

FROM CRIMINALS TO TERRORISTS AND BACK?

KICK-OFF REPORT



AUTHORS

Kacper Rekawek, Head of Defence and Security Programme, GLOBSEC Policy Institute

Stanislav Matejka, Junior Research Fellow, Defence and Security Programme, GLOBSEC Policy Institute

Martina Babikova, GLOBSEC Policy Institute

Tomas Nagy, Research Fellow, Defence and Security Programme, GLOBSEC Policy Institute

Jakub Rafay, GLOBSEC Policy Institute

Design by Peter Verček, GLOBSEC

The following distinguished partners were consulted in the process of preparation of this report. The sole responsibility for the content of this publication lies with the authors.

- Austria - Daniela PISOIU
- Bulgaria - Rositsa Dzhekova, Nadya Stoyanova
- France - Olivier de France, Damien Saverot, Pierre Colomina
- Germany - Matenia Sirseldudi
- Greece - Eleni Fotou
- Ireland - Orla Lynch
- Italy - Marco Lombardi, Giovanni Giacalone, Nicolò Spagna
- Netherlands - Jessica Sciarone, Bart Schuurman
- Spain - Fernando Reinares, Carola García Calvo, Álvaro Vicente
- United Kingdom - John Morrison, Aleksandra Łojek

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PROJECT SUMMARY

The most well-known ISIS terrorist atrocities in Europe, including the 2015 Paris and 2016 Brussels attacks, saw individuals who in the past had been involved in organized crime and illegal trade graduate into the ranks of the world's most successful terrorist organisation. It is now widely assumed that Europe's terrorists are no longer radicals first and foremost but criminals who turned to political violence at some stage throughout their ordinary crime careers. Thus a threat emanating from the "crime-terror nexus" hangs over Europe.

GLOBSEC¹, an independent, non-partisan, non-governmental organisation which aims to shape the global debate on foreign and security policy, responded to this threat by developing a research and advocacy project aimed at addressing the "crime-terror nexus" in Europe. Our project titled *From Criminals to Terrorists and Back?* will:

- ▶ collect, collate and analyse data on terrorism convicts from 11 EU countries (Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands, Spain, the UK) with the highest number of arrests for terrorism offences. We will investigate whether these individuals had prior criminal connections, and if so, whether a specific connection to illegal trade is a precursor to terrorism, and to what extent this trade funds terrorism. In short, we will check whether crime-terror nexus exists and how strong it truly is.
- ▶ disseminate project findings at high profile GLOBSEC Strategic Forums (GLOBSEC Bratislava Forum, TATRA Summit, Chateau Bela conferences) and other internationally acclaimed gatherings which attract decision makers, experts, private sector and law enforcement representatives, while also incorporating their expert level feedback into our work.
- ▶ help shape and strengthen the European counter-terrorism efforts by providing tailor made solutions on combating crime-terror nexus and terrorist financing via education and awareness, and advocacy efforts involving decision makers and security stakeholders in the 11 targeted countries. This line of activity directly links the project to the widely acclaimed work of the GLOBSEC Intelligence Reform Initiative (GIRI), led by Sec. Michael Chertoff, which is involved in developing and promoting more effective transatlantic counter-terrorism solutions.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Overlaps between the world of crime (be it organised or petty) and terrorism have been documented, albeit in a non-systematic fashion, for years. In the past, the attention of experts and researchers focused on organisational “convergence” between criminal and terrorist groups. Nowadays, the focus has shifted towards individuals who move on the crime-terror continuum as both criminal groups and terrorist organisations. Both are said to be looking for similar recruits.

Our project, the biggest research effort of its kind to date, seeks to determine whether the crime-terror nexus actually exists and to investigate which types of criminality are antechambers to terrorism. It specifically focuses on individuals from 11 EU countries arrested in 2015 and convicted of terrorism offences before 31 December 2018.

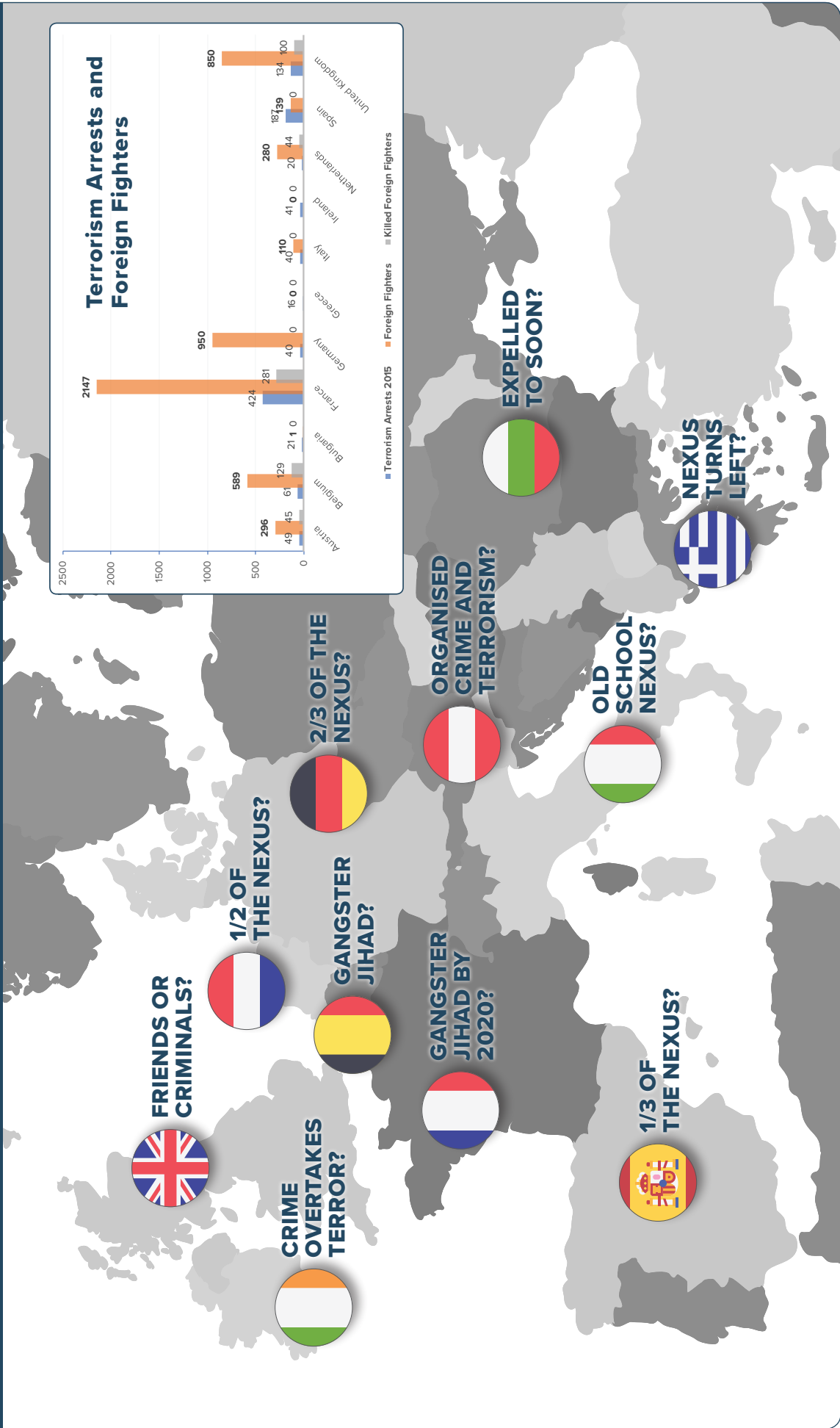
This report outlines some of the challenges facing researchers focusing on the nexus, as well as our preliminary findings on overlaps between criminality and terrorism in the EU. It also offers readers a snapshot of the terrorist threat facing 11 European countries.

Some Austrian, or **Austria** based, foreign fighters who travelled to Syria or Iraq are said to have backgrounds in organised crime. **Belgium** has witnessed the development of a phenomenon referred to as “gangster jihad”, a phenomenon which is also potentially present in **France, the Netherlands (more than 40% of its foreign fighters have previous criminal backgrounds)** and **Germany (up to 2/3 of its foreign fighters have a criminal past)**. A “gangster jihadi” is an individual who almost naturally drifts from the world of crime towards jihadism, sometime as a form of redemption for his earlier sins. He, as the phenomenon is almost exclusively male, possesses links and skills which allow him to thrive in both, seemingly, divided worlds of crime and terrorism. We also expect this phenomenon to become even more pronounced in France, where an estimated 60% of incarcerated radicals are predicted to return criminal-infested terrorist networks by 2020.












