



# Terrorism Threat Assessment

2018 – 2019

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# Introduction

The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague (ICCT) developed a baseline Terrorism Threat Assessment. This assessment used open source data to present an assessment of terrorism in 32 countries across four categories: (1) Terrorist Attacks, (2) (Returning) Foreign Terrorist Fighters (RFTF), (3) Prison & Prosecution, and (4) Terrorism Threat Assessments.

## Methodology

The time period of this situation report ranges from January 2018 until (and including) August 2019. The RFTF category concerns the total numbers of Foreign Terrorist Fighters (FTFs) and Returnees rather than just the numbers of RFTF for 2018-19. The Terrorism Threat Assessment discusses the availability of a National Threat Assessment or Terrorist Alert System in countries without specifying a timeframe.

Collecting data on the number of terrorist attacks is a delicate task. The open source data gathering process includes a variety of sources, including EUROPOL's TE-SAT 2019 and the 2019 update of the Global Terrorism Update, maintained by START. While both sources are considered among the most authoritative in the field, there is a discrepancy in the number of terrorist attacks reported (see *box 1*). This differentiation stems from a difference in definitions and methodology. To illustrate, EUROPOL reports on failed, foiled, and completed attacks, whereas the GTD only lists completed and failed attacks, excluding foiled attacks. Moreover, whereas the GTD has developed its own open source methodology, EUROPOL collects "qualitative and quantitative data on terrorist offences in the EU and data on arrests [...] provided or confirmed by EU Member States". As a result, TE-SAT's definition of an act of terrorism ties in to national definitions of individual EU Member States and, thus, tends to vary per Member State. While the GTD applies one, singular definition, its inclusion criteria are rather broad, including a variety of acts that may or may not be considered terrorism. In this report, if the numbers of attacks per ideology for 2018 in our search results were lower than those reported in Europol's TE-SAT 2019 report, the numbers from TE-SAT were used. If the numbers from our analysis were higher than those in the TE-SAT report, the numbers from our own analysis were used.

For the category *Terrorist Attacks*, using snowball sampling, a list of terrorist incidents compiled per month was created of attacks taking place across Europe, North America, and Oceania. Recognising that terrorism is a contested concept, the authors have adopted Schmid's *revised academic consensus definition of terrorism*: "a conspiratorial practice of calculated, demonstrative, direct violent action without legal or moral restraints, targeting mainly civilians and non-combatants, performed for its propagandistic and psychological effects on various audiences and conflict parties."<sup>1</sup> Additionally, there had to be at least some evidence that the perpetrator was acting on a political or ideological agenda.<sup>2</sup>

Next, a number of databases and lists of attacks were consulted to find attacks. The databases and lists that were consulted, are the following:

- The [Global Terrorism Database](#), produced by START;
- A [list](#) of jihadist attacks published by the Dutch AIVD;
- Johnston's Archive's [list](#) of jihadist attacks in the US;
- New America's [list](#) of lethal terrorist attacks in the US;
- The [list](#) of Islam-inspired violent incidents compiled by the website Religion of Peace;

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<sup>1</sup> Alex P. Schmid, "The Revised Academic Consensus Definition of Terrorism". *Perspectives on Terrorism*, Vol. 6, No. 2 (2012). <http://www.terrorismanalysts.com/pt/index.php/pot/article/view/schmid-terrorism-definition/html>

<sup>2</sup> Hate crimes, in which the perpetrator appears to have had no intention of bringing about a psychological effect on people beyond the immediate victims, have been left out.

- The Anti-Defamation League's [HEAT-map](#) of terrorist attacks in the US;
- The Police Service of Northern Ireland's [statistics](#) on the security situation in Northern Ireland;
- The [lists](#) of 'major extremist and terrorist incidents' per country on the website of the Counter Extremism Project.

Additional web searches were carried out using the search term "terrorist attack" in combination with the names of the various countries and the years 2018 and 2019. For countries with violent anarchist movements (Greece, France, Italy, Spain) Bing searches have been carried out using the search term "anarchist attack" in combination with the name of the country and the years 2018 and 2019. For the other three categories, data was collected through a variety of open sources, including:

- Annual reports (2018) from national agencies and fusion centres, as well as reports by the European Parliament, the ICCT, and the Soufan group for the RFTF category;
- Europol's TESAT 2019 report.

In addition, a broad media analysis was conducted by scanning newspapers and websites based on pre-determined key words, including Foreign Fighters (Country), Returning Foreign Fighters (Country), Foreign Fighters Europe, Violent Extremism Europe, Terrorist Arrest (Country), Terrorism Verdict (Country), Terrorism Acquittal (Country), Terrorism Conviction (Country), as well as these search terms repeated for each terrorism motive studied, i.e. Jihadist; Far-right; Left-wing/Anarchist; Ethnonationalist/Separatist, Single-issue.

