

# Europol Reveals Trends in Jihadi Terrorism in Europe

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Terrorist activities in Europe increased dramatically in 2007, according to the annual report published by Europol, the European Union's criminal intelligence agency [1]. Terrorists carried out—or attempted to carry out—583 attacks last year, a 24 percent increase from the previous year. Accompanying this increase in terrorist activities was an increase in counter-terrorist operations: 1,044 individuals were arrested for terrorism-related offenses, a 48 percent increase compared to 2006.

Most terrorist attacks were claimed or attributed to separatist groups in the Basque country, Spain (Euskadi Ta Askatasuna, or ETA), or in Corsica, France (Fronte di Liberazione Naziunale di a Corsica, or FLNC). ETA and FLNC were responsible for 517 attacks, constituting 88 percent of all terrorist actions. Arrests among separatist groups were also responsible for the large increase in arrests in the European Union (EU) in 2007. Spain saw a seven-fold increase in arrested suspects compared to 2006, while France registered a 68 percent increase. In total, arrests among separatist groups represented more than half of the total arrests.

Islamist terrorism was statistically much less significant. Only four attacks were recorded: Two failed bombings in the United Kingdom (the Glasgow attacks), and two foiled plots in Germany (the Sauerland cell) and Denmark (the Glasvej case). The number of arrests could indicate a general decrease in jihadi activities. Indeed, EU police forces arrested 201 jihadi suspects, 56 fewer than in 2006. However, it should be mentioned that these numbers do not include arrests in Great

Britain, which refuses to communicate precise statistics, although Britain did indicate a 30 percent increase in jihadi arrests. Including the British data could result in an increase of the arrests between 2006 and 2007.

Despite the comparatively low number of attacks, Islamist terrorism is still perceived as the main threat to European security. The reason for this assessment cannot be measured in number of attacks or arrests; it is an estimate of potential damages. "Most investigations into failed and foiled Islamist terrorist attacks in the EU in 2007 showed that Islamist terrorists continue to aim at causing indiscriminate mass casualties," claims the report. "This is not only observed in the choice of targets but also in the methods and explosives used."

Several European countries are currently—or were until very recently—at a very high level of terrorism alert. This was the case, for instance, in France, the UK, Spain and Belgium. On April 22, Gerard Bouman, head of the Algemene Inlichtingen- en Veiligheidsdienst (AIVD—Dutch domestic intelligence), confirmed that the threat of jihadi terrorism is growing in the Netherlands [2], especially since the release of the Islamophobic movie "Fitna" by Dutch extreme-right politician Geert Wilders (AP, April 22).

The Europol report underscores several interesting trends in Islamist terrorism in Europe:

- First, "although the majority of all arrested suspects for Islamist terrorism continue to be North African citizens, the member states reported a high number of arrested suspects with the nationality of the country of arrest." This seems to confirm a growing threat of homegrown terrorism that has been observed for several years.

- Second, this increase in homegrown terrorists is partly the result of an increase in quantity and a “new quality” in jihadi propaganda in Europe (see Terrorism Focus, February 20). It is now widely recognized that propaganda on the internet has a central importance in recruitment. Hence, some recent developments appear particularly worrisome. For instance, al-Qaeda’s media arm, al-Sahab, now offers English subtitles or translations. In order to target some specific audiences, certain jihadi websites have recently decided to translate jihadi material into other languages, such as German, despite some apparent difficulties in using the language correctly (Die Welt, February 8). Similarly, the website al-Ikhlās recently launched two new forums in French and Italian [3].

Recruitment constitutes an important part of jihadi activities in Europe and arrests related to this activity have increased. The observed developments in propaganda and recruitment suggest that al-Qaeda is taking roots in Europe and could potentially become stronger in the near future. On April 18, European ministers of justice reached agreement on a law that would condemn, among other things, online propaganda and recruitment (AFP, April 18). This new law—which must still be approved by the European Parliament—should facilitate EU cooperation with internet providers and, eventually, allow the identification of cyber-terrorists. According to Gilles de Kerchove d’Ousselghem, the EU counter-terrorism coordinator, there are approximately 5,000 jihadi websites that contribute to the radicalization of European youth.

