simcox found that among the 44 individuals identified, 26 (59 percent) were already radicalised prior to their arrival in Europe.[207] These 26 individuals radicalised pre-migration were, however, responsible for less terrorist plots (10 out of 32 plots identified, 31.5 percent) than refugees and asylum seekers radicalised after arrival in Europe (12 plots, 37.5 percent).[208] Moreover, it should be carefully noted that the attacks in Paris (2015) and Brussels (2016) were executed by a network which, despite using refugee flows for malign intent, was largely composed of Europeans born and raised in Belgium and France (*see section on FTFs below*).[209]

While much attention has focused on the risks of jihadist infiltration through refugee flows, it is important to note that terrorists have also exploited other legal migration channels to conduct operations abroad. Nowrasteh's research shows that from 1975 to 2022, the majority (62 percent) of foreign-born terrorists in the US were lawful permanent residents or 'green card holders' (70 individuals), travelled on tourist visas (44 individuals), or student visas (22 individuals).[210] In contrast, refugees and asylum seekers accounted for only 9 percent (28 refugees and thirteen asylum seekers), and just 4 percent (nine individuals) were illegal immigrants.[211] Significantly, those travelling on tourist visas were responsible for 93 percent of the 3,046 deaths caused by foreign-born terrorists during this period, primarily due to the 9/11 attacks.[212] Indeed, eighteen of the terrorists who carried out the 9/11 attacks were in the country on tourist visas.[213] Among those entering the country on a green card was Sayfullo Habibullaevic Saipov, who killed eight persons in his Halloween attack in New York City in 2017.[214] Hani Hanjour, one of the 9/11 hijackers, entered the US on a student visa.[215] More recently, Muhammad Shahzeb Khan, a Pakistani citizen arrested in Quebec in September 2024 for allegedly planning to enter the US to conduct a mass shooting in support of ISIS at a Jewish Centre in New York, entered Canada in June 2023 also on a student visa.[216] Zacarias Moussaoui, involved in the 9/11 plot, entered the US under the Visa Waiver Program.[217] Additionally, Tashfeen Malik, responsible for the San Bernardino attack that left fourteen dead and seventeen injured on 2 December 2015, entered the US on a K-1 fiancé(e) visa, with evidence suggesting that "she likely entered the United States with the intent to commit an attack."[218]

Finally, to be comprehensive, terrorist militants may also cross borders to conduct non-violent activities, such as propaganda, fundraising, logistical support, or recruitment, as well as to seek refuge in other countries and evade national counter-terrorism efforts, exploiting legal and political differences between countries. For instance, historically, members of the Irish Republican Army (IRA) took advantage of countries like the Netherlands to evade British security forces. Similarly, ETA, the Basque separatist group, used France as a safe zone and logistical base, where they could avoid Spanish counter-terrorism efforts. Among the ISIS "infiltrators" in Europe, identified by Mullins, some were involved in promoting jihadist ideology and recruiting, others conducted reconnaissance and provided logistical support, such as procuring false documents

206 Khalid Koser and Amy Cunningham, "Migration, violent extremism and terrorism: Myths and realities," *Institute for Economics & Peace, Global Terrorism Index* (2015): 84.
207 Simcox, "The Asylum-Terror Nexus," p.9.
208 Ibid.
209 Mullins, *Jihadist infiltration of migrant flows*, p.69.
210 Alex Nowrasteh, "Terrorism and Immigration: A Risk Analysis, 1975-2022," *Cato Institute Policy Analysis,* no. 958 (2023): 2.
211 Ibid.
212 Ibid., p. 7.
213 Alex Nowrasteh, "Terrorists by Immigration Status and Nationality: A Risk Analysis, 1975-2017." *Cato Institute Policy Analysis*, no. 866 (2019): 24.
214 Ibid., p. 22.
215 Ibid., p. 15.
216 Darren Major, "Terror suspect accused of plotting attack in New York came to Canada on student visa: minister," *CBC News,* 10 September, 2024.
217 Nowrasteh, "Terrorists by Immigration Status and Nationality," pp. 15-16.
218 Ibid., p. 2.

and arranging travel, to facilitate the infiltration of other operatives and/or attacks, or operated money transfer businesses.[219] These diverse activities demonstrate the multifaceted role that terrorists posing as asylum-seekers played in furthering jihadist objectives within Europe.

Dataset of Attacks Perpetrated by (Individuals Posing as) Migrants in Europe

A dataset was developed in the context of this project, to document jihadi attacks conducted in the EU between 2014 and 2024, involving directly non-EU nationals – including irregular migrants, regular migrants with a resident permit, asylum seekers, and refugees (*see Glossary*) – as well as EU nationals who returned from conflict zones using migration routes and/or posing as asylum seekers – but excluding those who returned by legal routes.[220] Our dataset therefore excludes non-jihadi attacks, as well as jihadi attacks committed by domestic perpetrators.[221] We only considered completed attacks, as information on foiled and failed terrorist plots is often very fragmentary, if available at all. Furthermore, we only included attacks that had been clearly investigated or prosecuted as terrorist, hence excluding some cases where the terrorist motive had been rejected by prosecution.[222] This dataset is based on Europol's *European Union Terrorism Situation and Trend reports (TE-SAT)* covering the researched time period[223] and supplemented with open-source information.

In total, 55 individuals were identified as participants in 43 completed attacks across the EU,[224] between 2014 and 2024. The majority of the perpetrators (29 individuals, 53 percent) were either born in Europe (eight individuals, 15 percent) or had resided in Europe for over five years (21 individuals, 38 percent) prior to committing an attack. In contrast, only five individuals committed an attack one year after arriving in Europe or less, including the two Iraqi ISIS members who attacked the Stade de France in November 2015. A quarter of our dataset (fourteen individuals, 25 percent) were EU citizens, sometimes holding dual nationalities.

Regarding their legal status, less than a quarter of our dataset (thirteen individuals, 24 percent) were irregular migrants. The remaining perpetrators included individuals with a permanent residence permit (35 percent), EU nationals having infiltrated migrant routes to return from conflict zones (16 percent), refugees (9 percent), individuals with tolerated stay permits (7 percent) and asylum seekers (4 percent), as well as three individuals (5 percent) for which the legal status could not be determined. Additionally, eleven individuals were under expulsion orders at the time of the attack. Interestingly, Figure 2 (below) shows that the number of attacks committed by the combined group of irregular migrants, asylum-seekers, and individuals with a tolerated stay permit is relatively stable over the past decade, whereas the spike of attacks in 2015-2017 is more clearly attributable to EU nationals or individuals that had been residing legally in Europe (a number of which for more than ten years).

219 Mullins, *Jihadist infiltration of migrant flows*, p. 65.

220 For instance, the case of Mehdi Nemmouche, perpetrator of the attack against the Brussels Jewish Museum on 24 May 2014, was excluded. Nemmouche, a French citizen, travelled to Syria in the winter of 2013-2014 and joined IS. He tried to conceal his return to Europe and flew to Frankfurt via Turkey, Malaysia, Singapore, and Thailand. However, he neither posed as a refugee nor travelled via migration routes. He also did not use a false passport, but travelled under his real identity. As he did not meet our inclusion criteria, he was excluded from our dataset.

221 The total number of jihadi and non-jihadi attacks in Europe between 2014-2024 was not calculated as part of this project, and therefore no ratio could be inferred from our dataset.

222 For example, a vehicle ramming attack on a Berlin highway, by an Iraqi irregular migrant, seriously injured three people on 18 August 2020. Although this incident was classified as a jihadist attack in Europol's TE-SAT report, it was excluded from our dataset as a court later ruled out a terrorist motive. Associated Press, "Berlin highway attack suspect kept at psychiatric clinic," 1 January, 2022.

223 TE-SAT reports are available at : https://www.europol.europa.eu/publications-events/main-reports/tesat-report

224 For the sake of consistency of our data, the UK was excluded from our dataset as a result of Brexit.

Figure 2. Perpetrators per legal status
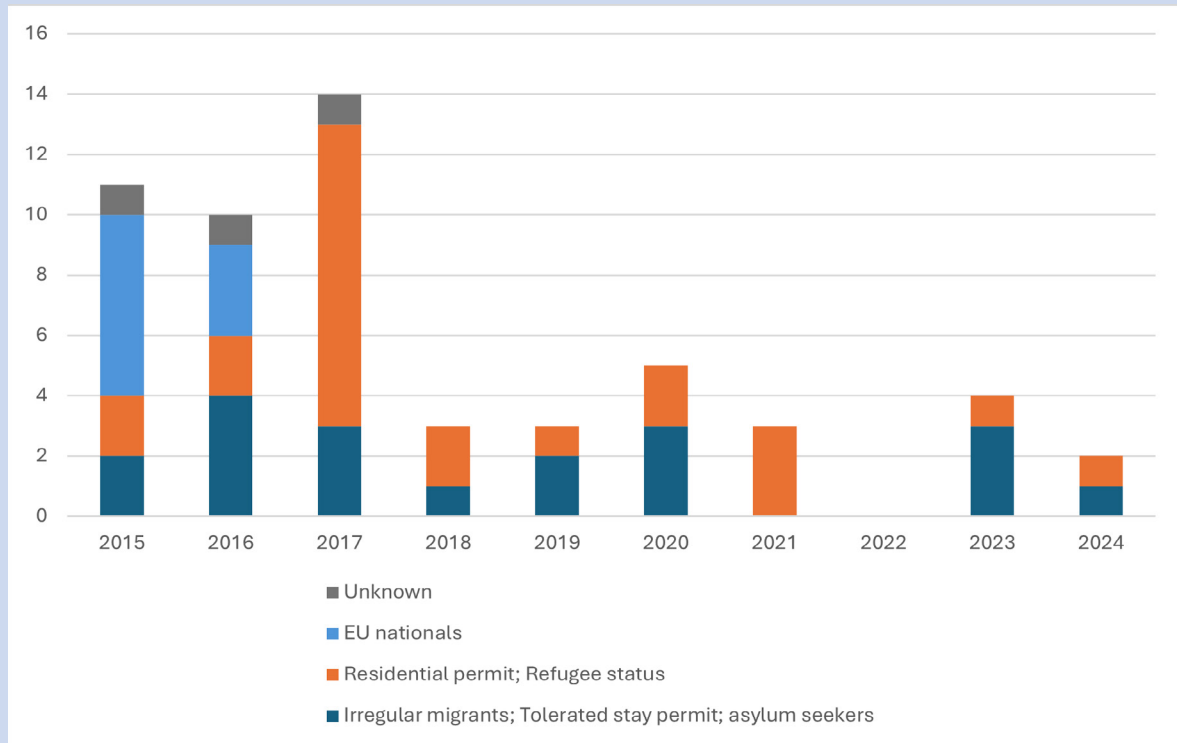
These attacks spanned across eight European countries, with France (nineteen attacks, 44 percent) and Germany (ten attacks, 23 percent) being the most affected, followed by Belgium, Spain, the Netherlands, Finland, Italy, and Sweden. Most of these attacks targeted civilians (34 attacks, 79 percent), and overall resulted in 316 deaths and 1,547 injuries. Following a peak in 2015-2017, the data shows a gradual decline in the frequency of attacks, the number of individuals involved, and associated casualties (*see Figure 3 below*), suggesting that the link between migration and terrorism has not grown as a threat over time.

Figure 3. Number of attacks, perpetrators, and deaths
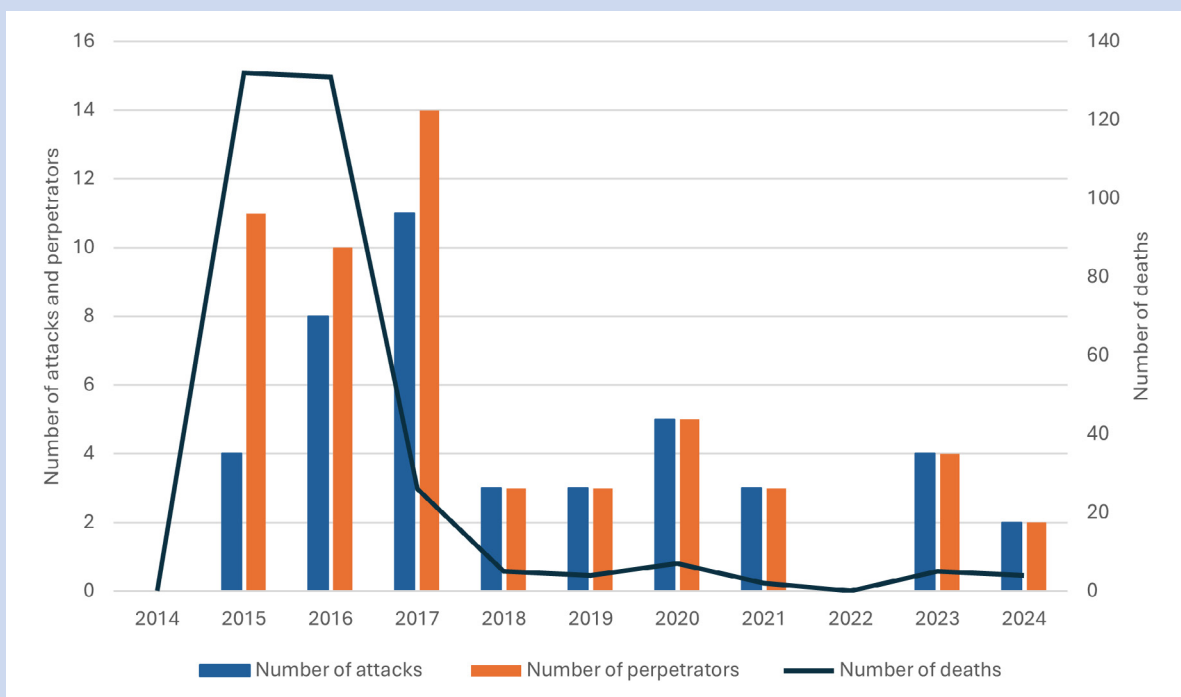
The Phenomenon of Foreign Terrorist Fighters (FTFs)

Between 2012 and 2019, approximately 50,000 individuals travelled from all around the world to join a terrorist organisation in Syria and Iraq, mainly ISIS. These so-called "foreign terrorist fighters" (FTFs) have been largely considered as terrorist militants by their home governments. Most of these individuals crossed several borders before reaching the Levant, usually combining a legal itinerary to Turkey with an illegal crossing of the border into Syria. These FTFs illustrate a corollary phenomenon to the one described above, that is the *emigration* of terrorists (as opposed to immigration). As pointed out by one scholar, with nearly 5,000 European citizens who joined a jihadi group in Syria in that period, Europe can also be considered as "an exporter of terrorists."[225]

The involvement of foreign fighters in conflicts is a long-established phenomenon which largely predates the Syrian civil war. Its roots can be traced back to at least the late eighteenth century, with David Malet's research notably highlighting foreign volunteers' involvement in the American Revolution, Simon Bolivar's liberation wars across South America in the 1810s, the Greek War of Independence in the 1820s, and the Italian Risorgimento in the 1860s.[226] While the phenomenon continued throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, with, for instance, some 50,000 foreign fighters engaging in the Spanish Civil War in the 1930s, research notes that "it was the transnational expansion of the jihadi movement by Sunni Arab militants that made foreign fighters a preeminent security threat."[227] The post-Cold War era indeed saw thousands of jihadi foreign fighters travelling to Afghanistan to fight against the Soviet occupation in the 1980s, to Bosnia and Chechnya in the 1990s, and among others, to Iraq, Somalia, and Yemen in the 2000s. Overall, David Malet estimates that around 100,000 foreign fighters participated in nearly 100 civil wars worldwide over the past 250 years.[228]

Yet, if the foreign (terrorist) fighters phenomenon is not new, neither is it unique to jihadi groups.[229] Research points to right-wing and left-wing extremists' participation in numerous conflicts throughout history, with, for instance, fascists and anti-fascists volunteers having fought on each side of the Spanish Civil War in the 1930s, neo-fascists having travelled to Lebanon to be trained in Falange camps in the early 1980s, and inter alia, both right-wing and left-wing extremists having fought in the Yugoslav Wars in the 1990s.[230] More recently, Europeans of right- and left-wing ideologies have reportedly engaged in the Syrian conflict as part of the broader, yet often overlooked, movement of anti-ISIS foreign fighters, fighting alongside Kurdish and Christian militias.[231] Similarly, the Russo-Ukrainian War, which began in 2014 and escalated with Russia's full-scale invasion in 2022, has also attracted some foreign fighters. It is estimated that approximately 17,000 foreign fighters from over 50 countries travelled to Ukraine between 2014 and 2019, among which "a significant but difficult to quantify number of right-wing extremists."[232] By contrast, research notes that the flow of right-wing foreign fighters to Ukraine since 2022 has been much smaller than anticipated.[233]

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225 Claudio Bertolotti, "Terrorism and immigration: links and challenges," p.43.
226 David Malet, "The European Experience With Foreign Fighters and Returnees," in Thomas Renard and Rik Coolsaet, "Returnees: Who are they, why are they (not) coming back and how should we deal with them. Assessing policies on returning foreign terrorist fighters in Belgium, Germany and the Netherlands", *Egmont Paper 101,* (2018): 7.
227 Ibid., p.8.
228 David Malet, "What Does the Evidence Tell Us about the Impact of Foreign Fighters on Home-grown Radicalisation?" Radicalisation Research Briefing, 5 July, 2015.
229 Ariel Koch, "The Non-Jihadi Foreign Fighters: Western Right-Wing and Left-Wing Extremists in Syria," *Terrorism and Political Violence 33*, no. 4 (2021): 685.
230 Ibid., p. 673.
231 While left-wing radicals have notably fought within the ranks of Kurdish militias, the International Freedom Battalion (IFB) and the International Revolutionary People's Guerrilla Forces (IRPGF), some right-wing militants—while reportedly representing a smaller cohort—initially joined the Kurdish forces, with some later deserted their ranks to join Christian militias such as the *Dwekh Naksha* (Self Sacrificers). See: Ibid., pp. 671-682.
232 Kacper Rekawek, "A trickle, not a flood: The limited 2022 far-right foreign fighter mobilization to Ukraine," *CTC Sentinel 15*, no. 6 (2022): 6.
233 Ibid., p. 7.

Whether Jihadist or extremist of other ideologies, the integration of foreign terrorist fighters into conflict zones and the prospect of their homecoming raise various challenges. Primary concerns are related to the role and influence these fighters may have on local conflicts. While foreign fighters might increase the strength of a local rebel force and the duration of conflict by bringing "resources such as fighters, know-how, weapons, and (access to) finance," they can also weaken a domestic insurgency by factionalising the rebellion and weakening popular support.[234] Foreign insurgents might notably introduce "new ideas about the meaning of the struggle and how it should be fought", which, if not aligned with the local context, can create intra-group divisions and local resistance.[235] For instance, the influx of foreign fighters in the Chechnya wars in the 1990s-2000s largely contributed to the re-framing of a secular nationalist struggle for independence towards an Islamist struggle. This ideological shift, combined with FTFs' introduction in the conflict of previously unseen tactics such as suicide terrorism, fuelled movement divisions and popular backlash.[236]

FTFs' presence can, moreover, adversely affect domestic and international perceptions of local insurgencies and, conversely, legitimise and boost international support for the government counter-insurgency.[237] In Chechnya, FTFs' presence and the rise in jihadist rhetoric among opposition movements enabled the Russian government to portray its heavy-handed response as part of the "Global War on Terror," reducing international support for the Chechen resistance.[238] Similarly, in Syria, the Assad regime leveraged the presence of FTFs to frame its actions as "an act of defence against an invasion of international 'terrorist' actors," stifling the underlying causes of the uprising and weakening Western support for the opposition.[239] Research on jihadi foreign fighters in Iraq in the early 2000s highlights how they progressively transformed "from instrumental actors in the fight against US forces to a liability for local insurgents."[240] This shift occurred as their enforcement of strict Salafi practices caused fractures within the insurgency, while their presence seemingly justified more intense airstrikes on areas where foreign fighters were active. Overall, research suggests that, contrary to common perceptions, the presence of FTFs can undermine the organisational cohesion and legitimacy of local insurgent movements— both in the eyes of local populations and international actors—outweighing any resources and skillsets they contribute to these conflicts.[241]

FTFs can also have influence well beyond the immediate conflicts they engage in. They can, for instance, contribute to recruiting more international fighters, spreading propaganda, as well as inspiring attacks elsewhere, or even playing a key role in the planification of these attacks. Research has notably highlighted their pivotal role in the global spread of Salafi-jihadism since the 1990s.[242] For instance, during the Bosnian war (1992-1995), foreign fighters effectively utilised logistical networks established during the Afghan-Soviet conflict – networks that included several hubs across Europe – to secure funding and weapons.[243] These resources, in turn, allowed them to recruit, train, and equip local forces, thereby reinforcing the international Salafi-jihadi movement.[244] The influence of Bosnian veterans endured long after the conflict, notably contributing to the planning of attacks abroad, as evidenced by their ties to multiple terrorist cells

234 Kristin M. Bakke, "Help Wanted? The Mixed Record of Foreign Fighters in Domestic Insurgencies," *International Security 38*, no. 4 (2014): 150-187.
235 Ibid., pp. 152-153.
236 Ibid., p. 185.
237 Ben Rich and Dara Conduit, "The Impact of Jihadist Foreign Fighters on Indigenous Secular-Nationalist Causes: Contrasting Chechnya and Syria," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism 38*, no. 2 (2014): 113-131.
238 Ibid., p. 119
239 Ibid., p. 123
240 R. Kim Cragin and Susan Stipanovich, "Metastases: Exploring the Impact of Foreign Fighters in Conflicts Abroad," *Journal of Strategic Studies 42*, no. 3-4 (2017): 415-416.
241 Ben Rich and Dara Conduit, The Impact of Jihadist Foreign Fighters on Indigenous Secular-Nationalist Causes: Contrasting Chechnya and Syria, *Networked Insurgencies and Foreign Fighters in Eurasia*, 2014, p. 113.
242 Cragin and Stipanovich, "Metastases".
243 Ibid., pp. 406-407.
244 Ibid., p. 408.

dismantled across Europe between 1995 and 2011.[245] These fighters also laid the foundation for recruitment networks that would channel fighters into the Syrian conflict decades later.[246] Similarly, in Iraq (2003-2008), FTFs – some with prior combat experience in Afghanistan – had a lasting impact on insurgency tactics, introducing and normalising violent methods, such as beheadings and suicide bombings, that continue to shape conflicts in the Middle East, North Africa, and beyond.[247]