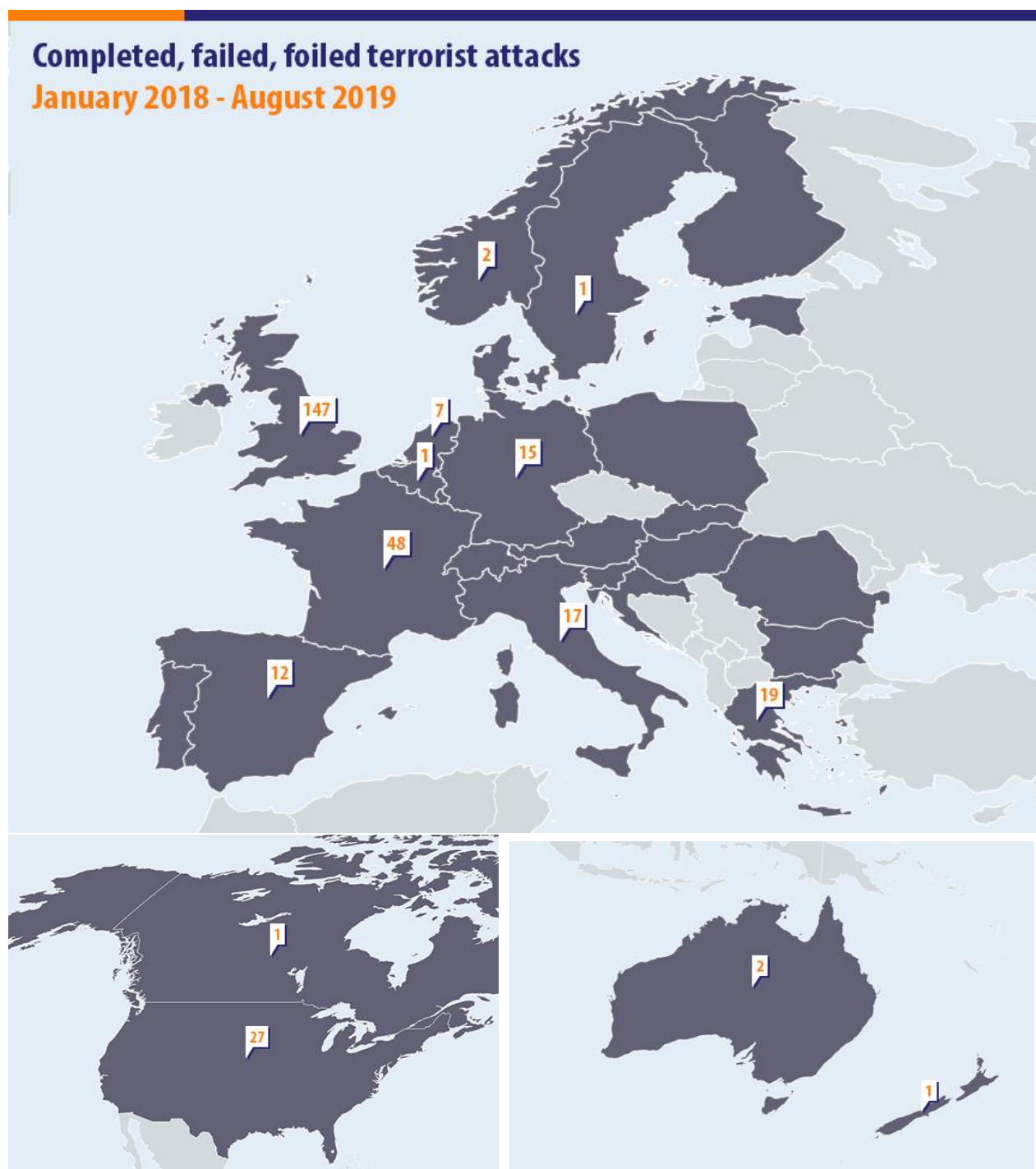
# Terrorist Attacks in 2018-2019

In the data gathering process for this category, the following rules were applied:

- Numbers of killed and wounded include, where applicable, the perpetrator(s);
- In cases where the victim estimates vary, the lowest credible number has been chosen;
- Attacks that occurred over more than one day have been dated on the day of the first attack.

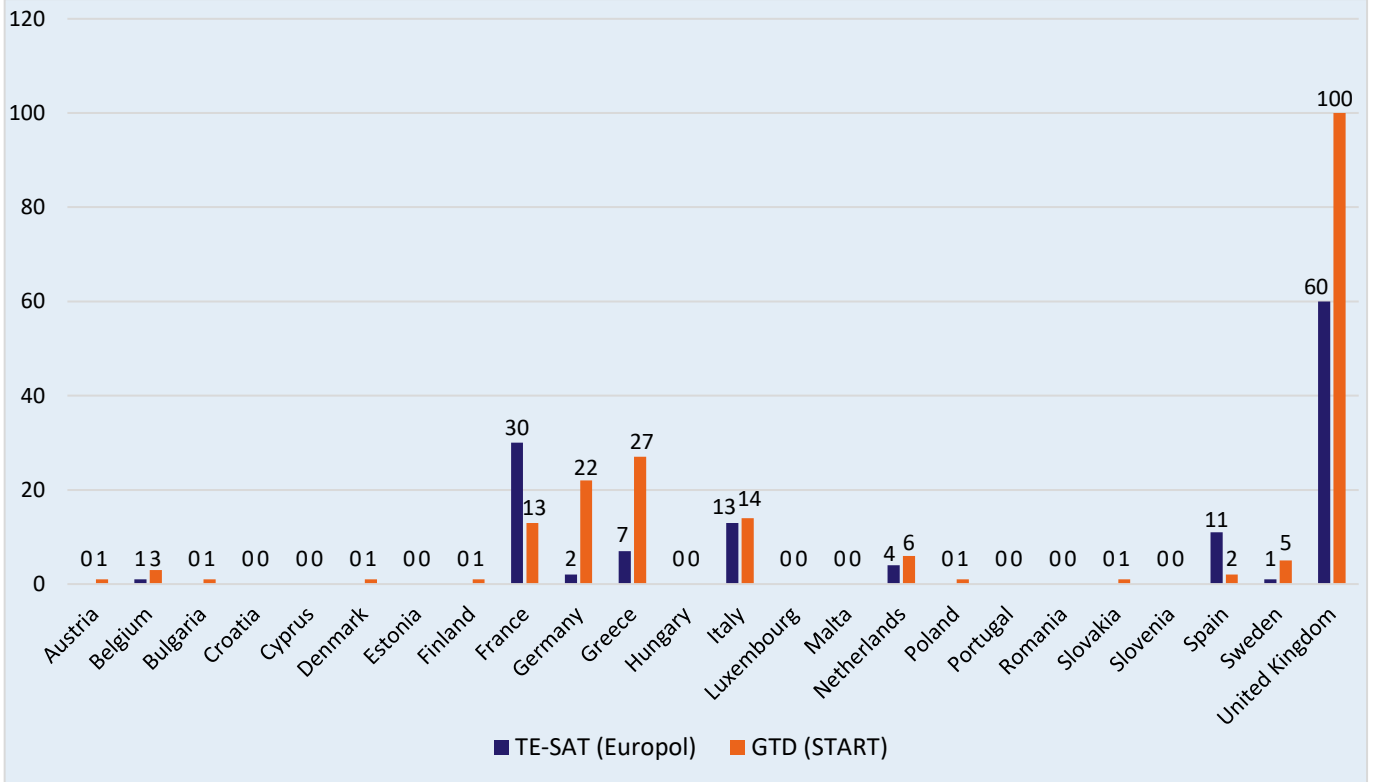
## Overview of terrorist attacks

From 2018 until August 2019, a total of 301 terrorist attacks took place in the 32 countries that were analysed. Based on the open source data analysis, the United Kingdom (UK) bore the brunt with a total of 147 terrorist attacks. France takes second place with 48 terrorist attacks, followed by the United States with 27, and Italy with 17 terrorist attacks. Seven countries suffered no terrorist attacks at all in the period analysed, including Austria, Canada, Croatia, Cyprus, Denmark, Estonia, and Finland.



