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The Right-wing Terrorism Threat in Europe

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A Report of the CSIS TRANSNATIONAL THREATS PROJECT

CSIS | CENTER FOR STRATEGIC &
INTERNATIONAL STUDIES

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Introduction

There has been growing concern about right-wing terrorism in Europe and across the world, based in part on several recent incidents.¹ In February 2020, 43-year-old Tobias Rathjen shot and killed nine people at two separate shisha bars in Hanau, Germany. He published a rambling 24-page manifesto that outlined his plans for global ethnic cleansing and vented against women. He listed more than two dozen countries where he believed “the entire population needs to be annihilated,” including Algeria, Turkey, Israel, and Afghanistan.² In October 2019, Stephan Balliet attempted to storm a synagogue in Halle, Germany, armed with guns and a head camera that streamed a video of the attack on the gaming website Twitch. He killed two people and injured two others, vowing in a manifesto to “kill as many anti-Whites as possible, Jews preferred.”³ In June 2019, Walter Lübcke, a member of Chancellor Angela Merkel’s center-right party, was gunned down by a 45-year-old right-wing extremist named Stephan Ernst, who was angry about Lübcke’s pro-refugee stance. Against this backdrop, there were other far-right attacks around the globe, including the August 2019 El Paso Walmart shooting in Texas, the March 2019 Christchurch attack in New Zealand, and the October 2018 Pittsburgh synagogue shooting in Pennsylvania.⁴

Despite these incidents, there is a vibrant debate about the severity of the right-wing terrorist threat in Europe. Some have argued that right-wing terrorism is rising, particularly compared to Islamic extremism.⁵ One study found that there was a 320 percent rise in far-right terrorism incidents in the West—including in Europe—between 2013 and 2018.⁶ In the United Kingdom, the number of people referred for screening and assessment to the government’s counterterrorism program, Prevent, for far-right extremism in 2019 nearly doubled in three years, outpacing referrals for jihadist extremists.⁷ The head of counterterrorism at the United Kingdom’s Metropolitan Police said that 7 of 22 plots foiled since March 2017 had been linked to far-right extremism.⁸ Some politicians have sounded the alarm bells. After the Hanau attacks, German Justice Minister Christine Lambrecht remarked, “Far-right terror is the biggest threat to our democracy right now. This is visible in the number and intensity of attacks.”⁹ In addition, some have expressed concern about a potential growth in the number of far-right political parties and their supporters, which could contribute to a rise in extremist views and potentially in terrorist activity.¹⁰ In March 2020, Germany’s domestic intelligence agency announced that it would put under surveillance the Flügel (or “Wing”), a group within the far-right political party Alternative für Deutschland (Alternative for Germany, or AfD).¹¹

Yet other analysts have argued that the threat from right-wing terrorism is overstated. One study, which constructed a data set of 578 right-wing incidents, concluded that “the number of deadly incidents motivated by right-wing beliefs or by anti-minority biases has *declined considerably since the 1990s*.”¹² Assessments from several European governments, such as Belgium, the Netherlands, and France, have argued that Islamic extremist networks and individuals represent the most significant threat to their countries.¹³ As the Netherlands’s *Terrorist Threat Assessment* concluded, “The main terrorist threat continues to be posed by jihadists, particularly ISIS supporters.”¹⁴ Some research has also argued that far-right political parties have not been gaining a larger vote share on average—and, in some cases, have even lost support in certain countries.¹⁵

To better understand the implications of right-wing terrorism in Europe, this analysis asks: How significant is the threat from right-wing terrorism in Europe, particularly compared to other terrorist threats? To answer this question, the report analyzes data from several sources to place the right-wing terrorist threat in a broader context. It builds and analyzes a data set of terrorist attacks in Europe from January 2009 to February 2020, which includes a total of 2,241 incidents.¹⁶ It also examines research on terrorism from a wide range of primary and secondary sources, including European government assessments and publications of extremist groups and individuals. Finally, it includes information from CSIS interviews with European and U.S. government officials.

This analysis makes three main arguments. First, while right-wing terrorism in Europe is concerning, jihadist terrorism continues to be the most lethal threat. According to our data, 69.3 percent of fatalities from terrorist attacks in Europe between 2009 and 2020 were from jihadists, compared to only 21.8 percent from right-wing individuals or networks, 6.9 percent from ethno-nationalists, and 2.0 percent from left-wing actors. The breakdown is even more stark in recent years. Between 2015 and 2020, for example, 88.0 percent of fatalities were from jihadist attacks, compared to only 8.5 percent from right-wing attacks. Second, the number of right-wing terrorist attacks in Europe is still high compared to other types. Right-wing extremists have been motivated by such issues as the spread of Islam in Europe, concerns about immigration, and a desire for a “white only” society. Many extremists have also developed close relations with far-right individuals and networks in the United States, Ukraine, Australia, and other countries. Third, the far-right threat remains diffuse and varied across Europe, with the most significant danger stemming from radicalized individuals. Most attacks in Europe have been perpetrated by individuals and small cells rather than by centralized groups. “Leaderless resistance” remains an important organizing principle.¹⁷ Far-right and other types of extremists are increasingly active on the internet and social media, which suggests that one of the primary battlefields may be virtual rather than on the street.¹⁸

The rest of this report is divided into four sections. The first provides an overview of how terrorism is defined in this study. The second section examines right-wing terrorism in Europe, along with left-wing, religious-based, and ethno-nationalist terrorism. The third section assesses the severity of the right-wing threat in the context of other terrorist threats. The fourth section provides policy implications.