More recently, FTFs' broader influence has been illustrated by ISIS foreign fighters having turned into so-called "virtual planners" responsible for inspiring and coordinating attacks against the West from afar.[248] Western FTFs have not only been instrumental in mobilising would-be jihadists living in the West, but have significantly contributed to attacks by providing aspiring plotters with technical and operational advice via encrypted messaging platforms.[249] A prominent example is Rachid Kassim, a French national having joined ISIS in 2015.[250] He is believed to have inspired and remotely coordinated several terrorist plots in France, including the June 2016 killing of a policeman and his partner by Larossi Abballa, the July 2016 murder of a priest in St.-Étienne-du-Rouvray by Adel Kermiche and Abdel Malik Nabil Petitjean, and the foiled car bombing near Notre Dame Cathedral in September 2016.[251]

Some research has also focused on the long-term risks posed by jihadi foreign fighters who have become "perpetual migrants" travelling from one jihadist hotspot to the next to engage in various insurgencies.[252] For instance, building upon a database of over 50 cases of Sunni jihadist "career foreign fighters" having fought with multiple non-state insurgent groups and/or across various conflicts, Daymon, de Roy van Zuijdewijn, and Malet argue that such individuals can "accumulate resources, develop skills, and transfer their abilities to new violent actors [and] pose a greater and broader security threat than returning, one-off foreign fighters."[253] With over one-third of their (relatively limited) sample having engaged in terrorist plots upon their return to their home countries, their study suggests that "career foreign fighters are more likely to pose security threats than average jihadist foreign fighters, of whom eleven to less than one percent are liable to engage in plots as returnees."[254] Authors finally note that beyond the fact that "a significant proportion have returned to become domestic terrorists,"[255] others have significantly contributed to "fortifying insurgencies elsewhere and successfully shaping the jihadist movement internationally."[256]

While a very large body of literature has emerged on the issue of FTFs over the past decade, focusing notably on the radicalisation, motivations, trajectories, and roles of these individuals,[257] a lot of research has actually centred on the threat of returning foreign fighters, that is, the threat that foreign fighters might actually pose upon their return to their home country. This stream of research was largely informed by the fear generated by terrorist attacks committed

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245 Ibid., p. 409.
246 Ibid.
247 Ibid., p. 415.
248 Bridget Moreng, "ISIS' Virtual Puppeteers: How They Recruit and Train 'Lone Wolve,'" *Foreign Affairs*, 17 January, 2023.
249 Ibid.
250 Ibid.
251 Ibid.
252 Schmid, "Links Between Terrorism and Migration," p. 43.
253 Chelsea Daymon, Jeanine de Roy van Zuijdewijn, and David Malet, Career Foreign Fighters: Expertise Transmission Across Insurgencies (Washington, D.C.: RESOLVE Network,2020), 2.
254 Ibid., pp. 17-18.
255 Ibid., p. 18.
256 Ibid., p. 18.
257 Daniel Byman, *Road warriors: Foreign fighters in the armies of jihad* (Oxford University Press, 2019); Thomas Hegghammer, "Should I Stay or Should I Go? Explaining Variation in Western Jihadists' Choice between Domestic and Foreign Fighting," *The American Political Science Review 107*, no. 1 (2013); Daan Weggemans, Edwin Bakker, and Peter Grol, "Who are they and why do they go? The radicalisation and preparatory processes of Dutch Jihadist foreign fighters," Perspectives on Terrorism 8, no. 4 (2014): 100-110; David Malet, "Foreign fighter mobilization and persistence in a global context," in: *Networked Insurgencies and Foreign Fighters in Eurasia* (Routledge, 2018),11-30; Thomas Renard and Rik Coolsaet, "Returnees: Who are they, why are they (not) coming back and how should we deal with them. Assessing policies on returning foreign terrorist fighters in Belgium, Germany and the Netherlands."

by returnees, notably in Europe between 2014 and 2016. There have been a few instances of blowback from foreign terrorist fighters in Europe prior to ISIS, such as attacks carried out in France by Mohammed Merah, who had previously received training in Egypt, Afghanistan, and Pakistan. Yet, "records from past conflicts seem to indicate that in most instances either they didn't come back in great numbers or that their returns to their home countries hardly made any impact."[258] While precise estimates vary across studies, research consistently indicates that only a small fraction of returnees become involved in domestic terror plots in their home countries.[259] For instance, as of late 2020, only about 2.3 percent of the European returnees from Syria and Iraq were involved in terror plots in Europe.[260]

Finally, some research also notes that individuals that were prevented from travelling for terrorism purposes (referred to as "failed" or "frustrated" FTFs) can be more dangerous than returnees.[261] In other words, the failure to emigrate can also result in terrorism. There have indeed been cases of individuals who were prevented from joining ISIS and instead launched domestic attacks, with this notably applying to the first completed jihadist attacks in Canada.[262] On 20 October 2014, Martin Couture-Rouleau drove his car into a group of Canadian soldiers in a parking lot near Montreal, killing one and wounding another soldier, and two days later, Michael Zehaf-Bibeau killed another soldier in a shooting spree in Ottawa's Parliament Hill – both perpetrators had reportedly attempted to travel to Syria prior to the attacks.[263] Similarly, Kujtim Fejzulai conducted an attack, killing four and injuring 23 individuals in Vienna in November 2020, after failing to travel to Syria.[264] Noting the prevalence of foreign fighting among Western jihadists between 1990 and 2010, a study by Hegghammer highlights that a variety of factors can motivate decisions to join insurgencies abroad. These may include opportunities and a willingness to receive training abroad, but most notably, the belief that foreign fighting is more legitimate than domestic fighting.[265] Assuming foreign fighting to be the default choice, the study points out two key factors that can lead to choosing domestic attacks instead: influence from veteran foreign fighters, who use their combat experience and authority to encourage domestic operations; and obstacles to travelling abroad, such as financial issues, lack of a passport, or surveillance by authorities.[266] The study also references several examples of jihadists who, after initially expressing an intention or attempting to fight abroad, carried out attacks at home, such as Jamal Ahmidan in the 2004 Madrid bombing and Samir Azzouz, a member of the Hofstad group, who had attempted to go to Chechnya in 2002.[267]

Radicalisation and Recruitment of Migrants, Asylum Seekers, and Refugees

This section focuses on the risks of radicalisation and recruitment of asylum seekers and first-generation migrants in various geographical and political contexts (radicalisation among second-generation migrants and diaspora communities is discussed in the following section). Evidence

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258 Renard and Coolsaet, "Returnees," p.71.

259 Jeanine De Roy van Zuijdewijn, "The foreign fighters' threat: what history can (not) tell us," *Perspectives on Terrorism 8,* no. 5 (2014); Thomas Hegghammer and Petter Nesser, "Assessing the Islamic State's Commitment to Attacking the West," *Perspectives on Terrorism 9*, no. 4 (2015).

260 Daniela Pisoiu and Thomas Renard, "Responses to returning foreign terrorist fighters and their families," *RAN Manual*, 2nd Edition, 2022, p.23.

261 David Malet, "European Experience With Foreign Fighters," p.17.

262 Ibid.

263 Counter Extremism Project, "Canada: Extremism and Terrorism," n.d.

264 Dženeta Karabegović and Asya Metodieva, "Deradicalization of Foreign Fighters and the Agency of Diaspora," *Nordic Journal of Migration Research 15*, no. 1 (2024): 7; Tanya Mehra and Julie Coleman, "Vienna Attack: The Path of a Prospective (Foreign) Terrorist Fighter, " *International Centre for Counter-Terrorism*, 16 November 2020.

265 Hegghammer, "Should I Stay or Should I Go?" p.7.

266 Ibid., pp. 11-12.

267 Ibid., p. 9.

suggests that radicalisation and recruitment by violent extremist groups can occur at various points throughout the migration process – whether during transit, in camps or reception centres, and later on after integrating within host communities.

First, research points to terrorist organisations taking advantage of migrants' vulnerability to forcibly conscript them along their journey.[268] Migrants travelling without protection and enduring tremendous hardship can become easy targets for militant armed groups operating along migratory routes. Some experts have suggested, for instance, that ISIS could prey on African migrants stranded in Libya, in an attempt to cross towards Europe.[269]

Additionally, refugee camps have, at times, become "breeding grounds" for radicalisation and recruitment by extremist organisations.[270] A well-known example is the recruitment of Afghan refugees in Pakistan during the 1980s, where camps near the Afghan border, especially in tribal areas with little control exerted by the national authorities, turned into key targets for mujahedeen recruitment.[271] Similarly, Palestinian refugee camps in Jordan and Lebanon have served as hubs for militant recruitment and activities, involving groups like the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO), fuelling decades of cross-border violence and regional instability.[272] The case of Rwandan refugees in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) following the Rwandan genocide provides another notable example.[273] Not only were Hutu armed extremists among refugees fleeing to DRC, but research indicates that the "relief community inadvertently allowed the militia members to distribute food to the refugees to gain support," enabling them to gain control over the camps.[274] Research by Jacobsen similarly notes that, at times, "the political control of entire camps has been taken over by militias, as occurred most famously in the Rwandan camps in Goma, but also in western Kenya (Kakuma camp), and by the Polisario in Mauritania and Algeria."[275]

Beyond these extreme scenarios of large-scale militarisation of refugee camps, there have been concerns of terrorist organisations attempting to recruit members within refugee camps worldwide, including reports warning against possible recruitment of Somali refugees from Kharaz camp in Yemen,[276] Boko Haram's recruitment of refugees from the Minawao camp in Cameroon,[277] ISIS' recruitment within the Akçakale refugee camp in Turkey,[278] or al-Shabaab recruitment of Somali refugees from the Dadaab camp in Kenya.[279] In Jordan, accounts have moreover emerged of Free Syrian Army (FSA) "recruiters with loudspeakers openly walking through Za'tari camp,"[280] alongside the identification of ISIS sleeper cells in a camp near Irbid.[281] Some instances provide anecdotal evidence of individuals recruited from camps getting involved in terrorist attacks, with, for example, one of the perpetrators of the 2013 Westgate attack in Nairobi reportedly being a refugee from the Kakuma camp in Kenya.[282]

268 Schmid, "Links Between Terrorism and Migration," p. 45.
269 Inga K. Trauthig, "Assessing the Islamic State in Libya," *ECTC Advisory Network Conference*, April 2019, 15.
270 Schmid, "Links Between Terrorism and Migration," p. 33; Sude, "Prevention of Radicalization in Refugee Camps," p. 241.
271 Schmid, "Links Between Terrorism and Migration," p. 36.
272 Ibid., p. 34.
273 Sude, "Prevention of Radicalization in Refugee Camps," p. 241.
274 Ibid., p. 242.
275 Karen Jacobsen, "Can Refugees Benefit the State? Refugee Resources and African Statebuilding," *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 40, no. 4 (2002): 577-596.
276 Khalid Koser and Amy Cunningham, Migration, violent extremism and terrorism: Myths and realities (Global Terrorism Index, 2015), pp. 83-85; Khalid Koser and Amy Cunningham, "Chapter 9–Migration, violent extremism and social exclusion," *World Migration Report* (2018): 7.
277 Koser and Cunningham, "Migration, violent extremism and social exclusion," p. 6.
278 Schmid, "Links Between Terrorism and Migration," p. 34.
279 Ibid., p.35; Koser and Cunningham, "Migration, violent extremism and social exclusion," p. 6.
280 Sude, "Prevention of Radicalization to Terrorism in Refugee Camps," p. 246; Marina Eleftheriadou, "The Dawn of the 'refugee-Warriors': Rebel Recruitment among the Syrian Refugee Population in Turkey, Jordan and Lebanon," *Middle East Bulletin* 27 (2015): 12; Jamal Halaby, "AP Exclusive: Syria Rebels Recruit at Refugee Camp," *AP News*, 11 November 2013.
281 Sude, "Prevention of Radicalization to Terrorism in Refugee Camps," p. 247; Mark Townsend, "ISIS Paying Smugglers' Fees in Recruitment Drive Among Child Refugees," *The Guardian*, 31 August, 2021.
282 Schmid, "Links Between Terrorism and Migration," p. 35.

Several conditions may influence the risk of radicalisation and recruitment within refugee camps. Research underlines host countries' policies, particularly those imposing restrictions on refugees' movements and access to employment, as key risk factors.[283] Increasing refugees' dependency on relief aid may be particularly problematic in situations where armed militants control and instrumentalise aid delivery to secure new recruits, as reportedly done by al-Shabaab militants.[284]

Moreover, the radicalisation risks for refugees are compounded by the type and location of their settlements, with isolated camps or those near conflict zones being particularly susceptible to become "places of temporary respite, recruits, and resources" for terrorist organisations.[285] Milton, Spencer, and Findley note that the more "isolated and segregated from society at large," the more opportunities for terrorist organisations to operate inside the camps and recruit while evading scrutiny,[286] as illustrated by the case of Afghan refugee camps in Pakistan's tribal areas. Salehyan and Gleditsch's empirical analysis further reveals that an influx of refugees coming from a neighbouring country can significantly raise the likelihood of host countries experiencing civil war, by facilitating the transnational transfer of arms, combatants, and ideologies.[287]

Conditions for youth, particularly their access to education, are also key, with research showing that some Syrian refugees in Jordan's Za'tari camp joined armed groups "partly because of boredom and lack of educational opportunities."[288] Schmid similarly notes that "the temptation to join the fight rather than wait in despair is real for many young men, especially when refugees cannot obtain education or employment and are isolated in camps for years."[289] As mentioned above regarding the delivery of aid, violent extremist groups have also been able to exploit gaps in educational services to diffuse their narratives and gain support among youth. This was notably the case in Pakistan in the 1990s, where "militant Islamist groups assumed responsibility for educating Afghan youth,"[290] as well as in Lebanon, where authorities "ceded control of the camps to the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO)," leaving an opportunity for militants to provide education and spread their narratives among young refugees.[291] Youth's susceptibility to extremist narratives may be further exacerbated by perceived discrimination, with research having shown that "young Somali refugees in Yemen were more likely to be radicalised than Somalis in Kenyan camps because they faced discrimination in Yemeni schools."[292]

Eleftheriadou moreover argues that refugees may have past military experience that renders them useful recruits for violent extremist networks, or may find themselves in close contact with radical milieus, often facilitated by inadequate supervision of relief efforts or the presence of former militants among them. This direct exposure to radical elements heightens the risk of radicalisation and engagement in terrorist activities.[293]

The author notes that host states' capacity and will to effectively manage refugee flows and address refugees' as well as local populations' grievances, including perceptions that refugee populations receive preferential treatment, play a key role in preventing violent escalation that may arise on both sides.[294] Similarly, Böhmelt, Bove, and Gleditsch's study found that refugee flows may increase the risk of intra-state violence in contexts marked by weak state institutions

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283 Koser and Cunningham, "Migration, violent extremism and terrorism," pp. 83-85; Koser and Cunningham, "Migration, violent extremism and social exclusion," p.8.

284 Sude, "Prevention of Radicalization to Terrorism in Refugee Camps," p. 248.

285 Marina Eleftheriadou, "Refugee Radicalization/Militarization in the Age of the European Refugee Crisis: A Composite Model," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 32, no. 8 (2020): 1809.

286 Milton, Spencer, and Findley, "Radicalism of the Hopeless," p. 627.

287 Idean Salehyan and Kristian S. Gleditsch, "Refugees and the Spread of Civil War," *International Organization* 60, no. 2 (2006): 335.

288 Sude, "Prevention of Radicalization to Terrorism in Refugee Camps," p. 244.

289 Schmid, "Links Between Terrorism and Migration," p. 36.

290 Sude, "Prevention of Radicalization to Terrorism in Refugee Camps," p. 244

291 Ibid., p. 241.

292 Ibid., p. 245.

293 Eleftheriadou, "Refugee Radicalization/Militarization," p. 1804.

294 Ibid., p. 1806.

with little capacity to manage and address the social and economic challenges raised by such flows, that are not in context of developed countries.[295] Lischer similarly points at the policies put in place by receiving states as being among the factors conditioning whether a refugee crisis will result in the spread of civil war.[296]

The ethnic composition of host societies may also play a role, with Rüegger's analysis of global refugee crises from 1975 to 2013 indicating that while refugees themselves are not *per se* a cause of conflict, their presence in ethnically tense environments can amplify existing tensions and grievances, especially when sharing ethnic ties with local marginalised groups.[297]

In Europe, and other developed countries, refugees and asylum-seekers are not immune to the risk of radicalisation or recruitment, as illustrated by some incidents in the past few years. While the threat is taken seriously by governments, little is actually known about the risk of radicalisation among asylum seekers in Europe.[298] Some individuals have allegedly radicalised in asylum reception centres. While such radicalisation is likely the result of a complex set of reasons, it may be facilitated by restrictions on asylum seekers' movement in crowded and often poorly resourced facilities, "isolated with few, if any, outside contacts,"[299] by the lack of access to employment and education, or by the uncertainties about their fate while awaiting a decision on their status – all factors that can fuel resentment, according to research.[300]

In some cases, terrorist recruiters have been able to access reception centres, either from the inside by posing as asylum seekers themselves and/or by taking advantage of poor security checks on visitors to access the reception centres from outside.[301] For example, two Moroccan nationals – Hicham el-Hanafi and Abdesselam Tazi – travelled to Portugal posing as asylum seekers, from where they acted as ISIS recruiters and indoctrinated other asylum seekers.[302] Similarly, a Somali imam was arrested in 2016 in an Italian reception centre for attempting to plan an attack and recruit fellow asylum seekers.[303] Additionally, a Europol report cited "unconfirmed information" that German authorities had detected around 300 attempts by terrorists to recruit refugees trying to enter Europe by April 2016,[304] and another report mentioned a member of ISIS, who was reportedly tasked with recruiting among refugees in Greece, before his arrest in Germany in 2017.[305] Koser and Cunningham mentioned the arrest of a teenage Syrian refugee in a refugee centre near Cologne in 2016 who was believed to have radicalised within the centre and planned to conduct an attack.[306] More recently, some intelligence services fear that ISKP is actively seeking to recruit asylum seekers entering Europe via Ukraine.[307]

Radicalisation to violent extremism may finally – and perhaps most prominently – start after settlement in receiving countries (whether before or after obtaining a legal status).[308] It is often difficult to determine whether an individual radicalised prior to or after arrival, notably due to limited cooperation and information exchange with authoritarian regimes impeding access to

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295 Tobias Böhmelt, Vincenzo Bove, and Kristian S. Gleditsch, "Blame the victims? Refugees, state capacity, and non-state actor violence," *Journal of Peace Research* 56, no. 1 (2019): 73-87.
296 Sarah K. Lischer, "Refugee Crises as Catalysts of Conflict," in *Dangerous Sanctuaries*, 1st ed. (NY: Cornell University Press, 2015), 10.
297 Seraina Rüegger. "Refugees, ethnic power relations, and civil conflict in the country of asylum." *Journal of Peace Research* 56, no. 1 (2019): 42-57.
298 Radicalisation Awareness Network, Preventing Radicalisation of Asylum Seekers and Refugees, 26 December, 2019.
299 Sude, "Prevention of Radicalization to Terrorism in Refugee Camps," p. 249.
300 Ibid.
301 Ibid.
302 Ibid.; Nuno Tiago Pinto, "The Portugal Connection in the Strasbourg-Marseille Islamic State Terrorist Network," *CTC Sentinel* 11, no. 10 (2018): 17-24.
303 Ibid.; Crispian Balmer, "Italy arrests Somali cleric over alleged plans for Rome attack," *Reuters*, 9 March, 2016.
304 Europol, "Changes in Modus Operandi of Islamic State Revisited," (November 2016): 9.
305 Sude, "Prevention of Radicalization to Terrorism in Refugee Camps," p. 247.
306 Koser and Cunningham, "Migration, violent extremism and social exclusion," p. 7.
307 United Nations Security Council, Thirty-fourth report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team submitted pursuant to resolution 2734 (2024) concerning ISIL (Da'esh), Al-Qaida and associated individuals and entities, July 2024, p. 15.
308 Koser and Cunningham, "Migration, violent extremism and social exclusion," p.8.

prior criminal records or other valuable information. Yet, there have been numerous cases of individuals having conducted terrorist attacks long after entering their host country, suggesting that they most likely started radicalising in-country. For instance, the Tsarnaev brothers, who conducted the Boston Marathon bombing on 15 April 2013, had entered the US as asylum seekers in 2002, when they were young children.[309] Similarly, Abdoullakh Anzarov, who murdered school teacher Samuel Paty in France on 16 October 2020, had arrived in France in 2007, at the age of six, with his family, obtaining a refugee status and later on a residence permit. Likewise, multiple members of the terrorist cell behind the 2017 attacks in Barcelona and Cambrils had arrived in Spain in the early 2000s as minors, only to start radicalising over a decade later.