With up to 1/3 of its convicted terrorists having previous criminal backgrounds, Spain has a long standing tradition of individuals shifting between ordinary criminal and terrorist milieus, dating back to at least the 2004 Madrid attacks. Significant traces of the nexus can also be found in **the UK**, where we are also mindful of evidence suggesting peer-to-peer recruitment into jihadism of individuals without criminal pasts. Finally, there exist a number of seemingly odd, and to an extent outlier cases, in **Italy (where traces of an old school nexus on an organisational level are still to be found)**, **Ireland (where ordinary crime seems to have long overtaken terrorist networks)**, **Greece (where the crime-terror nexus better fits left-wing rather jihadi terrorism)** and **Bulgaria (where the threat of terrorism is largely connected to foreigners residing, passing through or eventually expelled from the country)**.

The following map and the table provide a graphic summary of our tentative findings and situate it in the context of the threat of terrorism to the top 11 EU terrorism arrestee countries.

CRIME TERROR NEXUS?



STATE OF TERRORISM

	 Austria	 Belgium	 Bulgaria	 France	 Germany	 Greece	 Italy	 Ireland	 Netherlands	 Spain	 United Kingdom
Official Threat Level	elevated	3 (out of 4)	3 – low (out of 3)	-	-	1 – low	2 (out of 3)	2 (out of 5)	4 – substantial (out of 5)	4 (out of 5)	4 – severe (out of 5)
Terrorism Arrests 2015 (Jihadi arrests)	49 (48)	61 (60)	21 (21)	424 (377)	40 (21)	16 (Left-wing)	40 (40)	41 (Separatists)	20 (20)	187 (75)	134 (Not specified)
Terrorism Arrests 2016 (Jihadi arrests)	34 (30)	65 (62)	5 (5)	456 (429)	35 (25)	17 (15)	38 (28)	16 (1) (Separatists)	45 (36)	120 (69)	149 (Not specified)
Foreign Fighters	296 (51 attempted to leave)	589	1	2147	950	0	110	-	280	139	850
Killed Foreign Fighters	45	129	0	300	-	0	-	-	44	-	100
Returned Foreign Fighters	90	102	1	303	-	0	10	-	50	25	430
Convictions for Terrorism in 2015	27	116	0	14	17	38	0	0	18	166	106
Convictions for Terrorism in 2016	26	127	0	66	30	3	11	-	42	154	89
Victims killed in terrorism attacks 2015	0	32	0	147	1	1	0	-	0	0	1
Victims killed in terrorism attacks 2016	0	35	-	94	15	0	0	-	1	0	7
Foiled Plots 2015	0	0	0	6 – 7	2	3	1	-	0	3	7
Foiled Plots 2016	0	4	0	35	4	0	2	-	1	3	12

FROM CRIMINALS TO TERRORISTS AND BACK?

INTRODUCING CRIME-TERROR NEXUS

More than 2 years ago, a multinational terrorist cell belonging to Islamic State (ISIS) staged a string of deadly terrorist attacks in Paris. Its target was one of the most iconic Western capitals and the majority of its operatives were indeed Western Europeans with previous criminal records. ISIS' Paris cell, or "Paris-Brussels" after its remnants bombed targets in the latter four months after the former, is seen as a perfect example of a "merging of criminal and terrorist milieus" and a phenomenon known as the **crime-terror nexus**.² Not only had the terrorists had previous ordinary criminal experience but the cell also employed individuals with criminal know-how to, e.g., obtain fake ID cards that allowed them to remain undetected for a prolonged period of time. The cell's criminal endeavours and backgrounds seemed to have underscored the notion that Europe's jihadists of today are mostly "second-generation" Europeans, "fairly well integrated at first" but with a "period of petty crime" behind them.³ **In short, they are radicals (criminals) first, and Islamist extremists or terrorists later.**

Such an approach underscores the trajectory or graduation of individuals into the ranks of terrorist organisations or networks, and their evolution from criminals, or effectively thugs, towards a seemingly different phenomenon, i.e. terrorism. In short, theirs is a move away from profit driven illegal activity to violent activity in the name of certain political goals. **As much as the two phenomena differ, however, there exists an inherent connection between them as terrorism is also criminal in nature, and all terrorists are criminals but only a few criminals are also terrorists.** To stress this point, one only has to look into the activities of some of the world's most well-known terrorist organisations which not only perpetrated politically motivated violent crimes (assassinations, assaults, bombings, etc.) but at times performed what is often considered "ordinary" crimes, e.g., bank robberies by the Red Army Faction,⁴ the IRA's multitude of criminal activities including smuggling and racketeering,⁵ their loyalist paramilitary enemies in Northern Ireland transforming their organisations into vehicles for amassing personal fortunes on the back of a wide variety of illegal deeds,⁶ "Hezbollah's Organised Criminal Enterprises in Europe,"⁷ and Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb's (AQIM) focus on kidnapping for ransom as part of its "Sahelisation" strategy (with Mokhtar Belmokhtar, AQIM's "Marlboro man" as the iconic figure).⁸ Such activities, often performed by specialised departments of the aforementioned organisations, helped sustain them in their politically violent campaigns and efforts. Interestingly enough, more networked structures, emblematic of the jihadi terrorist efforts in Europe in the 21st century, also saw integration of fully criminal clusters of individuals into terrorist networks, like was the case with Europe's deadliest terrorist atrocity, the bombings in Madrid on 11 March 2004.⁹

Today's focus on this "nexus" is an attempt to establish how many non-terrorist criminals cooperate with or gravitate towards terrorist groups, organisations or networks, and if the two entities recruit their members from the same pool of individuals. This approach, as documented by the groundbreaking 2016 study by the International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation (ICSR),¹⁰ goes against the trends of the past when the majority of work on the subject concentrated on the issue of how entities, and not individuals, connected to either crime or terrorism cooperate with each other, or even converge in a "**crime-terror continuum**."¹¹ This cooperation was said to have been facilitated by a shortfall in funding for terrorist groups cut off from their sponsors by the geopolitical changes of the late 1980s and 1990s, when Russia, the successor of the Soviet Union, and other states no longer supported some of the world's leading terrorists.¹² Terrorist organisations, in pursuit of new funding avenues, used criminal "methods" but did not necessarily share criminal "motives," which purely amount to financial gain.¹³ Criminality was also discussed as a potential way for terrorism to end with a formerly terrorist entity becoming increasingly immersed in crime-related activities and evolving away from political violence.¹⁴ Alternatively, it only symbolically maintained its political focus while turning into quasi-criminal enterprises with an insatiable need for funding. These means, however, would not be acquired to stage further terrorist operations but to finance extravagant terrorist lifestyles.¹⁵

Nowadays, however, in the age of "lone actor" or "remote controlled" jihadi terrorism,¹⁶ the idea of a nexus focuses on the individual, and has become a point of reference in almost any terrorism-related news in Europe, and feature in segments on whether the perpetrator(s) of a given attack had had previous criminal records.¹⁷ **Discoveries of such links, often rudimentary and inconclusive, seem to support the primacy of the crime-**

terror nexus paradigm in our perception of terrorism, the main non-military and asymmetric threat to European and Western security.

Many, however, have questioned the accurateness of such a conclusion. Some claimed that **“the Islamized criminal has been a common character in the history of jihadism in Europe ever since the phenomenon emerged in the 1990s”** but in their view, the jihadi milieu in Europe is animated by ideologues and not criminals. Moreover, **“there is little evidence of an increasing integration between criminal networks and terrorists in the area of attack financing.”**¹⁸ Simultaneously, scholars studying the two phenomena outside Europe were coming to a conclusion that “theories of convergence and confluence [of criminality and terrorism]” were also said to “look good on paper [but] the reality of cultural, ideological, political, operational and practical differences between organized crime and terrorist groupings are obvious and ultimately ongoing collaboration appears unsustainable.”¹⁹ At the same time, however, a study of the U.S. “ideologically motivated” violence perpetrators (or domestic radicals) found out that up to 53% of the sample studied (1496 individuals) had previous involvement in either “nonviolent minor [or] major criminal activity” or “violent crime.”²⁰