Understanding Terrorism

This analysis focuses on terrorism: the deliberate use—or threat—of violence by non-state actors in order to achieve political goals and create a broad psychological impact.¹⁹ Violence—and the threat of violence—are important components of terrorism. As Bruce Hoffman argues: “Through the publicity generated by their violence, terrorists seek to obtain the leverage, influence, and power they otherwise lack to effect political change on either a local or an international scale.”²⁰

Overall, this analysis divides terrorism into four broad categories.²¹ First, *right-wing terrorism* refers to the use or threat of violence by sub-national or non-state entities whose goals may include racial or ethnic supremacy; opposition to government authority; anger at women, including from the incel (“involuntary celibate”) movement; and outrage against certain policies, such as abortion.²² This analysis uses the term “right-wing terrorism” rather than “racially- and ethnically-motivated violent extremism,” or REMVE, which has become increasingly used by the U.S. government.²³ Second, *left-wing terrorism* involves the use or threat of violence by sub-national or non-state entities that oppose capitalism, imperialism, and colonialism; pursue environmental or animal rights issues; espouse pro-communist or pro-socialist beliefs; or support a decentralized social and political system like anarchism. Third, *religious terrorism* includes violence in support of a faith-based belief system, such as Islam, Judaism, Christianity, and Hinduism, among many others. As highlighted in the next section, the primary threat from religious terrorists comes from jihadists inspired by the Islamic State and al-Qaeda. Fourth, *ethno-nationalist terrorism* refers to violence in support of ethnic or nationalist goals—often struggles of self-determination and separatism along ethnic or nationalist lines.

In examining terrorism—including right-wing terrorism—this analysis does not specifically address several related phenomena. For example, it does not focus on hate crimes. There is overlap between terrorism and hate crimes, since some hate crimes include the use or threat of violence.²⁴ But hate crimes can also include non-violent incidents like graffiti and verbal abuse. European countries define hate crimes differently. The UK government, for example, labels hate crime as “a range of criminal behaviour where the perpetrator is motivated by hostility or demonstrates hostility towards the victim’s disability, race, religion, sexual orientation or transgender identity.”²⁵ This hostility can include verbal abuse, intimidation, harassment, assault, bullying, and damage to property. The German government defines hate crimes as criminal actions “directed against a person or an

object” because of such reasons as “political affiliation, nationality, ethnic origin, on grounds of race, skin colour, religion, world view, origin, sexual orientation, disability, external appearance or social status.”²⁶ Hate crimes are obviously concerning and a threat to society, but this analysis concentrates only on terrorism and the use—or threat—of violence.

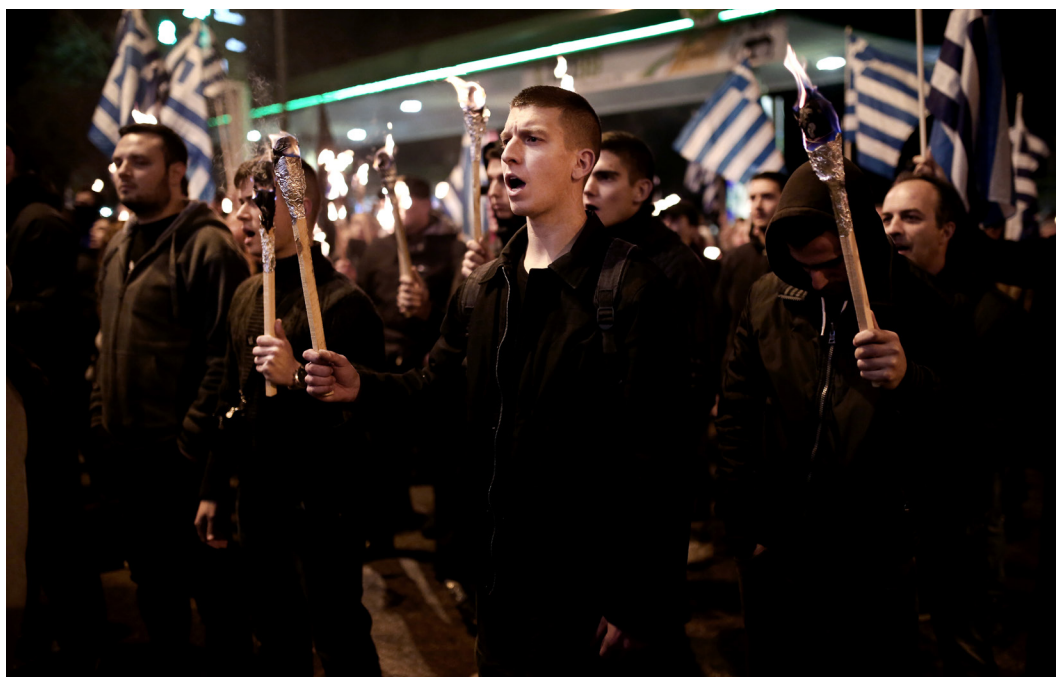


Photo: ANGELOS TZORTZINIS/AFP via Getty Images

A gathering of Golden Dawn supporters in Athens, January 2016.

This report also does not significantly address far-right political parties in Europe. There are numerous parties, such as Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs (Freedom Party of Austria, or FPÖ), the French National Front (renamed National Rally), Sverigedemokraterna (Sweden Democrats, or SD), Perussuomalaiset (Finns Party), the English Defense League, the Vox Party in Spain, the parties Fidesz and Jobbik in Hungary, the Danish People’s Party, Italy’s Lega Nord, the New Flemish Alliance in Belgium, and the AfD in Germany. In the European Parliament, nine far-right parties have formed a new bloc, called Identity and Democracy (ID). Far-right political parties in Europe appear to have increased their followers in some countries.²⁷ As one article argued, “Once, the far right was anathema. Now it is routine.”²⁸ While some of these parties espouse racist and xenophobic views—which is certainly concerning—this paper primarily focuses on individuals and networks that use violence. These political parties generally pursue their goals through non-violent means.