Research underlines a number of factors that may play a role in such post-migration radicalisation processes. Upon reaching host states, individuals often face numerous challenges, including socio-economic disadvantages, discrimination, social exclusion, and cultural alienation. Faced with various hardships and feeling excluded in host societies, migrants "might develop resentment and with some that anger might become so strong that they [...] turn against the host society."[310] Emphasising the phase of reintegration into communities as a particularly critical moment, Sude argues that "the experiences of high and middle-income countries, such as European Union countries, Turkey, Jordan, and Lebanon, highlight particular risks in the transition from the refugee aid safety-net of a camp or asylum centre to integration."[311] Perešin similarly notes that even "after being granted official refugee status, there are still needs and conditions – like social marginalisation and discrimination, perceived grievances and injustice, the sense of not belonging and identity issues, alienation, disappointment and hopelessness – that can feed the breeding ground for radicalisation and increase vulnerability to recruitment."[312]

Furthermore, research by Eleftheriadou argues that refugees might carry pre-existing grievances related to the violent conditions they fled, sometimes along with 'survivor guilt', feelings of despair, and loss of control, which can be exacerbated by poor living conditions and socio-economic deprivation in host countries.[313] This "explosive baggage of grievances" can lead to radicalisation, "render[ing] involvement in militant organizations a socially meaningful and economically rewarding activity."[314] Other research underscores the importance of "emotional trauma and mental health issues" and the need to consider their impact on refugees' "integration in their host countries' societies, including factors like acquiring language skills, ability to find work, economic independence, and personal quality of life."[315]

Research moreover underlines the need to consider "those excluded from the procedures by being denied asylum."[316] Asylum denial and the resulting risk of deportation have severe consequences for individuals, which could trigger radicalisation or violent action. Mullins underlines that "the significance of having an asylum claim rejected will vary from person to person."[317] Its effect on someone's decision to turn to terrorism is impossible to assess precisely. In the case of Abderrahman Bouanane, the Finnish authorities determined that the rejection of his asylum claim had not directly motivated his decision to conduct a stabbing attack, killing two people and injuring eight others in Turku, in August 2017.[318] However, "where other risk indicators are present (most notably, engagement with extremist individuals or propaganda and a history of violence), rejection of asylum should be viewed as a potentially exacerbating factor."[319] There

309 Alex Nowrasteh, "Terrorists by Immigration Status and Nationality," p.25.
310 Schmid, "Links Between Terrorism and Migration," p. 45.
311 Sude, "Prevention of Radicalization to Terrorism in Refugee Camps," p. 248.
312 Radicalisation Awareness Network, *Preventing Radicalisation of Asylum Seekers*, p. 1.
313 Eleftheriadou, "Refugee Radicalization/Militarization,", pp. 1801-1802.
314 Ibid., p.1797; p.1809.
315 Radicalisation Awareness Network, *Preventing Radicalisation of Asylum Seekers,* p. 2,
316 Ibid.
317 Mullins, Jihadist infiltration of migrant flows, p.73.
318 Ibid.; Aleksi Teivainen, "KRP: Turku knifeman saw himself as a soldier of Isis," *Helsinki Times*, 8 February, 2018.
319 Mullins, *Jihadist infiltration of migrant flows,* p.74.

have indeed been examples of individuals committing terrorist attacks after being denied asylum in Europe, as illustrated by the attack in Solingen, Germany, on 23 August 2024. The attacker Issa Al H, a 26-year-old Syrian, had his asylum claim denied in Germany in 2023 and was facing deportation to Bulgaria, but escaped authorities' surveillance.[320] In the UK, the Iraqi-born failed asylum seeker Emad al-Swealmeen, who died after detonating a bomb outside of a hospital in Liverpool in November 2021, reportedly "bore a grudge against the state because his asylum claim was rejected."[321] In the longer run, those denied asylum who decide to stay in the host country are condemned to clandestine life, at the margins of society. Such situations make these individuals more vulnerable to radicalisation, recruitment, or exploitation by terrorist groups, although virtually no research has focussed on this particular group, at least in Europe. However, practitioners underscore that "those who are denied asylum are even more vulnerable due to their status, expectation of repatriation and the uncertain future in the countries they are returned to."[322]

Finally, research has also explored radicalisation dynamics among broader expatriate communities and labour migrants. For instance, Sageman underlines the case of Middle Eastern expatriate students coming from upper-middle-class families who, separated from their families and feeling marginalised, sought companionship through student associations or local mosques and radicalised in European host countries.[323] A typical example includes the Hamburg group, which was composed of Middle Eastern students in Germany who radicalised together and decided to travel to join al-Qaeda in Afghanistan and later formed the core leadership for the 9/11 attacks.[324] More recent examples include Younes Abouyaaqoub, born in Morocco and living with his family in Spain since he was 4 years old, who killed 24 people and injured 152 others in Barcelona in August 2017,[325] and Jamel Gorchane, who had arrived illegally in France in 2009 and killed a police office in Rambouillet on 23 April 2021.

Additionally, as discussed by Heathershaw and Lemon, the Central Asian context reveals that many individuals from the region who joined ISIS were found to have radicalised after migrating to foreign countries as labour migrants, with notably over 80 percent of ISIS Tajik fighters having been recruited while working in Russia.[326] Authors argue that two factors played a significant role, namely the social exclusion and economic hardship in which many Central Asian labour migrants find themselves while living abroad and working in "jobs far below their capacity," and the transnational repressive actions of their home governments.[327]

In summary, migrants', asylum seekers', and refugees' radicalisation towards violent extremism can be influenced by a complex set of personal grievances, socio-economic conditions, identity factors, settlement patterns, local policies, and eventually, the presence of local radical networks seeking to recruit. It is also essential to remember that it remains a very rare phenomenon. In Europe, our dataset showed that only a small number of refugees and asylum-seekers (seven out of 55 perpetrators identified) have been involved in terrorist attacks. Figures mentioned in the introduction of this report suggest that a larger number of refugees might be considered a potential terrorist threat by European security services, likely in the few hundreds. However,

320 Paul Kirby, "Germany Resumes Afghan Deportations After Mass Stabbing in Solingen," *BBC,* 29 August, 2024.
321 Jamie Grierson, "Liverpool Hospital Bomber Had Asylum Claim Grievance, Policy Inquiry Finds," *The Guardian*, 8 November, 2024.
322 Radicalisation Awareness Network, *Preventing Radicalisation of Asylum Seekers*, p. 2.
323 Sageman, *Leaderless Jihad*, pp. 67-68.
324 Ibid., p. 66.
325 Debbie Mohnblatt, "Jihadist Recruiters Prey on Migrants to Europe," *The Jerusalem Post*, 17 January, 2023; Nacho Carretero, "Shy, a Good Student and a Car Fanatic: Suspected Driver in Barcelona Attack," *El Pais,* 22 August, 2017.
326 John Heathershaw et al., "How Can We Explain Radicalisation Among Central Asia's Migrants?" *Open Democracy*, 2 May, 2017.
327 Ibid.

and it is important to insist on this point, these numbers are infinitesimally small compared with the 8,464,330 first-time asylum applications filed in EU countries between 2014 and 2024, as recorded by Eurostat.[328]

The Role of Diaspora

Research into the nexus between migration and terrorism has delved into the complex role of diaspora communities, including second- and third-generation immigrants. It has been argued that diasporas may transpose intercommunal tensions from their home countries into host nations, as seen in tensions observed between Pakistani and Indian diasporas in the United Kingdom, or Turks and Kurds in Germany.[329]

Among the different types of support that can be provided by diaspora communities, research notes that "financial assistance is far and away the most common form of assistance that diasporas provide to insurgent movements."[330] Such international funding is particularly strategic to support the functioning of terrorist organisations (to pay salaries, to buy weapons and ammunition, etc.) and allows these organisations to circumvent financial attrition resulting from domestic counter-terrorism efforts. Research indicates that terrorist groups that benefit from material support from transnational ethnic diasporas are more resilient over time.[331] Notable examples include the Kurdish Workers Party (PKK)'s reliance on Kurds in Germany and the Provisional Irish Republican Army's (PIRA) reliance on Irish-Americans to get funds.[332] Similarly, research has explored the international support structure developed by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) among Tamil diaspora communities in Western states, particularly the UK, Canada, Australia, France, and Switzerland. [333] Research estimates that the LTTE has benefitted from up to 1.5 million USD a month, most of which would originate from taxes imposed on Tamil families living in these countries.[334]

Beyond securing funds, diasporas can also play important roles in spreading groups' propaganda and supporting their political activities. LTTE has, for instance, benefitted from the support of a wide range of front organisations – including pressure groups, media, charities, and non-governmental organisations – established in Western countries hosting important Tamil communities.[335] Lobbying and propaganda, disseminated online as well as through traditional media and in-person gatherings, has allowed the group to gain legitimacy in the West as "a genuine national liberation movement engaged in a legitimate struggle for independence" in the 1990s.[336] Research underlines that the effectiveness of LTTE's diaspora-backed publicity campaigns can be seen in how "Western politicians are often reluctant or averse to supporting tough actions against the LTTE and its activities among its diaspora." There have been other instances where diasporas communities have "generated political pressure on their various host governments to help insurgents [abroad] or to otherwise oppose the governments they are fighting," as is, for example, the case of Armenian and Kurdish diasporas in support for insurgents in Turkey.[337]

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328 This number includes first-time asylum applications filed across the 27 EU Member States from January 2014 to December 2024, with the UK having been excluded over the whole period, Eurostat, Asylum applicants by type, citizenship, age and sex - monthly data.
329 Schmid, "Links Between Terrorism and Migration," p. 38.
330 Daniel Byman et al., "Diaspora Support for Insurgencies," in *Trends in Outside Support for Insurgent Movements* (1st ed., pp. 41), RAND Corporation.
331 James A. Piazza, "Transnational Ethnic Diasporas and the Survival of Terrorist Organizations," *Security Studies* 27, no. 4 (July 2018).
332 Byman et al., "Diaspora Support".
333 Ibid., p. 41.
334 Ibid., p. 50.
335 Ibid., p. 44.
336 Ibid., p. 45.
337 Ibid., p. 59.

Diasporas have also, at times, been used for operational purposes. For instance, "Hezbollah has also used the Lebanese Shi'a diaspora to gather intelligence abroad, including information that has aided the group in conducting terrorist attacks on Israeli targets overseas."[338] In the 1990s, Belgium and France served as rear bases for terrorist networks like the Moroccan Islamic Combatant Group (GICM) and the Algerian Armed Islamic Group (GIA), which used these countries to hide some of its members among local diasporas, and to procure material assistance for terrorist operations abroad, whereas London (nicknamed "Londonistan") became in the same period a refuge for radical preachers and recruiters.[339]

Such support can be voluntary or coerced. Some diaspora members may voluntarily back insurgent groups due to "a genuine sympathy for the domestic struggles of their overseas kin," "a sense of guilt because they are safe while their kin are involved in a brutal and bloody struggle," or "for ideological as well as communal reasons," as was the case for many Palestinians supporting the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine or the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine.[340] Others are coerced into supporting certain groups, with research highlighting that while diasporas' financial contributions to the LTTE are generally made on a voluntary basis, the group has reportedly also resorted to intimidation, for instance, by threatening relatives remaining in the country of origin, to coerce unwilling contributors.[341]

Diasporas can also serve as pools of potential recruits for terrorist organisations. Major attacks in Europe have been conducted by diaspora members, often second or third generation. For instance, many of the members of the terrorist cell behind the 2015 Paris attacks and 2016 Brussels attacks were EU citizens of migrant background. Exploring jihadist terrorism in France between 2012 and 2016, Meyer notes that "although there are few migrants among the terrorists, they all have an immigrant background. Their geographical origin or that of their parents is in the Maghreb, in countries whose nationality they may have retained."[342] Notably, a vast majority of the European youngsters who radicalised and joined a jihadi group in Syria and Iraq after 2012 were of migrant descent, mostly second- and third-generation immigrants.[343] This was also true for previous waves of mobilisation for the jihad, including in Iraq (after 2003),[344] or for the recruitment in the so-called "Londonistan". More recently, European intelligence services have warned that ISKP was actively targeting "Afghan and Central Asian diasporas in Europe as potential recruits",[345] and there has indeed been a growing number of terrorist plots involving Afghan and Central Asian individuals in Europe over the past few years.

Research into the drivers of radicalisation within diaspora communities highlights a complex interplay of social, economic, cultural and identity factors. While remaining "exceedingly rare for members of this population to turn to terrorism," research from Stroink suggests that second-generation immigrants can experience a bicultural struggle, feeling disconnected from both their heritage culture and the mainstream society in their host countries.[346] This sense of isolation can lead some to radicalisation and to seek belonging and identity through extremist groups.

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338 Ibid.
339 Pieter van Ostaeyen, "Belgian Radical Networks and the Road to the Brussels Attacks," *Combating Terrorism Center* 9, no. 6 (June 2016); Paul Cruickshank, "The 2008 Belgium Cell and FATA's Terrorist Pipeline," *Combating Terrorism Center* 2, no. 4 (April 2009); Robert S. Leiken, "The Lords of Londonistan," in *Europe's Angry Muslims: The Revolt of The Second Generation* (Oxford University Press, 2011).
340 Byman et al., "Diaspora Support", p. 56.
341 Ibid., p. 50.
342 Meyer, "Le lien entre migration et terrorisme, " p. 52.
343 Bibi van Ginkel and Eva Entenmann (Eds.), "The Foreign Fighters Phenomenon in the European Union. Profiles, Threats & Policies," *The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism* 7, no. 2 (2016); Dženeta Karabegović and Asya Metodieva, "Deradicalization of Foreign Fighters and the Agency of Diaspora," *Nordic Journal of Migration Research* 15, no. 1 (2024): 2.
344 Rik Coolsaet, "Facing the Fourth Foreign Fighters Wave: What Drives Europeans to Syria, and to Islamic State? Insights from the Belgian Case," *Egmont Paper* 81 (March 2016): 19.
345 Thirty-fourth report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team submitted pursuant to resolution 2734 (2024) concerning ISIL (Da'esh), Al-Qaida and associated individuals and entities, United Nations Security Council, July 2024, p. 15.
346 Mirella L. Stroink, "Processes and Preconditions Underlying Terrorism in Second-Generation Immigrants," *Peace and Conflict* 13, no. 3 (2007): 293–312.

Schmid similarly observes that "some children of immigrants to Western diasporas, insufficiently integrated into the host society and being caught between two cultures, have, in a search for identity and meaning, looked at jihadists as role models."[347]

This quest for identity is often fuelled by real or perceived discrimination and socio-political grievances. Elaborating on the profiles of second-generation immigrants who eventually turned to terrorism, Sageman describes a population that, after experiencing discrimination, socio-economic exclusion, and generally following a prior involvement in criminal activities, turned to religious extremism to find hope and purpose.[348] Extremist narratives allow for the interpretation of their personal experiences of socio-economic exclusion and marginalisation through the lens of a broader Western hostility against Islam.[349] In other words, some became "attracted to the global Islamist terrorist interpretation that they were excluded from the economy because the West was engaged in a war against Islam."[350] This mechanism is believed to have played a role in leading some "to identify with jihadis in Afghanistan, Chechnya, Iraq, Somalia, and Syria."[351] Examining the case of Belgium, Coolsaet's research emphasises that Belgian citizens with a non-European family background "are overrepresented in the lower rungs of most socio-economic categories," facing obstacles in employment, education, and housing markets.[352] They are disproportionally affected by unemployment and represented in "vulnerable and ill-paid temporary jobs."[353] The persistence of urban segregation and social inequity, compounded by high unemployment rates and educational disparities, creates breeding grounds for feelings of frustration and abandonment. Moreover, widespread discrimination based on ethnic and religious backgrounds may further exacerbate this sense of alienation, with Coolsaet underlying that

> the children and grandchildren of the migrant workers that Belgian (and other European) authorities invited to come en masse in the 1960s to compensate for domestic labour shortages are still being confronted on a daily basis with their origins. They are still routinely labelled 'migrant communities' – notwithstanding the fact that these families have now been present on European soil for three or four generations, and that many of them have acquired Belgian (or other European) nationality.[354]

This sense of exclusion, particularly felt among Belgian-Moroccan families, reveals how socio-economic and cultural inequalities contribute to the broader issue of radicalisation among second-generation immigrants.[355] This environment, where identity politics plays an increasingly significant role, pushes some to define themselves more by their religious affiliations than by their national identity, creating a fertile ground for radical ideologies to take root.[356] Olivier Roy describes this phenomenon as "the Islamisation of radicalism" to emphasise that the religious dimension is secondary to the deeper social, identity, and generational discontent that finds expression through it.[357]

In such conducive environments, various social networks may contribute to mobilising young diaspora members into terrorist groups. First, migration flows often follow patterns that create "small clusters of people," bringing together, in the host states, family and friends from the same regions of origin, which can facilitate trust and resource transfer. In the UK, for instance, "many of the second-generation, homegrown terrorists arrested in Britain were children of people who came from the Mirpur district of Azad Kashmir."[358] This pattern underscores the importance of

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347 Schmid, "Links Between Terrorism and Migration," p. 4.
348 Sageman, *Leaderless Jihad*, pp. 68-69.
349 Ibid., p. 84.
350 Sageman, *Leaderless Jihad*, pp. 68-69.
351 Schmid, "Links Between Terrorism and Migration," p. 39.
352 Coolsaet, "Facing the Fourth Foreign Fighters Wave," p. 31.
353 Ibid.
354 Ibid., p. 32.
355 Ibid., p. 34.
356 Ibid., p. 33.
357 Olivier Roy, "Le Djihadisme Est Une Révolte Générationnelle Et Nihiliste," *Le Monde*, 30 November, 2015.
358 Sageman, *Leaderless Jihad*, pp. 84-85.

social networks and transnational connections in the radicalisation process, with many terrorists radicalised together with friends or through connections established in the host country. Other important social networks include "radical Muslim student associations," as well as "study groups that formed around radical mosques," such as groups formed around the M-30 Mosque in Madrid or the Finsbury Park mosque in London.[359] Other research underlines that "the role of diaspora-based influencers became particularly evident in the recruitment of FTFs," as illustrated by the case of Misrad O., who was sentenced in 2016 for recruiting FTFs in Austria.[360]

It is, however, important to note that diaspora communities are not monolithic blocs, nor are they all facing the same challenges.[361] Various factors can influence diaspora communities' resilience. For instance, a study examining the integration of Turkish and Moroccan diasporas in Belgium found that Belgian-Moroccan communities face greater social mobility challenges, compared to their Belgian-Turkish peers.[362] Whereas Belgian-Moroccans are better integrated into Belgian society and have a higher social capital (average education, salary, etc.), they are also discriminated against by the host society, which largely limits their social ascendance. In contrast, Belgian-Turks are less well integrated within Belgian society and have a lower social capital, but benefit from a greater community cohesion, which allows a degree of social mobility within the Turkish diaspora community. This study sheds light on the nuanced effects that various levels of integration can have on communities, which can result in different levels of resilience to radicalisation.[363] Indeed, Belgian-Moroccans have been much more vulnerable to radicalisation compared to Belgian-Turks.[364]

As research has traditionally focused on diaspora communities' support for violent extremist groups, some scholars are emphasising the need to examine their role in fostering resilience against or preventing radicalisation, and supporting disengagement from violent extremism, an aspect that has been largely "understudied and undertheorized."[365] In Austria, for example, promising initiatives at the city level work with diaspora groups to foster community ties and promote intercultural dialogue to prevent radicalisation.[366] However, research also notes that diaspora communities may sometimes be reluctant to directly engage in such initiatives due to "a fear of association with 'radicalization' or 'extremism' in communities that may be politicized to begin with."[367]

Lastly, it should also be noted that diaspora communities can be the targets of transnational repression from their countries of origin – actions that in some instances might constitute "state terrorism."[368] Hostile tactics can include surveillance, harassment, and threats to family members who remain in the home country. For instance, reports indicate that Chinese authorities have pressured Uyghurs in exile by detaining relatives back home and resorting to 'passport blackmail' – denying overseas citizens passport renewals through their embassy – to coerce them into spying on fellow diaspora members or returning to China. Such efforts to silence dissent can go as far as assassination attempts, as illustrated by the attempted murder of former Russian intelligence officer Sergei Skripal and his daughter in March 2018, widely attributed to the Russian state.[369] This case notably echoes the 2006 murder of Alexander Litvinenko, a British-naturalised Russian defector of

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359 Ibid., pp. 85-86.
360 Karabegović et al., "Deradicalization of Foreign Fighters," p.7.
361 Sara K. Thompson, and Sandra M. Bucerius, "Transnational Radicalization, Diaspora Groups, and Within-Group Sentiment Pools: Young Tamil and Somali Canadians on the LTTE and al Shabaab," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 31, no.3 (2017): 577–94.
362 Corinne Torrekens et al., "Belgo-Marocains, Belgo-Turcs: (auto)portrait de nos concitoyens," *Foundation Roi Badouin*, no. 3323 (2015).
363 Ibid.
364 Pieter van Ostaeyen and Guy Van Vlierden, "Citizenship and Ancestry of Belgian Foreign Fighters," *International Centre for Counter-Terrorism*, Policy Brief, 2018.
365 Karabegović and Metodieva, "Deradicalization of Foreign Fighters".
366 Ibid., p. 12.
367 Ibid., p. 13.
368 Alex P. Schmid, "Repression, state terrorism, and genocide: conceptual clarifications," In: P. Timothy Bushnell, Vladimir Shlapentokh, Christopher Vanderpool, Jeyaratnam Sundram, eds., *State organized terror* (New York: Routledge, 1992): 23-37.
369 Italy, U.S. Mission, "Putin's Poisons: 2018 Attack on Sergei Skripal," *U.S. Embassy and Consulates in Italy*, 12 April, 2022.

the FSB and fierce critic of the Kremlin, killed in London after ingesting radioactive polonium-210[370] - a murder later ruled by the European Court of Human Rights as directed by the Kremlin.[371]

Crime-Migration-Terrorism Nexus

The migration-terrorism nexus overlaps occasionally with another nexus: terrorism and crime. The literature has highlighted several key dynamics where crime, terrorism, and migration intersect, especially in regions experiencing significant migratory flows. However, in spite of a growing body of literature on the crime-terror nexus, only very little research attention has been given to the migration-crime-terrorism nexus.

Schmid notes that, as people flee zones targeted by attacks or falling under terrorists' control, violent extremist groups not only get immediate benefit from looting the possessions that displaced populations leave behind, but can also get a share of the profits generated by criminal smugglers.[372] Terrorist groups often exploit population movements by setting up checkpoints to leverage taxes and/or by coercing human smugglers to share their profits.[373] In Libya, for instance, the Islamic State controlled stretches of the Mediterranean coast and reportedly benefitted financially from human smuggling activities.[374] The potential financial gains for terrorist groups from human smuggling are significant, with estimates suggesting that profits shared with terrorists in Libya alone could have exceeded $100 million in 2015.[375] Some reports pointed to even higher sums, highlighting that "the migration has proved an invaluable business opportunity for groups like ISIS"[376] – so much so that the group "may have been deliberately intended to increase the flow of refugees along smuggling routes that the organisation controls, in order to provide additional revenues."[377]

Along the same lines, Sumpter and Franco's study of contemporary relationships between terrorist organisations, criminality, and migration flows in Europe and Southeast Asia similarly highlights how terrorist organisations have made significant profits by exacerbating migrant flows through attacks on civilians and refugee camps, and subsequently profiting financially by taxing migrants.[378]

Choi and Salehyan underline that "the infusion of aid resources during refugee crises—including food, medical supplies, and vehicles—provides opportunities for looting and theft by violent groups."[379] They moreover argue that such crises also create further opportunities for armed groups to abduct relief workers to be held for ransom.[380] Reports have moreover indicated that refugee camps can be used for smuggling weapons, including, for instance, in Kenya.[381] Furthermore, Eleftheriadou importantly notes that deprivation and the lack of means of subsistence in refugee camps "often creates parallel economies" where criminal activities flourish, which "also indirectly lead to militarization by breeding insecurity and small arms circulation in the refugee settlements."[382]

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370 Luke Harding, "Alexander Litvinenko: The Man Who Solved His Own Murder," *The Guardian*, 29 November, 2017.
371 Frank Gardner, "Russia Behind Litvinenko Murder, Rules European Rights Court," *BBC News*, 21 September, 2021.
372 Schmid, "Links Between Terrorism and Migration," p. 27.
373 Ibid.
374 Ibid., p. 27.
375 Ibid., p. 28.
376 Vivienne Walt, "ISIS Makes a Fortune From Smuggling Migrants Says Report," *TIME*, 13 May, 2015.
377 RHIPTO, and Global Initiative against Transnational Organized Crime, "Libya: A Growing Hub for Criminal Economies and Terrorist Financing in the Trans-Sahara," Policy Brief (11 May, 2015): 8.
378 Cameron Sumpter and Joseph Franco, "Migration, Transnational Crime and Terrorism: Exploring the Nexus in Europe and Southeast Asia," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 12, no. 5 (2018): 40.
379 Choi and Salehyan, "No good deed goes unpunished," pp. 53-75.
380 Ibid.
381 Erick Ochieng Otieno, Felistus Mwikali, and Norvy Paul, "Refugees and National Security in Kenya: A Case Study of Eastleigh, Kamukunji Constituency, Nairobi County," *International Journal of Public Policy and Administration* 5, no. 1 (2022): 87 – 111.
382 Eleftheriadou, "Refugee radicalization/militarization," p.1810.