**Fig. 1: Terrorist attacks in the EU reported in TE-SAT vis-à-vis the GTD (2018-2019)**

The data used in this study is derived from open sources. A key challenge in this has been the variety of definitions of terrorism. Events characterized as acts of terrorism by some, are not necessarily classified as such by others. As a consequence, the number of terrorist attacks in the EU reported in TE-SAT vis-à-vis the GTD varies, as illustrated by the discrepancy in number of attacks reported in 2018 in, for example, the United Kingdom (TE-SAT, 60; GTD, 100), Germany (TE-SAT, 2; GTD, 22), Greece (TE-SAT, 7; GTD, 27), France (TE-SAT, 30; GTD, 13), Spain (TE-SAT, 11; GTD, 2), Sweden (TE-SAT, 1; GTD, 5).

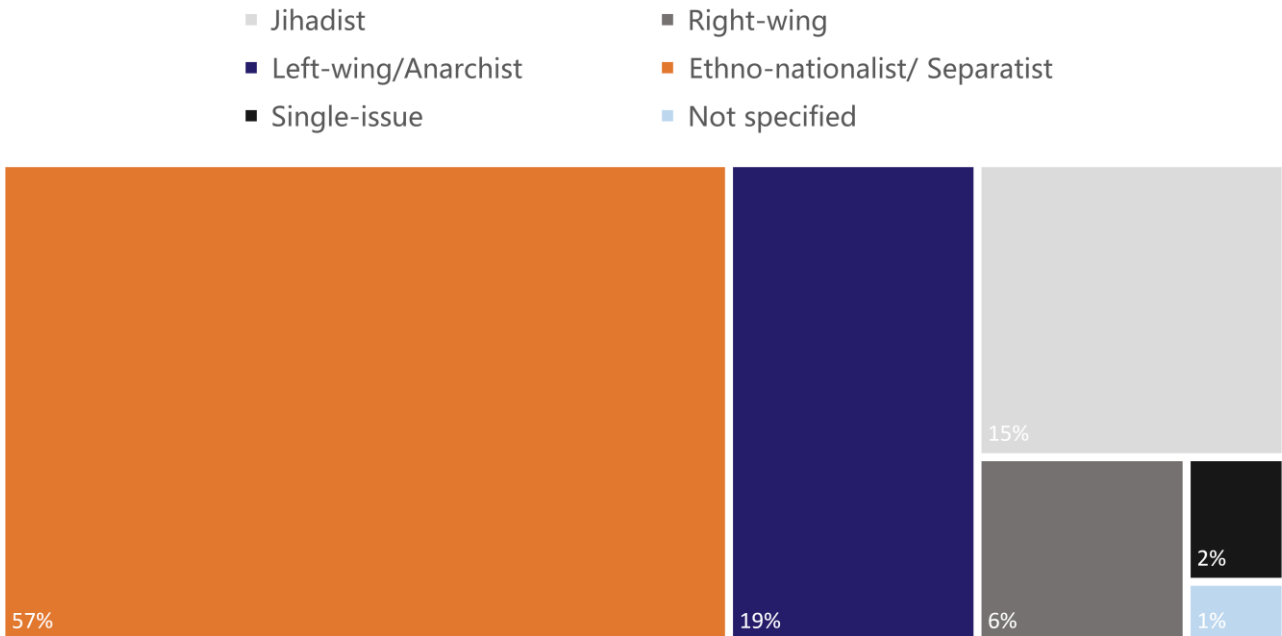


### Ideological background of attackers

Overall, of the terrorist attacks suffered by the 32 countries in this analysis in 2018 and 2019, 56.3% had an Ethnonationalist/Separatist causes, 19.5% a left-wing background, 14.5% a jihadi background, 6.5% a right-wing background and 2% of attacks were single-issue-related. Finally, 1% of terrorist attacks was unspecified or undetermined in terms of ideological background.

When it comes to the ideological background of the terrorist attacks, the vast majority (163/56%) were classified as ethnonationalist or separatist—of which 76 attacks took place in 2018 and 87 in 2019. However, the majority of these attacks took place in a limited number of countries, reflecting areas of political unrest around ethnonationalist and separatist groups, such as Northern Ireland and France (Corsica). Aside from these two regions, terrorist attacks with this ideological background are rare. Following ethnonationalist/separatist attacks were left-wing terrorist attacks, accounting for a total of 60 (20%) attacks, of which 31 took place in 2018 and 29 in 2019. Left wing terrorism is spread relatively equally across a handful of countries including Greece (17), France (14), Italy (13), and Germany (11). In Italy, left wing terrorist attacks accounted for the majority of attacks with 13 out of 58 attacks having a left wing background. Left wing terrorist attacks generally attract very little media attention—which might be a consequence of the low number casualties. The 60 left wing terrorist attacks for 2018 and 2019 caused one casualty and left six injured.