The Contours of European Terrorism

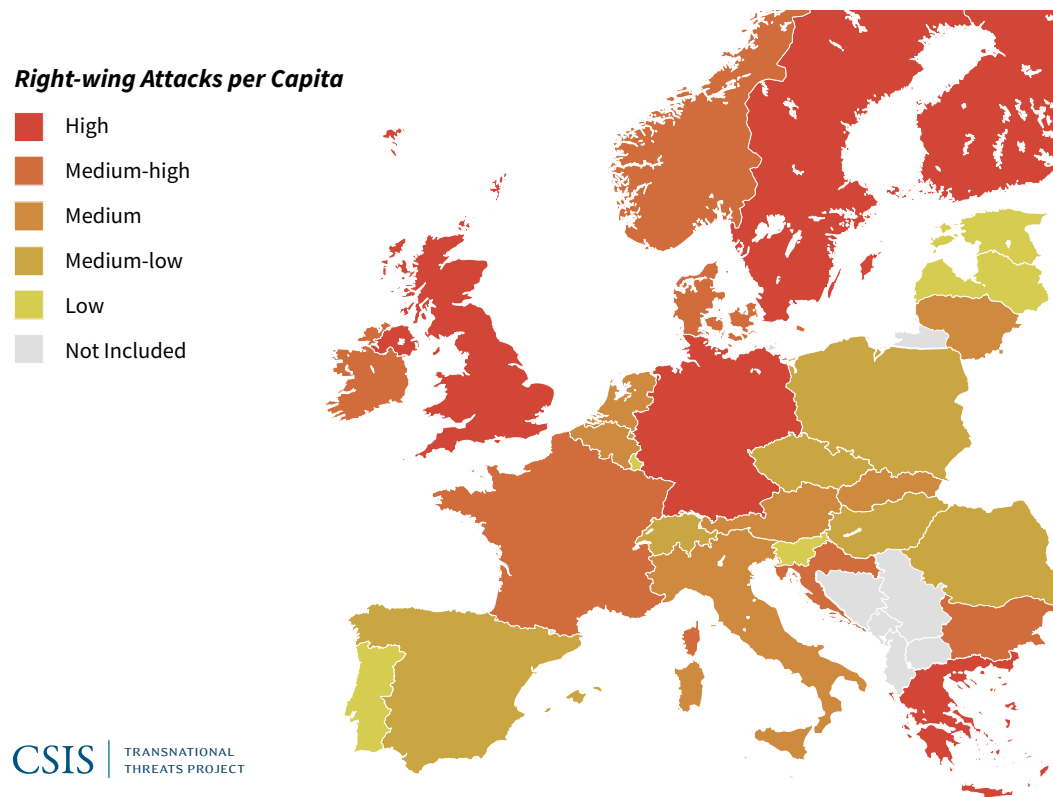
There are four broad types of terrorist individuals and networks in Europe: right-wing, left-wing, religious, and ethno-nationalist. There are numerous differences between (and even within) these types, such as their ideology, organizational structures, tactics, and level of threat to European countries. But there are also some commonalities. For terrorists in all of these categories, for example, the internet and social media are important mediums for communicating, fundraising, distributing propaganda, radicalizing, and coordinating activities. Right-wing terrorists, for example, have used various combinations of Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Gab, Reddit, 4Chan, 8kun (formerly 8Chan), Endchan, Telegram, VKontakte, MeWe, Discord, BitChute, and Twitch. They have also used encrypted messaging apps and other forms of encrypted chat to communicate with each other. Many have also used computer games and gaming forums.²⁹ The use of the internet and social media among all types of terrorists indicates that an important part of the battlefield will continue to be virtual—not just physical.

Right-wing Terrorism

Far-right individuals and networks have been active in Europe since at least the nineteenth century, and their activity continued after World War II.³⁰ In 1962, for example, far-right extremists established the National Party of Europe in Venice.³¹ Among the most active recent networks was a loose group of neo-Nazis called the Nationalsozialistischer Untergrund (National Socialist Underground, or NSU), which conducted bombings between 2000 and 2007 that killed 10 people in Germany—9 of whom were immigrants.³²

Far-right terrorism in Europe continues today. While the next section more systematically assesses the right-wing threat in the context of other terrorist threats, Figure 1 shows the number of per-capita right-wing terrorist attacks by country. The darker shades of blue indicate a higher rate of right-wing terrorist attacks per capita. It indicates that the frequency of terrorist incidents has been highest per capita in such countries as Sweden, Greece, the United Kingdom, Finland, and Germany.

Figure 1: Number of Right-wing Terrorist Attacks per Capita, 2009-2020³³



Source: The figure uses the most recent population data from “DataBank,” World Bank, 2018, <https://databank.worldbank.org/home.aspx>. Note that countries in gray—such as Serbia and Albania—are not included in the data set.

There is significant diversity among right-wing terrorists in Europe. Some have railed against Muslims and migrants based, in numerous cases, on either exaggerated or false information.³⁴ For example, some promulgate an identitarian ideology and a “great replacement” theory, which includes “the process by which the indigenous European population is replaced by non-European migrants.”³⁵ Using similar rhetoric, Brenton Tarrant, the white supremacist who killed 51 people at two New Zealand mosques on March 15, 2019, titled his manifesto “The Great Replacement,” based in part on his travels through Europe. He wrote about the “crisis of mass immigration and . . . assault on the European people that, if not combated, will ultimately result in the complete racial and cultural replacement of the European people.”³⁶ Tobias Rathjen, the Hanau, Germany attacker, published his views online in a manifesto that complained about immigrants, foreigners, and minorities.³⁷

Extremists associated with Combat 18 aim to create all-white countries by shipping “all non-whites back to Africa, Asia, Arabia, whether alive or in body bags,” killing “all Queers” and “white race mixers,” weeding “out all Jews in the government, the media, the arts, the professions,” executing “all Jews who have actively helped to damage the white race,” and ordering “into camps the rest until we find a final solution to the eternal Jew.”³⁸ Some far-right terrorists in Europe have been inspired by Anders Breivik, who killed 77 people in Norway in July 2011 and expressed paranoia in his