As part of an analysis exploring terrorist infiltration of migrant flows to Europe, Mullins underlines how 'terrorist asylum-seekers' often have "substantial connections to criminality."[383] The Paris-Brussels network is a prime example, where members with criminal histories were "connected to a variety of smugglers, arms traffickers, and drug dealers."[384] Approximately a quarter of terrorists having posed as asylum-seekers identified by Mullins have reportedly used smugglers along their journey, and a notable number have "directly engaged in organised crime," including people smuggling, fraud, counterfeiting, and drug dealing.[385] Additionally, "incidental criminality", such as petty theft, was observed among twenty percent of these individuals, indicating that low-level crimes are also prevalent among terrorist operatives posing as asylum-seekers.[386] Sumpter and Franco moreover note that the clearest "link between migration, organised crime, and terrorism can be found in the forged document industry, which the Islamic State appears to have both sought as a service and possibly emulated."[387]

Finally, terrorists commit crimes when crossing borders illegally, using fake identities and forged documents. As a result, they could be – and have been – prosecuted for such crimes, in addition to or in place of terrorism.

Migrants as Targets of Terrorism

Quantitative studies attempting to measure the correlation between migration and terrorism have yielded sometimes contradictory results, as discussed in the introduction. Yet, it is interesting to note that some scholars found that refugees are more likely to be victims than perpetrators.

Overall, a significant body of research disputes the claim that migration increases the risk of terror in host countries solely because of terrorist activities committed by migrants and refugees themselves, and rather emphasises the effect of "reactionary violence in response to changes in refugee flow and perceived threats."[388] The research by Gineste and Savun, based on a dataset of refugees' involvement in violence in their host state, either as victims or perpetrators, between 1996 and 2015, found that globally, "a larger number of host states experienced terrorist attacks against refugees than terrorist attacks by refugees" adding that "this overall pattern seems to have picked up in recent years."[389]

Similarly, research by Polo and Wucherpfennig, covering 161 countries from 1970 to 2016, finds no significant effect of hosting sizable refugee stocks from countries hosting transnational terrorist organisations on the probability of terrorist attacks against domestic targets in OECD countries.[390] By contrast, this research shows that "refugees and refugees' co-nationals from terror exporting countries are disproportionately likely to become the targets of (right-wing) terrorism in host states," especially in the developed world.[391] Revealing a scapegoating phenomenon, it shows that the contribution of refugee flows to the diffusion of terrorism, contrary to public discourse often portraying refugees as the source of increased terrorist activities, is more likely to take the form of attacks against refugees in developed countries.

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383 Mullins, *Jihadist infiltration*, p.85.
384 Ibid.
385 Ibid., p.88.
386 Ibid., p.89.
387 Sumpter and Franco, "Migration, Transnational Crime," p.41.
388 Klein, "Reframing Threats".
389 Specifically, an analysis of the Political and Societal Violence by and against Refugees (POSVAR) dataset – a global dataset on refugee-related violence from 1996 to 2015, shows that "among countries hosting at least 10,000 refugees, a larger number of host states experienced terrorist attacks against refugees than terrorist attacks by refugees." See: Gineste and Savun, "Introducing POSVAR," p. 140.
390 Polo and Wucherpfennig, "Trojan Horse," p. 40.
391 Ibid., p. 43.

Supporting this view, Klein's research further shows that host-country populations' attitudes towards foreigners influence the likelihood of domestic terrorism in the presence of refugee inflows, suggesting that "host-country nationals' xenophobia can better explain increases in domestic terrorism than refugee flows can."[392] Analysing a global sample of countries from 1995 to 2014, it finds that "when refugee flows into a host-country increase, the larger the host-country's population with negative social perceptions of foreigners is, the greater the likelihood of domestic terrorism."[393] McAlexander argues that an increase in the flow of migrants provides right-wing groups with "both the opportunity to commit such an attack (by providing more targets, meaning migrants) and a motive (more migrants cause more resentment)." [394]

Globally, an analysis of all terrorist-related events recorded in the Global Terrorism Database (GTD) targeting refugees, refugee camps, IDPs, and asylum seekers between 1970 and 2020 revealed a total of 683 terrorist attacks, resulting in 3,148 deaths and 4,374 injuries across 56 countries, with the most affected being Sudan (113 attacks), Germany (71), Iraq (61), Nigeria (51), and Sweden (43).[395] While some high-profile attacks have made the headlines, such as the ISIS raid on the Yarmouk camp near Damascus in April 2015,[396] this data interestingly underscores that anti-migrant terrorist violence is a global phenomenon. In Europe, a large number of violent incidents targeting refugee reception and housing centres have indeed been reported over the past decade,[397] including among others in Germany,[398] the UK,[399] Sweden,[400] Finland,[401] Belgium,[402] France,[403] Ireland,[404] or Greece.[405]

Not all these violent incidents against migrants meet the threshold of terrorism. Such incidents range from incitement to hate, to harassment and intimidation, physical assaults, and arson attacks against migrant accommodation. For instance, far-right activists in the UK have been known to show up at hotels housing refugees to harass and intimidate both residents and staff, often filming these encounters and sharing them on social media.[406] Moreover, in many instances, these incidents remain unsolved, with the exact motive or political orientation of the perpetrators often remaining unknown.

Yet, the implication of individuals affiliated with extreme far-right movements is sometimes obvious. Some groups are particularly geared against migrants, such as Forza Nuova in Italy, the

392 Klein, "Reframing Threats"; Klein, "Refugees, perceived threat," pp. 668-699.
393 Klein, "Refugees, perceived threat," p. 678.
394 Richard J. McAlexander, "How Are Immigration and Terrorism Related? An Analysis of Right-and Left-Wing Terrorism in Western Europe, 1980–2004," *Journal of Global Security Studies* 5, no. 1 (2020): 183.
395 Ryan Hata, Alexander Hart, and Derrick Tin, "Terrorist Attacks on Refugees, Internally Displaced Peoples, and Asylum Seekers," *Prehospital and Disaster Medicine* 38, no. 1 (2023).
396 Atika Shubert, Bharati naik, and Nick Thompson, "The Deepest Circle of Hell': Terrified Yarmouk Residents Describe ISIS Raid," *CNN*, 15 April, 2015.
397 Ojeaku Nwabuzo and Lisa Schaeder, "Racism and Discrimination in the Context of Migration in Europe," *European Network Against Racism Shadow Report* 2015-2016, (2017): 40-41.
398 In the two-year period between 2015 and 2016, a total of 2,035 incidents targeted asylum seekers and refugees centres in Germany, resulting in a 2,500 percent increase of anti-refugee violence between 2014 and 2015. Recent reports indicate that this type of violence is again on the rise in Germany, albeit at comparatively lower levels and after a few years of decline, with 135 incidents recorded between early 2021 and mid-2022. Klein, "Reframing Threats"; Thomas Wieder, "Attacks against asylum seekers on the rise again in Germany," *Le Monde*, 16 November, 2022; Oliver T. Nia, "Germany sees spike in attacks on refugee shelters, with 80 reported in 1st half of 2023," *Anadolu Agency*, 3 August, 2023.
399 In the UK, the Home Office recorded 70 racist incidents targeting asylum seekers accommodation between early 2020 and mid-2021. Diane Taylor, "Home Office Records 70 Racist Incidents by Far Right at Asylum Accommodation," *The Guardian*, 9 August, 2021.
400 Sweden recorded 43 attacks on asylum centres in 2015. Nwabuzo and Schaeder, "Racism and Discrimination," pp.40-41; Johan Ahlander and Violette Goarant, "After escaping war, asylum seekers in Sweden now face arson attacks," *Reuters*, 2 November, 2015; Leila Nezirevic, "Nazi group attacks EU migrant camp in Stockholm," *Anadolu Agency*, 17 April, 2024
401 Finland recorded 47 attacks on asylum centres in 2015. Nwabuzo and Schaeder, "Racism and Discrimination," pp.40-41; Al Jazeera, "Finland far-right groups attack refugees," 25 September, 2015.
402 Gabriela Galindo, "Arson in housing centre for asylum seekers was 'act of political terror,' Flemish interior minister says," *The Brussels Times*, 13 November, 2019.
403 In 2016, a reception centre intended to accommodate migrants following the dismantling of the camp in Calais was set ablaze before migrants arrived. Nwabuzo and Schaeder, "Racism and Discrimination," p.43. See also: Juliette Micheneau, "Migrants : le future centre d'accueil de Loubeyrat incendié," *France Bleu*, 24 October, 2016.
404 The country reportedly recorded "9 racist incidents targeting migrants" in 2015. Nwabuzo and Schaeder, "Racism and Discrimination," p.41.
405 NGOs in Greece have reported 75 incidents targeting immigrants and refugees in the country in 2015. Ibid., p.41.
406 Safya Khan-Ruf, "Hate, Harassment and Hotels – Hope Not Hate," *Hope Not Hate*, 18 March, 2022; Diane Taylor, "Far-Right Groups In UK Target Hotels Housing Afghan Refugees," *The Guardian*, 25 October, 2021.

Nordic Youth movement in Sweden, or even newly-created vigilante groups specifically tasked with patrolling cities and borders, such as the Soldiers of Odin, the *Shipka* (Bulgarian national movement) or *Vasil Levski* (Bulgarian Military Union) in Bulgaria, and Hunyadi Border-Guard Unit in Hungary.[407] Additionally, some individuals have been prosecuted on terrorism charges related to anti-refugee violence. This includes eight members of the Freital Group, named after the German town where it was formed, who were sentenced in 2018 for founding a terrorist organisation and conducting attacks on refugee shelters and political opponents.[408] In the UK, the firebombing of a migrant centre in Dover in November 2022 by Andrew Leak was found to be motivated by extreme far-right ideology and met the threshold of a terrorist attack.[409] Many, including the former head of UK counter-terrorism, have also called for greater recognition of far-right politically-motivated attacks on refugees and migrants as acts of terrorism when appropriate.[410] According to Schmid, "there is no good reason to call many of these attacks anything other than acts of terrorism."[411]

Additionally, it should be noted that official figures are likely below reality due to the combined effect of the "general lack of official data collected by police and state authorities on racially motivated crime in Europe" and the tendency among asylum seekers and refugees to underreport incidents because of "a lack of trust in the police, a lack of confidence in the impact of reporting, fear of discrimination, fear of repeat victimisation, lack of victim support services and lack of awareness of victims' rights."[412]

Furthermore, such acts of violence have not only targeted refugees, but also human rights activists and politicians who support their integration, with such incidents having been reported in various countries, including Slovenia, Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Germany, and France.[413] This has notably been illustrated by Anders Behring Breivik's attacks in Norway in 2011, who killed 77 people at a Labour Party youth camp on Utoya Island, claiming he was protecting Norway from a Muslim takeover and blaming the Labour Party for their immigration policies.[414] Another notable example was the murder of Jo Cox, a Labour Member of the UK Parliament and vocal defender of immigration and the Remain campaign, in June 2016 by far-right activist Thomas Mair, who shouted "Britain first!" during the attack and reportedly regarded the victim "as one of the 'collaborators', the white people who had betrayed their race."[415] In Germany, Walter Lübcke, a regional politician of the Christian Democratic Union, was killed in June 2019 for his pro-immigration stance and support for Germany's decision to welcome refugees.[416]

Also interesting to note are instances of "false flag" attacks perpetrated by far-right militants to exacerbate tensions towards migrant communities. This is illustrated by the case of Franco A., a German soldier falsely registered as a Syrian asylum seeker who planned to use this false identity to conduct terrorist attacks and frame refugees for the crimes.[417]

Overall, the literature suggests that the emphasis on the threat migrants and refugees pose is often exaggerated, whereas the xenophobic and reactionary violence they face in host

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407 Nwabuzo and Schaeder, "Racism and Discrimination," pp.43-44.
408 "Freital Group Found Guilty of Terror Crimes," *Deutsche Welle*, 7 March, 2018.
409 "Dover attack on migrant centre driven by hate, say terror police," *BBC*, 1 November, 2022.
410 Vikram Dodd, Emine Sinmaz, and Neha Gohil, "Worst Far-Right Violence Should be Treated as Terrorism, Says Ex-Police Chief," *The Guardian*, 5 August, 2024.
411 Schmid, "Links Between Terrorism and Migration," p.40.
412 Nwabuzo, and Schaeder, "Racism and Discrimination," pp.40-44.
413 Agata Kałabunowska, "Politically Motivated Extreme-Right Attacks Against Elected Representatives in Contemporary Germany," *Perspectives on terrorism* 16, no. 6 (2022): 87-99; Nwabuzo and Schaeder, "Racism and Discrimination", p.43; Schmid, "Links Between Terrorism and Migration" p.41; Soufan Center, "Arson Attack in France Signals the Rising Strength of the Far-Right in Europe," *IntelBrief*, 19 May, 2023.
414 Schmid, "Links Between Terrorism and Migration", p.41.
415 Ian Cobain, Nazia Parveen, and Matthew Taylor, "The Slow-Burning Hatred That Led Thomas Mair to Murder Jo Cox," *The Guardian*, 23 November, 2016.
416 "Walter Lübcke: Man on Trial Admits to Killing German Politician," *BBC*, 5 August, 2020; "2 Alleged Neo-Nazis on Trial for Killing of German Mayor," *Deutsche Welle*, 16 June, 2020.
417 "German Soldier Charged With Plotting to Kill Politicians," *Deutsche Welle*, 12 December, 2017.

countries is largely under-evaluated. Suffering from false perceptions and scapegoating by host populations and authorities, migrants are more likely to be victims rather than perpetrators of terrorism, suggesting that "refugees' lack of protection in their host state remains a far greater risk than refugee violence."[418]

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418 Gineste and Savun, "Introducing POSVAR," p. 140-141.

Case Study 2: The December 2016 Berlin Attack

On 19 December 2016, Tunisian national Anis Amri rammed a truck into a crowded Christmas market at Breitscheidplatz, Berlin, killing twelve people and injuring dozens more. The attack sparked a national debate over Germany's refugee policy when it became clear that the attacker had entered Europe as an illegal migrant, sought asylum under multiple false identities, and evaded deportation despite being denied asylum and known for violent radicalisation.

The Migration-Terrorism Nexus

Born in Tunisia in 1992, where he had a record of petty crimes, Amri entered the EU via the Italian island of Lampedusa on 4 April 2011.[419] Having reportedly discarded his personal documents along the way and falsely claiming to be sixteen years old, he was registered as an unaccompanied minor and placed in a refugee shelter in Belpasso, Sicily.[420] Arrested for assault and arson on 23 November 2011, after starting a fire in the shelter and assaulting a member of the staff, Amri was sentenced to four years in prison.[421] His radicalisation most likely started during his detention in various Italian jails, where he exhibited aggressive behaviour towards prison guards and other (particularly Christian) inmates.[422] According to the German Bundestag committee of enquiry into the attack, Italy had "indications that Amri had already tried to travel from Italy to the so-called Islamic State."[423] Despite signs of his radicalisation, there is no clear evidence that Italian authorities took any specific action based on this information.[424]

Upon his release from jail on 18 May 2015, Amri was placed in a detention centre in Caltanissetta pending deportation.[425] In the absence of valid identity papers, Italy made a request for Tunisia to recognise him as a citizen and issue him travel documents. As this request stayed unanswered, Italian authorities were forced to release him on 17 June 2015, with the requirement to leave Italy and the Schengen area.[426] Instead, he travelled illegally to Switzerland before crossing into Germany on 6 July 2015, where he first registered as an asylum seeker at a police station in Freiburg under the alias "Anis Amir."[427] Despite being subjected to fingerprinting and identification checks, Amri went undetected due to his combined false identity and Italy's failure to register him (and his fingerprints) in Eurodac.[428] He was thus assigned to an asylum centre in Karlsruhe.[429]

Over the following months, Amri registered under no less than fourteen different alias-identities across various German cities, amongst others in Dortmund, Münster, and Berlin. These cities, along with Freiburg, fall under different federal states (Länder)[430] — namely Baden-Württemberg, North Rhine-Westphalia, and Berlin — a factor that likely contributed to information not being readily shared, ultimately allowing Amri to obtain several certificates of registration (called *Büma*). These registrations, which used to be issued to asylum seekers as a temporary substitute identification

419 Georg Heil, "The Berlin Attack and the "Abu Walaa" Islamic State Recruitment Network," *CTC Sentinel* 10, no. 2, February 2017, p.1.
420 Georg Heil, "The Berlin Attack," p.1; Volker Ullrich et al., Beschlussempfehlung Und Bericht 1. Untersuchungsausschuss [Recommended Resolution and Report 1st Committee of Inquiry], Berlin, Germany: Bundestag, 15 June, 2021, pp.276-278; Kate Connolly, "Anis Amri: from young drifter to Europe's most wanted man," *The Guardian*, 23 December, 2016.
421 Ullrich et al., "Recommended Resolution"; Connolly, "Anis Amri".
422 Ullrich et al., "Recommended Resolution"; pp.277, 331, 1110; Georg Heil (2017), p.2; Alison Smale, Gaia Pianigiani, and Carlotta Gall, "Anis Amri, Suspect in the Berlin Truck Attack: What We Know," *The New York Times*, 22 December, 2016.
423 Ullrich et al., "Recommended Resolution," p.508.
424 Connolly, "Anis Amri".
425 Ullrich et al., "Recommended Resolution," pp.276-278.
426 Ibid., pp.276-278.
427 Ibid., pp.281-283.
428 According to the German Bundestag inquiry report, Amri's data were not registered in Eurodac by Italian authorities. Yet, according to one witness cited in this report, Italian authorities had registered Amri in Eurodac, but the period for the retention of his data has expired.
429 Ibid., pp. 281-283.
430 Baden-Württemberg (Freiburg), North Rhine-Westphalia (Dortmund and Münster), and Berlin.

for accessing social services,[431] did not equate to an official asylum application through Germany's Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (BAMF), which ultimately determines whether an individual will be granted refugee status. Amri only formally applied for asylum on 28 April 2016 – almost a full year after his entry into German territory – at the Dortmund branch of the BAMF under the alias 'Ahmed Almasri.'[432]

By this time, at least since February 2016, Amri had become known for his Islamist activities and was classified as a *Gefährder*—a person regarded as posing a potential terrorist or violent extremist threat—by the state criminal police (LKA) of North Rhine-Westphalia and subsequently by LKA Berlin after his move to the capital in March 2016, and several of his alias identities had been identified.[433] With both information flagged in his asylum file, combined with his inability to answer basic questions about his alleged country of origin, Egypt, and his accent being identified as Tunisian, the BAMF quickly rejected his application on 30 May 2016.[434] Yet, his deportation could not be carried out because he lacked valid documents and Tunisian authorities did not recognise him as one of their citizens.[435]

While in Germany, Amri's radicalisation deepened as he progressively integrated into the country's Islamist milieu, in particular with a group led by the Dortmund-based preacher, Ahmad Abdulaziz Abdullah Abdullah, known as *Abu Walaa*, considered the central figure of ISIS recruiting network in the country,[436] and later frequently visited the *Fussilet*-mosque in Berlin, known as an Islamist hotspot. According to the findings of the investigation committee, Amri started thinking about conducting an attack in November 2015, in the aftermath of the Paris attacks, and started searching for bomb manufacturing manuals online a month later.[437] From December 2015, he had also been in contact, through social media platforms, with Tunisian acquaintances who had joined the so-called Islamic State in Libya.[438] In July 2016, Amri reportedly attempted to leave Germany to join ISIS, but German authorities prevented his departure.[439] This failed attempt reportedly marked a turning point, after which he decided to carry out a terrorist attack within Germany.[440] Inspired by the 2016 Nice attack in France, Amri began with concrete planning in October 2016, maintaining regular contact with ISIS operatives, including the German-Serbian national and prominent member of the Abu Walaa network, Boban Simeonovic.[441]

On 19 December 2016, Amri hijacked a truck and drove it into a busy Berlin Christmas market, before managing to escape.[442] Despite the European arrest warrant issued by Germany on 21 December, he was able to travel through the Netherlands, Belgium, France, and Italy, where he was eventually killed in an exchange of fire with Italian police after a routine identity check in Sesto San Giovanni, near Milan, on 23 December.[443] On the same day, a video in which Amri pledged allegiance to the Islamic State was released on the group-affiliated website *Amaq*.[444]

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431 Among the various alias identities used by Amri were reportedly: Anis Amir, Mohamed Hassa, Ahmed Almasri, Ahmad Zaghoul, Mohammad Hassan, and Ahmad Zarzour. Georg Heil (2017), p.2; Ullrich et al., "Recommended Resolution," pp. 850-861; Matthias Bartsch, et al. "Why Did Germany Fail to Stop Terrorist?" *Spiegel International*, 5 January 2017.
432 Ullrich et al., "Recommended Resolution," pp. 850-861.
433 Ullrich et al., "Recommended Resolution," pp. 850-861.
434 Ibid, pp. 850-861.
435 Connolly, "Anis Amri."
436 Connolly, "Anis Amri"; Paul Cruickshank, "A look inside the Abu Walaa ISIS recruiting network," *CNN*, 29 December, 2016.
437 Ullrich et al., "Recommended Resolution," pp.153-154.
438 Ibid., pp.154-155.
439 Ibid., pp.154-155.
440 Ibid., pp. 154-155; 331-332.
441 Heil, "The Berlin Attack," p.2.
442 *BBC*, "Berlin market attack: How did Anis Amri escape?" 28 December, 2016; Alison Smale, Gaia Pianigiani, and Carlotta Gall, "Anis Amri, Suspect in the Berlin Truck Attack: What We Know," *The New York Times*, 22 December, 2016.
443 Elisabetta Povoledo, Gaia Pianigiani, and Rukmini Callimachi, "Hunt for Berlin Suspect Ends in Gunfire on an Italian Plaza," *The New York Times*, 23 December, 2016.
444 Laura Smith-Spark, "Berlin attack: Amri's ISIS allegiance video called 'authentic'," *CNN*, 29 December, 2016.