Regardless of the existence, or the intensity, of the aforementioned nexus, **experts in the field have for years debated the utility of researching terrorism while borrowing methods and concepts from criminology** with both often studying somewhat comparable individuals – existing outside the law, forming clandestine structures and violent.²¹ Criminology, itself a “more empirically robust” discipline, was said to offer many insights for “anecdotal” terrorism studies.²² Gangs, a phenomenon studied since the 1920s,²³ seem to constitute a relevant reference point for terrorism experts and researchers. Such an approach appears fitting for the current reality in which one hears about **“gangsta”**²⁴ or **“gangster jihad,”**²⁵ with “gangster terrorism” present in the public space since the 1990s.²⁶ As gangs allegedly embraced “networked organizational forms,” and turned into power seeking “netwarriors,” modelled on entities involved in political violence, such comparisons gained new weight.²⁷ Simultaneously, other commentators, observing politicisation of gang violence, saw “gang members” and “gang lifestyle” as “a nucleus from which [the new form of] soldier,” an anti-systemic, nihilistic warrior “could develop.”²⁸ **Such mid-1990s or early 2000s conclusions and predictions come to mind while looking at some of the biographies covered by the aforementioned (ICSR) study on “criminal pasts” of today’s terrorists; or while studying the individual terrorist trajectories of the members of the ISIS’ Paris-Brussels attack cell. Indeed, it seems like these new “soldiers” or “gangster jihadists” have finally arrived.**²⁹ Interestingly enough, while making this assertion, one cannot discard the backdrop of traditional, organisation level focused crime-terror convergence as the likes of ISIS, despite losing its territorial clout, seems to be involved in massive drug rings,³⁰ and the Taliban, albeit not recognised as a terrorist entity on their own, becoming involved in “every stage of the drug business.”³¹

This report, while providing a snapshot of the state of the terrorism threat in 11 European countries, will also outline to what extent the aforementioned threat is connected with the presumed crime-terror nexus. It will also set out the practical and research challenges for our research project, which will see GLOBSEC’s team assess the scope and strength of the criminal connections of hundreds of terrorism arrestees, and check whether a reverse process, i.e., criminals-turned-terrorists returning to their “ordinary” criminal careers (“re-criminalisation”),³² is also taking place. While appreciative of both the efforts outlining the “convergence” of criminal and terrorist organisations and the ground-breaking recent attempts to look for criminal “pasts” and their morphing into terrorist “futures”, we want to contribute to the most comprehensive understanding of the presumed overlap between the two illegal, clandestine, and violent phenomena.

RESEARCHING THE CRIME-TERROR NEXUS: CHALLENGES

A 2012 study published by the European Parliament on the interconnections between the two phenomena determined that **“as a starting point for it, it is imperative to determine how the crime-terror nexus exists/develops within specific EU member states.”** It also stressed that **hardly anyone fully understands “how [the nexus ...] can be operationalized,” i.e., works in practice. Moreover, it called on broadening the focus of the inquiry beyond criminal-Islamist terrorism connections and links.**³³

The aforementioned doubts related to the actual functioning of the crime-terror nexus force us to consider the three following challenges:

1. **How do we define crime, itself a vital element of the nexus?** Some past attempts³⁴ to grapple with this issue only debate the linkage between terrorism and **organised crime**.³⁵ Others, especially those focusing on individual criminals and not criminal entities, underscored **“petty crime”** as a potential element to be considered while debating the existence of the nexus.³⁶ We follow the latter logic and are ready to scrutinise **ANY PREVIOUS or ongoing criminal involvement of our subjects as an issue worthy of examination.**
2. **Who is to be studied?** This was the result of our concern related to two issues, i.e., A) too many subjects of study (terrorism³⁷-related individuals), and B) data availability issues. The first of the two necessitates, in theory, a subjective judgement, which we attempted to mitigate by focusing on individuals arrested for terrorism offences in 2015. Such an approach, albeit imperfect, allows for the development of objective criteria (arrests by law enforcement agencies of the 11 EU countries with the highest number of terrorism arrests) in terms of our choice of individuals included in our dataset. Such a course of action, however, does not address the second issue because data availability varies from country to country or even from case to case. Thus, an idea first raised at the project’s kick-off meeting to focus not solely on 2015 terrorism arrestees but the 2015 arrestees who would be convicted by the end of 2018, and including those who, e.g., would be sentenced after that date (a practice common in, i.a., the UK).³⁸ For example, the latest Europol *TE-SAT* report clearly demonstrates that the number of individuals in concluded court proceedings for terrorist offences has been consistently rising, so openly available data should not be lacking.³⁹

We focus on the 2015 sample for a variety of reasons: A) that year saw a string of high-profile terrorist attacks, arrests, and plots in Western Europe (symbolic start—Charlie Hebdo attack; symbolic end—Paris attacks of November 2015), which some, as we heard during the project kick-off, called **“the peak year”** or **“the most relevant year”** for our study of the crime-terror phenomenon. In fact, the 11 highest terrorism arrestee countries reported FEWER terrorism arrests in the subsequent year, 2016: 1 046 in 2015 to 981 in the next year;⁴⁰ B) our research will start in the autumn of 2017 and conclude in the end of 2018 or early 2019, which allows for more court proceedings to conclude, providing us with more data on our research subjects.

The next part is the **country focus** of our research, which is to help us ascertain if the crime-terror nexus exists. If we look at the *TE-SAT* report, which provides arrest figures for 2015, then we are able to see the group of 11 EU Member States that reported 20+ arrests to Europol that year (from the Netherlands, with 20, to France, with 424).⁴¹ The remaining 17 states reported 11 or fewer arrests and thus were disqualified as case-study countries. Our sample of 11 countries covers 1 046 arrests out of 1 077 in total, but the inclusion of the remaining 31 arrestees would necessitate our forming research teams in eight additional countries, an endeavour almost equalling the standing teams in the countries responsible for more than a thousand arrests.

Lastly, we also need to determine **“which terrorism”** we will be looking at in this study of the presence or absence of the aforementioned nexus. The EU has six categories of terrorism arrests, depending on

the suspect's stated political motive: jihadist, left-wing, right-wing, separatist, single issue, unspecified. **In surveying the 2015 arrest data, provided by the EU Member States to Europol, it transpires that in 7 of the 11 countries, the majority of the arrests were related to jihadist terrorism.** One country, Spain, saw the same number of both jihadist and separatist arrestees (75 each), the UK would not break down its data on arrestees by political affiliation, and Greece and Ireland saw the prevalence of left-wing and separatist terrorism arrestees, respectively. Given these results, and in consultation with the project's research teams, **we decided the project would mostly focus on jihadist terrorists, who constitute Europe's most acute terrorist challenge, with Greece and Ireland as outlier cases,** with research teams either constructing parallel databases of their own solely devoted to left-wing or separatist terrorism or contributing to the overall dataset related to the crime-terror nexus from 2015. The Spanish team's earlier research confirmed that this country's leading separatist group—ETA—had a strict “no criminals in the ranks” policy. However, its members would then commit crimes for the sake of their terrorist organisation, but this is arguably the case with other separatist groups, not only the Basques.⁴² **The project is nonetheless primarily concerned with individuals who had criminal careers BEFORE joining a terrorist organisation, and not necessarily those who practiced “ordinary” crime to, e.g., raise funds for a terrorist entity.** As for the UK case, we assume, based on the consultations with the research team based there, that jihadist terrorism arrests constitute the majority, and research in this country will also concentrate on this type of terrorism.

3. **What constitutes a nexus?** In theory, the answer to this question is easy, as a nexus is a casual link, relationship, or connection.⁴³ This does not, however, properly describe the extent to which criminals and extremists have to be linked, related, or connected. **How long lasting do these ties have to be, and how deep or thorough? And, how does this work on an organisational and individual level?** Such questions go back to the heart of the research, which focuses on how such a “nexus exists/develops within specific EU member states.”⁴⁴ We do not have a final answer to these questions, and opted for a relatively straightforward approach of mapping out all possible criminality-terrorism overlaps before deciding upon whether their intensity (via the sheer number of interactions) constitute a (quasi)systemic arrangement and not just an accidental encounter.

RESEARCHING THE NEXUS: WHAT IS NEXT?

The first question we would like to answer through our project—to an extent, a meta question tested against a foreign fighter population by ICSR in its 2016 study—is: **are today's terrorists criminals first and radicals later?** We understand that it must be disaggregated or broken down so that we can measure the scale, level, style, commitment, etc. of the criminality of the radicals arrested in 2015 for terrorism offences and convicted by the end of 2018.

To accomplish this, we wish to pose and answer the following questions:

1. Do terrorist arrestees within the scope of our research have prior criminal careers? Do they have a record of criminality and, if yes, then what kind or what was their criminal business or speciality? What is their record? How systematic and dedicated were they in their criminal careers? Can they truly be called criminals, first and foremost, or is the link more casual?
2. Do patterns of individual criminal involvement with terrorism exist? Are different criminals more likely to move into terrorism and vice versa? Which criminal activities are the most attractive from the point of view of terrorist groups and networks? And, is there a reverse interest in terrorists from the point of view of criminal entities?
3. Does criminality finance terrorism-related activities and, if yes, to what extent? What kind of criminality do they engage in and how exactly? How illegal is financing of terrorism, itself an illegal deed? We assume that a huge role in financing, especially in our case-study countries, is played by seemingly legal sources (salaries, savings, benefits, loans, etc.) but is this correct?