Fig. 2: Ideological background of perpetrators (2018-2019)



Ranking third in terms of ideological background is jihadi terrorist attacks with 58 (15%) terrorist attacks across 2018 and 2019 (of which 44 attacks took place in 2018 and 14 attacks in 2019). Of all countries that suffered more than 15 terrorist attacks, the United States (US) is the only country in which the majority (12) of these attacks had a jihadist background. Nonetheless, compared to both ethnonationalist/separatist and left wing attacks, jihadi terrorist attacks have taken place in a wider range of countries (11 countries total in 2018 and 2019). Finally, right wing terrorism comes fourth with a total of 19 (7%) terrorist attacks, of which eight happened in 2018 and 11 in 2019. In line with jihadi terrorism, right wing terrorist attacks have taken place in a wider range of countries, six in total. In the remaining category of single-issue terrorism, 2018 and 2019 saw six terrorist attacks, including attacks conducted by the so-called Sovereign Citizen movement<sup>3</sup>, terrorist attacks by the anti-abortion movement<sup>4</sup>, and two terrorist attacks by the so-called Incel movement.<sup>5</sup>

*The attacks in Pittsburgh, Christchurch, and El Paso ensured that right wing terrorism was the deadliest form of terrorism in the analysed countries in 2018 and 2019.*

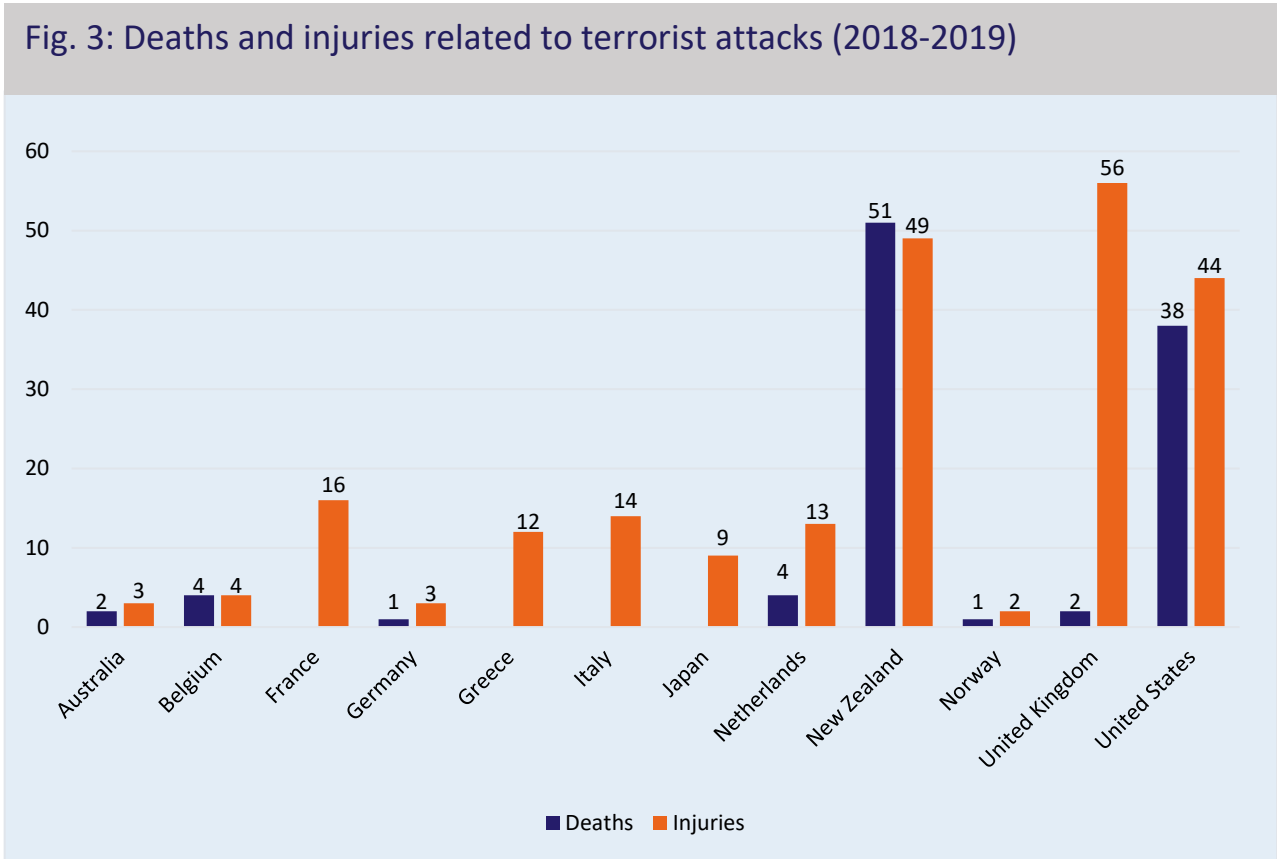
<sup>3</sup> The Sovereign Citizen Movement are an [anti-government extremist group](#) that “believe that even though they physically reside in this country, they are separate or “sovereign” from the United States.” The movement is [rooted](#) in racism and anti-Semitism.

<sup>4</sup> The [Anti-abortion movement](#) is a form of extremism active particularly in the US, Canada, and New Zealand; it has [ties to other forms of right-wing extremism including white supremacy](#).

<sup>5</sup> Beginning as an online community, [the Incel movement](#) is a [male supremacist](#) group composed of misogynistic “involuntary celibates” who have been responsible for numerous recent high-profile terrorist attacks including the 2018 shootings at a [Florida yoga studio](#) and the 2018 [Toronto van attack](#) that resulted in ten casualties.