1,500-page manifesto that Muslim migrants were replacing ethnic Europeans. “You cannot defeat Islamization or halt/reverse the Islamic colonization of Western Europe without first removing the political doctrines manifested through multiculturalism/cultural Marxism,” he lamented.³⁹

In addition, far-right terrorism in Europe is decentralized and includes some extremists with broader international connections.⁴⁰ It is difficult and, in some cases, erroneous to talk about far-right terrorist “groups” in Europe, which implies a more organized and hierarchical structure than exists. Still, far-right individuals and networks are operating in a political eco-system that may be more accepting of extremism today than a decade ago. There has also been a growing number of networks in Europe associated with extremists in the United States and other locations. For example, the U.S.-based Atomwaffen Division has branches in the United Kingdom, Germany, and the Baltics.⁴¹ The Base, a white supremacist group with a support network in the United States, has a presence in Europe. Members of the Rise Above Movement, a U.S.-based organization, have traveled to European countries like Germany, Ukraine, and Italy to meet with other extremists.⁴² In addition, the war in Ukraine has attracted some far-right extremists from Europe and other locations who have improved their combat training and broadened their extremist networks. As one study concluded, “Where jihadis travel to fight in places like Syria, white supremacists now have their own theater in which to learn combat—Ukraine.”⁴³

There has also been growing concern from European and U.S. intelligence and law enforcement agencies that Russia has provided money and assistance to some far-right networks.⁴⁴ Russian intelligence agencies appear to have covertly funneled money to some far-right political parties in countries such as Austria and Italy. The total amount is difficult to calculate, and it likely comprises a small percentage of overall funding for right-wing networks.⁴⁵ There is also growing alarm that Russian intelligence services have conducted information operations to magnify far-right ideology—including spreading far-right nativism, xenophobia, racism, and anti-Semitism—on the internet and social media platforms.⁴⁶ In addition, Russia has provided sanctuary to Rinaldo Nazzaro (aka Norman Spear or Roman Wolf), the leader of the Base.⁴⁷ Moscow’s objectives do not appear to include encouraging terrorism per se, but rather to sow discord within and among Western countries and encourage political polarization. Moscow’s activities can be understood as part of broader Russian *aktivnyye meropriyatiya* (active measures) in the West, which include misinformation, disinformation, and other covert and overt activity to expand Russia’s influence and weaken the United States and its partners. The Russian Orthodox Church has also been active in funding and fueling far-right individuals and networks, including highlighting the supposed decadence of the West.⁴⁸

Several European governments have expressed concern that right-wing terrorists have recruited members of their security services. German agencies have investigated allegations of far-right radicalism among German soldiers and police officers.⁴⁹ In a confidential report, the European Union Agency for Law Enforcement Cooperation, or Europol, concluded that right-wing extremist networks were aggressively attempting to recruit police officers and soldiers.⁵⁰

Figure 2: Examples of Right-wing Terrorist Networks in Europe

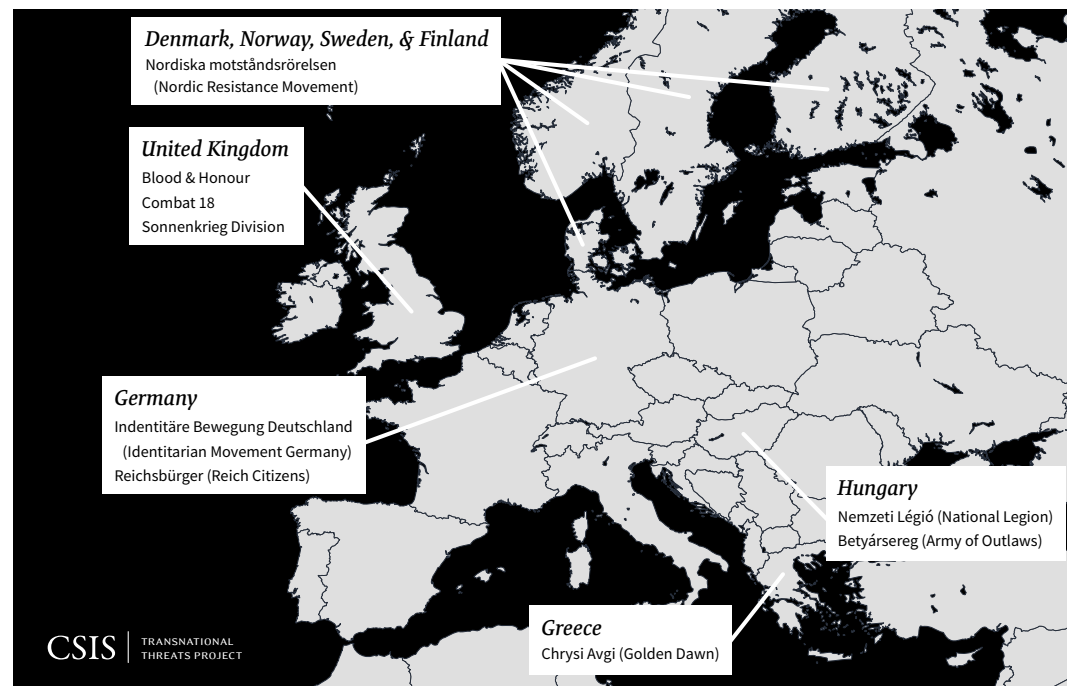


Figure 2 highlights some right-wing terrorist networks in Europe. Examples of these networks include:

- Betyársereg (Army of Outlaws) is a far-right, neo-Nazi organization founded in 2008 in Hungary. Their supporters have targeted immigrants, including refugees.⁵¹
- Blood & Honour is a loose network of neo-Nazi gangs founded in the United Kingdom in 1987 which has cells in numerous European countries. It is also a record label and political organization. As Ian Stuart Donaldson, the founder of Blood & Honour, remarked, “Eventually there will be a race war and we have to be strong enough in numbers to win it. I’ll die to keep this country pure and if it means bloodshed at the end of the day, then let it be.”⁵²
- Combat 18 is a violent neo-Nazi skinhead network founded in the United Kingdom in 1992 which has a presence in at least 18 countries and encourages supporters to carry out terrorist attacks as part of its goal to create white-only countries. The 18 in the group’s name indicates the first and eighth letters of the English alphabet (A and H), for Adolf Hitler.⁵³
- Golden Dawn is a neo-Nazi party whose members have targeted immigrants and left-wing networks across Greece. Golden Dawn supports Adolf Hitler’s national socialism and has used Hitler, Third Reich, swastika, and Nazi symbols at its events and in its publications.⁵⁴
- Identitäre Bewegung Deutschland (Identitarian Movement Germany, or IBD) is the German branch of the pan-European Identitarian movement. Originating in France with Generation Identitaire, the movement took its inspiration from influential individuals such as Alain de Benoist.

