Radicalisation in Europe after the fall of Islamic State: Trends and risks

Sara Brzuszkiewicz

Abstract
The so-called Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) has experienced repeated defeats since 2017. To develop more effective counter-radicalisation and de-radicalisation strategies, the counterterrorism community has started to focus on the possible consequences in Europe of these defeats. The goal of this article is twofold. First, it aims to address the resilience of jihadism and the major challenges that Europe has to face in dealing with it. Second, it gives an overview of the best practices that should be adopted to face the persistent risks that will have to be addressed in the short and medium terms. Moreover, it argues that understanding the concepts of re-Qaedisation—the process that might cause ISIS-affiliated cells to bear a greater resemblance to the al-Qaeda model—and old-style recruitment—a set of recruitment patterns based on face-to-face interaction, pre-existing bonds and a shared radical milieu—will be crucial to reaching the above-mentioned objectives.

Keywords
Terrorism, ISIS, Radicalisation, Counter-radicalisation, Foreign fighters, Far Enemy

Introduction
At its peak in late 2014, the so-called Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) controlled more than 100,000 km² of territory—almost the size of Iceland—containing more than 11 million people (Jones et al. 2017). By February 2018,1 98% of the territory ISIS had once held in Syria and Iraq had been recaptured, including the Caliphate’s most important cities, Raqqa and Mosul. Of the forty thousand men who had once fought for ISIS, only three thousand were thought to be left (Neumann 2018a).

Corresponding author:
Sara Brzuszkiewicz, Catholic University of Sacred Heart, Largo A. Gemelli 1, Milan, Italy.
Email: sara.brzuszkiewicz@gmail.com

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Counterterrorism experts (Brzuszkiewicz 2017b; Callimachi 2017; Hassan 2018) have, however, reached a universal consensus that, in spite of this huge deprivation, the physical loss of territory corresponds neither to decreased terrorist activity abroad nor to diminished ideological appeal. In fact, the most creditable perspective suggests the opposite: in order for ISIS to survive, the movement is likely to focus more and more on attacks abroad and on the ideological recruitment of new adherents. In other words, the goal is now ideological survival as a terrorist movement, and it is not by chance that, since 2017, ISIS propaganda has gradually evolved towards more insistent exhortations for its supporters to stay where they are and fight the kuffār (infidels) where it hurts the most—that is, in their own countries.

This change implies the abandonment—temporary in the hopes of the movement—of one of its most crucial narratives, that of the hijra (migration) to ISIS-controlled territories, which used to represent the climax of the radicalisation path for every new recruit. Indeed, the new fighters, after being fully radicalised, were exhorted to leave the Dār al-Kufr (‘Land of Impiety’), and move to the so-called Islamic State in order to live under the only authentic guardian of the Dār al-Islam (‘Land of Islam’). This momentous strategic and narrative shift relies on the notorious jihadi resilience, a resource that ISIS has taken to a new level. Indeed, not only does ISIS as an organisation continue to exist, but it also has unprecedented adaptability, which suggests that its external action, in Europe in particular, might increase, especially when one bears in mind that the conflicts that played a major role in fuelling its rise—most importantly the Syrian Civil War—are far from being completely resolved.

ISIS has never just been a territorial project—it is also the embodiment of a jihadi utopia and a transnational network—so there is no reason to think that without territory it will cease to exist. It is more likely to evolve, probably towards bearing a greater resemblance to the older model of al-Qaeda (Brzuszkiewicz 2017b). In other words, the group will return to its origins, undergoing a re-Qaedisation that will allow it to survive even without territory. In redefining itself after its territorial losses, the group will likely try to intensify its activity in the West, which has always been a crucial aspect of its strategy: between June 2014 and June 2017, 51 successful attacks were carried out in Europe and North America, causing 395 deaths, excluding those of the perpetrators (Vidino et al. 2017, 15). It is not by chance that, before being killed in 2016, the group’s spokesman Abu Muhammad al-Adnani declared that ISIS would continue fighting even without territory (Brzuszkiewicz 2017b). Territorial control and administration were essential for the group in building up its founding myth: that of being the sole jihadi movement that was able to become a State.