4. How can we break the nexus [policy-oriented question]? What would work best, given the data we amass? What patterns in crime-terror convergence or in the crime-terror conveyor belt development do we see and how can they be interrupted, with what tools, and by whom? Can crime-prevention strategies be adapted from counter-terrorism and/or vice versa, and, if yes, then how? How can the liaison between police forces and intelligence agencies be improved on this front? [The last question is related to the GLOBSEC Intelligence Reform Initiative (GIRI)⁴⁵ and its scope in sharing the best standards and benchmarks in counterterrorism].

We will attempt to answer these questions via a study of open sources performed by the project's 11 national research teams on data about individuals arrested for terrorism offences in 2015 and convicted by the 31st of December 2018. To give the fullest picture and context of the crime-terror nexus, the teams will collect data and code it for more than 120 variables according to the project's codebook, in the development of which the project team received the invaluable assistance of Dr Paul Gill, senior lecturer in Security and Crime Science at University College London.

Such organisation of our research effort will provide us with useful data on the **extent to which past careers in crime in general, and illicit trade in particular, could have assisted or propelled terrorism arrestees towards terrorist activities. We will also study the radicalisation trajectories of the criminals turned terrorists and the degree to which they had prior military/paramilitary/foreign-fighter experience. We will investigate their networks and assess whether these were terrorist and/or criminal in nature. Finally, we will establish if amongst them one could trace “re-criminalised” terrorists, i.e., individuals who have performed the full trek “from criminals to terrorist and back.”** The project team will continue its work for almost the full duration of the next two years, up until autumn 2019, and in the meantime, will report on its findings via a series of **quarterly reports** (conclusions on observations from all the national research teams), and **mid-term** and **final reports**, to be authored by the GLOBSEC research team.

TERRORISM AND CRIME-TERROR NEXUS IN 11 EUROPEAN COUNTRIES: AN INTRODUCTION



AUSTRIA

THREAT LEVEL	ARRESTS 2016	FOREIGN FIGHTERS	RETURNED FF	CONVICTED 2016	FOILED PLOTS 2016
	↓34	296	90	↓26	0

According to the Federal Office for Constitutional Protection and Counterterrorism (BVT), “the greatest threat to internal security in Austria continues to be from religiously motivated Islamic extremism and terrorism”.⁴⁶ An August 2014 report in the Austrian daily *Der Standard* referred to Vienna as a “hub” for European jihadists, alleging that radicalized Europeans use the Austrian capital as a stopping point before traveling through the Western Balkans to Syria.⁴⁷ At the same time, however, no terrorist attacks targeted Austria nor major terrorist plots were said to have been prepared in the country. Nonetheless, Austria reported 49 terror arrests in 2015 to Europol.⁴⁸ Out of those, 48 were identified as cases of jihadism. This positioned Austria higher than, for example, Italy or even Germany in the Europol chart. As for 2016, Europol data show 34 terrorism arrests with 30 jihadists among those.⁴⁹ These are hardly overwhelming numbers, but given the population of the country, the terrorist threat can in no way be discarded as irrelevant.

Vienna became a “hub” for European Jihadists. The Austrian capital is used by radicalized Europeans as a stopping point before traveling to the Middle East.

The aforementioned threat is further compounded by the high numbers of Austrian or Austria-based individuals who travelled for jihad to Syria and Iraq, or made preparation to travel there. An estimated 25-35% of Austrian foreign fighters are of Balkan origin, most notably Bosnian.⁵⁰ At the end of 2016, their number stood at 296,⁵¹ of whom 90 have returned to Austria. Official documents of the Interior Ministry also report that by 2015, the number of foreign or

wannabe Austrian foreign fighters had peaked and began declining.⁵² The ministry perceived this decrease as the result of more successful preventive and repressive measures.⁵³ A sharp increase in terrorism investigations, from 77 in 2012 to 337 in 2016, combined with an increase in convictions, might also play a role in this trend.⁵⁴

Assessing the scale of the crime-terror nexus in Austria runs into the challenge of a lack of concise empirical data on suspects. According to Johannes Saal, an expert on Austrian foreign fighters, the majority of suspects arrested for association with a terrorist organisation have no prior criminal record.⁵⁵ On the other hand, Daniela Pisiou, a senior researcher at the Austrian Institute for International Affairs (OIIP), when assessing the nexus between criminal groups and terrorists in Austria, suggested that there are indeed cases of Austrian foreign fighters leaving for Syria or Iraq who are often young boys associated with organized crime groups.⁵⁶ This research project aims to collect the necessary data to rigorously assess the phenomenon in the country.



BELGIUM

THREAT LEVEL	ARRESTS 2016	FOREIGN FIGHTERS	RETURNED FF	CONVICTED 2016	FOILED PLOTS 2016
	↑65	589	102	↑127	↑4

Belgium is a unique case for our study. It is a relatively small country with a long history of jihadist presence in the country.⁵⁷ Nonetheless, it has seen a high increase in jihadist activity, and the highest per capita number of Syria- and Iraq-bound jihadist foreign fighters.⁵⁸ This fact, and the now infamous string of terrorist attacks

and plots that either targeted Belgium or were partly prepared there, including those in Verviers, Brussels or Paris and some smaller-scale attacks,⁵⁹ is responsible for the high level (3 out of 4) of terrorist threat as set by the Threat Analysis Coordination Body.⁶⁰ The significance of the threat of terrorism to Belgian security can be assessed by the reaction of the Belgian authorities to attacks in 2015 and 2016. Following these, Belgium pledged an additional €400 million for counterterrorism and committed to recruiting 1 000 new staff⁶¹ for the Ministries of Foreign Affairs, Defence, Justice, and Police, as well as for Intelligence Services.⁶²

Belgium reported 60 jihadi terrorism arrests in 2015⁶³ and 62 in 2016.⁶⁴ Given the scale of the threat, these numbers seem relatively low, but Belgium also reported a higher number of terrorism convictions: 109 and 81, respectively. Also, adding to that death of the jihadists, both in attacks and as a result of counterterrorism operations, nine in Paris and two in Verviers, and fugitives, this paints a more negative picture of the terrorism reality in Belgium.⁶⁵

The statistics of foreign fighters give more background on the threat of terrorism to Belgium. Significantly more fighters, per capita, joined Sunni militant organizations in Syria and Iraq from Belgium than from any other country in the EU.⁶⁶ The key reason behind this is the emergence of effective recruiting radical networks—Sharia4Belgium in Antwerp and the Zerkani network in Brussels.⁶⁷

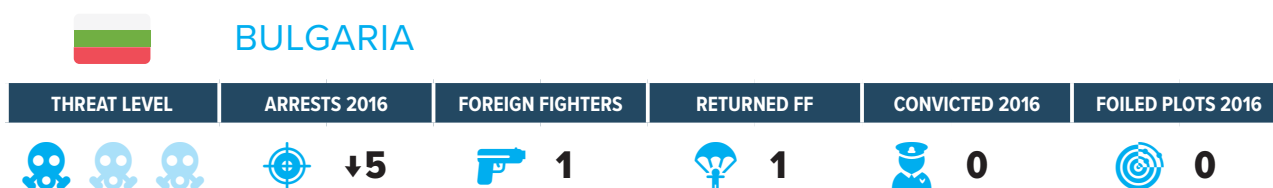
A database compiled by Pieter van Ostayen lists 589 Belgian foreign fighters.⁶⁸ According to this database, at least 289 have joined Islamic State (IS), while the last-known affiliation of 50 individuals is Jabhat an-Nusra—the Syrian al-Qaeda affiliate—or one of its subsequent forms. In terms of recruitment, Shariah4Belgium remains the most important actor with 101 individuals whose departure was implicated. The so-called Zerkani network can be held responsible for 85 departures. Of those who reached the conflict zone, at least 102 have returned and 129 were reportedly killed.⁶⁹

Thus, a new “breed” of terrorism is born in Belgium with some referring to it as “gangster-jihad”.