- Nemzeti Légió (National Legion) is a fascist network based in Hungary. It has roots in Magyar Garda (Hungarian Guard), which believes that “the migration of a population of a different culture is threatening Europe and a Europe with a mixed population is totally unacceptable.”⁵⁵
- Nordiska motståndsrörelsen (Nordic Resistance Movement, or NRM) is a transnational, neo-Nazi organization with chapters operating in countries like Sweden, Finland, Norway, and Denmark. Nordiska motståndsrörelsen supporters have carried out attacks—or threats—against members of the lesbian and gay community, Muslim asylum seekers, and ideological adversaries.
- Reichsbürger (Reich Citizens) is a far-right network that rejects the legitimacy of the modern German state and aims to re-establish the 1937 borders of Germany. Supporters do not accept the legality of the Federal Republic of Germany and refuse to pay taxes. In 2016, a member of the Reichsbürger movement shot and killed a police officer during a police raid to seize the man’s arsenal of over 30 firearms that he had illegally stockpiled. In March 2020, the German government banned two clubs linked to the Reichsbürger and raided the homes of several leaders.⁵⁶
- Sonnenkrieg Division is a white supremacist network based in Europe with ties to the Atomwaffen Division in the United States and supporters in the United Kingdom and other countries.⁵⁷

Religious Terrorism

A number of European governments continue to express concern about religious terrorists, particularly those inspired by jihadist groups such as the Islamic State and al-Qaeda.⁵⁸ Europe faces an ongoing threat from foreign fighters and their families returning from Syria and Iraq; extremists that have been (or will soon be) released from prison; and individuals that have been radicalized online, in person in society, or in prison.⁵⁹ Over the past several years, there have been several high-profile attacks from jihadists.

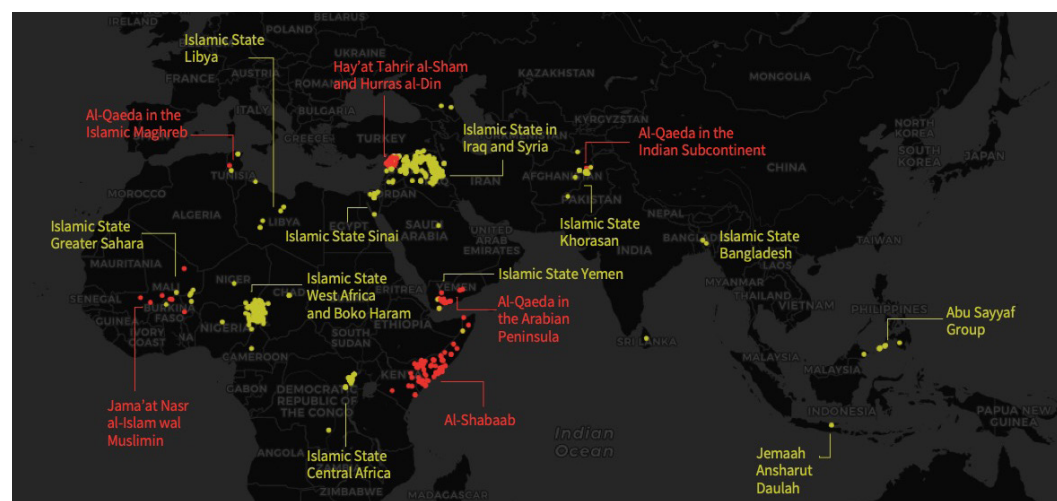
In February 2020, for example, 20-year-old Sudesh Amman stabbed two people in Streatham, south London, before police killed him. He had previously been convicted under the United Kingdom’s terrorism laws and was wearing a fake suicide vest at the time of his death. In November 2019, 28-year-old Usman Khan, who had been released a year earlier after serving 8 years of a 16-year sentence for his involvement in a bomb plot, killed two people and wounded three others with a knife near London Bridge. In 2018, there were multiple jihadist attacks, such as the December 12 attack by Chérif Chekatt at the Strasbourg Christmas Market in France, which killed at least five people; the March 23 attack in Carcassonne and Trèbes, France, where Redouane Lakdim hijacked a car, shot at police officers, and took hostages in a supermarket; the May 12 attack in Paris, France, in which Khamzat Azimov stabbed five people in a neighborhood near the Paris Opera; and the May 29 attack in Liège, Belgium, in which Benjamin Herman conducted a knife and small-arms attack that killed two female police officers and a teacher.⁶⁰

The jihadist threat in Europe will likely continue because of the persistence of the Islamic

State and al-Qaeda in areas such as Iraq and Syria. Leaders of these groups will continue to encourage individuals in Europe to conduct attacks on their own, and the Islamic State and al-Qaeda may attempt to directly orchestrate attacks if they can reconstitute their external operations capabilities.⁶¹ To illustrate the problem, there are still roughly 20,000 to 25,000 jihadist fighters in Syria and Iraq from the Islamic State and another 15,000 to 20,000 fighters from two al-Qaeda-linked groups: Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham and Tanzim Hurras al-Din.⁶² Over the next several months, more jihadists may enter the battlefield after escaping—or being released—from prisons run by the Syrian Democratic Forces in areas such as al-Hol, located in eastern Syria near the border with Iraq.⁶³