Now that the founding narrative has been consolidated, there is no risk that ISIS could disappear as a myth simply because it has been defeated on the ground. The rhetoric on territorial conquests will probably be realigned and shifted to an indistinct utopian level—as in the case of al-Qaeda—wherein the noble jihadi sovereignty will be revived and re-established once and for all. As a consequence, the future wave of jihadism will probably focus on the ‘Far Enemy’,2 relying on small sleeper cells with weak or no
formal ties to the central leadership perpetrating low-cost attacks, as in some of the recent terror events in Europe. Nice (14 July 2016), Berlin (19 December 2016), and Barcelona and Cambrils (17/18 August 2017), for example, were logistically quite simple attacks and did not require substantial personnel or long-term planning. In this ever-changing scenario, Europe is called to face a number of crucial challenges, which can be grouped into three macro-areas: (1) old and new recruitment patterns, (2) returning foreign terrorist fighters, and (3) dilemmas related to the counterterrorism response, including intra-European cooperation and the ability to implement enhanced responses.

**Radicalisation in Europe**

**Old-style recruitment**

In this article, the notion of old-style recruitment includes the whole range of recruiting strategies, radicalisation patterns and forms of socialisation with radicalising agents that largely or completely exclude online affiliations, virtual propaganda, encrypted messaging and more general use of computerised communication.

Old-style recruitment relies mainly on face-to-face interactions, which take place within given peer groups and are usually based on pre-existing relations and a shared social background, such as a school, neighbourhood, mosque or family. In the context of old-style recruitment, local radicalising agents exploit old bonds of trust—or build new ones—to radicalise impressionable youths. Indeed, along with pre-existing relations, old-style recruitment relies on individuals with leadership skills in a given locale. Therefore, these days, as an uncertain number of foreign fighters is returning from Syria and Iraq to Europe, recourse to old-style recruitment is likely to increase due to the renewed presence of a higher number of experienced radical units.

The radicalising actors are able to systematically exploit two main narratives. The first is a narrative of self-pity, aimed at underlining the injustices that Muslim people face, whether in Muslim-majority countries or in Europe. The second is a discourse concerning empowerment and redemption from any sins that the recruits feel they have committed in the past, which is strikingly effective in the prison environment and in contexts of marginalisation and urban blight. In spite of the fascination that online radicalisation and recruitment exerts on scholars and terrorism experts, traditional recruitment should not be overlooked. Indeed, as long ago as 2014, the European Parliament’s Committee on Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs released a report stating that, while communication technologies have changed the ways in which jihadists communicate, cooperate and plan attacks, violent actions do not stem from purely virtual relations. In other words, contemporary jihad inevitably requires direct social interactions (Bigo et al. 2014, 16).

Between 2014 and 2017, terrorist attacks carried out in Europe by individuals with no connections to formal jihadi groups comprised 26% of the total number of attacks, whereas attacks carried out by individuals who had some form of connection to jihadi
groups—mainly ISIS—but acted independently, represented 66% of the attacks (Vidino et al. 2017, 17). This thus confirms the crucial role of face-to-face interactions in small groups.

The Barcelona and Cambrils attacks provide an illustration of the old-style recruitment phenomenon. The mastermind, Abdelbaki el-Satti, was a Moroccan citizen who had moved to Spain in 2002 and was the imam of a mosque in Ripoll, a small town north of Barcelona. All members of the cell except one hailed from there as well (Peréz Colomé et al. 2017). The nexus between el-Satti and the other members of the cell provides an emblematic example of old-style recruitment: the same town, pre-existing relations, radicalisation that was fostered in jail, a local charismatic leader (el-Satti) and face-to-face interactions rather than virtual contacts.

These radicalisation patterns are not new to Europe. The Belgian branch of Sharia4, Sharia4Belgium, allegedly recruited 80 foreign fighters all over the country, largely by relying on face-to-face interactions and informal meetings (Van Vlierden 2015). Within the same borders, the Zerkani Network—which was particularly active in Molenbeek, the most notorious Belgian jihadist hotbed—sent at least 59 individuals to Syria and Iraq, according to available reports (Brzuszkiewicz 2017c). One of them was Abdelhamid Abaaoud, who is thought to have led the group that carried out the Paris attacks in November 2015 and the Brussels attacks in March 2016. As in the Spanish cell, recruitment within this network used to take place during sporting and recreational activities with the aim of strengthening group unity and increasing the appeal of the leader, who only focused on indoctrination at a later stage (Van Vlierden 2016).

In comparing old-style recruitment with jihadist recruitment in the virtual world, a key contrast emerges: while online radicalisation may win from a quantitative perspective, the older form is likely to be more effective from a qualitative point of view—especially now that efforts to counter online radicalisation are constantly increasing. In other words, online propaganda may reach thousands of individuals worldwide, but only a small fraction of them will go on to develop the operational skills necessary to perpetrate attacks. Moreover, online radicalisation is a highly atomised phenomenon, which means that the radicalising agents are unable to leverage peer pressure on recruits in the same way as they can through personal interaction.