The crime-terror nexus in the Belgian case has been widely reported, also in connection to the Molenbeek-based Zerkani network in particular. While Shariah4Belgium operated openly, preaching in the streets, the Zerkani network, according to van Ostayen, operated clandestinely, more like a

criminal gang.⁷⁰ The group’s recruit’s history of petty criminality and gangsterism made them better equipped to obtain weapons or travel with more ease to Syria and back. Abdelhamid Abaaoud, a suspected ringleader of the Paris attacks and a Zerkani network recruit, is an example of a petty criminal with contacts in the criminal milieu turned terrorist.⁷¹

According to Alain Grignard, a senior member of the counterterrorism unit in the Brussels Federal Police, there is indeed a new trend in the recruitment of jihadists in Europe. While in the past authorities had to deal with radical Islamists devoted to Islamist ideology, in the last few years there has been a rising number of so-called “Islamized radicals”—young Muslims around Europe rebelling against their parents by joining street gangs and getting involved in petty crime.⁷² Thus a new “breed” of terrorism is born, with some referring to it as “gangster-jihad”.⁷³



The official Bulgarian terrorism threat level as of May 2017 was set at “low”—3 out of 3 (with 1 being the highest).⁷⁴ Nonetheless, the last decade saw a transformation of this threat when Bulgaria went from “not one case of radical Islam on its territory” to 50 between 2010 and 2017.⁷⁵ The sole terrorist act in recent Bulgarian history was the Sarafovo bus bombing of 2012. Bulgarian authorities later officially named Hezbollah as the perpetrator of the attack.⁷⁶ In addition, another landmark case is still ongoing against an informal Muslim Roma leader and his

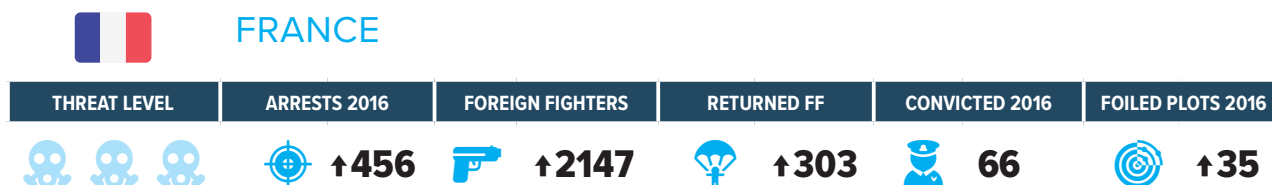
13 associates for preaching hatred on religious grounds and assisting foreign fighters (“Ahmed Musa Case”).⁷⁷ What is more, according to a statement from the Bulgarian State Agency for National Security (SANS), at least 332 foreign fighters from Western Europe passed through Bulgaria en route to Syria and Iraq between 2013 and June 2015.⁷⁸ In April 2017, Bulgaria detained five individuals for affiliation with a terrorist organisation. Bulgarian authorities also expelled four of them to Germany.⁷⁹ A “ban on staying in the country” or “ban on entering the country” was imposed on 22 individuals in 2016 and 29 in 2015 for association with terrorist activity.⁸⁰

Bulgaria went from not one case of radical Islam on its territory to 50 between 2010 and 2017.

According to data reported to Europol, Bulgaria arrested 21 individuals for jihadist terrorism in 2015, and then the number dropped to five in 2016.⁸¹ According to Rositsa Dzhekova, coordinator of the Security Programme at the Centre for the Study of Democracy in Sofia, there are several possible

explanations for the higher number of arrests in 2015. The numbers might have been inflated by the inclusion of 14 Roma suspects related to the aforementioned “Ahmed Musa case” (a group arrested in Pazardjik for allegedly spreading IS propaganda)⁸², although charged for non-terrorism offences. Another major factor behind the greater number of arrests could also be the scale of migration flows through Bulgaria or amendments to the Criminal Code with new provisions criminalising further activities as terrorism-related. Another reason may be the inclusion of arrested foreigners who were expelled without any involvement of a court.⁸³

The ongoing legal proceedings against terrorism suspects in most cases concern foreigners rather than Bulgarian citizens or residents. Two terrorism cases are presently underway in Bulgaria: one concerning three Syrian citizens⁸⁴ on suspicions of travelling to join IS and a Bulgarian with an Australian passport who was allegedly preparing to join the terrorist organization.⁸⁵ According to Dzhekova, it is very difficult to assess the scope of the crime-terror nexus in Bulgaria for several reasons. First, most of the cases of arrests related to terrorism in Bulgaria involve foreign individuals who are then expelled without involvement of any court. Another issue the researchers in the country face is restricted access to court documents, even with the closed cases. Mitigating such obstacles will be one of the key themes of this research project.



France has more than two decades of experience with Islamist terrorism, as the Armed Islamic Group (GIA) from Algeria targeted the country in the mid-1990s.⁸⁶ More than two decades later, the Centre for the Analysis of Terrorism (CAT)⁸⁷ estimated that 2 299 French nationals or residents were involved in jihadist networks since January 2013, which makes France the top “jihadist-producing” country in Europe.⁸⁸

More recently, the country has suffered a wave of deadly terrorist attacks, starting with the 2012 attacks in Toulouse when Mohamed Merah killed seven people.⁸⁹ Since then, France has seen a string of some of the most successful jihadist terrorist attacks in the history of Europe, with two of the most “spectacular” targeting Paris in 2015: the *Charlie Hebdo* attack in January,⁹⁰ and a multi-stage plot targeting a sports stadium, concert hall and several bars and restaurants in November of that year.⁹¹ These were followed by another high casualty attack from July 2016 that saw 86 deaths and more than 400 injuries after a car ploughed through a crowd during Bastille Day celebrations.⁹² In total, more than 240 people were killed in terrorist attacks in France since January 2015.⁹³

The threat is not diminishing: according to former Prime Minister Valls, the total number of foreign fighters leaving France between 2011 and 2017 was 2 147.⁹⁴ According to Interior Minister Gérard Collomb, seven terrorist plots have been foiled since the start of 2017 while 303 foreign fighters have returned to France.⁹⁵ These numbers do not account for potential illegal or clandestine returnees, including North African foreign fighters who came to France to avoid a more repressive counter-terrorism reality in their home countries.⁹⁶ Due to the unprecedented

nature of the terrorism threat, France introduced a state of emergency in November 2015 and has extended it several times since. In October 2017, the French parliament adopted an anti-terrorism bill bolstering police surveillance powers while ending the state of emergency.⁹⁷

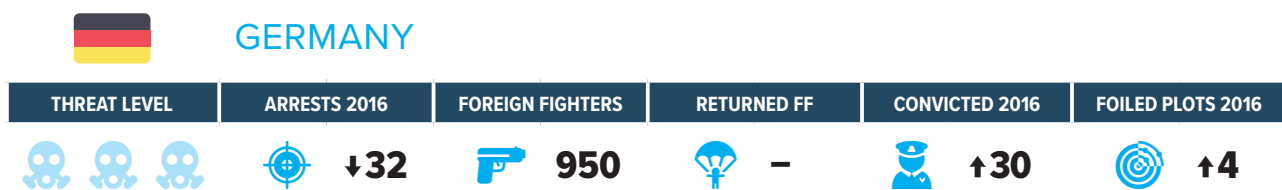
The contrast between the high number of arrests followed by a small number of terrorism convictions in France can be attributed to the length trial proceedings in France, and the past, uneasy relationship between the judicial system and the intelligence services.

According to Europol data, France reports the highest numbers of terrorism arrests in the EU. There were 377 arrests of suspected jihadist terrorist in 2015,⁹⁸ while in 2016, the number rose to 429.⁹⁹ These were accompanied by a relatively low number of convictions, 14 in 2015 and 66 in 2016. The contrast between the figures (many arrests followed by a small number of convictions) can be attributed to the length of trial proceedings in France and the past, uneasy relationship between the judicial system and the intelligence services, expected to but also not always willing to provide information on the suspect for the judge.¹⁰⁰ Another layer of already high threat level in France are terrorism convicts leaving prisons. According to Jean-Charles Brisard of CAT

almost 60% of “convicted radicalized individuals will have served their sentences by 2020.”¹⁰¹ Effectively, that entails hundreds of former terrorism arrestees out on the streets of France in the next 3 years.

Our research shows that there are currently 450 judicial procedures open in France which are linked to terrorism.¹⁰² In total, 1 400¹⁰³ individuals are presently the subject of those proceedings, 370 of which have been indicted, and 250 of which have been incarcerated. In total, 136 of these cases were opened in 2015. In the treatment of cases, the priority is given to those where an individual is incarcerated.¹⁰⁴

France, as one of the epicentres of jihadi terrorism, both in terms of the sheer number of foreign fighters as well as number of attacks, serves as an example of new trends in terrorism emerging in Europe. Following the November 2015 attacks, a great number of reports focused on the profiles of the perpetrators, clearly showing that a new breed of European, in this case Belgian-French, jihadists is emerging—part terrorist, part gangster.¹⁰⁵ The profiles of Abdelhamid Abaaoud and the Abdeslam brothers, Salah and Brahim, are an illustrative case in point. While Abdelhamid was known to authorities as a petty criminal even before they linked his name to several foiled as well as successful attacks in Europe, the brothers, Brahim and Salah Abdeslam operated a café in Brussels that was shut due to drug-related activity.¹⁰⁶ The phenomenon goes beyond these infamous cases, as analysis of 265 killed jihadists’ profiles by the French Counter-Terrorism Coordination Unit shows. According to its estimates, about 48% of the jihadists had been known to security authorities for various petty crimes.¹⁰⁷



Up to two-thirds of those who left for Syria or Iraq from Germany had been subject to investigation for various criminal offences.