## Impact of terrorist attacks

Both in 2018 and 2019, a handful of terrorist attacks were responsible for the lion’s share of the fatalities and injured. Of the 20 fatalities in 2018, 11 were killed in a mass shooting at a synagogue in Pittsburgh. In 2019, only two attacks—the mass shootings in Christchurch and El Paso—account for the majority of the victims: 73 of the 83 fatalities. Given that the attacks in Pittsburgh, Christchurch and El Paso all had a right-wing ideological background, right wing terrorism was the deadliest form of terrorism in the analysed countries in 2018 and 2019. Regarding injured, the pattern is similar with a handful of attacks accounting for the majority of the victims. The El Paso and Christchurch attacks account for 41% (73 of 180) of all injured in 2019. Most other injured in 2019 (31%, or 56 of 180) were injured in paramilitary shootings and assaults in Northern Ireland



## (Returned) Foreign Terrorist Fighters<sup>6</sup>

As pressure mounted on the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in recent years, the appeal of travelling to Syria and Iraq to join the ranks of jihadist terrorist organisations has decreased significantly. As a

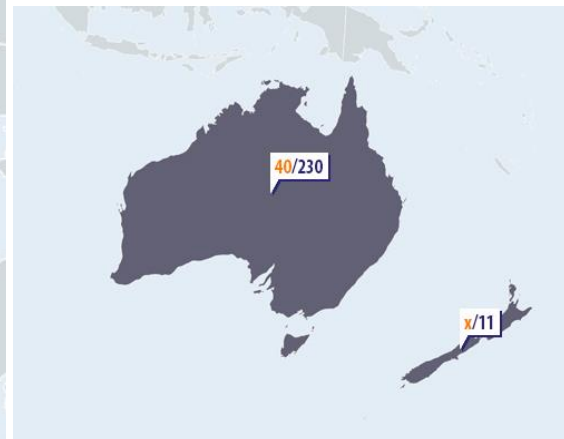
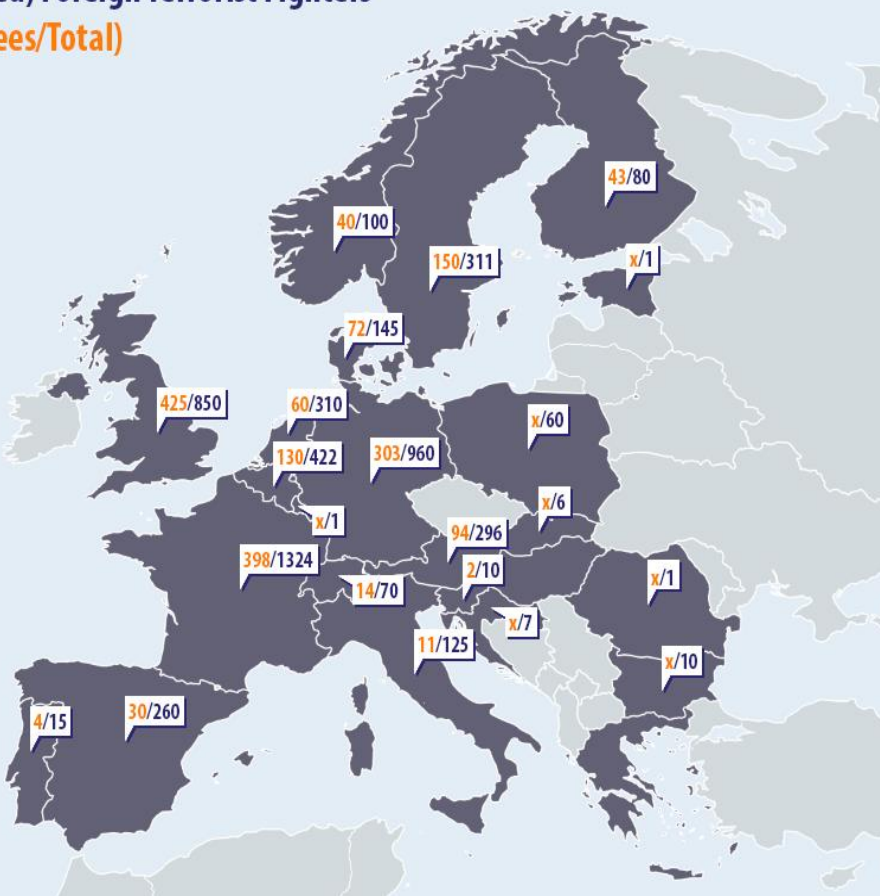
<sup>6</sup> While this section focuses exclusively on jihadist foreign fighters, governments are also faced with nationals joining other conflicts. The conflict in Ukraine attracted large numbers of right-wing fighters, with estimates indicating a total amount as high as 17,000 from 50 countries, joining both the Ukrainian (approx. 3,900) and the Russian/separatist side (approx. 13,400). The majority of these fighters came from Russia (15,000). For more information on right wing foreign fighters, see: <https://thesoufancenter.org/research/white-supremacy-extremism-the-transnational-rise-of-the-violent-white-supremacist-movement/>



consequence, the total number of Western FTFs that has travelled to the conflict zone has remained stable, estimated at approximately 6,000. Nearly 90% (or approx. 5,300 nationals) originate from the European Union. France (1,324), Germany (960), and the United Kingdom (850) have the highest numbers of foreign terrorist fighters traveling to Syria and Iraq, followed by Belgium (422), Sweden (311), the Netherlands (310), Austria (296), the United States (272), Australia (230), and Spain (208), which have all produced more than 200 foreign terrorist fighters (see figures 1 and 2).

Since the total number of FTFs has not significantly increased over the past year, the composition remains unchanged. Based on the available data, it is estimated that approximately 20% of the total number of FTFs are female (1,166 out of 5,741). Countries that exceed this number include France (33%; or 440 females), the Netherlands (26%; or 80 females), Finland (25%; or 20 females), and Sweden (24%; or 75 females).