**Returning foreign terrorist fighters**

The plague of the so-called returnees is something that the Middle East and North Africa region shares with Europe: around 5,000 Europeans have left for Syria and Iraq since 2012 to fight alongside various groups, but primarily with what would become ISIS, and, of them, around 1,500 have returned so far (Renard 2018). In dealing with the risks represented by these demobilised combatants, Europe has to be aware of a relatively positive factor: the number of returnees directly involved in attacks on European soil is low compared to their overall number. Nevertheless, the threat might generate a multi-layered risk. First, the involvement of veteran fighters increases both the probability of
success of a plot and its lethality (Hegghammer 2010; Leduc 2016)—the attacks in Paris and Brussels are emblematic illustrations of this phenomenon. Second, the mere presence of returnees within the social fabric can generate long-term ideological risks. Indeed, through their charisma and appeal, and since they are usually not de-radicalised but only—perhaps temporarily—disengaged, they can easily become radicalising agents and create extremist feeder organisations both inside and outside prison, thus exploiting the aura of heroism that they achieved by actually fighting for ISIS.

**Counterterrorism response: coordination and the pooling of sovereignty**

The first organic attempt to give the EU a communal vision in counterterrorism dates back to 2005, with the EU Counter-Terrorism Strategy, which was signed by the European Council and based on four pillars: prevent, protect, pursue and respond. With the goal of strengthening the pillar of prevention, in 2008 the Council adopted the EU Strategy for Combating Radicalisation and Recruitment to Terrorism (Van Ginkel and Entenmann 2016, 5). After the emergence of ISIS as a regional and international player, and in light of trends such as lone-actor terrorism, foreign fighters and the new use of social media by terrorists, the strategy was revised in 2014.

In January 2016, Europol created the European Counter Terrorism Centre, a centre of expertise whose major activities include providing operational support on request to EU member states for investigations, sharing intelligence on terrorism financing (through the Terrorist Finance Tracking Programme and the Financial Intelligence Unit), monitoring online terrorist propaganda (through the EU Internet Referral Unit) and illegal arms trafficking, and fostering international cooperation among counterterrorism authorities (European Law Enforcement Agency 2016).

A somewhat similar role is played by the European Commission’s Radicalisation Awareness Network, which brings together practitioners from around Europe working on the prevention of radicalisation. The network’s specialism is its focus on activities on the ground, and the practitioners involved include police and prison authorities, teachers, youth workers, civil society representatives and local authorities. Divided into working groups, the practitioners provide recommendations to policymakers through a bottom-up process that is likely to be particularly effective in the realm of prevention (European Commission 2018). A few years ago, Europe also implemented a continent-wide arrest warrant that expedites the extradition of terrorism suspects and approved the collection of passenger name records for flights entering and departing the EU (Council of the EU 2016).

In spite of the rapid growth in the number and quality of European apparatuses and actions to fight radicalisation and terrorism, there are long-standing problems that have yet to be addressed. First, even though European authorities have improved efforts to thwart complex, large-scale attacks, low-cost and poorly planned—but effective—terrorist actions, such as those perpetrated with knives and by running over pedestrians, might represent the priority for the next few years. Indeed, jihadi resilience is already
leading terrorists to bypass the obstacles that they would encounter when planning large-scale attacks. Moreover, the contemporary jihadi cells in Europe, especially those not directly connected to formal international networks, do not have the same financial and logistical capabilities that characterised, for instance, the 9/11 hijackers. Second, the current pooling of sovereignty in security matters is largely insufficient, and this creates a hiatus between the terrorist networks, which are free to move around the continent, and the intelligence and law enforcement agencies, which still operate predominantly within their own national borders. Intelligence sharing among EU countries remains unsatisfactory and patchy (Argomaniz et al. 2016, 61), both in terms of legal and cultural resistance.9

The relevance of counter-narratives

Counterterrorist narratives are created and disseminated by a number of different actors on the international, regional, national and sub-national levels. A recent report commissioned by the European Parliament’s Policy Department for Citizens’ Rights and Constitutional Affairs at the request of the Committee on Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs (Reed et al. 2018) provides an exhaustive overview of the actions taken and projects set up on a global level. However, in this article three key points will be highlighted.