The problem for Europe is much larger than Iraq and Syria, however. Figure 3 shows the location of attacks perpetrated by the Islamic State, al-Qaeda, and groups that have sworn allegiance (or *bay'ah*) to them in Africa, the Middle East, and Asia. It indicates violence in areas such as: Yemen from al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula; West Africa from Jamaat Nusrat al-Islam wal Muslimeen (and, to a lesser extent, the Islamic State Greater Sahara); Nigeria (and bordering countries) from Boko Haram and the Islamic State West Africa; Somalia from al-Shabaab; and Afghanistan from the Islamic State Khorasan Province and al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent. A number of European governments have been particularly concerned about jihadists from North, West, and East Africa threatening Europe—in addition to the Middle East.⁶⁴

Figure 3: Islamic State and Al-Qaeda Attacks, January to September 2019



Source: “Jane’s Terrorism and Insurgency Centre,” IHS Markit, 2019, <https://ihsmarkit.com/products/janes-terrorism-insurgency-intelligence-centre.html>; the figure includes attacks between January and September 2019.

Left-wing Terrorism

Most left-wing terrorist networks in Europe are anarchists and are based in Greece and Italy. Using improvised explosive devices and other weapons, they have targeted law enforcement officials, members of the judiciary, right-wing networks, banks and other financial institutions, businesses, and journalists. Like most terrorist networks, they use the

internet and social media platforms to claim responsibility for attacks, spread propaganda, fundraise, and recruit supporters. In Greece, left-wing terrorist networks include the Kiklos Assimetrou Mitropolitikou Polemou (Circle of Asymmetric Metropolitan Warfare), Enoples Epanastatikes Dynameis (Armed Revolutionary Forces), and Omada Laikon Agoniston (Group of Popular Fighters). In Italy, far-left networks include the Federazione Anarchica Informale / Fronte Rivoluzionario Internazionale (FAI/FRI, Informal / Anarchist Federation/ International Revolutionary Front).⁶⁵

Ethno-nationalist Terrorism

Most active ethno-nationalist terrorist networks in Europe operate in the United Kingdom, including the New Irish Republican Army, Continuity Irish Republican Army, Óglaigh na hÉireann, and Arm na Poblacht. These networks, whose support base is strongest in Londonderry, are closer to personality-based clans than formal organizations. Most are involved in illegal activity like drug-trafficking and extortion. They oppose the Northern Ireland peace process, support violence to secure a united Ireland, and have been bolstered by Brexit and the open border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. These networks have conducted a small number of attacks against the police, prison officials, and the military and collectively number no more than a few hundred members.⁶⁶ While militant republicans have been somewhat marginalized since the Good Friday Agreement, the United Kingdom's Joint Terrorism Analysis Centre (JTAC) nevertheless assesses the threat from Northern Ireland-related terrorism is severe (meaning that an attack is highly likely).⁶⁷ Northern Ireland also faces a potential threat from loyalist extremists committed to keeping Northern Ireland in the United Kingdom, especially if republican violence increases.

Other types of ethno-nationalist violence have either ceased to exist or currently present a low threat. Euskadi ta Askatasuna (Basque Fatherland and Liberty, or ETA), which seeks a Basque homeland in Spain and France, has not committed a terrorist attack in a decade. In May 2018, ETA released a statement that it was disbanding and dismantling its structures. In May 2016, the main Corsican terrorist group in France, the Front de Libération Nationale de la Corse (National Liberation Front of Corsica, or FLNC), announced that it would end military operations, though several members have since threatened violence. The Partiya Karkeren Kurdistan (Kurdistan Workers' Party, or PKK), which seeks an independent or autonomous Kurdish homeland, maintains a fundraising and logistics apparatus in Europe and has carried out propaganda and recruitment activities.⁶⁸

Assessing the Threat

To evaluate the threat of different types of terrorist attacks, we examined terrorist incidents that occurred in Europe from January 1, 2009, to February 29, 2020, in the following categories: ethno-nationalist, jihadist, left-wing, right-wing, and other.⁶⁹ Virtually all religious terrorist attacks within the geographic and temporal scope of the data set were perpetrated by networks or individuals who adhered to a jihadist ideology; therefore, the figures below use the term “jihadist” rather than “religious” when describing perpetrator orientation. The appendix provides an overview of the data set and the methodology.

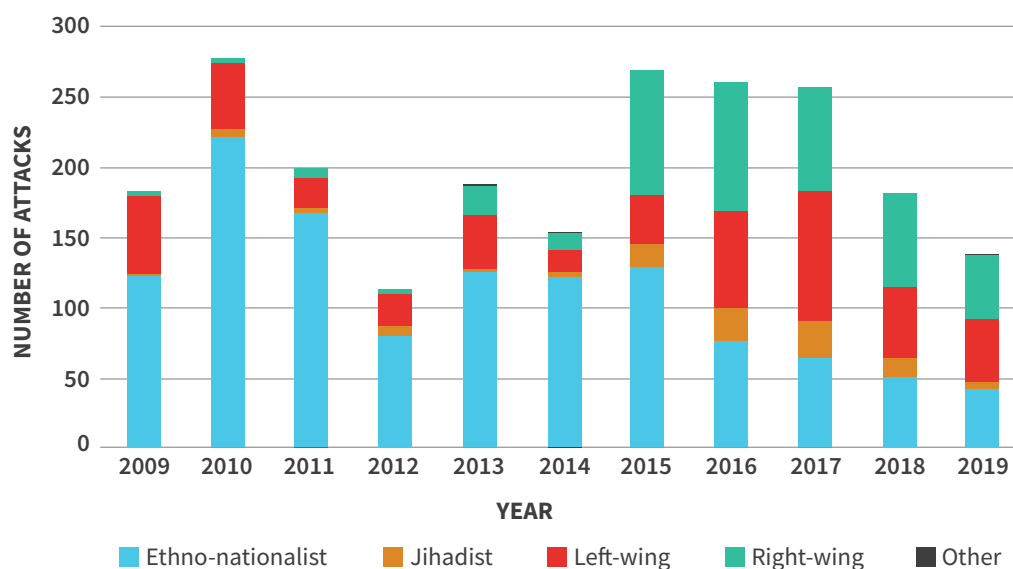
In the rest of this section, we divided the analysis into two parts: terrorist attacks and fatalities. The data suggest several trends. First, though the total number of terrorist attacks has declined in recent years, there were significantly more right-wing attacks in the latter half of the past decade than from 2009 to 2014. Second, the number of jihadist attacks is relatively small compared to other types, including ethno-nationalist, right-wing, and left-wing. Third, despite their lower quantity, jihadist attacks caused the majority of fatalities. While the other types of perpetrators conducted more attacks, they killed fewer people—or, in some years, none at all. This suggests that jihadist terrorism remains the most lethal type of terrorist activity in Europe.

