

# Metamorphoses of Terrorist Groups and Their Strategy in Europe

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**AVERA** – COMMENTARY

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Social study researchers are regularly blamed for failing to update and contextualise their reports on extremist groups to new developments occurring locally, regionally and internationally that continuously keep reshaping and evolving the jihadist movement. As a result there is a significant risk that their network analysis is based on incomplete or outdated models and data, leading to wrong conclusions and faulty risk assessments.

Correct assessment can only come from an up-to-date, complete and correct representation of data. In order to contribute to this, the Brussels International Centre for Research is aiming to update some of its previous papers and research, to include the latest and recent developments and to synthesise real time data and new insights regarding topics related to Extremism and Violent Radicalism.

While – generally speaking – the same theoretical frameworks for studying Extremism and Violent Radicalism remains valid, it is important to incorporate the constant evolution in their use of new tactics, branding, technology and operations that occurs as a result of adaptations to local and international sentiments, law enforcement, developments in society and specific events.

These constant transformations are unfortunately absent from many studies despite being critical to comprehensively analyze, understand, anticipate and

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counter their covert movements. It may also help prevent the recurrence of scenarios of terrorist attacks Europe has faced since 2015.

It is for example well-known that the disappearance of a certain branch or specific terrorist group does not mean its defeat, as the same ideology often pops up in new groups, shapes or geographical locations, with or without similar targets and tactics. That explains rresearch and security reports indicating that despite the decrease in the number of deaths in terrorist operations in recent years, the scale and spread of terrorism has nevertheless increased significantly with operations now taking place in more than 71 countries<sup>1</sup>.

Moreover, it is essential to also keep in mind the geo-political and economic dimensions of extremism and terrorism. As long the Islamic world is teeming with sectarian, religious and ethnic conflicts, economic hardship and repression, it will remain a theatre for the birth and rebirth of radical movements, tensions and conflicts that will eventually spill over to Europe. The tensions in Yemen, Iran, Palestine and the Gulf states are of constant concern and play a provocative role in the rebellion against the existing regimes, providing a fertile breeding ground for extremist groups throughout the world.<sup>2</sup>

On a global level, we see with the rising tide of de-globalisation, populism, geopolitical challenges to the current rule-based world order, inequality and economic stagnation a hardening of society and with it the fuelling of all sorts of extremism and radicalism that rejects current society and ideology.

### **The importance for a comprehensive reference book regarding terminology, discourse and symbols utilized by extremist groups**

Concepts cannot be seen separately from its perceived meaning. As such everyday concepts and terminology such as Jihad, Shariah, Caliphate, Tawhid, Taghut, Political Islam can create enormous confusion and misperception, - both with Muslims and Non-Muslims -, when not defined scientifically and within the correct historical,

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<sup>1</sup> Global Terrorism index, Vision of humanity.org, 2019.

<sup>2</sup> El-Afandi Abdelwahhab, Who needs an Islamic State ? Minbalalhurriyya Project, Atlas Research Foundation , Arabic language edition by Al-Ahlia –Jordan, 2010.

comprehensive theological (encompassing the dogmatic, philosophical and spiritual meaning) and cultural context.

Even researchers might get lost in certain assumptions, bias, confusion, generalisations etc. if these terms are not properly defined. Political parties and interest groups will be tempted to apply any definition that suits their narrative the most. And for the general public it is sheer impossible to differentiate between propaganda and facts, between form and meaning, and between Islam and Islamism.

Apart from using terms directly related to Islam, it is also crucial to define terminology that is specific related to extremist groups such a loot, religious immigration, promise, foreign fighter etc. and a contextual lexicon mapping radicalism and extremism and anything associated with it.

To remedy this gap, the Brussels International Centre for Research and Human Rights (BIC-HR), department AVERA, is compiling a comprehensive index of lexical names and terminology related to extremism and violent radicalism, with the aim of publishing it in different languages.

The aim of this manual is to assist researchers and various stakeholders in the field of terrorism and extremism to recognize and correctly understand the significance and meaning of terminology, concepts, tactics, symbols used in the field that forms the core of radical ideology and propaganda. This will allow for more accurate identification of radical tendencies, rejection of democratic values and potential threats in an early stage, before they become actualized in indiscriminately terrorist attacks.

Furthermore, such a lexicon will help differentiate real experts from 'opinion'-makers. It is remarkable how in recent years we frequently seen the emergence of a large number of so-called experts Islamic movements and de-radicalization programmes in the media and satellite channels who lack even the basic understanding of essential concepts or contextual frameworks. Not held back by their absence of constructive contributions to the debate, they often inflame the discourse through providing biased and personal opinions on the latest publications or events in the media.