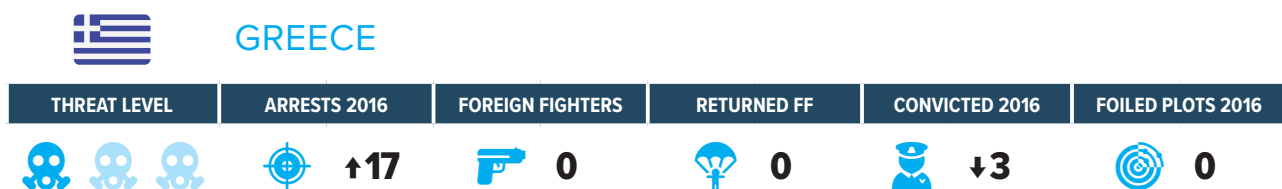
Germany is among the EU countries with the longest track record of terrorism and countering it.¹⁰⁸ The country appeared on the radar of jihadi terrorism experts and authorities after it was found out that several plotters of the 9/11 attacks had lived in Hamburg.¹⁰⁹ Nonetheless, up until 2016, Germany was spared a major successful attack by Islamic extremists. There were, though, several cases of

either attempted attacks (including the plot to bomb Ramstein Air Base in 2007)¹¹⁰ or smaller-scale attacks (murder of two US airmen shot in Frankfurt in 2011).¹¹¹ However, Germany became a target of multiple terrorist

attacks throughout 2016 in particular, the biggest of which killed 12 people when a truck ploughed into a crowd at the Berlin Christmas market.¹¹² In the aftermath of this attack, and the subsequent killing of the fugitive attacker by police in Milan, Italy, the German interior minister stated that “the conclusion of the manhunt does not unfortunately change the terror threat level in Germany—it remains high and the authorities remain vigilant.”¹¹³

According to Europol data, Germany reported arrests of 21 and 25 individuals for terrorism offences in 2015 and 2016, respectively.¹¹⁴ Germany reported 17 concluded terrorism-related court cases in 2015, and the number rose to 30 in 2016. According to Florian Flade,¹¹⁵ a journalist focusing on terrorism and jihadism, the German Federal Prosecutor has opened more than 800 new jihadi terrorism investigations in 2017.¹¹⁶ The sharp rise in cases (according to some reports, from 80 cases in 2013 to at least 900 in 2017) has stretched the manpower of the federal prosecutor’s office.¹¹⁷

Germany, the EU’s most populous country with a Sunni Muslim population of more than 2.5 million, is one of the top four European countries with the highest number of foreign fighters leaving for Syria or Iraq.¹¹⁸ In October 2017, the German domestic intelligence service (BfV) estimated the total number of individuals who had left or attempted to leave to join jihadist groups in Syria or Iraq since 2012 at 950.¹¹⁹ In 2016, the Bundeskriminalamt (BKA, Federal Criminal Police Agency), in cooperation with other German authorities,¹²⁰ collected and analysed data on 784 such individuals.¹²¹ According to analysis of that data, the number of Islamist-motivated departures from Germany to Syria or Iraq has fallen dramatically since July 2015.¹²² Daniel Heinke, the chief of detectives and director at the State Bureau of Investigation at the Bremen State Police, claimed that in 2016, the number of monthly departures averaged around five, compared to 100 at the peak in 2013.¹²³ Up to two-thirds of those who had left for Syria or Iraq were said to have previously been subject to investigation for various criminal offences, from property crime and violent attacks to drug trafficking.¹²⁴ Such findings correlate with those from recent studies highlighting the “crime-terror nexus”¹²⁵ that seems to be in existence in Germany in relation to jihadist terrorism. By looking at the data on the terrorism convicts, we will seek further evidence of this claim, and investigate if the German situation is in any way comparable to that of the jihadist or “gangster jihadist” milieus of France and Belgium.



Greece is, together with Ireland, one of the outlier cases in our research. Its history of terrorist violence is predominantly connected to the activities of politically violent far-left groupings and organisations.¹²⁶ In 2015, Greece reported to Europol 29 terrorist arrests, of which 16 were connected to left-wing terrorism.¹²⁷ A year later, this state of affairs was seemingly reversed with 17 terrorism arrests, of which 15 were connected to jihadist terrorism. However, as the project team learned from the local sources, these “jihadi arrests” had in fact been short term detentions of people originally suspected of terrorist crimes but mostly released shortly afterwards.¹²⁸ Greek anarchist terrorist movements continue to appear in the news because of their terrorist activity, e.g., the Conspiracy of the Cells of Fire sending a letter bomb to Wolfgang Schäuble, the then German finance minister, and also allegedly to the headquarters of the International Monetary Fund.¹²⁹

The recent, most notable case of far-left Greek terrorism was a letter bomb sent to the office of Wolfgang Schäuble by the Conspiracy of the Cells of Fire.

Although the country does not have a severe problem with radicalisation of its Muslim community, there are concerns about the vulnerabilities of “new” immigrant communities, rather than with the Muslim minority living in Greece ever since Ottoman times.¹³⁰ Notably, the Muslim minority in Greece represents only 1.3% of the population, or about 100 000 persons.¹³¹

No major Islamist terror attack has targeted Greece. However, waves of migrants from regions of North Africa and the Middle East have passed through the Greek isles, raising fears that this country serves as a crossroad for jihadists travelling to Syria or Iraq and for returning fighters.¹³² Many reports also claim that IS recruits or other groups have used fake passports and pose as refugees and asylum-seekers to enter the EU through Greece.¹³³

Since the case of Greece stands out within this research, the nexus between crime and terrorism will mainly focus on the criminal past of the left-wing terrorists. According to Eleni Fotou, a forensic psychologist with extensive experience interviewing convicted individuals, including those jailed for terrorism offences, these homegrown terrorists often have a history of various criminal activities preceding their involvement in political or terrorist violence.¹³⁴ Thus, one could risk the theory that a nexus of some sort exists in Greece. Our research will assess its scope and size.



In comparison to the rest of the case-study countries, the dominant terror threat to Ireland, both the Republic and Northern Ireland, does not come from jihadist cells or operatives but from Irish republican terror groups, known as “violent dissident republicans” (VDRs), and to a lesser extent from the still-functioning loyalist paramilitary groups.¹³⁵ The VDRs emerged in the second half of the 1990s as rejectionists of the then ongoing peace process in Northern Ireland,¹³⁶ and the loyalists’ groups have a track record dating back to the 1960s and 1970s.¹³⁷

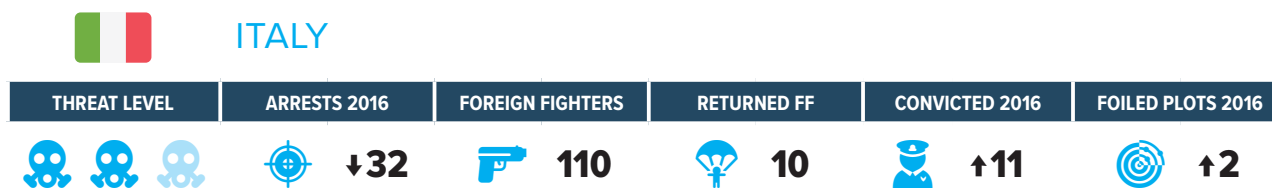
The case of Ireland constitutes an example in which it might be incorrect to talk of a nexus between crime and terror. It is more an actual overtake of the latter phenomenon by the former.