Attacks

Trends in the number and type of terrorist attacks indicate that while the total quantity of attacks has decreased since 2015, the number of right-wing attacks has grown since the beginning of the decade. Meanwhile, a relatively small percentage of total attacks were carried out by jihadists.

Figure 4 displays the 2,224 incidents in the data set from 2009 to 2019.⁷⁰ Over half (54.1 percent) of the attacks in this period are attributed to ethno-nationalist groups or individuals, most of which operate in the United Kingdom. This is due in part to the activity level of dissident republicans in Northern Ireland, though it may also be in part caused by selection bias, as discussed in the appendix. The total number of terrorist incidents in Europe increased in 2015, nearly matching the 2010 high of 278 incidents, and decreased only slightly in 2016 and 2017. However, the total number of attacks continued to decline at a greater rate in 2018 and 2019, including decreases in all major categories.

Figure 4: Total Attacks, by Perpetrator Orientation, 2009-2019



The increased frequency of incidents starting in 2015 is largely the result of an increase in right-wing incidents in that year, alongside smaller increases in jihadist and left-wing activity. The rise in right-wing violence coincided with the 2015 European migrant crisis. A large proportion of right-wing attacks during this period targeted refugees or locations associated with Islam, including refugee housing facilities and mosques. Although many of the perpetrators of these attacks were never identified, the target pattern and incident details—which frequently included racial slurs and anti-immigrant sentiments (either spoken or drawn in graffiti) accompanying violent acts—indicate that this surge in right-wing activity was likely tied to the increase in migration to Europe. Although the number of right-wing attacks has decreased each year since 2016, they remain both more frequent and form a larger share of total attacks than in the period from 2009 to 2014.

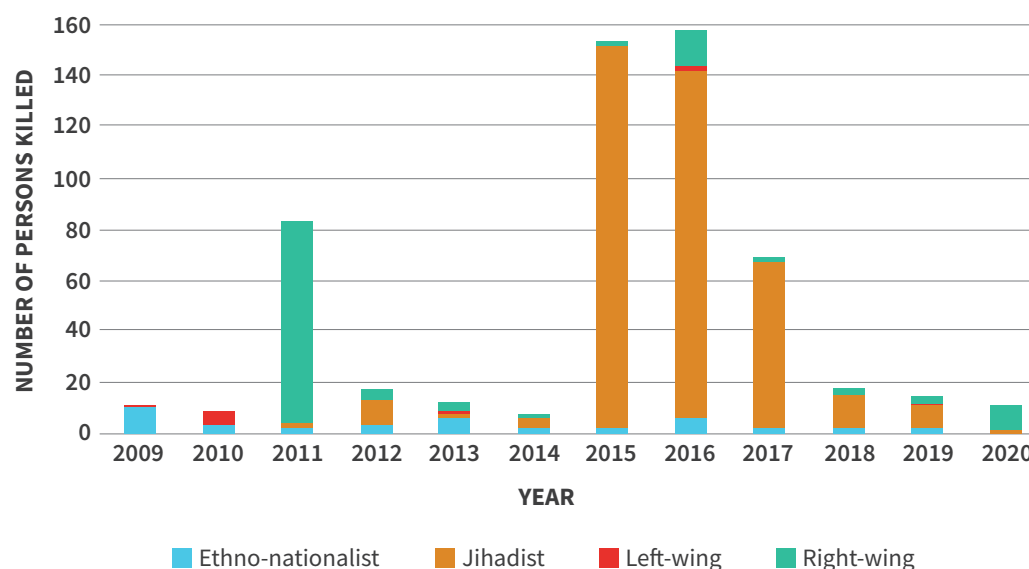
Jihadist attacks were the least frequent of the four main perpetrator orientations.⁷¹ Only 4.9 percent of all attacks from 2009 to 2019 were attributed to jihadist groups or individuals. Though there was an increase in the number of jihadist attacks from 2015 to 2018, there were still fewer attacks conducted by jihadists in those years than by ethno-nationalist, left-wing, or right-wing actors.

Fatalities

To judge the lethality of terrorist attacks by perpetrator orientation, we assessed the number of fatalities resulting from attacks in each category. We found that jihadist attacks were overwhelmingly the most lethal. Although ethno-nationalist, left-wing, and right-wing perpetrators all orchestrated more attacks than jihadists, they killed fewer people.

Of the 2,241 incidents recorded in the full data set from January 2009 to February 29, 2020, 105 were fatal attacks, which resulted in a total of 563 persons killed.⁷² As shown in Figure 5, the total number of fatalities has declined since peaking at 158 in 2016.