Apart from the correct understanding of such terminology and symbols, it is of course essential for experts to have access to analytical tools, frameworks and data to correctly monitor the various forms, shapes and network in order provide credible analysis, recommendations and solutions.

### **Key tactical changes of terrorist organisations in Europe**

Many of the current jihad leaders and extreme groups fled to Europe in the 1990s and sought asylum as political refugees in various European countries. After granted residence, they became increasingly active, with London becoming the centre of jihadists such as Abu Qatada the Palestinian, Muhammad al-Sibai, Abu Hamza al-Masri and Abu Basir al-Tartoushi. Joined by other jihadism ideologues, they took up a leading role within extremist groups through fatwas and publications<sup>3</sup>.

Following their footsteps extremism and Islamism have shifted towards digitisation. As explained in our previous article on cyber jihad, those include the establishment of a virtual global Ummah and caliphate, hacking and cyber terrorism, digital propaganda and recruitment, and more. Of particular global importance is that instead of focusing on establishing a national or regional caliphate in parts of the Middle East and Israel, they now see the opportunity to establish a global caliphate, first through digital/virtual means and, once that is strong enough, next also politically and geographically.

Today, their ideological discourse and organizations tentacles have already global reach and include sophisticated use of technology and communication. They have often been able to manoeuvre themselves in privileged positions in society and become accepted intellectual authorities in the area of Islamic education, political debate and media talking points.

Another example of tactical change can be found in ISIS that shifted its command and operational structure from a centralized towards a decentralised one after its military defeat. Instead of directly planning and executing terrorist and military

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<sup>3</sup> Abu Qatada was extradited to Jordan in 2013, Abu Hamza to the USA in 2012.

operations, it currently mainly focuses on instigating, encouraging, praising and blessing terrorists attacks by lone wolves with a particular focus on so-called gangster jihadism (recruiting potential terrorists from criminal circles) and Yusuf jihadism (recruiting from prisons). Today these are still very worrisome trends in Europe

There has also been a change in the targets and priorities of jihadist groups, shifting from fighting the “close” enemy (Muslims that do not subscribe to their version of Islam ideology) to fighting the “far” enemy (mainly Western countries, the USA and Israel) and recruiting individuals to take up positions of influence through their secret organizational structure instead of direct recruiting members to fight and commit terrorist attacks.

### **Re-evaluation of extremist group is urgently required to assess current threat levels**

In Belgium the threats posed by Salafists (jihadists) ideology include ‘knowledge-Salafism’ (followers of Sheikh Al-Albani), also known as the Madkhalites (the Salafists of al-Madinah) and political Salafism (Al-Sururiyya)<sup>4</sup>.

According a 2018 security report, Belgium counts over 100 Salafists associations and institutions. Salafism is an exclusive, closed-minded and extreme ideology that not only exists as a parallel and not-integrated subset of Belgian society, but also has a significant medium and long-term impact on Muslims living in Belgium. In particular they implant misconceptions, polarisation and self-serving jurisprudential interpretations in the minds of Muslims who already struggle to integrate their Belgian- and Muslim-identities, effectively acting as false spiritual guides and authorities. Moreover they strive hard to exclude impartial Muslims - those without an Islamism inspired political agenda and ideology -, from positions of influence. Those include for example independent Imams and scholars running an independent mosque or independent Muslims willing to take up positions as Islamic governing bodies. This opposition against independent Muslim leaders is something that can for instance be clearly observed in the hold of Turkish wing of the

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<sup>4</sup> This name is attributed to the Syrian Imam Mohammed Soroor Zeyn Abidien, who lived in London until his death in 2016.

Brotherhood over the Muslim Executive in Belgium, using political lobby power and pressure through the use of foreign high level associations and political contacts.

An important question is the extend the Belgian government is also responsible for such worrisome developments such as the further spread and influence of Salafism in Belgium. A good example is the government's action last year after the media reported foreign influence and other issues in both the Grand Mosque in Brussels and the Muslim Executive: after some grandstanding, the government intervention was limited to symbolically forcing the replacements of some administrative figure heads, bowing to foreign lobby power and in effect handing both the mosque and executive over to Diyanet that is strongly affiliated, both politically and ideological, with the Turkish government and the Muslim Brotherhood<sup>5</sup>.