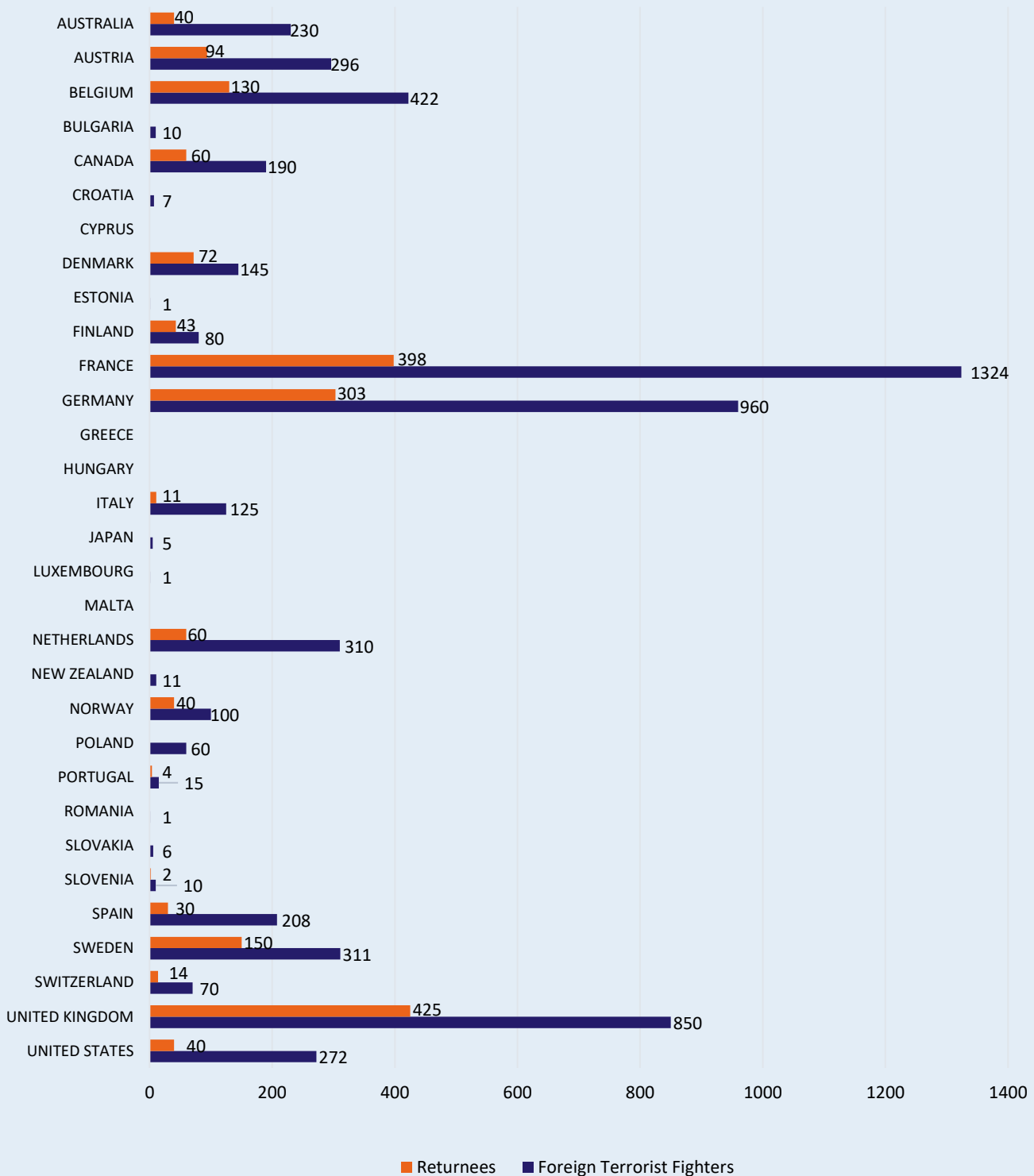
**(Returned) Foreign Terrorist Fighters**  
**(Returnees/Total)**





Based on open source data, it is estimated that at least 1900 FTFs (32% of the total) have returned home (see figures 3 and 4). Countries in the Schengen area account for 1351 returnees. As a consequence of their high number of foreign terrorist fighters, France, Germany, and the United Kingdom are also faced with high numbers of returnees (398, 303, and 425 respectively). Finland (54% or 43/80), the United Kingdom (50% or 425/850), Denmark (50% or 72/145), Sweden (48% or 150/311), and Norway (40% or 40/100) are ranked among the countries with the highest number of returnees as a percentage of the total number of foreign terrorist fighters.

**Fig. 4: Number of (returned) foreign terrorist fighters and total foreign terrorist fighters per country (2018-2019)**



The number of returnees compared to last year has only slightly increased. It should be noted that the open source data collection process has not always resulted in finding current data. This implies that the actual number of returnees may actually be higher than the estimates provided based on this open source analysis. The open source data indicates that there were at least 1,238 FTF casualties (21%) from the countries in the period studied. On a country level, some countries have had well over 30% of the FTFs who originated in their country killed in Syria and Iraq.<sup>7</sup> Regarding FTFs in detention, data is only available for Australia (80 FTFs in detention), Germany (60 FTFs), the Netherlands (55 FTFs), and Belgium (27 FTFs).

Based on the analysis, it is estimated that there are at least 1,365 Western children in Syria and Iraq. However, due to the lack of reliable data, it is expected that the actual number is much higher. Data on the number of children was only available for 13 countries. While for some countries it is known that some of the children are currently in refugee camps, no further data has been provided on their status or whereabouts.