The Challenges of the Nexus for the Authorities

The Berlin attack, and the investigation committee established by the German Bundestag in 2017 to investigate the circumstances and failures related to the incident, exposed significant challenges related to the intersection of migration and terrorism.[445]

Amri's case first exposed significant gaps and operational challenges within the Schengen area's asylum and information-sharing systems. Upon his first entry into the EU, via Lampedusa, Italian authorities failed to record him in Eurodac.[446] When he registered in Freiburg, Germany, on 6 July 2015, his personal information, including finger- and palmprints, were entered into the German databases INPOL and POLIS, and cross-checked with the Federal Criminal Office (BKA) and Eurodac.[447] However, due to Amri's use of the alias 'Anis Amir' and the absence of prior records in Eurodac, the search yielded no results and he was issued a *Büma* certificate.[448]

Additionally, Italy had issued an alert within the Schengen Information System (SIS II) on 23 June 2015, flagging that he was refused entry into the Schengen area.[449] This alert was, therefore, remarkably issued only six days after releasing Amri from pre-deportation detention, allowing Amri to move across Europe undetected, had he been controlled. Furthermore, it appears that German authorities did not search or notice the SIS II alert during his asylum registration. Since SIS II could not be queried using biometric data like fingerprints – only accessible for identity confirmation – Amri's aliases would likely have hampered his identification within the database.

Further inconsistencies in the registration and processing of asylum claims in Germany during 2015 – when "the arrival of tens of thousands of people daily stretched the capacities of the authorities"[450] – further hindered Amri's later identification. For example, when he registered in Berlin under the name 'Mohammed Hassan' on 28 July 2015, his fingerprints were only taken on paper and the copy reportedly never reached the Dortmund authorities to whom he was referred.[451] In some cases, as during his registration in Dortmund on 30 July 2015, the process of registration appeared to primarily rely on self-reported information.[452] In other instances, as during his second registration in Berlin on 11 September 2015 under the alias 'Ahamad Zaghloul', no identification procedure was conducted because the responsibility had been assigned to another authority.[453] These procedural shortcomings allowed for Amri's previous registrations to remain unnoticed.[454] Even after he registered again in Berlin on 11 December 2015 as 'Ahamad Zarzour' and the cross-checking of his fingerprints pointed to his prior registration in Freiburg under a different alias, investigations did not yield any immediate consequences and were closed on 25 February 2016.[455]

Amri's use of false identities was "only gradually exposed as he came increasingly under the scrutiny of security authorities."[456] By the time he formally applied for asylum under the alias 'Ahmed Almasri' at the BAMF office in Dortmund on 28 April 2016, some of his aliases and extremist affiliations were known.[457] In fact, his asylum procedure was purposefully prioritised as a result of these security concerns, in order to obtain the rejection of the application required

445 Ullrich et al., "Recommended Resolution".
446 Ibid., pp.276-278.
447 Ibid., pp. 278-285; 1061.
448 Ibid., p.1061.
449 Ibid., pp.276-278.
450 Anne Koch et al., "Integrating refugees: Lessons from Germany since 2015–16," *Background paper*, World Development Report 2023: Migrants, Refugees, and Societies, April 2023.
451 Ullrich et al., "Recommended Resolution", pp.288-290; pp.312-314.
452 Ibid., pp.288-290.
453 Ullrich et al., "Recommended Resolution," pp.312-314.
454 Ibid., pp.288-290.
455 Ibid., p.314.
456 Ibid., pp.1061-1064.
457 Ibid., pp.850-861.

for deportation as quickly as possible. After this idea of an accelerated asylum procedure was first discussed in February 2016, a note compiling some of Amri's aliases and information about his radicalisation was shared, in early March 2016, by the state's criminal police (LKA) to the BAMF.[458] Both pieces of information were added to his asylum file. A request to prioritise his case was eventually sent from the Ministry of the Interior of North Rhine-Westphalia to the BAMF headquarters on 7 April, and forwarded to the BAMF Dortmund branch on 13 April. From that point, the BAMF Dortmund office swiftly proceeded with Amri's case, the latter being "summoned comparatively quickly" to file an application on 28 April, and attend a hearing on 17 May 2016.[459] During the hearing, Amri's responses raised inconsistencies, particularly regarding his supposed Egyptian origin, leading the BAMF to reject his application on 30 May 2016, issuing the rejection for all eight known alias identities.[460] Amri was requested to leave Germany within a week after the decision became legally binding on 11 June 2016.[461]

However, Amri's case "illustrates the challenges faced in the return procedure of an asylum seeker whose request for asylum has been rejected."[462] Without official identification confirming his citizenship, Amri's deportation depended largely on Tunisian authorities to confirm his nationality and issue new identification documents. However, Tunisian authorities were notably unresponsive to both Italian and German requests, impeding his deportation even after his asylum claims were rejected. Italian authorities were compelled to release Amri after 30 days of detention, as they had not received the necessary identification documents from Tunisia within that timeframe. In Germany, where his asylum application was denied in June 2016, several months passed before Tunis finally confirmed in October 2016 that Amri was a Tunisian national.[463] The necessary documents were eventually issued by Tunisia but only arrived in Germany two days *after* the attacks.[464] Furthermore, the report lamented that Germany remained unaware that Tunisia had sent Amri's identity documents to the Italian authorities after the 30-day detention limit. If German authorities had become aware of the existence of these documents, it could have sped up the deportation process.

The 2016 Berlin attack, moreover, exposed critical flaws in the monitoring of radicalised individuals. For months, Amri had been on German intelligence's radar over suspicions that he was planning an attack. Classified as a *Gefährder* by the police in February 2016, Amri was placed under surveillance.[465] Phone records from monitored Salafist preachers indicated that Amri had volunteered himself as a suicide bomber, but the intercepted conversations were so coded that authorities deemed the evidence insufficient for an arrest.[466] Additionally, Amri was suspected to have attempted to organise a break-in to fund the purchase of automatic weapons, and there was evidence that he had researched bomb-making techniques online.[467] The Bundestag investigation committee, moreover, indicates that his attempt to leave Germany in July 2016 was part of a plan to join ISIS in Libya or Syria.[468] Despite these red flags, Amri's surveillance was reportedly "dropped in September 2016 after it was determined he did not pose a security threat."[469] This decision, later heavily criticised, allegedly stemmed from a lack of evidence.[470]

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458 At a meeting on 24 February 2016, North Rhine-Westphalian authorities urged for *Amri's* asylum procedure to be prioritise to obtain the rejection of the application required for deportation.
459 Ibid., pp.288-290.
460 Ibid., pp.288-290.
461 Ibid., pp.288-290.
462 Willemijn Tiekstra, "Free movement threatened by terrorism: an analysis of measures proposed to improve EU border management," *International Centre for Counter-Terrorism*, Policy Brief, October 2019, p.4.
463 Ullrich et al., "Recommended Resolution," pp.1061-1064.
464 Connolly, "Anis Amri".
465 Ibid., p.39.
466 Connolly, "Anis Amri".
467 Ibid.
468 Ullrich et al., "Recommended Resolution", , pp.154-155.
469 Chase Winter, "A well-trodden trail of jihad," *Deutsche Welle*, 23 December, 2016.
470 Connolly, "Anis Amri".

Furthermore, investigations revealed failures to act on warnings from Amri's co-asylum seekers, several of whom noticed signs of his radicalisation and reported their concerns to various authorities. In many instances – especially when they informed their caregivers or local social welfare offices – their hints were not taken seriously and were not forwarded to security authorities.[471] In one notable case, it was only through the persistence of an asylum-seeker who ultimately reached out to the local immigration office, that his tip-off was finally shared with the police, bringing Amri's radicalisation to the attention of the security authorities for the first time in October 2015.[472] However, even when reports were properly forwarded, no thorough interviews were conducted with the reporting asylum seekers, which might have uncovered further information.[473]

Finally, the committee of inquiry report further highlighted some deficiencies in inter-agency cooperation across the vast number of security and migration authorities involved at the local, regional, state, and federal level.[474] According to the report, this fragmentation resulted in substantial information on Amri's radicalisation and dangerousness that had been available early on not being appropriately utilised.[475] The report also identified collaboration gaps between German migration and security authorities. Although some information was exchanged, security agencies often withheld key intelligence from immigration authorities. For instance, a staff member at one of Amri's accommodations was instructed to "pay special attention" to him, but was not given specific reasons, leading the staff to assume it related to general criminal activity.[476] In another instance, the caseworker managing Amri's file at a local immigration office was informed that Amri was of interest to the intelligence services but not that he was classified as a *Gefährder*.[477] The caseworker indicated that this knowledge would have likely led to Amri's case being prioritised.[478]

A critical shortfall in cooperation related to Amri's palmprints. Although the BKA had them filed in the police information systems INPOL and the special database for fingerprint files AFIS since his first registration in July 2015, these records were not available to the Kleve immigration office (NRW) in charge of Amri's deportation.[479] This information gap complicated efforts to meet Tunisian authorities' requirement for palmprints to issue replacement documents required for deportation. The immigration office indeed had to retrieve a second set of palmprints collected as part of Amri's arrest on 31 July 2016, when he attempted to flee Germany.[480] The report further noted that security and immigration authorities' reliance on different databases and systems for storing fingerprints and identity data complicated efforts to track Amri's aliases and monitor his activities.[481]

Lessons Learned

The 2016 Berlin attack offers several lessons to address the challenges posed by the migration-terrorism nexus:

- **Streamline border management and identity verification:** This situation underscored how individuals could exploit gaps and inconsistent usage of EU border management systems by using different aliases and inconsistent personal information. One of the primary gaps that

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471 Ullrich et al., "Recommended Resolution," pp.296-298.
472 Ibid., pp.296-298.
473 Ullrich et al., "Recommended Resolution," p.1069.
474 Ibid., pp. 1014-1015; 1132.
475 Ibid.
476 Ullrich et al., "Recommended Resolution," 291-293.
477 Ibid., p.304.
478 Ibid., p.825.
479 Ibid., pp.278-285.
480 Ibid., p.1064.
481 Ibid., pp.1013-1014.

benefitted Amri was the inconsistent and delayed entry of data in EU databases. For instance, Italy did not register Amri in Eurodac, and only registered him into the SIS II database six days after his release from the deportation centre, a timeframe leaving plenty of time for an individual to move across borders. Furthermore, if, as indicated in the committee of inquiry report, Italian authorities had suspicions about Amri's radicalisation and potential travel to Syria, an indication of this in the SIS II entry could have prompted German authorities to reach out for further information. Yet, a major issue in detecting individuals using multiple identities, as pointed out by BKA President Münch, was the lack of a link between alphanumeric and biometric data, with fingerprints being stored as images attached to the SIS file, but not searchable, only consultable once a person was found using personal details.[482] Ensuring that countries upload relevant information in a timely manner, and can search biometric data such as fingerprints into these databases, while respecting fundamental rights and data privacy, is essential for preventing individuals from evading detection by using false identities and putting pressure on the immigration system by unlawfully applying several times in different countries, in breach of Dublin regulations.

- **Enhance information-sharing among immigration authorities, and interagency cooperation with other relevant services:** Amri's case revealed inefficiencies in information sharing between immigration authorities – notably due to the multitude of such authorities in Germany's federal system[483] and "the complete overload of all agencies dealing with refugees in the summer and autumn of 2015" which lacked resources to properly process the high number of new arrivals,[484] leading to aforementioned inconsistencies in the registration and processing of asylum claims. Important steps have been taken to improve the process, including by replacing the informal system of the *Büma*, which differed from one Länder to another by the issuance of a proof of arrival (*Ankunftsnachweis*, AKN) following a more comprehensive early registration process, including the registration of asylum-seekers in a Central Register of Foreigners, to which all immigration authorities are now connected.[485] Additionally, effective coordination between immigration, law enforcement, and intelligence agencies was lacking. Addressing this requires better communication channels and integrated systems that allow for the seamless exchange of information. Although intelligence information is sensitive and cannot be shared broadly, it is essential to ensure that criminal police and intelligence agencies are aware of monitored individuals' status and that immigration authorities receive relevant intelligence—under defined conditions—on individuals who pose potential national security threats.

- **Improve deportation procedures:** Amri's ability to remain in the Schengen zone after being denied asylum, and despite being possibly plotting to join a jihadi group, and then planning an attack, sparked debates for more efficient deportation processes for high-risk individuals. This involves working closely with the countries of origin to ensure that rejected asylum seekers can be identified. The committee of inquiry, moreover, recommended the establishment of a European information exchange on the availability of identification documents issued by third countries – to avoid a similar scenario where Tunisia had provided necessary documents to Italy without Germany ever being aware.[486] The attacks also raised sensitive questions around preventive detention periods for those awaiting deportation, a measure that should be placed under very strict conditions. Germany has since extended this pre-deportation

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482 Ibid., pp. 1013-1014

483 One witness heard by the committee of inquiry stated that "at least there were 650 back then. Ullrich et al., "Recommended Resolution," pp. 1014-1015.

484 Ullrich et al., "Recommended Resolution," p.1132.

485 BAMF, "Digitalising the asylum procedure," accessed 9 December, 2024, https://www.bamf.de/EN/Themen/Digitalisierung/DigitalesAsylverfahren/digitalesasylverfahren-node.html

486 Ullrich et al., "Recommended Resolution," p.1061.

detention period, a measure heavily criticised by civil society organisations.[487] Considering the human rights implications of such reforms, it is important to note that what Amri's case rather underscored was a failure to enforce already existing laws due to a lack of information-sharing and cooperation.

- **Improve utilisation of tip-offs from co-asylum seekers:** This case underscored the role that can be played by asylum seekers in the early detection of high-risk individuals and the need for authorities to take such warnings seriously. However, research has highlighted the risk of "deliberate misinformation to settle personal disputes," a challenge that has surfaced in Germany, where authorities are often overwhelmed with tips—many of which are unhelpful and, at times, can be intentionally misleading.[488] Some safeguards are thus needed to help authorities focus on credible intelligence and manage the flow of information effectively.[489]

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487 Through the Act on Better Enforcement of the Obligation to Leave the Country (2017) and the Second Act on Better Enforcement of the Obligation to Leave the Country (2019), Germany extended to the period to a maximum 18 months in cases where individuals pose a specific security risk and when the deportation cannot be executed due to delays, for example, in receiving appropriate documents from third countries. See: Bundesministerium der Justiz, "Gesetz zur besseren Durchsetzung der Ausreisepflicht" [Act to improve the enforcement of the obligation to leave the country], Bundesgesetzblatt 2017, No. 52, 28 July, 2017; Bundesministerium der Justiz, "Gesetz zur besseren Durchsetzung der Ausreisepflicht" [Act to improve the enforcement of the obligation to leave the country], Bundesgesetzblatt 2019, No. 31, 20.08.2019; Anne Koch et al., "Integrating refugees: Lessons from Germany since 2015-16," *Background paper*, World Development Report 2023: Migrants, Refugees, and Societies, April 2023.
488 Mullins, *Jihadist infiltration*, p.143.
489 Mullins, *Jihadist infiltration*, p.143.

Discourse Analysis of the Migration-Terrorism Nexus

The migration-terrorism nexus is not just a matter of trends, facts, and events, it is also a matter of perceptions and discourses, which can, in turn, shape reality. This section looks at the impact of terrorism on public attitudes towards immigration, at the political discourse on the nexus, and notably the instrumentalisation of terrorism to restrict immigration, and finally at the references to migration in the narratives of terrorists.

Migration-Terrorism Nexus in Public Perception

The issues of migration and terrorism can interact in several ways in public perception. Several research articles have shown that terrorism negatively affects public attitudes regarding immigration.[490] This was notably the case in Sweden and Germany, where people became more hostile towards immigrants after the 9/11 attacks.[491] This was also highly visible in a Pew Research survey conducted in 2016, in the aftermath of a string of terrorist attacks in Europe, according to which 59 percent of the European respondents considered that refugees increase the likelihood of terrorism in their countries.[492] That number remained almost the same (57 percent) in a subsequent poll in 2018.[493]

One explanation advanced by several authors is that terrorist attacks heighten a sense of insecurity among the population, which then associates the "unknown migrant" with a potential threat (a security threat, such as terrorism, but also a symbolic threat to the prevalent culture or religion).[494] For instance, a study found that many people in Australia viewed refugees as a threat due to their supposed links with Islam and terrorism.[495] Interestingly, some research suggests that terrorism has a clear negative effect on attitudes towards "outgroup immigration" (based on, for example, ethnicity or religion), but no effect on attitudes towards "in-group immigration".[496] This distinction was particularly visible when research contrasted public attitudes in Europe towards Ukrainian refugees and Syrian refugees, with much more positive attitudes towards the former compared to the latter.[497] The link between terrorism and attitudes towards outgroups is, however, complex, and some other research has concluded that there was no direct effect.[498] Research into the impact of right-wing terrorism even found an increase in outgroup trust in the aftermath of the Utøya attacks in July 2011 in Norway.[499] Indeed, the effect of terrorism on public attitudes seems to be influenced by several variables, including socio-demographics, socio-political and psychological factors. The literature has identified a number of reliable indicators influencing individuals' general "prejudice" against migrants (such as level of education or political preferences), which are more likely to be exacerbated in the context of a terrorist

490 Erik Cruz, Stewart J. D'Alessio, and Lisa Stolzenberg, "Decisions Made in Terror: Testing the Relationship Between Terrorism and Immigration," *Migration Studies* 8, no. 4 (2020): 573–588; Keren L. G. Snider, Amir Hefetz, and Daphna Canetti, "Terrorized by Immigration? Threat Perceptions and Policy Preferences," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 36, no. 4 (2023): 552–566.

491 Olof Åslund and Dan-Olof Rooth, "Shifts in Attitudes and Labor Market Discrimination: Swedish Experiences After 9-11," *Journal of Population Economics* 18, no. 4 (2005): 602-629; Simone Schüller, "The Effects of 9/11 on Attitudes Toward Immigration and the Moderating Role of Education," *Kyklos* 69, no. 4 (2016): 604-632.

492 Richard Wike, Bruce Stokes, and Katie Simmons, Europeans Fear Wave of Refugees Will Mean More Terrorism, Fewer Jobs, *Pew Research Centre Report,* 11 July, 2016.

493 Richard Wike, Janell Fetterolf, and Moira Fagan, Europeans Credit EU With Promoting Peace and Prosperity, but Say Brussels Is Out of Touch With Its Citizens, *Pew Research Centre Report*, 19 March, 2019.

494 Cruz et al., "Decisions Made in Terror," pp.573-588..

495 Fiona H. McKay, Samantha L. Thomas, and Susan Kneebone, "'It Would Be Okay If They Came through the Proper Channels,' Community Perceptions and Attitudes toward Asylum Seekers in Australia," *Journal of Refugee Studies* 25, no. 1 (2012): 113–133.

496 Cruz et al., "Decisions Made in Terror," p.584.

497 Lenka Drazanova and Andrew Geddes, "Europeans Welcome Ukrainian Refugees but Governments Need to Show They Can Manage," *MPC Blog*, 6 December, 2022.

498 Jasper Van Assche, and Kim Dierckx, "Attitudes Towards Outgroups Before and After Terror Attacks," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 33, no. 7 (2019): 1530–1545.

499 Øyvind Bugge Solheim, "Right-wing Terrorism and Out-group Trust: The Anatomy of a Terrorist Backlash," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 32, no. 6 (2018): 1206–1224.

threat.[500] According to at least one study, the fewer refugees present in one country, the higher the likelihood of growing negative attitudes towards refugees after a terrorist attack, whereas "the marginal effect becomes smaller as the number of refugees increases and the effect of the attack becomes insignificant in countries with more than six refugees per 1000 population".[501] The explanation for such variation comes from the fact that the more contact between indigenous populations and migrant communities, the less likely they are to see migrants as a security threat. According to another study, anti-immigrant policy preferences increase after a terrorist attack, particularly among respondents that are more sensitive to security issues and fearful of crime and violence, which can represent more than a quarter of the population.[502]

The role of media appears significant in framing the migration-terrorism nexus and shaping public opinion about migrants.[503] Media framing can notably reinforce a sense of threat to security and identity.[504] Research has shown, for instance, how European media framed migrants as a threat much more frequently in 2015 (in the context of migration from Syria) compared to 2022 (in the context of migration from Ukraine).[505] Media can also contribute to de-humanising migrants, hence lowering levels of empathy for refugees. Traditional media can also reinforce stereotypes and prejudices, notably depicting migrants as a threat, which then feeds into conversation on social media.[506]

Interestingly, research suggests that the effect of terrorism on public perception of migrant communities can transcend borders. Terrorist attacks not only affect public attitudes in the country where they occurred, but they can also influence public attitudes in nearby countries.[507] Other research also suggests that terrorist attacks lead to greater popular support for more restrictive immigration policies.[508] Finally, some research suggests that the negative effects of terrorism on public attitudes towards immigrants are relatively short-lived.[509]

Migration-Terrorism Nexus in Political Discourse

Many politicians, particularly but not exclusively on the far-right of the political spectrum, entertain the illusion of a direct link between migration and terrorism. For example, in 2017, Polish President Andrzej Duda said: "there is no doubt that the growing wave of terrorism is linked to migration".[510] Two years earlier, in 2015, Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán stated: "Of course it's not accepted, but the factual point is that all the terrorists are basically migrants."[511] Several studies have confirmed that far-right or conservative politicians purposefully contribute to articulating a "magical correlation" between migration and terrorism.[512]

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500 Misha M. Cowling, Joel R. Anderson, and Rose Ferguson, "Prejudice-relevant correlates of attitudes towards refugees: A meta-analysis," *Journal of Refugee Studies* 32, no. 3 (2019): 502-524.

501 Enzo Nussio, Vincenzo Bove, and Bridget Steele, "The Consequences of Terrorism on Migration Attitudes Across Europe," *Political Geography* 75 (2019): 6.

502 Marc Helbling, Daniel Meierrieks, and Pardos-Prado, "Terrorism and Immigration Policy Preferences," *Defence and Peace Economics* 34, no. 5 (2023): 646–659.

503 Katherine McCann, Megan Sienkiewicz, and Monette Zard, The role of media narratives in shaping public opinion toward refugees: A comparative analysis, *International Organization for Migration*, 2023.

504 Cowling, Anderson, and Ferguson, "Prejudice-relevant correlates of attitudes," pp. 502-524.

505 McCann, Sienkiewicz, and Zard, The Role of Media Narratives.

506 Carlos A. Calderón and Andreas Veglis, Migrants and Refugees in Southern Europe Beyond the News Stories (Lexington Books, 2023).

507 Tobias Böhmelt, Vincenzo Bove, and Enzo Nussio, "Can terrorism abroad influence migration attitudes at home?" *American Journal of Political Science* 64, no. 3 (2020): 437-451.

508 Henning Finseraas, Niklas Jakobsson, and Andreas Kotsadam, "Did the murder of Theo van Gogh change Europeans' immigration policy preferences?" *Kyklos* 64, no. 3 (2011): 396-409.

509 Helbling and Meierrieks, "Terrorism and Migration," p. 986; Philippe Bourbeau, *The Securitization of Migration: A Study of Movement and Order* (London: Routledge, 2011),118.