## **Extremist groups active in Europe**

### **Islamic State**

Even after its military defeat in Iraq and Syria, ISIS still retained a significant number of followers and members in different countries. According to a Military News Agency estimate in 2019, ISIS still has more than 30,000 fighters spread across Syria, Iraq and Libya, while its financial war-chest - estimated to contain around US\$300 million – allows it to expand its operations to new front-lines and transform its modus operandi. A comprehensive overview still shows active involvement of ISIS fighters in at least 12 areas: Iraq, Syria, Libya, Yemen, Saudi Arabia, Algeria, Afghanistan, Pakistan, the Caucasus, East Asia, the Philippines, Somalia, West Africa and Nigeria.

In Europe ISIS's operational and organisational focus have shifted to lone wolves. As part of this strategy it provides directives for its members and sets-up sleeper cells to plot terrorist attacks in the future, with recruiting targetting specifically people coming from the Balkan countries, Kosovo, Albania and Bosnia<sup>6</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> Salafisme in België, mechanismen en realiteit , SV 2018.

<sup>6</sup> Steinberg Guido, the current threat posed by ISIS & Germany, European Threat Assessment , PP 2021

### **Sharia4Belgium.**

Sharia4Belgium was established in 2010<sup>7</sup> in Antwerp. Two years later it was banned by the government and subsequently judicially dissolved in 2012. The government also prosecuted many of its prominent members, after travelling to Syria to join armed organizations there (it is estimated that the number of organisations active in Syria after the outbreak of the revolution in 2011 amounted to almost 1,800)<sup>8</sup>.

### **Right Religion Group**

Al-Din Al-Haq Group was founded in 2005 in Germany by Ibrahim Abu Naji. The group was able to recruit many young people to join ISIS, using misleading propaganda. The group received media attention for distributing Qurans on the street of Cologne. Right Religion Group was later banned and its most prominent founders arrested with the German government considering Right Religion to a jihadist Salafist group that posed an immediate threat to the German state.

### **Nation of Abraham**

The Millat Ibrahim group was founded by the young Austrian Abu Usama al-Gharib, who settled in Germany and then started his activities from the city mosque of Solingen in North Rhine-Westphalia. The group was banned by the German government in 2012, though not before many young Belgians joining the organization.

### **Guardians of Religion**

The Guardians of Religion is a branch of the Al-Nusra organisation which is affiliated with Al-Qaeda and was targeting to recruit youngsters from Turkish origin in Germany, with also a particular focus on organizing women's activities. Their members are estimated to be around 100<sup>9</sup>.

### **Turkish Islamic Federation for Religious Affairs (DITIB):**

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7 2020 دبي 158 رؤى من بلجيكا لمكافحة التطرف والإرهاب ، كتاب) مشترك (المسبار ، رقم 7

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9 Steinberg Guido, the current threat posed by ISIS & Germany, European Threat Assessment , PP 2021

The Turkish Islamic Federation for Religious Affairs (DITIB) is considered a branch of the Brotherhood in Germany with close ties to Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan. The organization, under leadership of Kazem Turkmen, recently built the largest mosque in Germany in Cologne, manages around 900 mosques and reaches 800.000 members. In Belgium DITIB operates under the name Diyanet, managing 62 mosques and has been officially appointed to develop and provide all official Islamic curriculum and educational material.

### **Hizb ut-Tahrir or the Islamic Liberation Party (PLI)**

Is a radical Islamist political party founded in 1958 by Palestinian Imam Taqi al-Din al Nabhani ( died in 1977 ) . Hizb ut-Tahrir strives for a world caliphate and its ideology is closely related to that of the Muslim Brothers and has a very outspoken anti-Western ideology. She regularly holds the so-called Khilafah conferences and, through political awareness-raising, tries to prepare the young people to promote and install the caliphate.

They are active worldwide - especially in Indonesia - but the organization is banned in several countries. Hizb ut –Tahrir owns several media channels and websites (also in Belgium) that are published in eight different languages. In Europe they have a strong presence in Great Britain, Denmark, Ukraine, and the Netherlands. In Belgium they are estimated at about 200 militants and usually have a lot of following in the student world and among intellectual Muslims.

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## About the BIC

The BIC is an independent, non-profit, think-and-do tank based in the capital of Europe that is committed to developing solutions to address the cyclical drivers of insecurity, economic fragility, and conflict the Middle East and North Africa. Our goal is to bring added value to the highest levels of political discourse by bringing systemic issues to the forefront of the conversation.

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