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## Prison and Prosecution

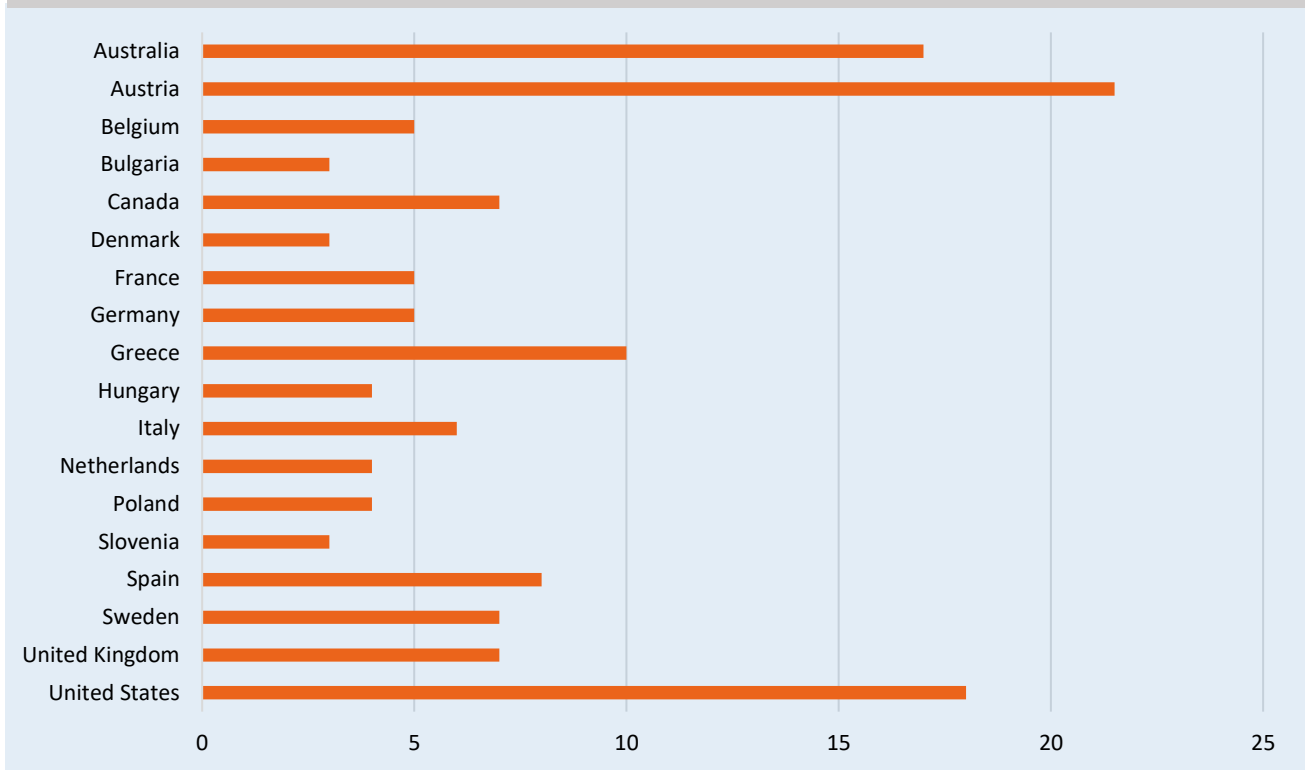
Under the Prison and Prosecution category, data was collected and analysed regarding the number of arrests and sentences for terrorism-related offences; the category of terrorist action leading to the arrest or sentencing (e.g. jihadist, left-wing, right-wing, etc.); the number of verdicts, convictions, and acquittals; the average sentence length; the number of individuals imprisoned for terrorism-related offences; the number of individuals whose citizenship has been stripped; and/or the number of individuals believed or suspected to have been radicalised in prison. France reported the highest number of arrests (322) for 2018-2019, followed by the UK with 279 arrests and Belgium with 168. This trend was reflected in number of arrests and the number of verdicts with France again reporting the highest number of individuals being sentenced for terrorist offences (141), followed by the UK with 135 verdicts. However, in this case, Spain followed in third with 121 sentenced individuals, followed by Belgium with 81.

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Regarding the average sentence length, most countries fall in the range of four to eight years on average for terrorism-related offences. Australia is a notable exception, with an exceptionally high reported average sentence length of seventeen years. Denmark, Bulgaria, and Slovenia rank lowest in terms of average sentence length, each with a reported average of three years. Nonetheless, in most cases these average sentence lengths are often based on very few cases (i.e. for Bulgaria and Slovenia it is based on one sentence) and on a variety of offenses (i.e. in Australia imprisonment for terrorist offenses under its CT law has led to sentences of 44 years whereas foiled terrorist plots led to a 16-year sentence and association/affiliation with terrorist groups led on average to 3.5 year-sentences).

<sup>7</sup> i.e., Slovakia, 50% (N=6); Switzerland, 46% (N=70); Belgium, 33% (N=422); the Netherlands, 31% (N=310); France, 30% (N=1324); Norway, 30% (N=100); and Italy, 30% (N=125).

Fig. 5: Average sentence in years (2018-2019)