- Third, propaganda and recruitment serve multiple purposes. Some would-be jihadis are recruited by local cells to carry out operations in their own countries. Some are “self-recruited” through the media, and constitute a “new generation” of terrorists [4]. Some limit their support to financing terrorism. Others, finally, decide to join the jihad abroad, in Iraq—which remains the main destination for European fighters—in Afghanistan, or, increasingly (according to French intelligence), in Somalia.

- Fourth, the remaining core leadership of al-Qaeda in Pakistan still largely commands, controls and inspires jihadi terrorists in Europe. Europol, however, recognizes the rising importance of groups isolated—or more autonomous—from al-Qaeda's core leadership, and their potential threat to European security. "This expansion of the 'al-Qaeda franchise' has the potential to constitute a threat to the EU's security," claims the report. "It could provide al-Qaeda with access to new centers of support which it can motivate and exploit."

- Fifth, the report emphasizes the strategic importance of Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan for European security. Should the situation in Iraq improve or the war terminate, Iraqi fighters—European or not—could relocate to other places and continue to wage jihad. Former Iraqi fighters could, for instance, carry out operations in Europe, establish new cells, or teach their know-how to young, would-be terrorists. In other words, there is a risk that the Iraqi generation will follow a similar path to the 1980s Afghan generation.

The problem with Afghanistan and Pakistan is more imminent. European citizens receive training in Pakistani tribal areas camps, either to go fight in Afghanistan, or to bring jihad back to Europe. "Al-Qaeda and affiliated pro-Taliban groups in Pakistan and Afghanistan are increasingly recognized as one of the main drivers of Islamist extremism and terrorism in the EU," says the report. This statement underscores the European dilemma in facing terrorism. On one hand, EU members recognize that their domestic security is related to the evolution of the situation in Afghanistan and Pakistan. On the other hand, however, they refuse a greater commitment in those regions for various other reasons, including electoral concerns.

Finally, a last interesting trend relative to Islamist terrorism in Europe concerns judicial sentences. In 2007, one-third of

jihadi terrorist suspects were acquitted, while only one-fifth of separatist terrorists were discharged. This seems to indicate two things. First, the strong emphasis on Islamist terrorism by security services has led to a certain “paranoia” and abusive arrests that could ultimately hurt European efforts in countering radicalization. However, it should also be emphasized that some individuals were acquitted due to a lack of evidence, but could still be related to terrorism. Second, the better records in jailing separatist terrorists prove that European intelligence agencies have a greater knowledge of separatist groups and more effective strategies to counter them than is the case with Islamist terrorism.

Although a large part of the Europol report is dedicated to Islamist terrorism, it also includes other chapters on separatist terrorism, left-wing terrorism, extreme-right terrorism, and single-issue terrorism. Four points concerning those other forms of terrorism are worth a quick highlight:

- Attacks by separatist groups continue to overwhelmingly outnumber any other form of terrorism.
- ETA activities remain largely based in Spain, with logistical support in France. However, Portugal noticed an increase of Basque activities within its borders.
- ETA is starting to use propaganda videos in order to recruit among youth. This confirms that terrorist groups copy successful strategies developed by other groups, in this case al-Qaeda’s model.
- Extreme-left terrorism is regionally in decline. However, these activities increased in Italy. Moreover, French Interior Minister Michèle Alliot-Marie declared recently that left-wing groups constitute a resurgent threat to domestic security (AFP, February 10).

Looking at the number of attacks, separatist groups are more

active than jihadi terrorists. However, jihadi groups are still perceived as the main threat to European security due to their potential for damage. Moreover, it appears that the Islamist threat is growing. Al-Qaeda is taking roots in Europe, seducing an increasing number of EU citizens, although the influence of the core leadership remains important. In terms of counter-terrorist strategies, the EU as a whole—as well as EU members individually—are taking some steps to increase their efficiency. Nevertheless, they are still better at fighting separatist movements than at countering jihad.

## Notes

1. "TE-SAT 2008 – EU Terrorism Situation and Trend Report," Europol, April 2008.
2. "Jaarverslag AIVD 2007," Algemene Inlichtingen-en Veiligheidsdienst, April 2008.
3. "Islamist Website Al-Ikhlās Launches French, Italian Forums," MEMRI Islamist Websites Monitor Project, April 4, 2008.
4. Marc Sageman, "The Next Generation of Terror," Foreign Policy, March/April 2008.