First, a preliminary, unambiguous identification of the target audience is crucial to an effective counter-narrative, and this entails identifying the recipients among the intended and unintended audience, supporters, adversaries and neutrals. In other words, going viral should not be the aim of counter-narratives. Second, the messaging needs to be synchronised with activities on the ground, thereby reducing the risk of a perceived ‘say–do gap’ (Reed 2018). Third, the entire spectrum of counterterrorism actors must monitor the support given to the counter-narrative by technology companies, many of which are engaged in strategic communications. This is a remarkably sensitive issue, particularly given the potential of Internet platforms to facilitate the spread of radical narratives; in order to mitigate this problem technology companies have developed a number of responses. One example is the Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism, which was launched in 2017 by Facebook, Microsoft, Twitter and YouTube with the goals of providing technical solutions and increasing knowledge sharing in the sector.10

Conclusions

During the last decade, the terrorism threat in Europe has evolved and expanded, producing some unprecedented trends that require appropriate and effective responses from policymakers and the counterterrorism community. One of the major challenges is embodied by what has been termed old-style recruitment, which poses a different set of problems to those of online radicalisation and recruitment. Indeed, the former involves penetrating on-the-ground, human networks with pre-existing links, where members share a stronger sense of belonging and a camaraderie that it is hard to compete with. The issue of old-style recruitment should not be underestimated, especially considering its
potential connection with the influx of returning foreign terrorist fighters to Europe, which is likely to increase the risk of new cells forming through traditional methods on the continent.

A further set of challenges relates to the pooling of sovereignty and cooperation between counterterrorism actors in Europe, which will need to become more systematic. Some issues are particularly delicate: Europol does not have operational powers yet, and it still lacks the authority to make arrests; no EU country has fully implemented the Passenger Name Record directive yet; and the laws concerning returning foreign terrorist fighters and terrorist financing vary widely from one country to another.

As far as counter-narratives are concerned, the factors to take into account are diverse, with the major ones including the relevance of properly individuating the target; monitoring and evaluating the efficacy of the implemented strategies; and being aware that, in fighting radicalisation, there is no magical formula for success.

Notes
1. The most recent reliable data can be found in BBC (2018).
2. The concepts of the Near and Far Enemy (al-‘adū al-qarīb wa al-‘adū al-ba‘īd) were theorised by al-Jihad al-Islamy’s main ideologue ‘Abdel Salām Farağ. Al-Jihad al-Islamy was an Egyptian jihadi group active in the last three decades of the twentieth century. In his ‘al-Farīḍa al-Ghā‘iba’ (The Absent Obligation), Farağ stated that the Near Enemy took priority over the Far one. In contrast, with the ascent of al-Qaeda at the end of the 1990s jihad went global, and the Far Enemy—the US, Israel and the West in general—was prioritised over the Near Enemy—the Arab regimes and the religious minorities in Muslim-majority countries.
3. In the last few years, a vast body of research has addressed the issue of radicalisation in prison. Virtually every European country is now facing significant numbers of radicalised inmates, with Belgium alone having between 230 and 450 radicalised inmates, according to various estimates. However, this is not an exclusively European problem, since even in Muslim-majority countries, a number of prominent jihadists have been radicalised, at least in part, in prison, including Ayman al-Zawahiri and Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi.
4. Sharia4 is a radical Islamist set of networks—now largely dismantled—that had various connections with Anjem Choudary, the British Islamist who founded al-Muhajiroun—later Islam4UK—in 2002 and was sentenced to five and a half years in prison in 2016.
5. The Zerkani Network is named after Khalid Zerkani, a Moroccan citizen arrested in 2015 and sentenced to 15 years in prison for his recruiting activities.
6. The term ‘foreign fighters’ is not fully satisfactory: it describes nationals of one country who travel to participate in a conflict in another country. A more exhaustive definition implies that these individuals are driven mainly by ideology or religion. The international community, in order to bypass some of the existing legal limits to address non-state actors and terrorist groups, has developed the term ‘foreign terrorist fighters’, which seems to have a stronger explanatory power.
7. As of early December 2016, at least eight hundred of the more than six thousand Tunisian foreign terrorist fighters had returned home, and the figure is probably much higher now.
8. Some of the most reliable figures are available for the Balkans and Eastern Europe: for instance, we know that by the end of 2016 more than 100 Bosnians, 117 Kosovans and 86
citizens of the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia had returned to their homelands (Holmer and Shtuni 2017).

9. Furthermore, European countries vary widely in the degree of professionalism of their domestic security services.

10. Each of these companies has its own individual counter-speech initiative, see YouTube (n.d.), Facebook (2015) and Microsoft’s partnership with the Institute for Strategic Dialogue.

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Author biography

Sara Brzuszkiewicz is editor-in-chief of European Eye on Radicalization and a Ph.D. student at the Catholic University of Sacred Heart (Milan). Her research interests focus on radicalisation, de-radicalisation and jihadism in Europe.