510 Radio Poland, "Terrorism Linked to Migration: Polish President," 15 September, 2017.

511 Matthew Kaminski, "All The Terrorists Are Migrants," *Politico*, 23 November, 2015.

512 Vincent Geisser, "Immigration et terrorisme : « corrélation magique » et instrumentalisation politique," *Migrations Société* 182, no. 4 (2020) : 3-13; Sarah Léonard and Christian Kaunert, *Refugees, Security and the European Union* (Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2019).

There are several underlying reasons for politicians to uphold such discourse. First, the underpinnings of the far-right ideology, including nationalism, racism, and xenophobia, facilitate a direct causation between immigration and terrorism. They can lead to portraying all outgroup migrants (whether legal or illegal) as a potential security threat. For example, in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks by Mohamed Merah in 2012, resulting in the death of seven persons, French far-right presidential candidate Marine Le Pen declared: "How many Mohamed Merah in the boats, in the planes that arrive every day full of immigrants? (...) How many Mohamed Merah among the children of non-assimilated immigrants?"[513]

Similarly, in the aftermath of the Southport stabbing in the UK, in July 2024, where three children were killed by a UK citizen of Rwandan descent, British far-right MP Nigel Farage was quick to amplify rumours that the stabbing could be a terrorist attack perpetrated by an immigrant. In a video on social media, he stirred up conspiratorial thinking: "The police say it's a non-terror incident, just as they said the stabbing of an Army Lieutenant Colonel in uniform on the streets of Kent the other day was a non-terror incident. I just wonder whether the truth is being withheld from us."[514] As in previous incidents, notably in the aftermath of the 2020 Glasgow stabbing,[515] Farage was quick to draw a link between illegal immigration and terrorism, even when the incidents were neither considered terrorism by the police, nor linked to illegal migration (the Glasgow stabbing was committed by an asylum seeker with mental issues, and the Southport stabbing by a UK citizen born in the UK, of Rwandese parents).

While the migration-terrorism nexus aligns well with the traditional far-right ideology, it is not entirely absent from the far-left discourse. One study has shown that xenophobia was as widespread among far-left Europeans as among far-right, and that the difference in attitudes towards migrants between the two extremes might not be as marked as widely believed.[516] Indeed, in recent years, several European left-wing parties have significantly hardened their discourse on immigration.[517] In Germany, a new far-left political party, established in 2024 by Sahra Wagenknecht (BSW), is strongly anti-migration. According to a German study, the programmes of the far-left party BSW and the far-right party Alternative for Germany (*Alternative für Deutschland*, AfD) are very close on migration issues.[518] In 2016, Wagenknecht had blamed Merkel for her loose migration policy, after Anis Amri's terrorist attack;[519] and after the Solingen attack in 2024, she said on TV: "Anyone who allows uncontrolled migration gets uncontrollable violence".[520]

Xenophobic takes on the migration-terrorism nexus are not limited to the Western world either. In India, for instance, Prime Minister Narendra Modi and other Hindu populist politicians have regularly associated non-Hindu refugees with security threats, including terrorism.[521]

A second set of reasons motivating the formulation of a migration-terrorism nexus in political discourse pertains to politicking approaches. To begin with, some scholars have argued that counter-terrorism policy and discourse have a performative dimension.[522] As such, government officials often make statements related to immigration policy in the aftermath of a terrorist attack,

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513 *Le Nouvel Obs*, "Le Pen: 'Combien De Merah Dans Les Bateaux Qui Arrivent En France?'" March 25, 2012.

514 *Belfast Telegraph*, "Cable accuses Farage of 'whipping up antagonism to foreigners'," 22 May, 2019.

515 Tim Wyatt, "Glasgow Stabbings: Nigel Farage Accused of Stirring up 'Fear and Hatred' After Blaming Attack on 'Illegal Immigrants'," *Independent*, 27 June, 2020.

516 Svenja Kopyciok and Hilary Silver, "Left-wing xenophobia in Europe," *Frontiers in sociology* 6 (2021): 666717.

517 Michael Bröning, "Europe's left turns right on immigration," *Project Syndicate*, 19 June, 2018; "Europe's lefties bash migrants (nearly) as well as the hard right," *The Economist,* 29 August, 2024.

518 Marcel Fratzscher, "AfD und BSW in Thüringen und Sachsen: Regierungsverantwortung wäre ein gefährliches Experiment," *DIW Berlin*, 12 August, 2024.

519 Rebecca Staudenmaier, "The Left party's leading figure", *Deutsche Welle*, 25 August, 2017.

520 *WELT*, "Wer unkontrollierte Migration zulässt, bekommt unkontrollierbare Gewalt, " 28 August, 2024.

521 Rizwana Shamshad, *Bangladeshi migrants in India: foreigners, refugees, or infiltrators?* (Oxford University Press, 2017).

522 Beatrice De Graaf and Bob De Graaff, "Bringing politics back in: the introduction of the 'performative power' of counterterrorism," *Critical Studies on Terrorism* 3, no. 2 (2010): 261-275.

in order to "show resolve,"[523] independently of ideology, and whether or not there is an intention to follow up with action. This need for resolute action, particularly in the context of regional elections, was possibly one incentive for German social-democrat Chancellor Olaf Scholz to take strong measures on immigration and border control after the Solingen attack. Political leaders can also use the opportunity of terrorist attacks (even when the attack occurred abroad) to justify their restrictive migration policy, as Polish and Hungarian leaders did on several occasions.[524]

Furthermore, blaming migration in case of terrorism offers another advantage: it "externalises" the causes of the problem. If terrorism is an imported issue (through immigration), rather than a homegrown challenge resulting from domestic policies, then the government's responsibility is partly diluted. For example, in the aftermath of the London July 2005 bombings, there was a quick focus on the "foreign" dimension of the plots, although all bombers were British citizens, which informed political reactions and policy responses.[525]

Similarly, for the political opposition, the migration-terrorism nexus offers opportunities to blame the government's (in)action, notably in the aftermath of a terrorist attack. For instance, following Anis Amri's terrorist attack in Berlin, in December 2016, far-right AfD politician Marcus Pretzell said "these are Merkel's dead", while another AfD member said "[Merkel's] policy of open doors made this possible", referring to Angela Merkel's decision to welcome more asylum-seekers during the 2015 refugee crisis.[526]

Thirdly, electoral reasons can also explain the migration-terrorism nexus in the political discourse. Some far-right politicians seek to exacerbate fear through an illusory migration-terrorism nexus, in order to lure in fearful voters, as some research has observed in France notably.[527] Another reason to scapegoat refugees in relation to insecurity, including terrorism, is because it is electorally either rewarding, or at least costless. Refugees generally do not vote, hence there is no electoral cost to alienating them. More broadly, responding to terrorism with migration restrictions is more appealing to politicians, as it is easier to restrict the rights of a minority than to restrict the rights of the voters' majority.[528]

Fourthly, it has become clear that the migration-terrorism nexus is no longer restricted to the most extreme ends of the political spectrum. Populist discourses offering simple solutions to complex challenges are allegedly gaining traction in global politics.[529] In this context, discourses that assume implicit or explicit correlations between terrorism and immigration, and offer seemingly simple solutions, albeit unrealistic and ineffective, such as closing the borders or deporting terrorist suspects, appeal to a significant part of the population. Furthermore, the past decade has witnessed a significant mainstreaming of far-right ideas. Research suggests that traditional political parties and media have increasingly co-opted a number of far-right narratives, giving them more visibility, resonance, and legitimacy in the public sphere. [530] According to this research, critical events, and notably the co-occurrence of the migration crisis and the string

523 Vincenco Bove, Tobias Böhmelt, and Enzo Nussio, "Terrorism abroad and migration policies at home," *Journal of European Public Policy* 28, no. 2 (2021): 192. See also: Burcu Savun and Christian Gineste, "From Protection to Persecution: Threat Environment and Refugee Scapegoating," *Journal of Peace Research*, vol. 56, no. 1, 2019, pp. 88–102.
524 Monika Kabata and An Jacobs, "The 'migrant other' as a security threat: the 'migration crisis' and the securitising move of the Polish ruling party in response to the EU relocation scheme," *Journal of Contemporary European Studies* 31, no. 4 (2023): 1223-1239.
525 Jef Huysmans, and Alessandra Buonfino, "Politics of Exception and Unease: Immigration, Asylum and Terrorism in Parliamentary Debates in the UK," *Political Studies* 56, no. 4 (2008): 777.
526 Yardena Schwarz, "Germany's Right-Wing AfD Party Blames Merkel's Immigration Policy for Berlin Attack", *NBC News*, 25 December, 2016.
527 Geisser, "Immigration et terrorisme," p.4.
528 Bove et al., "Terrorism abroad and migration policies at home".
529 Matthijs Rooduijn, et al., "The PopuList: A Database of Populist, Far-Left, and Far-Right Parties Using Expert-Informed Qualitative Comparative Classification (EiQCC)," *British Journal of Political Science* 54, no. 3 (2024): 969–78.
530 Theresa Völker, "The Drivers of Far-Right Mainstreaming in Public Debates," *OXPOL*, 13 December 2023; Maria G. Galantino, "The migration–terrorism nexus: An analysis of German and Italian press coverage of the 'refugee crisis'," *European Journal of Criminology* 19, no. 2 (2022): 259-281; Michał Krzyżanowski, "Discursive shifts and the normalisation of racism: imaginaries of immigration, moral panics and the discourse of contemporary right-wing populism," *Social Semiotics* 30, no. 4 (2016): 503-527.

of terrorist attacks in Europe in 2015-16, have created an opportunity for far-right narratives to proliferate and mainstream, helped notably by an anxiety-triggering media framing. For instance, UK Home Secretary Suella Braverman echoed far-right narratives when describing immigration as an "invasion on our southern coast" in 2022, a vocabulary long used by the far-right. Similarly, the conspiracy-driven notion of "great replacement" (*see below*), which is perhaps the ultimate far-right construction of the outgroup other as an existential threat, has found echoes in public debates and among mainstream politicians.

Importantly, as highlighted by some scholars, the securitisation of migration and the mainstreaming of far-right narratives in relation to the migration-terrorism nexus could actually "fuel an increased likelihood of domestic terrorism", specifically targeted against migrants.[531] Arguably, this is exactly what occurred in the UK during the Summer 2024. The stabbing of children in Southport was instrumentalised by the far-right and led to weeks of political violence, including a mix of thuggery and terrorism, by a group of individuals groomed to anti-migrant hatred.

Finally, geopolitics could also be considered. According to some reports, some states have sought to instrumentalise the migration-terrorism nexus, in order to further polarise the public debate and destabilise neighbouring countries. This is notably the case of Russia, which has been suspected of sending migrants across the border with Finland, in order to stir far-right narratives and groups,[532] in line with Russia's broader strategy of undermining socio-political cohesion in Europe.[533] Similarly, Poland and the EU have accused Belarus of "weaponising" migrants in retaliation against European sanctions, triggering a migration crisis at the Polish-Belarussian border in 2021, which the Polish conservative Prime Minister deemed a form of "state terrorism".[534]

Migration in the Terrorist Discourse

The migration-terrorism nexus is also present in the narratives of terrorist groups and ideologues. This is very much the case in far-right violent extremism, where the topic of immigration has become one of the catalyst issues in discourse and mobilisation.[535] One of the core themes in right-wing circles has become the so-called "great replacement", a conspiratorial racist and white supremacist theory alleging of a ploy by certain elites to encourage mass immigration of "non-whites" into Europe and North America, in order to strip native whites of their power and dominant status. A similar ideology is that of the alleged "white genocide", where immigration and diversity are perceived as clear threats to white culture and identity. While racism and supremacism have always underpinned far-right movements, these narratives are very much focused on immigration, and have gained more prominence in far-right circles. These theories resulted in several terrorist attacks, such as the Christchurch attack in 2019, in New Zealand, whose attacker's manifesto was titled "The Great Replacement", or the 2022 Buffalo attack in the US, whose attacker was also avidly consuming such narratives online.[536]

The 2015 refugee crisis certainly contributed to the rising importance and perceived legitimacy of immigration and "Islamisation" fears among far-right extremists. In Germany, far-right activists seized the opportunity of the crisis to mobilise a large number of anti-migration sympathisers under the PEGIDA movement, which was founded in late 2014.[537] In the UK, concerns about a

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531 Klein, "Reframing Threats".
532 Essi Lehto, "Finland says thousands of migrants are seeking to enter via Russia," *Reuters*, 20 February, 2024.
533 Kacper Rekawek et al., Russia and the Far-Right: Insights From Ten European Countries, International Centre for Counter Terrorism, 2024.
534 "Poland Accuses Belarus of Terrorism at Border," *VOA News*, 10 November, 2021.
535 Bruce Hoffman and Jacob Ware, *God, guns, and sedition: Far-right terrorism in America* (Columbia University Press, 2024).
536 Jason Wilson and Aaron Flanagan, "The Racist 'Great Replacement' Conspiracy Theory Explained," *SPLC Centre*, 17 May, 2022.
537 Marco Bitschnau, Dennis Lichtenstein, and Birte Fähnrich, "The "refugee crisis" as an opportunity structure for right-wing populist social movements: The case of PEGIDA," *Studies in Communication Sciences* 21, no. 2 (2021): 361-373.

perceived "invasion" of migrants among far-right circles, and associated conspiracy theories, are also increasingly circulating, resulting in violent mobilisation sporadically, as well as in calls to attack refugee centres on far-right Telegram channels.[538]

In the Western Balkans, it is assessed that the number of migrants that crossed the region in 2015 became a major mobilising factor for the far-right, "changing the far-right landscape" and resulting in more integration with far-right circles within Europe and North America.[539] In Russia as well, the far-right discourse shifted from nationalism to anti-migration discourses under the impulse of far-right ideologue Aleksandr Dugin, allowing for a greater integration of global far-right extremists.[540]

The issue of migration is also very present in the jihadi discourse, although quite differently from the far-right. To begin with, jihadi groups have actively encouraged the immigration of fighters, and family members, to their territories. The mujahedeen were actively recruiting internationally for the jihad in Afghanistan in the 1980s, whereas the issue of *Hijrah* (migration to the so-called caliphate) was one of the main themes in ISIS propaganda, and notably in its international magazine *Dabiq*.[541] Furthermore, jihadi groups have also sought to use migration-related grievances in order to radicalise and recruit, notably when emphasising how Muslims and children of immigrants were unfairly treated around the world. In another example, ISIS discussed the Rohingya issue in *Dabiq* magazine, with the intent to build support and influence in Bangladesh, making it possibly the "single greatest migration-related issue that could impact the trajectory of ISIS influence in Southeast Asia."[542]

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538 Anam Alan, "UK refugee centres 'prepare' for potential attacks by far-right following chilling 'hit list," *The New Arab*, 7 August, 2024.
539 Marina Lažetić, ""Migration Crisis" and the Far Right Networks in Europe: A Case Study of Serbia," *Journal of Regional Security* 13, no. 2 (2018): 131-178.
540 Marina Lažetić, "Migration Crisis".
541 Greg Barton, "Understanding Key Themes in the ISIS Narrative: An Examination of Dabiq Magazine," In: *Contesting the Theological Foundations of Islamism and Violent Extremism*, ed. by Fethi Mansouri and Zuleyha Keskin, Middle East Today (Palgrave Macmillan, 2019).
542 Cameron Sumpter and Joseph Franco, "Migration, Transnational Crime and Terrorism: Exploring the Nexus in Europe and Southeast Asia," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 12, no. 5 (2018): p. 44.

Case Study 3: The October 2023 Brussels Attack

On 16 October 2023, in the city centre of Brussels, Abdessalem Lassoued, armed with a semi-automatic rifle, gunned down Swedish football fans. Two individuals were killed, and two injured. Lassoued targeted specifically Swedish supporters, on the occasion of a football game between Belgium and Sweden that evening. Although his motivations were not entirely clear, they likely included a combination of personal grievances (he had been denied asylum and was convicted of crime in Sweden), ideological grievances (the burning of Qurans in Sweden earlier that year triggered a lot of reactions worldwide), and geopolitics (the attack occurred a couple of weeks after the Hamas terror attack on 7 October).

In a video posted on Facebook after the attack, Lassoued claimed to have acted on behalf of the Islamic State to "avenge Muslims". The Islamic State took credit for the attack the next day, via a message from its news agency *Amaq*. Lassoued was quickly identified and located by the police. On 17 October, in the early morning, he was shot down by the police during the attempted arrest.

The Migration-Terrorism Nexus

Lassoued was born in Sfax, Tunisia, in 1978. He was sentenced to 26 years of imprisonment in Tunisia, in 2005, for attempted murder and drunkenness in public space. He escaped prison in 2011, during the Arab Spring, and fled to Europe. In June 2011, he filed for asylum in Norway, and his personal data, including fingerprints, were entered into Eurodac. After being denied asylum in Norway, he travelled to Sweden, where he applied for asylum again in September 2012, but was also rejected. He was furthermore sentenced to prison by the Swedish authorities, in 2012, for crimes related to drugs and weapons. As a result, Swedish authorities entered his name in the SIS II database as "refused entry or stay in the Schengen area". In April 2014, Lassoued was expelled by the Swedish authorities to Italy, the country through which he allegedly entered Europe, in line with the "Dublin rules".[543] The same year, Lassoued filed an asylum request in Italy, which was once more denied, and followed by an order to leave the country.[544]

In the following years, Lassoued seems to have moved across Europe, certainly between Italy and Belgium. According to his own statements, he was present in Belgium in 2015 and was certainly in Italy in 2016 when he came under the attention of the Italian police. The Italian services suspected Lassoued to have radicalised and to be a potential candidate to join the Islamic State in Syria.[545] In July 2016, the Italian police made an official request to the Belgian authorities with regard to three Belgian phone numbers that had been in contact with Lassoued. However, none of these numbers were known to the Belgian authorities at the time. Living a clandestine life in Europe, his whereabouts between 2014 and 2019 are largely unknown.

In October 2019, Lassoued made an asylum request in Belgium. His request was denied in October 2020, and he received an order to leave the Belgian territory ("ordre de quitter le territoire", or OQT) in March 2021. The 18-month-long procedure is somewhat surprising, given Lassoued's

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543 Comité P, "Position d'information de la Police fédérale et locale concernant l'attentat terroriste survenu le 16 Octobre 2023," Comité permanent de contrôle des services de police, 2024, p. 10. It is interesting to note that there is no clear mention in available reports of any registration of Lassoued in Italy, in 2011, which would suggest that he managed to cross the entire European continent illegally, before reaching Norway.

544 Comité P, "Position d'information de la Police," p. 9.

545 Comité R, "Enquête de contrôle relative à la Position d'information de l'Organe de Coordination pour l'Analyse de la Menace (OCAM) concernant l'attentat Terroriste survenu le 16 octobre 2023 à Bruxelles," Comité permanent de contrôle des services de renseignement et de sécurité, 12 March 2024, p. 7.

previous failed attempts and SIS II alert. In spite of the OQT, Lassoued did not leave the territory voluntarily, nor was expelled by force. In Belgium, in 2021, only 15 percent of the administrative OQT were followed by an effective return.[546]

In June 2022, Belgian and Tunisian authorities exchanged information on Lassoued, as a result of suspicions by Belgian authorities that Lassoued had escaped a Tunisian prison in 2011, which was confirmed by the Tunisian authorities. Subsequently, a "red notice" was circulated by Tunisia and Interpol against Lassoued. In August 2022, the Tunisian authorities requested the extradition of Lassoued to the Belgian authorities, but that request remained inexplicably unanswered. On 20 October 2023, four days after the terrorist attack, the Belgian Minister of Justice resigned because of this, considering that it was an "unacceptable mistake".[547]

While in Belgium, Lassoued came under the attention of counter-terrorism services on a few occasions. In May 2022, he drew the attention of the Brussels local police, under suspicion of holding radical views and engaging in religious proselytism near mosques.[548] His case was discussed among specialised counter-terrorism services, but did not meet the threshold of evidence for further investigation, notably as the content of the preachings was not known. In July 2023, Lassoued appeared on the radars of another local police (near Antwerp), after an asylum seeker reported having been threatened online (via Facebook) by Lassoued, leading once more to his case being discussed among relevant counter-terrorism services.[549] These discussions were still ongoing when the attack occurred.

The Challenges of the Nexus for the Authorities

From a counter-terrorism point of view, the case of Lassoued raised a number of very concrete challenges for the Belgian authorities, including: the issue of the spelling of foreign names (at least five different spellings have been used in Belgian databases: Abdessalam Lassoued, Abdessalem Lassoued, Abdesalem Lassoued, Abdeslam Laswad, Abdesslem Laswad), the connection between various Belgian and European databases, and the exchange of information between services. Overall, these issues resulted in a fragmented information position that weakened the counter-terrorism response.

In 2016, following the request for information by the Italian services, an entity was created in an internal database of the Belgian federal police under the name "Abdesslem Laswad" (as spelt by the Italians).[550] No entity was created in the internal database of the national counter-terrorism fusion centre (CUTA), because no clear connection was established between Lassoued and Belgium at that time.[551] No additional follow-up was given to the Italian request, although it appears in hindsight that Lassoued might have been present in Belgium during that period, clandestinely, based on his own declarations.

In late 2019, when Lassoued applied for asylum in Belgium, the immigration services ran the usual screenings within their databases, as well as with police and intelligence services. The immigration services found a match for his fingerprints in Eurodac and could then see his previous failed requests in Norway, Sweden and Italy. A few months later, in April 2020, the Italian immigration authorities confirmed to their Belgian counterparts that Lassoued had indeed been declined

546 Eurostat, "Third-country nationals returned following an order to leave, by type of return, citizenship, country of destination, age and sex – quarterly data," 13 November, 2024.
547 "Attentat à Bruxelles: le ministre de la Justice Vincent Van Quickenborne démissionne," *L'Echo*, 20 October, 2023.
548 Comité P, "Position d'information de la Police," p. 22.
549 Comité P, "Position d'information de la Police,".
550 Comité P, "Position d'information de la Police," p.5
551 Comité R, "Position d'information de l'Organe," p. 8

asylum in Italy under the name "Abdesslem Laswad".[552] Meanwhile, as is standard procedure, the Belgian police had checked its main databases on the basis of the name provided by the Belgian immigration services ("Adbdesalem Lassoued"), which yielded no result at that time.[553] If the Belgian immigration services had shared the name provided by the Italians ("Laswad"), the Belgian police could have found a match in the database of the federal police, as well as in the SIS II database.

In May 2022, when Lassoued became suspected of radicalisation by the Brussels local police, they ran several checks in various police databases but yielded no results. The only existing entity was "Abdesslem Laswad", but it appears that the phonetic search function was not activated by the local police officer leading the investigation.[554] To conduct further checks, the local police officer also contacted the immigration services to verify Lassoued's immigration status, and found that he was under an OQT. A new entity was then created for "Abdesalem Lassoued" in the main database of the police.