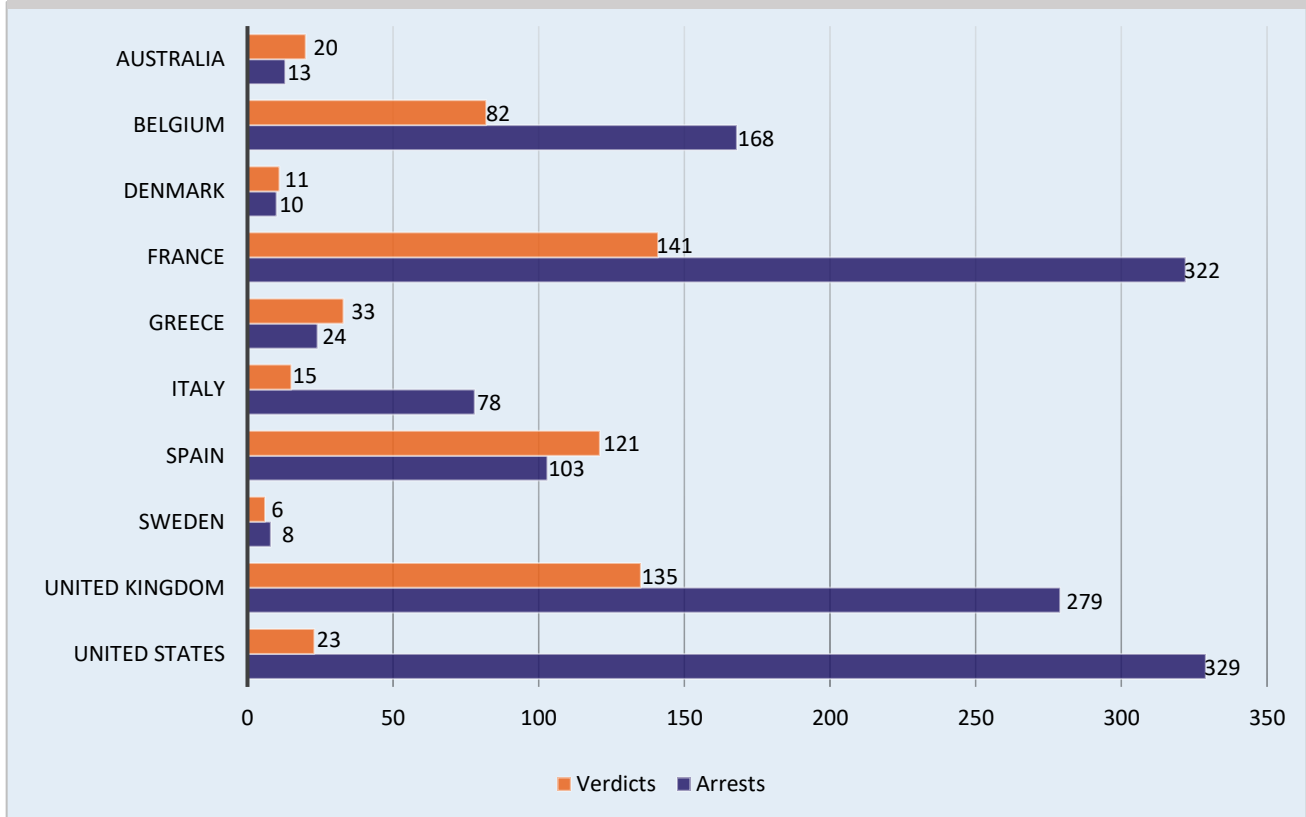


France has the highest number of radicalised individuals in detention (400), in addition to the 26,000 radicalised individuals who are listed on the country’s watch list. Of the 26,000 radicalised, 10,000 of these are confirmed to have been radicalised in Mosques, prisons, online, or abroad. Of those imprisoned for terrorism-related charges in the US, at least 61 will be released between 2018 and 2024; many others are currently awaiting trial or sentencing so this number is likely to be higher in reality. The UK reports having 218 people currently in prison for terrorism-related charges. Since 2014, 312 terrorist offenders have been released. 700 are believed to be radicalised. In Italy, as of late 2018, there were a total of 478 individuals flagged for radicalisation in the country’s prisons. In addition, 66 detainees were either awaiting trial or had already been sentenced for crimes related to “international Islamic terrorism”. In Spain, 132 individuals are currently imprisoned for crimes directly related to terrorism; with an additional 120 reported to have shown signs of radicalisation. In Belgium, there are reportedly 220 violent extremist offenders while in Norway, there are 30.

*The high numbers of terrorism-convicted individuals who will be released from prison, also referred to as domestic returnees...will pose a significant issue for authorities.*

Fig. 6: Total number of sentences and arrests per country (2018-2019)

Open Source Data (incl. TESAT 2019)



From a terrorism threat perspective, the high number of arrests that seemingly do not lead to convictions (or for that matter, verdicts of any kind) present a challenge for authorities as many individuals that were arrested have either been released into society without charge or are facing long periods awaiting trial—which can also provide a risk in and of itself. At the same time, given the time lapse between arrests and verdicts, the arrests and verdicts in any given year do not necessarily relate to the same cases, making it difficult to have a clear picture of exact

Additionally, the high numbers of terrorism-convicted individuals who will be released from prison—also referred to as *domestic returnees*—in the coming years in countries across Europe and the US pose a significant issue for authorities in those nations and their neighbouring countries. With many questions about the availability and effectiveness of rehabilitation and reintegration programs still unanswered, it will remain difficult to accurately assess the short- and long-term threat posed by individuals both in and after the prison context.

While no attention was paid to foiled attacks specifically, it is worth mentioning the foiled terrorist attack in France in August this year,<sup>8</sup> where three men, two of which were still in prison in France, were indicted for planning a terrorist attack. One of the three was sentenced for joining *Al-Nusra* front in 2014. As such, this is a clear indication of the role that prisons can play in recruiting, networking and planning terrorist attacks.

<sup>8</sup> N.a., French intelligence foils terrorist plot, FRI, 1 Aug 2019, <http://en.rfi.fr/france/20190801-terrorist-plot-foiled-france>



## Terrorism threat assessment

While a variety of countries have adopted some form of threat level metric or scale, there is a discrepancy in the way these tools define and report on the actual threat level. In some countries it is the respective national counter-terrorism unit that is responsible for defining the threat level, whereas in other countries the government consults its law enforcement agencies, its internal security intelligence services, or CT stakeholders. In most countries the terrorism threat assessment is not intended to inform the public, but rather to provide the information to the relevant authorities.

*Some countries, such as Denmark and Switzerland, have heightened terrorism threat assessment levels, although they have not experienced any terrorist attacks recently.*

Generally, countries that have suffered from one or more attacks have an increased national threat assessment level. France, for example, raised the level to its highest level, “Emergency Attack”, following the attack in December 2018 in Strasbourg. The Netherlands, while an attack was ongoing on 18 March in Utrecht, temporarily raised the threat level from four (substantial) to five (critical) for the region of Utrecht and then lowered it to four again after the arrest of the perpetrator on the same day. New Zealand, following the 15 March 2019 Christchurch attack, raised the threat level from low to high in the aftermath of the attack but then decreased the level to medium after one month. At the same time, an attack did not

have to have occurred on the territory of the country for a country to raise its threat assessment level. Some countries, such as Denmark and Switzerland, have heightened terrorism threat assessment levels, although they have not experienced any terrorist attacks recently themselves.

Interestingly, while being hit with a series of terrorist attacks over the past years, the threat level in Belgium (2 out of 4) is lower than Denmark (4 out of 5), the Netherlands (4 out of 5), Spain (4 out of 5), and the United Kingdom (4 out of 5). The different standards and metrics across Europe raise questions on the overall comparability of these different threat levels. This discrepancy can be explained by the fact that the threat level assessment is established differently in each country. Where some threat assessments take into account developments in neighbouring countries for example, others only focus on the domestic threat development and where some countries can have different terrorism threat levels in different regions, most countries work with one national threat level, creating a large variety within the 32 countries under analysis. This limits the ability to build a comparative pan-EU understanding of the terrorist threat.

The graph below shows an overview of the different threat level assessments (standardised) for countries that have a terrorism threat assessment system in place.

Fig. 7: National Threat Levels (standardised) (2018-2019)