The VDRs have not been able recently to match the terrorist successes of the Provisional Irish Republican Army, which disarmed in 2005,¹³⁸ even though since 2009 they have supposedly killed 20 people.¹³⁹ However, the threat assessment from Northern Ireland remains “severe” (4 out of 5) and “substantial” (3 out of 5) for Northern Ireland and Great Britain, respectively.¹⁴⁰ Ireland’s terrorism threat status lies at 2 out of 5, i.e. “moderate”, meaning an attack is possible but unlikely.¹⁴¹

In 2016, VDR groups were said to have been responsible for 1 007 violent attacks between 2007 and 2015. The majority of these events took place in Northern Ireland and targeted primarily civilians, police, and intelligence personnel, but also other VDRs perceived as criminals, drug dealers, or sex offenders.¹⁴² According to Europol reports, there were 41 and 16 cases reported of separatists arrested for terrorism offences in 2015 and 2016, respectively.¹⁴³ These arrests count for both Ireland and the United Kingdom, and although the clear majority of violent dissident Irish republican activity takes place in Northern Ireland, a significant proportion of the membership is based in the Republic of Ireland.¹⁴⁴

Kidnapping for ransom, armed robbery, extortion, drug dealing, fraud and other criminal activities were widely engaged in by the Provisional IRA (PIRA, active between 1969 and 2005), as well as by the loyalists, to finance their terrorist activities, bombings and shootings during the Troubles in Northern Ireland (1969-1998/2006).¹⁴⁵ The conflict may be over but some of its past characteristics, with armed actors involved in non-terrorist activities, persisting in Northern Ireland. Both VDR and loyalist paramilitaries are accused of “collaboration ... [with] foreign criminals”, and of raising “money to fund their paramilitary structure, not for paramilitarism but to put money into their pockets”.¹⁴⁶ At the same time, they perform vigilante “justice” in paramilitary-style attacks in different parts of Northern Ireland, including shootings of members of their respective nationalist (Catholic) and loyalist (Protestant) communities—this activity explains the high number of assaults in which they are involved.¹⁴⁷ Based upon our conversations with experts in the field,¹⁴⁸ we are tentatively assuming that the case of Ireland (for the purpose of this research: both the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland) constitutes an example in which

it might be incorrect to talk of a nexus between crime and terror. It is more of an actual overtake of the latter phenomenon by the former, all within the same organisational structures of former terrorist groups.



Unlike other Western European countries, Italy has not witnessed a jihadist-related attack comparable in size to al-Qaeda’s 2004 Madrid attacks or the 2005 London bombings, nor IS’s November 2015 Paris attacks or the March 2016 Brussels bombings. In fact, the only successful jihadi attack took place in 2009 when military barracks in Lombardy were targeted.¹⁴⁹ This could be due to Italy’s track record of not only countering terrorism but also because of its vast experience with combating the mafia, itself a shadowy conglomerate operating at the intersection of crime and politics.¹⁵⁰ Thus, one could risk the theory that a kind of counter crime-terror nexus arrangement has appeared in Italy. This fact, when combined with the relatively small population of second-generation Muslim immigrants present in Italy, according to some studies the most ripe for recruitment to jihadi radicalisation, could explain the relatively low threat by Western European standards of terrorism in this country.¹⁵¹ However, today’s expert debates started to question this notion as the second-generation Muslim diaspora is still growing in numbers. According to Alessandro Boncio’s detailed analysis, “51% out of sampled Italian foreign fighters (55) are children of first generation Muslim migrants.”¹⁵² Nonetheless, it is assumed that Italy’s severe migration policies, based on which the country deports non-Italian terrorism suspects back to their home countries, also play a role in mitigation of the terrorist threat as many of the suspected terrorists operating on the Italian soil are not, due to the fact they are first generation immigrants, possess Italian nationality. By the end of 2015 there were 63 non-Italian citizens expelled from the country that year.¹⁵³ Since 2015 there have been additional 229 cases of expulsions of terrorist suspects from Italy.¹⁵⁴ Despite all this, the Italian government decided to set the threat level at 2- “medium/high”, the second-highest level.¹⁵⁵

With IS-tied voices calling for “conquering Rome”, the terrorist threat in Italy moves from “if” to “when.”

For Islamic extremists, Italy has been for many years mainly a transit country on their way to and from the Balkans or North Africa.¹⁵⁶ However, since the 2000s, Italy has experienced a number of lone-wolf terrorist plots perpetrated by Islamic extremists.¹⁵⁷ Amidst the IS voices calling for “conquering Rome”, some perceive the terrorist threat in the category of “when” and no longer “if”.¹⁵⁸ In 2016, Italy reported 17

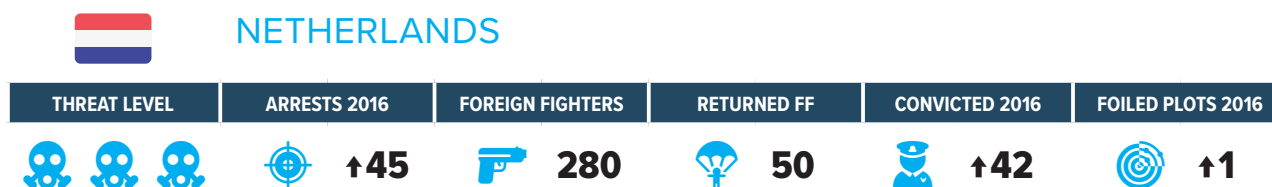
failed and foiled terrorist attacks to Europol, a steep rise from four in 2015.¹⁵⁹ The number of terrorism arrestees, however, remained fairly consistent at 40 in 2015¹⁶⁰ and 38 in 2016.¹⁶¹ The Italian authorities also report 30 individuals were faced with administrative measure of expulsion. These individuals do not overlap with the arrested ones as expulsions are very rarely preceded by arrests.¹⁶²

According to the Italian Institute for International Political Studies, there are 125 jihadi foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq coming from Italy, with 37 of them allegedly dead. Another 22 returned to Europe and supposedly 10 of them have returned to Italy.¹⁶³ What is more, certain terrorist plots conducted in, e.g., Germany and the UK, have revealed plotters’ connections to Italy.¹⁶⁴

Even if Italy is not the priority target for European jihadists, some recent news seems to validate theories that a crime-terror nexus is in existence in this country. There is a track record of cases of ID forgery, and oil and drug smuggling in areas with mafia and jihadist presence.¹⁶⁵ Early November saw the discovery of a container in the Italian port Gioia Tauro full of opiates worth 50 million euros, which was supposedly meant to finance extremist groups in Libya, Syria and Iraq, as well as terrorist activities around the globe.¹⁶⁶ In May 2017, another shipment, even larger (with cargo of a net worth of 74 million euros) was found in the port of Genoa, but this time it was traveling in the opposite direction, allegedly to Libya, so that ISIS fighters could use the painkillers while involved in combat.¹⁶⁷ Furthermore, Franco Roberti, Italy’s national anti-terror and anti-mafia chief also confirmed

that “the mafia and IS had colluded in the smuggling of cannabis into Europe from Libya”. He has also suggested “the decriminalisation of cannabis, or even its legalisation, to hit the coffers of both IS and the mafia”.¹⁶⁸

Such developments suggest that Italy could be more of an example of an “old school” crime-terror convergence (between organisations like IS and the mafia) and to a lesser extent, the “gangster jihad” phenomenon. Our project will assess the validity of this tentative assumption.



Even though there has been no successful terrorist attack in the Netherlands since 2004, when 26-year-old Dutch-Moroccan citizen Mohammed Bouyeri murdered the Dutch filmmaker Theo van Gogh,¹⁶⁹ the threat level has remained at “substantial”, at 4 of 5, since 2013.¹⁷⁰ According to the country’s National Coordinator for Security and Counterterrorism (NCTV), this means that the chance of an attack in the Netherlands is real, but that there are no specific indications that an attack is being prepared.¹⁷¹ Therefore, as reported by Dick Schoof, the head of NCTV, “there is as yet no reason to increase the already high threat level”.¹⁷² The Dutch National Security Strategy sees activities related to “terrorism as a serious threat which have demanded more and more attention, and which have made us (the Netherlands) realise our increasing vulnerability”.¹⁷³ The recent National Counterterrorism Strategy for 2016-2020 perceives “the threat posed by extremism and terrorism as variable and unpredictable”.¹⁷⁴

42% of individuals known to the Dutch Prosecution Service, suspected or convicted of involvement in terrorism-related offences, had previous criminal careers. 73% of them had prior convictions for violent crime.