Several emails and requests for information were exchanged in May 2022 between the Brussels local police, the federal police, immigration services, intelligence services and CUTA. As a result of these exchanges, all partners became aware that Lassoued and Laswad were one and the same person. However, the entities continued to co-exist under different spellings in different police databases and would only be merged after the 2023 attack.[555]

Furthermore, during these exchanges, the federal police did not share its available knowledge of a previous suspicion of radicalisation (from 2016), based on the assumption that the information could not be shared – although that argumentation could be contested.[556] The federal police also inexplicably failed to report the SIS II notice, although logins indicate they searched and found that information in May 2022.[557]

On 14 June 2022, as a result of the suspicions of radicalisation from the Brussels local police, the case of Lassoued was discussed during a meeting of the Local Task Force (LTF), a counter-terrorism multi-agency platform gathering representatives from the local/federal police, intelligence services, CUTA, immigration services and prosecutor's office. From the report of the LTF meeting, it appears that the information regarding a previous radicalisation or SIS II alert was not mentioned, either for a lack of willingness to share the information or due to a lack of proper preparation for the meeting (as during these discussions priority is given to existing entities in the common database on extremists and terrorists, rather than to "new" entities).[558] Lassoued was not discussed in any ulterior LTF meetings.

Lassoued appeared one last time on police radars in July 2023, after an asylum seeker filed a complaint against "Abdeslam Laswad" (yet another spelling) for online threats. The local police officer in charge of the case (in the Northern part of Belgium) found "Lassoued" in the police database through a creative searching method (using date of birth and first two letters of last name), to circumvent spelling issues.[559] The Flemish local police officer could see in the main police database that there had been previous suspicions of radicalisation. But his request to receive more information from the various local Brussels police services resulted in no relevant

552 Comité P, "Position d'information de la Police," p.9
553 Comité P, "Position d'information de la Police," pp. 9-10
554 Comité P, "Position d'information de la Police," pp. 17-19
555 Comité P, "Position d'information de la Police," p.5
556 Comité P, "Position d'information de la Police," pp. 24-26
557 However, it appears that the local Brussels police were aware of the SIS II alert, as of 18 May 2022 (Comité P, "Position d'information de la Police," p. 23)
558 Comité R, "Position d'information de l'Organe," pp. 10-14.
559 Comité P, "Position d'information de la Police," p. 39

update.[560] A few weeks later, Antwerp's judiciary police formulated a similar request to the federal police, but obtained a "no-match" answer[561] as the entity "Lassoued" was not connected to "Laswad" in the internal federal police database. The information regarding the threats against an asylum seeker was also shared with CUTA, but led to no immediate action, as the complaint was still under investigation and was not considered a "threat against Belgian interests or residents".[562]

During an "intel concertation" (an informal multi-agency mechanism on radicalism for the Antwerp area) on 21 September 2023, between Antwerp's judiciary police, Antwerp's local police, Antwerp's prosecutor's office and intelligence services, the case of Lassoued was discussed one last time before the attack. From these discussions, it appears that participants were not aware of the details of Lassoued's previous conviction in Tunisia, the red notice issued, or the Tunisian request for extradition,[563] all of which dated back to Summer 2022. Indeed, the extradition request had been filed by the Brussels prosecutor's office in an internal database (not visible to other partners), and the paper file was inexplicably "stored in a cupboard" and not given priority anymore.[564]

Lessons Learned

Quite a few lessons have been or should be taken away from this case.[565] It is interesting to note that, while some of the Belgian services have conducted their own post-mortem analysis to reflect on what went wrong and could be improved, in addition to the investigations led by the three oversight committees cited in this case study (police oversight committee, Comité P; intelligence services oversight committee, Comité R; and oversight committee of the judiciary, CSJ), there does not seem to have been an overarching, collective post-mortem reflection gathering all counter-terrorism services. It is equally unclear what measures, if any, have been or will be taken to address problems and challenges encountered in this particular case.

- **Improve databases functioning, to allow for flexible search options:** A first clear lesson is that databases must allow to include various aliases under a single entity. Furthermore, these databases should be searchable phonetically, to identify different possible spellings of a same person. At least five different spellings were used in this case. It is also important that databases users understand whether their searches include phonetic approximations or not. According to the Comité P, there might be some confusion among police officers in this regard, as some databases require to activate this field specifically; and a platform that allows to search multiple police databases at once does not include phonetic search.[566]

- **Sharing known aliases to connect the dots:** When different spellings or aliases for the same person are identified, such information should be shared with partners on relevant opportunities. For instance, if the immigration services had shared the alias "Laswad" with the police for a second screening based on that new identity after receiving the information from their Italian counterparts, they would have known about the SIS II signalling. Furthermore, a

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560 Comité P, "Position d'information de la Police," pp. 42-43

561 Comité P, "Position d'information de la Police," p. 46.

562 Comité R, "Position d'information de l'Organe," p. 13.

563 Comité P, "Position d'information de la Police," pp. 46-49

564 CSJ, "Enquete Particulière, Affaire Abdesalem Lassoued," Conseil supérieur de la justice, 19 June 2024.

565 Some of the observations below are drawn from post-mortem investigations conducted by the oversight committees of the police (Comité P), of the intelligence services (Comité R), and of the justice (Conseil Supérieur de la Justice). Some observations are also drawn from discussions with representatives from CUTA, VSSE, and immigration services (interviews conducted in person, in Brussels, in September 2024).

566 Comité P, "Position d'information de la Police," pp.58-59

more proactive sharing of aliases could allow certain services to connect entities or pieces of information that were previously held separately. This was notably the case of the entities "Laswad" and "Lassoued" in the internal database of the federal police.

• **Increase databases' interoperability:** The interoperability between certain databases could still be improved, in order to allow services to know that certain information is available, even though subject to access authorisation. For instance, the fact that the SIS II alert remained unknown to most services is highly problematic. Likewise, the fact that the extradition request of the Tunisian authorities was not visible to the relevant services is equally problematic.[567]

• **Review criteria to create a new entity in counter-terrorism databases:** The threshold for creating a new entity in certain databases could be revised. For instance, CUTA claims that while their criteria did not justify creating a new entry in their internal database for Lassoued in 2016, this would be different in 2025. This broadening of criteria allegedly results from a reflection that had started prior to the 2023 attack, but was clearly "accelerated" after the attack.[568] With hindsight it is always easier to say, of course, but the 2016 lead from Italian services could have been further investigated. The Belgian phone numbers mentioned by the Italian police were unknown to the Belgian services, but they suggested that Lassoued had links with Belgium and, indeed, Lassoued claims he had been present in Belgium in that period. This could have justified further investigation into his case.

• **Review information-sharing protocols between services:** A more positive lesson shared by Comité R and Comité P, as well as interviewees for this case study, is that the existing mechanisms to share information between relevant Belgian services, including between immigration and counter-terrorism services, are functioning relatively well. Furthermore, there is a general agreement that all relevant actors are willing to cooperate. When information was not shared, it seems to have resulted mainly from individual mistakes and errors of judgement, rather than from a culture of information retention.[569] Nevertheless, it appears from the case of Lassoued that the discussion of new entities in LTFs could be better prepared by all partners, while they are not always considered the highest priority. Furthermore, as noted by one interviewee, the information available to Belgian services also depends partly on the information shared by external partners. In this regard, it is far from clear for interviewees whether the level of cooperation between immigration and counter-terrorism services is similarly advanced in other European countries, which could then impact negatively the Belgian information position and, more broadly, national security.

• **Do not overlook, nor exaggerate, the threat from illegal migrants:** Concerns about illegal immigrants are not new to counter-terrorism services, but the attack by Lassoued triggered new reflections among security services about specific risks and challenges related to this particular group, given Lassoued's continuous clandestine life in Europe over twelve full years. Indeed, it is acknowledged by interviewees that the monitoring of illegal migrants is overall complicated. It also creates administrative complexities, such as, for instance, deciding which LTF is competent for the management of a particular individual, when they do not have an official address.[570] However, a check of the common database on terrorists and (potentially) violent extremists reveals that there are only 31 illegals under an OQT listed in Belgium as of late 2024, which is less than 5 percent of the total database, that the majority of them are actually in prison, and that almost all of them have a relatively low to moderate individual

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567 CSJ, p. 41
568 Comité R, "Position d'information de l'Organe," p.10
569 Comité P, "Position d'information de la Police," p. 61
570 Interview VSSE, 27 September 2024.

threat assessment.[571] Furthermore, all of these individuals lost their official status (and thus became "illegal") after being listed in the common database. The listing of individuals that are already considered "illegal" in the common database is possible, but exceptionally rare.[572] According to a CUTA interviewee, all these figures are "reassuring" in the sense that they put this particular threat in perspective.[573] All this said, a particular decision that was made after the attack is to keep track more systematically and regularly of these "illegals" in the common database, and to have a specific briefing about them in LTFs every three months.[574] For instance, the granting of an OQT could be discussed in LTF, if it would be assessed that it could act as a trigger element for violence and/or to discuss what measures could be taken to mitigate the risk.[575] One specific challenge recognised by all interviewees is that illegal migrants, due to their status, are not eligible for most socio-preventive measures (such as, psychiatric treatment or psycho-social support, etc), which limits possible measures to surveillance and security approaches.

- **More efficient deportation of radicalised illegals, when possible:** Given that Lassoued was under an OQT since 2021, having been signalled SIS II, being under a red notice and extradition request, it is hard to conclude differently from the Comité P in that his expulsion from the Belgian territory would have been "the most effective obstacle to the commission of his attack".[576] It is widely known that the implementation of OQT is complicated (*see above for numbers in Belgium*). However, given Lassoued's previous conviction in Tunisia, his conviction in Sweden, and the recurring albeit unsubstantiated suspicions of radicalisation in 2016 and 2022, maybe there was enough information available to the authorities to prioritise his expulsion. Indeed, "dangerousness" (i.e. threats against public order or national security) is considered a key criteria in prioritising expulsions.[577]

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571 Interview CUTA, 5 September 2024.
572 Interview CUTA, 5 September 2024.
573 Interview CUTA, 5 September 2024.
574 Interview CUTA, 5 September 2024.
575 Interview VSSE, 27 September 2024.
576 Comité P, "Position d'information de la Police," p. 63
577 Interview CUTA, 5 September 2024.

Migration-Terrorism Nexus in Public Policies

The migration-terrorism nexus raises important challenges for counter-terrorism and immigration services. This section focuses on some of the main policy responses that have been developed over the past two decades, mostly in Europe and North America, as identified in the literature. It covers some broad trends, some specific operational challenges, as well as the more fundamental concerns about human rights and the rule of law. This section, combined with the case studies, sets the scene for our policy recommendations.

Securitisation and Externalisation

There is consensus among immigration scholars that there has been a clear securitisation of migration policy in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks in 2001, and again in Europe after the 2015-16 string of terrorist attacks.[578] Securitisation can be defined as the politicisation of an issue to frame it as a security threat, and respond to it accordingly. In other words, migration has increasingly become perceived as a security issue since 2001, whereas it was previously primarily perceived through a human rights or economic lens.

Although some securitisation dynamics were already present prior to 2001,[579] 9/11 had arguably a major impact on immigration policies in the US. According to one scholar, "few immigration policies have been created without terrorism policy in mind" after the 9/11 attacks.[580] Illustrative of this securitisation was the transfer of the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS), from the US Department of Justice to the newly created US Department of Homeland Security (DHS) in 2003. This shift had a "profound symbolic impact", as it communicated that immigrants were now perceived as a security threat.[581]

The 9/11 attacks impacted migration policies in Europe as well.[582] The EU, and most of its member states, responded to 9/11 with the adoption of a series of counter-terrorism measures that also covered immigration policy, including regarding border controls or asylum. However, securitisation dynamics remained fairly limited in Europe, certainly at the EU level, as the European Commission was careful to avoid any simplistic correlation between terrorism and immigration, and to protect the rights of asylum seekers and refugees.[583] Securitisation of migration policy was much more flagrant in some European countries, however, particularly in the UK, where the Anti-terrorism, Crime and Security Act passed in late 2001 made it possible, against principles of international conventions, to deport suspected terrorists and keep asylum-seekers deemed a security threat in indefinite detention, when deportation was not possible.[584]

A more significant securitisation of migration policy occurred in Europe from 2015 onwards. This was notably visible at the EU level, with the adoption of a new "European Agenda on Migration" in 2015, but also with the strengthening of the role of certain EU agencies to address notably the migration-terrorism nexus, such as the EU borders control agency (Frontex), Europol, Eurojust or

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578 Anthony Messina, "Securitizing immigration in the age of terror," *World Politics* 66, no. 3 (2014): 530-559.

579 See for instance: Evan Smith, "Creating the National/Border Security Nexus."

580 Karen C. Tumlin, "Suspect First: How Terrorism Policy Is Reshaping Immigration Policy," *California Law Review* 92, no. 4 (2004): 1175.

581 Tumlin, "Suspect First," p. 1179.

582 Georgios Karyotis, "European Migration Policy in the Aftermath of Aftermath of September 11," *The European Journal of Social Science Research* 20, no. 1 (2007): 1-17.

583 Christina Boswell, "Migration control in Europe after 9/11: Explaining the absence of securitization," *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies* 45, no. 3 (2007): 589-610; Sarah Léonard and Christian Kaunert, *Refugees, Security and the European Union* (Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2019).

584 Elspeth Guild, "International Terrorism and EU Immigration, Asylum and Borders Policy: The Unexpected Victims of 11 September 2001," *European Foreign Affairs Review* 8, no. 3 (2003): 331-346.

the EU agency for asylum (EASO, now EUAA).[585] To some extent, there was even a militarisation of the migration policy at the EU level, with the deployment of naval operations in the Mediterranean to detect and deter illegal crossings by immigrants, in cooperation with NATO.[586]

Within Europe, there were also efforts to increase awareness and train staff directly confronted with asylum-seekers, notably within reception centres, in order to be able to detect and report cases of radicalisation or extremism.[587] These measures partially changed the philosophy of staff members in these centres, by integrating them into the broader efforts to prevent and counter terrorism.[588]

Securitisation is a process, and as such it is still ongoing. In its June 2022 conclusions, the Council of the EU highlighted that deteriorating security conditions in Europe's neighbourhood resulted in more people's movements towards the EU, with the "risk of infiltration by individuals posing a terrorist threat,"[589] before formulating a series of recommendations for the EU and its member states to improve security, notably in light of the migration-terrorism nexus. These issues and recommendations continued to be discussed among EU Member States, notably during the Belgian rotating presidency of the Council of the EU in the first semester of 2024.[590] In late 2024, a number of EU member states, notably Austria, Denmark, France, Germany, and Italy, had reinstated controls at their borders, within the border-free Schengen area, justified notably by the terrorist threat and illicit migration.[591]

Some researchers have also argued that a dual strategy of "externalisation" of the European migration and counter-terrorism policies has been emerged over the past decade. On the one hand, the EU negotiated deals with third countries, notably Turkey, Libya, and Tunisia, in order to treat asylum requests from outside Europe's borders.[592] This policy relied on the illusion that illegal migration should and could be stopped, and that this would result in a safer Europe.[593] On the other hand, European states invested more in counter-terrorism missions and operations abroad, notably in its southern neighbourhood and Sub-Saharan Africa. While these missions had a counter-terrorism purpose, research into Italian external engagements suggests that countering migration flows is an equal, if not superior, purpose for these missions for political leaders.[594]

In the words of Léonard and Kaunert: "it is likely that, in future, asylum-seekers and refugees will increasingly be at the receiving hand of security practices, particularly military security practices. This is due to a large extent to some important changes in the perception of asylum-seekers and refugees, which have occurred as a result of the juxtaposition of the 'migration crisis' and the 'terrorism crisis' in 2015–2016."[595]

585 Léonard and Kaunert, *Refugees, Security and the European Union*.

586 Foteini Asderaki and Eleftheria Markozani, "The Securitization of Migration and the 2015 Refugee Crisis: From Words to Actions," in: *The New Eastern Mediterranean Transformed*, ed. Aristotle Tziampiris and Foteini Asderaki (Springer, 2021).

587 Jordy Krasenberg and Steven Lenos, RAN study visit on 'PVE and CVE in and around asylum centres and within refugee communities,' *Radicalisation Awareness Network*, 2018; Joris Van Wijk, and Maarten P. Bolhuis, "Awareness trainings and detecting jihadists among asylum seekers: A case study from the Netherlands," Perspectives on Terrorism 11, no. 4 (2017): 39-49.

588 Joris Van Wijk, and Maarten P. Bolhuis, "Awareness trainings and detecting jihadists among asylum seekers: A case study from the Netherlands," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 11, no. 4 (2017): 39-49.

589 Council of the European Union, "Conclusions du Conseil: « Protéger les Européens du terrorisme: actions accomplies et prochaines étapes »" 9 June, 2022.

590 Council of the European Union, "Counterterrorism: Current challenges and Presidency initiatives and activities in the area," 3 June, 2024.

591 European Commission, "Temporary Reintroduction of Border Control".

592 Bruno Oliveira Martins, and Michael Strange, "Rethinking EU External Migration Policy: Contestation and Critique," *Global Affairs* 5, no. 3 (2019): 195–202.

593 Lorena S. Martini and Tarek Megerisi, "Road to nowhere: Why Europe's border externalisation is a dead end," *European Council on Foreign Relations*, 14 December, 2023.

594 Michela Ceccorulli and Fabrizio Coticchia, "'I'll take two.' Migration, terrorism, and the Italian military engagement in Niger and Libya," *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* 25, no. 2 (2020): 174-196.

595 Léonard and Kaunert, *Refugees, Security and the European Union,* p. 156; See also: Manni Crone and Maja F. Falkentoft, Europe's Refugee Crisis and the threat of terrorism, an extraordinary threat? Danish Institute for International Studies, 2017, p.28.

Operational Aspects

This section highlights some operational challenges related to the response to the migration-terrorism nexus. They include issues pertaining to border controls, databases interoperability, cooperation between counter-terrorism and immigration services, or the deportation of illegal immigrants suspected of terrorism.

A first key challenge that emerged prominently in 2015, in the context of an unprecedented influx of asylum-seekers from Iraq and Syria, was the unequal exposure of EU countries to this immigration. European peripheral countries (mainly Greece, and Italy) were most exposed as first entry points in the Schengen area. However, these countries had neither the capacity to properly treat all asylum requests, nor the political will to fully abide with the EU rules. As a result, a large number of illegal immigrants were not registered or "waved through", allowing them to proceed with their journey to other European countries (mainly Germany and Sweden).[596] To some extent, the Schengen border control system "broke down" in 2015, resulting in a limited capacity to properly treat and monitor an unusually large number of incoming migrants.[597] This absence of a proper registration and fingerprinting of migrants created several challenges. From an immigration point of view, it resulted in poorly controlled and regulated flows. From a counter-terrorism point of view, this was clearly a missed opportunity to detect and monitor potential suspects.

In partial response to this capacity problem, the EU initiated a new "hotspot approach" in 2015, that is centralised reception centres for asylum seekers, generally located on islands. In these hotspots, national authorities could treat asylum requests with the support of various EU agencies, namely Frontex, EASO (now EUAA), Europol, and Eurojust.[598] While this approach improved the capacity to process asylum requests in Europe, important capacity gaps remain, particularly in cases of acute migratory pressure.[599] Furthermore, in March 2017, new EU rules reinforced controls at the external borders of the Schengen area, by obliging member states to systematically check all relevant databases for persons entering Europe, including EU citizens.[600]

A second challenge that emerged prominently in the past decade relates to the capacity to detect potential terrorists hiding among asylum seekers, through a better use of European databases. For instance, one could mention one of the attackers in Paris (November 2015) who managed to pass through Greek border staff with a passport that had been registered as stolen in Interpol's database.[601] In another striking example, the only surviving member of the Paris attacks in November 2015, Salah Abdeslam, was controlled by the French police after the attacks but was not arrested, even though he was known and registered in the EU's SIS II database for radicalisation (*see French case study in this report*). The SIS II database is the largest information system for public security in Europe containing information on wanted or missing persons, persons under police surveillance and persons who are not nationals of a Schengen Member State and who are prohibited from entering the Schengen area, as well as information on stolen or missing vehicles and objects, such as identity documents, vehicle registration certificates, and vehicle number plates.

596 Florian Trauner, "Asylum policy: the EU's 'crises' and the looming policy regime failure," in *EU Policies in Times of Crisis,* pp. 93-108. Routledge, 2018; Chiara Loschi and Peter Slominski, "The EU Hotspot Approach in Italy: Strengthening Agency Governance in the Wake of the Migration Crisis?" *Journal of European Integration* 44, no. 6 (2022): 769–86.
597 Schmid, "Links between Terrorism and Migration," p. 8.
598 Loschi and Slominski, "The EU Hotspot Approach in Italy".
599 European Parliament, "Hotspots at EU external borders State of play," September 2020.
600 "Schengen borders code: Council adopts regulation to reinforce checks at external borders," *European Council*, 7 March, 2017.
601 Crone and Falkentoft, *Europe's Refugee Crisis*, p. 32-33.

This particular series of incidents acted as a real shock to EU Member States. There were in fact two distinct issues at play: the lack of proper feeding of information and use of databases, on the one hand, and the lack of interoperability between the databases, on the other hand. With regard to the former, it became clear in 2015 that most police services were not feeding and consulting – neither regularly nor in a consistent manner across EU member states – relevant EU databases (notably SIS II) on terrorists and FTFs, hence providing a very incomplete threat picture to law enforcement and border controls services.[602] From 2015-2016 onwards, the information entered in EU databases, such as SIS II, and the amount of times these databases were accessed increased exponentially.[603] With regard to the interoperability of databases, something that was previously considered taboo,[604] efforts started in 2015 and resulted in new regulations in 2019.[605] The regulations actually cover three distinct purposes. First, modernise existing systems (SIS II, a police database; Eurodac, a database on asylum-seekers, including e.g. fingerprints; and VIS, a database on visa requests). Second, build new databases (EES, a database on entry-exit of Schengen; ETIAS, a visa waiver programme; and ECRIS-TCN, a database of convictions of non-EU nationals in the EU). Third, ensure the interoperability between all these databases, notably through a European Search Portal, allowing relevant services to search all databases at once through a system of 'hit/no-hit'. While some aspects are already in place, the whole system should only become fully operational in 2027.

According to law enforcement officials, these new databases and their interoperability will significantly improve counter-terrorism efforts, notably in the context of the migration-terrorism nexus.[606] For instance, the new system could allegedly have contributed to preventing the terrorist attack in Stockholm, in April 2017. The perpetrator, Rakhmat Akilov, entered Europe via Poland, under a Schengen visa, where he stayed a few months.[607] When he crossed from Poland to Sweden, he reportedly threw away his papers and claimed asylum in Sweden, under a false identity. Under the new system, his fingerprints would have been taken when applying for asylum, and would have been matched with his visa application, hence raising warnings and resulting in further investigation. Furthermore, the EES system would have indicated that he had overstayed his short-term visa, providing grounds for his expulsion.