As of November 2015, NCTV¹⁷⁵ reported around 220 Dutch citizens had taken up arms in Syria and Iraq, and a year later, in December 2016, the number stood at 280 individuals. Moreover, at least five of them have carried out suicide bombings in foreign countries.¹⁷⁶ In April 2017, the Dutch government put the number of Dutch citizens currently fighting in Syria and Iraq at 190, with about 50 back in the Netherlands and an estimated 44 already dead in the combat zone.¹⁷⁷

According to the General Intelligence and Security Service’s (AIVD) October 2014 report, Islamic extremism has been spreading in the Netherlands since 2010 and has transformed from a “virtually invisible” phenomenon into an open and widespread threat with several hundred supporters and thousands of sympathizers.¹⁷⁸ In 2015, the Netherlands reported 20 terrorism arrests to Europol, and this number increased to 36 in 2016.¹⁷⁹

Among the Dutch foreign fighters and homegrown jihadists, many have a history of criminal behaviour, particularly in petty crime and drug use.¹⁸⁰ According to the Netherlands House of Representatives, “Dutch jihadists often have a criminal record and use the services of criminal networks, such as the acquisition of forged documents, weapons or explosives”.¹⁸¹ Based on research conducted on a sample of 140 jihadist foreign fighters, 47% were Dutch (66) and had a criminal history.¹⁸² More recently a similarly high figure of 42% of individuals known to the Dutch Prosecution Service, and suspected or convicted of involvement in terrorism-related offences, had previous criminal careers. Worryingly, 73% of those with such a background had prior convictions for violent crime.¹⁸³



SPAIN

THREAT LEVEL	ARRESTS 2016	FOREIGN FIGHTERS	RETURNED FF	CONVICTED 2016	FOILED PLOTS 2016
	↓120	139	25	↓154	3

Spain is one of a few EU Member States with extensive experience and a history of countering different strands of terrorism. In the 21st century, the majority of the country’s efforts in this domain, especially “the worst Islamist attack in European history” on March 11, 2004, focused on the rising threat of Islamist terrorism.¹⁸⁴

Spain is a target of robust jihadist propaganda that hardly ever fails to remind the Spanish of the period of Muslim rule in their history.¹⁸⁵ According to Fernando Reinares, Carola García-Calvo and Álvaro Vicente, Spain’s five centres of radicalisation are Madrid, Ceuta, Melilla, Girona and Barcelona,¹⁸⁶ the last targeted by the August 2017 attacks in which 24 people (including eight terrorists) died.¹⁸⁷ In the aftermath of this attack, the terrorism threat level in Spain remained at level 4 of 5.¹⁸⁸

The vein of criminality was also present amongst the members of the 2017 Barcelona terrorist cell, which was led by an individual who, while imprisoned, encountered a member of the broader 2004 Madrid bombings network.

Spain’s high threat of jihadi terrorism is not necessarily reflected in the numbers of foreign fighters who have travelled from the country to Syria or Iraq to join the conflict there.¹⁸⁹ According to Fernando Reinares, a renowned terrorism expert with the Elcano Royal Institute, more than 200 individuals had left Spain for Syria and joined jihadi groups by 2017.¹⁹⁰ These relatively low numbers in comparison to other Western European countries with long track records of countering terrorism could be the result of the relative youthfulness of Spain’s Muslim community, which has not yet produced a critical mass of Salafi-jihadists and is often only in its

first generation.¹⁹¹ According to TE-SAT reports, Spain reported 75 and 69 individuals arrested on suspicion of involvement in jihadi terrorism in 2015¹⁹² and 2016¹⁹³, respectively. In 2016, Spain reported the highest number of concluded court proceedings and the highest number of convictions (157) or acquittals of individuals for terrorist offences.¹⁹⁴

There is a long-standing crime-terror nexus link in jihadi activities in Spain, with one of the clusters of the 2004 Madrid attacks composed of individuals with track records in crime (e.g., drug dealing).¹⁹⁵ Interestingly, the vein of criminality, although not dominant, is also present in the 2017 Barcelona terrorist cell, which was led by an individual with a history of drug smuggling and who, while imprisoned for non-terrorist offences, encountered a member of the broader 2004 Madrid cell.¹⁹⁶

According to Reinares, a growing number of convicted terrorists have a criminal past—one third at this point. In most cases, these individuals have criminal records varying from robbery, socio-economic crimes, drug trafficking, homicide, storage of weapons, or attacks on authorities to domestic violence.¹⁹⁷



UNITED KINGDOM

THREAT LEVEL	ARRESTS 2016	FOREIGN FIGHTERS	RETURNED FF	CONVICTED 2016	FOILED PLOTS 2016
	↑149	850	430	↑89	↑12

Between 1970 and the early 2000s, the UK regarded Irish republican groups as the primary terrorist threat. Just as in the case of Spain, however, this equation changed dramatically in the 21st century when the UK security community prioritised countering Islamist terrorism, and after the 2005 London bombings, homegrown radicalisation.¹⁹⁸

The next decade saw the UK prioritise countering terrorism as the key security issue.¹⁹⁹ Despite facing a robust threat from a vibrant radically Islamist local milieu consisting of over 3 000 extremists²⁰⁰ and global terrorist organisations,²⁰¹ which resulted in 20 plots targeting the UK in the last four years,²⁰² (and nine in 2017 so far)²⁰³ the country saw very little successful terrorist activity between the 2005 London bombings and the spring of 2017.²⁰⁴

Irish republican terrorist groups killed seven people in the UK in the last three years. Jihadists were behind 36 deaths, all in 2017.

This reality, however, changed with the string of jihadist attacks that targeted the UK this year. In March, five people died in a terror attack near the Houses of Parliament, and then in the Manchester suicide bombing on May 22, 22 people were killed.²⁰⁵ This was followed by the London Bridge attack with eight victims.²⁰⁶ The country's threat level for international terrorism is at "severe" (4 out of 5). The same level was set prior to these attacks.²⁰⁷

The UK has seen about 850 individuals leave for Syria and Iraq since January 2011, of whom 315 are currently in the conflict area, over half returned, and about 100 have died.²⁰⁸ According to Europol,²⁰⁹ the UK reported the highest number of terrorist attacks (103) in 2015, followed by France (72) and Spain (25). In 2015, there were 134 terrorist arrests and in 2016, the UK reported 149 individuals arrested for terrorism-related offences, which is the second-highest figure after France (456) and followed by Spain (120).²¹⁰ These high numbers are also down to the activities of Irish republican terrorist groups, which killed seven people in the UK within three years compared to the 36 lives lost in the four successful IS terror attacks in 2017.

Basra et al.'s 2016 ground-breaking analysis flags up the existence of a crime-terror nexus amongst British jihadist foreign fighters. There are also traces of the existence of such a nexus amongst some of the perpetrators of the 2017 attacks.²¹¹ However, there also exist divergent opinions on this matter that stress the fact that the UK has no French or Belgian problem with individuals gravitating in and out of gangs towards terrorist networks.²¹² Solving this dilemma will be one of the priorities of our research project.

CRIME-TERROR NEXUS IN 11 EUROPEAN COUNTRIES: QUESTIONS FOR THE FUTURE

This report's aim was to introduce GLOBSEC's "From Criminals to Terrorists and Back?" project and to outline its scope of interest and its future activities. As the national chapters clearly demonstrate, this research will cover the countries with the highest numbers of terrorism arrests in Europe in 2015, and with different experience and history of various kinds of terrorism, as well as varying successes in trying to tackle it. It is the largest attempt to answer questions about the character, style and *modus operandi* of the presumed crime-terror nexus, a subject attracting a lot of attention and one of the reference points in researching and reporting on all terrorist cases. **This project involves more than 30 people working in 12 countries, who over the next two years will be rigorously researching the overlap between criminality and terrorism, presenting their results in a string of reports, and formulating policy-oriented recommendations to relevant stakeholders.**

While accomplishing the aforementioned goals, they will be guided by the following questions:

1. Is the crime-terror overlap about organizational convergence or more about a nexus related to individuals moving between the two milieus?
2. **Are the criminals-turned-terrorists coming from organized crime groups or are they petty criminals?**
3. **Is "gangster jihad" real and to what extent?** Is it a solely a Francophone Europe phenomenon or is it also relevant to other studied countries? To what extent is it relevant to the situation in, for example, Germany and the Netherlands?

- 4. Is the presumed crime-terror nexus in the 11 studied countries connected to developments in other countries, and if yes then which ones?** Is there a Western Balkan or perhaps a MENA connection?
- 5. How does the nexus fare when the totality of the terrorist threat to a given country (e.g., Bulgaria) is relatively modest?** Is it a factor at all?
- 6. Will there be a counter crime-terror nexus backlash as more data from the ongoing investigations on the 2015 terrorism arrestees comes to light, and does that not validate the presumed theory?** In short, will “gangster jihad” hold?
- 7. Does the presumed nexus apply to the outlier cases in the project (Greece and Ireland), and other types of political and violence and terrorism?** Are they more prone, as it seems in the case of Ireland, to see terrorist groups morph into criminal structures?

Bratislava, December 2017

ENDNOTES

- 1 GLOBSEC, an independent, non-partisan, non-governmental organisation which aims to shape the global debate on foreign and security policy.
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▶ Polus Tower II
Vajnorská 100/B
831 04 Bratislava
Slovak Republic

▶ +421 2 5441 0609
▶ info@globsec.org
▶ www.globsec.org