A third key operational challenge relates to the cooperation between all relevant European services. On the one hand, cooperation is needed between all European services, to ensure that the relevant information is circulating in a timely manner between counter-terrorism or immigration services, through European databases or bilaterally. However, lack of trust remains sometimes an issue, hindering the sharing of information or affecting the importance given to the information shared by an untrusted partner. On the other hand, ensuring good cooperation between counter-terrorism and immigration services at the national level, in every European country, is equally paramount to ensure a robust information position and effective counter-terrorism and immigration policies. In June 2022, the Council of the EU encouraged more cooperation at the European level between (1) immigration and asylum authorities, and (2) counter-terrorism authorities, as well as (3) more cooperation between counter-terrorism and migration and asylum authorities at the national level.[608] The purpose was explicitly to ensure that all services receive the relevant information necessary to detect and arrest potential terrorists

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602 Thomas Renard, "The evolution of the policy response to jihadi returnees in Europe (2012-2020)," in *La lutte contre le terrorisme : ses acquis et ses défis / The fight against terrorism: achievements and challenges*, eds. Christiane Höhn, Isabel Saavedra, and Anne Weyembergh, Liber Amicorum Gilles de Kerchove (Bruylant, 2021), 695-709.
603 Christine Andreeva, "The EU's counter-terrorism policy after 2015—'Europe wasn't ready'—'but it has proven that it's adaptable'," *ERA-Forum* 20, no. 3 (2020): 343–370.
604 Andreeva, "The EU's counter-terrorism policy," p. 352.
605 "Interoperability," n.d., *Migration and Home Affairs European Commission*.
606 Authors' meeting at Europol, The Hague, 21 October 2024.
607 Per Kudo, "Akilovs asylfall skulle ha prövats i Polen," Svenska Dagbladet, 9 February, 2018.
608 Council of the European Union, Protecting Europeans from terrorism: achievements and next steps, 9 June, 2022.

hiding among migrant flows" or taking advantage of the fragmented European asylum system. This issue appeared again prominently during the Belgian presidency of the EU, following the October 2023 terrorist attack in Brussels by an illegal immigrant (*see Belgian case study*).[609]

Detection of potential terrorist-migrants within Europe, rather than at the external borders of Europe, constitutes a fourth operational challenge. As highlighted by Mullins, "the majority of terrorist asylum-seekers have been detected not at the external borders, but within Europe itself—typically more than a year after they first arrived."[610] In many cases, it is tip-offs from other refugees or asylum-seekers that allowed to identify terrorism suspects (*see German case study*). Further illustrating migrants' critical contributions to counter-terrorism efforts is how Syrian refugees in Germany supported the investigation of international crimes committed by Daesh in Syria.[611]

Furthermore, as mentioned in the previous section, several member states have strengthened the detection capacities within refugee reception centres and among immigration officers, notably by training staff and creating clear information exchange protocols between these services and counter-terrorism services.[612] The temporary restoration of border controls within the Schengen area, also mentioned in the previous section, is also part of this detection strategy.

Last but not least, there is the complex issue of the management of immigrants that were denied asylum and/or have received an expulsion order. This issue is particularly important because a number of terrorist attacks over the past few years have been committed by individuals that were residing illegally in Europe, some of which were under one (or even several) expulsion orders (**see Belgian and German case studies in this report**). According to this study's dataset, eleven individuals under an expulsion order have been actively involved in completed terrorist attacks in Europe, between 2014 and 2024.

The expulsion or deportation of illegal immigrants is a sensitive and complex issue, notably because there are legitimate concerns about risks of abuse or torture of individuals sent back from Europe to their country of origin. However, there is a significant gap between the number of individuals that have been denied asylum in Europe, and those that have actually left Europe, which is raising legitimate questions. A 2021 report from the European Court of Auditors indicated that only 20 to 30 percent of the individuals that had received an order to leave the EU territory had actually left the EU.[613]

Challenges and Negative Impacts

Responding to the migration-terrorism nexus implies a series of dilemmas and challenges. Among the dilemmas, several scholars have noted that stricter immigration policies can contribute to security under certain circumstances, notably by making it more difficult for terrorists to cross borders. However, excessively repressive policies can also backfire and lead to more terrorism, notably by fostering grievances and radicalisation.[614]

Like many other dilemmas in public policy, key issues relate to effectiveness and proportionality, among others. With regard to proportionality, there is a well-known tendency in counter-terrorism

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609 Council of the European Union, Counterterrorism: Current challenges and Presidency initiatives and activities in the area, 3 June, 2023.
610 Mullins, *Jihadist infiltration of migrant flows*, p. 99.
611 "Refugees as Witnesses in Germany," *Syria Justice and Accountability Centre*, 10 May 2023.
612 Jordy Krasenberg and Steven Lenos, RAN study visit on 'PVE and CVE in and around asylum centres and within refugee communities,' RAN, 2018; Van Wijk, and Bolhuis, "Awareness trainings and detecting jihadists among asylum seekers."
613 European Court of Auditors, EU readmission cooperation with third countries: relevant actions yielded limited results, 2021.
614 Helbling and Meierrieks, "Terrorism and Migration"; Tobias Böhmelt and Vincenzo Bove, "How migration policies moderate the diffusion of terrorism," *European Journal of Political Research* 59, no. 1 (2020): 160-181.

policy to overreact in speech and act.[615] The history of "extraordinary measures" in response to terrorism is long. One measure that illustrates this particularly well, in relation to the migration-terrorism nexus, was the so-called "Muslim ban" promulgated by US President Donald J Trump in 2017, blocking the entry of citizens from seven Muslim-majority countries in response to the presumed threat of jihadi terrorism.[616]

With regard to effectiveness, public policies should be evaluated holistically. In this light, some policies may appear to offer short-term rewards, but prove overall ineffective or even counter-productive. For instance, the "externalisation" of border controls to address the migration-terrorism nexus appears to have had some short-term benefits, but it is deemed by some experts "not a viable long-term counter-terrorism strategy", as it creates conditions for further radicalisation and recruitment by terrorist organisations in fragile neighbouring countries.[617] In a similar manner, the policies of citizenship-stripping and deportation of terrorism suspects have long been criticised as being short-sighted and ineffective at best, and even counter-productive.[618] In 2003, the so-called Newton Report already stated:

> *Seeking to deport terrorist suspects does not seem to us to be a satisfactory response, given the risk of exporting terrorism. If people in the UK are contributing to the terrorist effort here or abroad, they should be dealt with here. While deporting such people might free up British police, intelligence, security and prison service resources, it would not necessarily reduce the threat to British interests abroad, or make the world a safer place more generally. Indeed, there is a risk that the suspects might even return without the authorities being aware of it. [619]*

Finally, there are serious legal and human rights concerns raised by the growing overlap between migration and counter-terrorism policies. Various scholars have warned against regulations that deviate from international standards – particularly with regards to their impact on the right to privacy and data protection. Such regulations could moreover stigmatise asylum-seekers as potential criminals, notably by systematically taking fingerprints, while putting at risk the rights of genuine asylum seekers in need of protection.[620] There are also concerns about the systematic collection of data on all travellers to the EU.[621] Particularly, the use of new technologies at border controls raises concerns about respect for human rights.[622]

615 Thomas Renard, *The Evolution of Counter-Terrorism Since 9/11: Understanding the Paradigm Shift in Liberal Democracies*, London: Routledge, 2021.
616 "Trump's executive order: Who does travel ban affect?" *BBC News*, 10 February, 2017.
617 Sajjan M. Gohel, "Prevention of Cross-Border Movements of Terrorists," pp. 484-485.
618 Christophe Paulussen, "Countering Terrorism Through the Stripping of Citizenship: Ineffective and Counterproductive," *International Centre for Counter Terrorism*, 17 October 2018.
619 Cited in: Christina Boswell. "Migration control in Europe after 9/11," p. 599.
620 Niovi Vavoula, "The recast Eurodac regulation: Are asylum seekers treated as suspected criminals?" In *Seeking Asylum in the European Union*, pp. 247-273. Brill Nijhoff, 2015.
621 Chris Jones, "Automated Suspicion the EU's New Travel Surveillance Initiatives," *State Watch*, 2020.
622 "Human rights risks of using of new technologies in border management need urgent attention, international human rights office ODIHR says," *OSCE*, 20 June, 2024.

Conclusions

The migration-terrorism nexus is a complex, multifaceted issue. Distinguishing myths from realities requires careful examination. While interconnections exist, and certainly warrant objective analysis, they are neither new nor aligned with stereotypical narratives often conveyed in public and political discourses. Based on a review of the literature, this report contributed to a better understanding of all facets of the migration-terrorism nexus, and henceforth paved the way for a proper conceptualisation, as well as for identifying evidence to support more effective counter-terrorism policies. Before expanding on research gaps and recommendations in the final chapter, here is a brief summary of our findings.

Terrorist organisations have exploited migration flows for operational purposes. Some terrorists have infiltrated refugee flows to *(re-)migrate* to Europe undetected. This tactic, notably observed during the 2015-2016 refugee crisis, involving posing as asylum seekers to conduct attacks in third states, led to some of the most devastating attacks in Europe's recent history. While recent migration patterns, such as those from Ukraine, might warrant scrutiny for potential misuse, such occurrences are statistically rare. Terrorists can also migrate for other purposes, including to hide from counter-terrorism authorities. Furthermore, terrorists can infiltrate both legal and illegal flows.

Terrorist organisations have capitalised on migrants' vulnerabilities. Various elements in migrants, asylum seekers, and refugees' trajectories may influence their susceptibility to radicalisation, ranging from traumatic experiences in their countries of origin or during their journey, uncertainties about their future, prolonged stays in poorly equipped camps or reception centres, restricted access to education and employment, weak social support networks, or experiences of discrimination in host countries. As a result, some migrants have radicalised into violent extremism, although in very small numbers. There are furthermore indications that terrorist organisations are proactively taking advantage of migration flows and vulnerabilities, to recruit members or make financial gains. The risk of radicalisation among diaspora communities, including second- and third-generation immigrants, is also a very serious challenge.

Not all migrants are terrorists, nor are all terrorists migrants. Data shows that some migrants can constitute a security risk, with a number of asylum-seekers and illegal aliens being monitored by counter-terrorism services or having been involved in terrorist plots. However, these cases should not obscure the fact that terrorism remains predominantly a homegrown problem. In other words, most terrorists are not (first-generation) migrants. As a matter of fact, research suggests that migrants are more likely to be victims than perpetrators of political violence. Indeed, terrorism might be the reason for migrants to seek refuge abroad, but they can also become targets of xenophobic attacks in their host country.

The migration-terrorism nexus has deep historical roots, and is likely to persist in the future. Several dynamics suggest there will be more migration flows in the future. This includes the multiplication and intensification of conflicts worldwide,[623] as well as climate change acting as a potential exacerbating factor for populations' displacement, while creating fertile ground for conflicts.[624] Moreover, increased climate-induced migration in a context where far-right eco-fascist movements have appropriated ecological concerns to further xenophobic narratives and violence is also concerning.[625] Compounding these dynamics is the pervasive influence of mis- and dis-information about migration, a longstanding issue that has only been amplified in

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623 Siri Aas Rustad, "Conflict Trends: A Global Overview, 1946–2023," *PRIO Paper*. (2024). Oslo: PRIO.

624 Andrea Malji, Laurabell Obana, and Cidney Hopkins, "When Home Disappears: South Asia and the Growing Risk of Climate Conflict," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 34, no. 5 (2022): 939–57; John P. Sullivan and Keeley Townsend, "Climate Migration: Adding Fuel to the Ethnocentric Fire," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 34, no. 5 (2022): 914–25.

625 Graham Macklin, "The Extreme Right, Climate Change and Terrorism," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 34, no. 5 (2022): 979–96.

the digital age. With social media increasingly becoming a dominant source of information in Europe,[626] the spread of distorted, hateful narratives has the potential to inflame public fears and harmful stereotypes about migrants. Finally, the rise in populist and far-right parties and governments across Europe and North America also raises significant challenges for the future. Simplistic and fear-driven rhetoric, pushed by populist political figures, will likely further hinder efforts to address the nexus in a balanced way, and the development of policies grounded in evidence, human rights, and the rule of law.

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626 "TV still main source for news but social media is gaining ground," *European Parliament News*, 17 November, 2023.

Research Gaps and Recommendations

Research Gaps

Expanding evidence-based research into the migration-terrorism nexus is the only way to allow for more nuanced perspectives to emerge. Yet, while mapping possible interconnections, this research has identified several areas that remain underexplored.

Underexploited historical insights from older manifestations of the nexus: While research on the migration-terrorism nexus has expanded in recent years, the phenomenon is not new. A deeper exploration of earlier manifestations of the nexus may offer valuable lessons. While some limited research has examined previous waves of foreign terrorist fighters, a historical perspective on other longstanding aspects of the nexus could be beneficial.

Predominant focus on the nexus between migration and jihadist terrorism: Recent developments, such as Russia's invasion of Ukraine, have shifted some focus, but academic research and public discourse still predominantly examine the migration-terrorism nexus in relation to jihadist terrorism. For example, although both left- and right-wing extremists have participated in several foreign conflicts throughout modern history, research has largely focused on jihadi foreign fighters. This leaves a notable gap in understanding its potential effects on other forms of violent extremism, especially far-right extremism.

Limited literature from/about developing countries: As acknowledged in the methodology section, the large majority of existing academic literature emanates from and focuses on the impact of the nexus in Western countries. While not restricted to this topic, this lack of data and insights from developing countries seems particularly problematic in this case as the latter are "where the majority of violent extremist attacks occur, and where the majority of the world's refugees and IDPs and at least half the world's migrants can be found."[627]

Disproportionate focus on risks posed (rather than those faced) by migrants: Additionally, there has been a disproportionate focus on the perceived risks posed by migrants to host countries, often overlooking the impact of reactionary extremist violence targeting migrant and refugee communities themselves and those who support their integration.

Terrorism's direct and indirect effects on migration are understudied: In light of the inconsistent findings from the literature, there is a need for further investigation into the effects of terrorism and counter-terrorism on migration dynamics, exploring both the direct effects as well as indirect ones. Particularly, research into the indirect effects of terrorism on emigration from Europe is still in its early stages. The dynamic revealed by a recent French study, showing members of Muslim minorities leaving France due to increased (perceived) stigmatisation in the aftermath of terrorist attacks, could be further investigated in other countries.

Granular examination of different migration flows: When attempting to measure the effects of migration on terrorism, research must more carefully distinguish between different types of migrants as perpetrators of terrorism (e.g. asylum-seekers, illegals, diaspora, etc.), terrorists among migrants flows, and migrants as victims of terrorism. Otherwise, the results of the research are meaningless, since they hide very different issues. Limited attention has notably been paid to the exploitation of legal migration flows, as compared to refugee and asylum seeker flows,

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627 Koser and Cunningham, "Migration, violent extremism and social exclusion, " p.3.

by terrorist organisations. Overall, there is a need to move beyond quantifying developments to focus on finding causation and explaining observed trends and phenomena through more qualitative and empirical research.

Radicalisation and recruitment among (legal and illegal) recent immigrants: The issue of the radicalisation and recruitment of asylum-seekers in Europe is largely understudied. There is extensive literature on the radicalisation of immigrants established in Europe for years or decades, as well as their children, but virtually no research is available focusing on recently-arrived individuals, notably those residing in reception centres and/or deportation centres. Similarly, there is almost no research on the vulnerabilities to radicalisation and recruitment among illegal migrants trying to live clandestinely in Europe. This is notably due to a lack of data available to researchers and the difficulty of accessing that particular population.

Role of diasporas and migrants in preventing and countering terrorism: There is little research available on the role that diasporas and the community of migrants (including refugees and asylum-seekers) can play in terms of detecting terrorists and recruiters, as well as in terms of preventing radicalisation and supporting disengagement.

Crime-terror-migration nexus: In spite of a relatively abundant literature on the crime-terror nexus and on the migration-terrorism nexus, the more complex crime-terror-migration nexus remains largely overlooked.

Influence of (social) media framing: More research could be done on the role of media framing on public attitudes towards immigration, in relation to terrorism. In the era of social media, the particular role of social media in framing the migration-terrorism nexus would require particular attention.

Reciprocal impact of political discourse and public attitudes: Similarly, more research is needed into the influence of political discourse on public attitudes with regard to immigration, in relation to terrorism, in order to examine whether politicians drive anti-migrant attitudes, or whether they rather adapt to growing concerns among the population. Moreover, particular attention may be paid to the mainstreaming of anti-immigration narratives across the political spectrum, beyond the far-right, in relation to terrorism.

Evaluation of the policy responses: More research is needed into the policy responses in place to address the migration-terrorism nexus, and how these policies have evolved over time. Specifically, more research would be desirable on the ethical, human rights, and rule of law considerations related to the policy responses to the migration-terrorism nexus.

Recommendations

Based on the literature review, case studies, and interviews, this report formulates some concrete policy recommendations to better assess, prevent, and address challenges raised by the migration-terrorism nexus. These recommendations are mostly geared towards European policy-makers, although some have a broader reach.

Understand challenges raised by the migration-terrorism nexus and assess current responses

1. Improving our understanding of the migration-terrorism nexus is a crucial step, in order to get counter-terrorism priorities right. A biased or incomplete view could result in a waste of resources, in underestimating a possible threat, or in designing inadequate responses with potential adverse effects.

2. A full-fledged audit of policy responses to the migration-terrorism nexus is needed, to identify the key operational challenges faced by the various relevant services (such as counter-terrorism services, immigration services, border guards, etc.), to identify challenges related to the cooperation between services or to the use of certain tools (e.g. databases), as well as to identify some good practices.

3. It is important to consider seriously the potential threat emanating from illegal immigrants, which constitutes a challenging target population given its clandestine life. Meanwhile, it is important not to underestimate the threat from legal immigrants, not least as, for example, more legal immigrants have been involved in terrorist attacks in the US than illegal ones.

4. It is important to highlight that only a tiny minority of immigrants, legal or illegal, become involved in terrorist activities. Hence, it is crucial to avoid the criminalisation of an entire population or the excessive securitisation of immigration policies, at the risk of wasting resources and leading to counter-productive results.

Enhance efforts to prevent risks related to the migration-terrorism nexus

5. In refugee or IDP camps, in conflict areas or nearby, it is important to ensure that aid and services are adequately provided to prevent terrorist groups from exploiting gaps (for example, in the provision of education) to spread their narratives and recruit. Equally important is to ensure that provided aid and related resources are not captured by militants, as it could reinforce violent extremist groups and provide them with leverage to take control over the camps or coerce refugees into joining them.

6. In Europe, it is important to ensure the most efficient process for asylum-seekers, in order to reduce as much as possible the time and uncertainty of the process, which puts individuals in a situation of vulnerability to radicalisation or recruitment.

7. In order to prevent the radicalisation of asylum-seekers, more prevention work could be done. This could include, for instance:

• Training of staff working in reception centres, in order to improve their capacity to detect and report cases of radicalisation or recruitment;

• Developing trusted channels for asylum-seekers to report cases of radicalisation or recruitment that they witness, with necessary safeguards to adequately process such information;

- Working with asylum-seekers to reinforce their resilience and reduce their vulnerability to radicalisation (e.g. by circulating leaflets in their own language highlighting the risks of radicalisation and the consequences);

- Ensuring the security of asylum-seekers in reception centres, protecting them from undesirable influence, such as radical preachers, for instance, by better controlling people that come in and out of such centres;

- Offering mental health and socio-preventive support to asylum-seekers, including those rejected, in order to reduce their vulnerability to radicalisation;

- Ensuring some degree of continuity by offering follow-up support even after refugee status is granted to reduce vulnerability during the critical moment of transition from services received in reception centres to integration into host communities.

8. A large part of the migrant population in Europe (including diasporas) is socio-economically marginalised and discriminated. Policies that seek to address these underlying conditions of radicalisation would strengthen European security and economy.

Effectively detect and address the migration-terrorism nexus

9. A stronger cooperation between counter-terrorism and immigration services in every European country is needed. At the national level, this would improve the security screening of immigrants, while collectively improving the information collection since these services have different sources, tools, and mandates. A better cooperation at the national level would also strengthen the information position at the European level on possible threats linked to asylum seekers and irregular migrants.

10. Efforts to ensure the interoperability of EU databases are underway, but have already taken some delays. Ensuring the completion of these efforts as quickly and smoothly as possible should become a priority, while ensuring that all fundamental rights and freedoms are respected.

11. Meanwhile, more attention should be paid to improving the interoperability of relevant databases at the national level. The case studies outlined in this report suggest that the lack of connection between certain national databases hindered the information position of the services.

12. However, all these databases – national and European – are only as good as the information they are fed with. It is, therefore, crucial to train relevant practitioners, within law enforcement, counter-terrorism and immigration services, in using these databases, so they understand the importance of properly feeding them, checking them in the right circumstances, and adequately and timely acting upon the information. There might also be a need to define minimum standards about the quality of the information entered by different parties. Lastly, efforts should also be targeted at increasing trust, as the effectiveness of the information-sharing instruments ultimately depends on participating parties' willingness to share information and to trust the information shared by counterparts.

13. Given that some individuals might use different aliases or provide different spellings for their names, as observed in the case studies above, it is crucial to ensure that databases relevant to immigration and counter-terrorism services allow the entry and search of multiple aliases and spellings. Moreover, databases should be upgraded to allow for phonetic searches, when possible. Finally, given that new aliases or spellings for a particular individual might appear

over time, and recognising that knowledge of this new information can allow one to make significant connections with other profiles or cases, a "push alert" could be envisaged when new aliases or spellings are added in certain databases, to warn other services.

14. The enforcement of orders to leave the EU territory is a complex and delicate matter. However, when there is strong evidence that an individual under such an order is involved in activities endangering public order or national security, such as terrorism, arrest, and deportation should be prioritised. Enhanced information-sharing on documents required for deportation made available by third countries would also be beneficial.

15. Since migrants are more likely to be victims than perpetrators of terrorism, more consideration should be given to the protection of these communities, particularly the most vulnerable ones, namely asylum-seekers in reception centres. It is also important to consider the protection needs of professionals working with these populations, who can also become targets, and of diaspora communities subjected to transnational repression from their country of origin.

16. It is important that police record more systematically anti-migrant attacks in national statistics and that these acts get qualified as violent extremism or terrorism when appropriate. This is essential to have a better understanding of the actual scope of the threat and its evolution over time. This may entail engaging a broader reflection on strategies to be developed to encourage reporting, as many migrant communities – especially those in precarious situations, such as asylum seekers and illegal migrants – may be reluctant to approach law enforcement. Additionally, communicating about these incidents may also be necessary to raise awareness about anti-migrant violence and shift public perceptions.

17. It is important to systematically monitor and flag narratives that appear to facilitate or encourage violence against migrants, notably on social media.

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