Figure 5: Total Persons Killed, By Perpetrator Orientation, 2009-2020



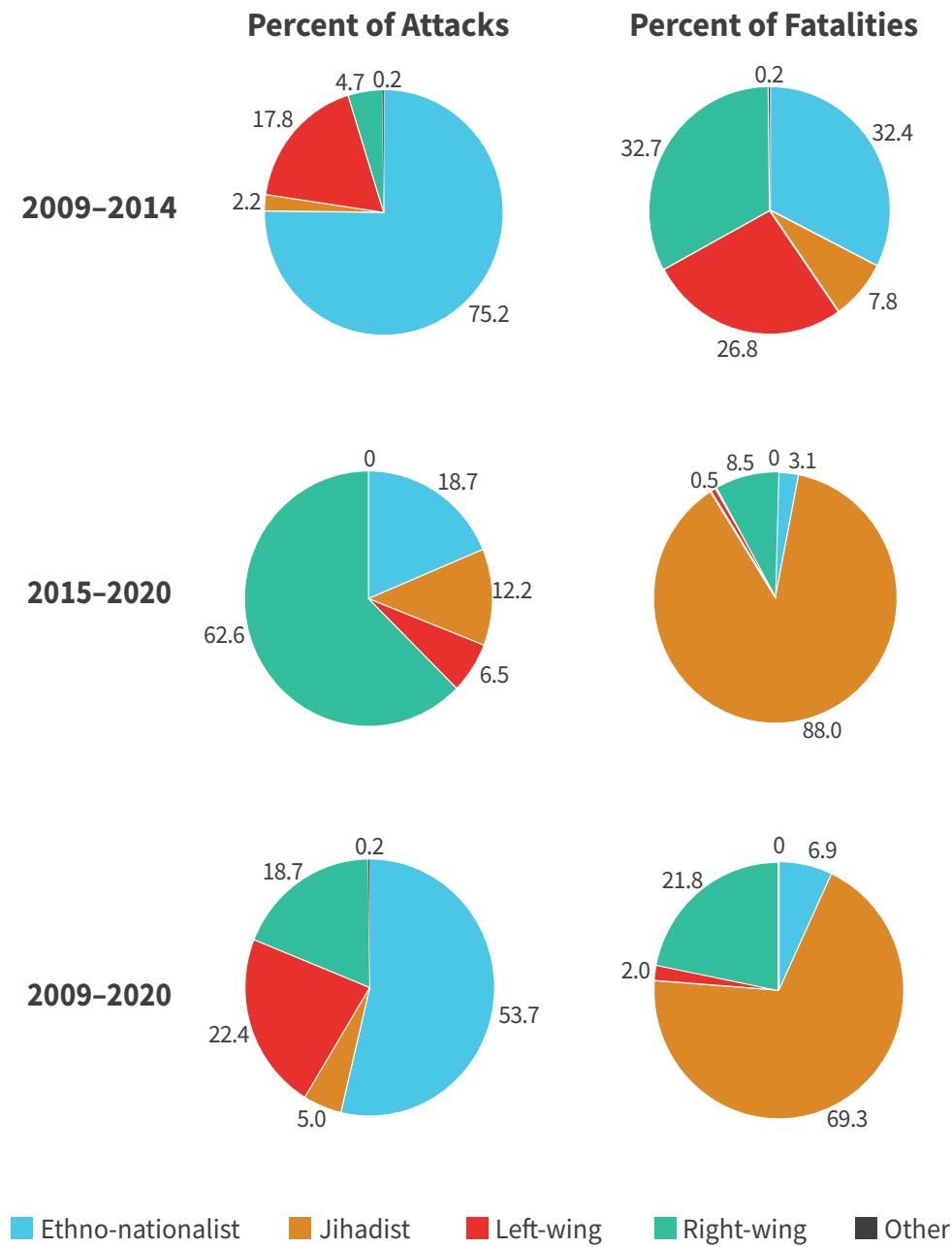
Total fatalities were relatively high in 2011, as well as from 2015 to 2017. The majority of the deaths in 2011 are attributed to Anders Behring Breivik. He detonated a vehicle-borne improvised explosive device (VBIED) in Oslo that killed 8 people and then killed another 69 individuals in a mass shooting at a nearby youth camp. The increase in fatalities in 2015 to 2017 primarily resulted from jihadist attacks. These included high-profile, high-fatality attacks, such as the January 2015 Charlie Hebdo shooting, the November 2015 Paris attacks, the March 2016 Brussels attacks, the July 2016 attack in Nice, the December 2016 Berlin Christmas market attack, the May 2017 Manchester Arena attack, and the August 2017 Barcelona and Cambrils attacks. They also included a variety of other incidents involving small arms, knives, and vehicle attacks. Although the majority of fatalities in 2016 were from these jihadist attacks, fatalities from right-wing attacks increased from 2 in 2015 to 16 in 2016.

As shown in Figure 6, the percentages of total attacks and fatalities attributed to each perpetrator orientation are not all proportional. Jihadists caused the majority of fatalities (69.3 percent) from 2009 to 2020 despite orchestrating only 5 percent of all attacks. Right-wing attacks did result in a percentage of fatalities proportional to their percentage of total attacks (21.8 and 18.7 percent, respectively). Although ethno-nationalist attacks composed over half of the total incidents assessed in the data set, they were responsible for only 6.9 percent of all fatalities.

Noting the increase in the total number of right-wing attacks since 2015, we also compared the percentages of total attacks and fatalities attributed to each type of perpetrator from 2009 to 2014 and 2015 to 2020, respectively. Although right-wing actors committed a larger percentage of the total attacks from 2015 to 2020, these incidents resulted in a lower

percentage of total fatalities during that period. Instead, the majority of fatalities from 2015 to 2020 remained attributable to jihadists, with a higher proportion (88.0 percent) than in the full period from 2009 to 2020. We therefore conclude that jihadists continue to pose the most lethal terrorist threat.

Figure 6: Percent of Attacks and Fatalities, by Perpetrator Orientation and Timeframe



Policy Implications

There are several takeaways from the evolving terrorism environment in Europe. First, jihadist terrorism continues to be the most lethal threat to Europe despite a rise in right-wing terrorist incidents and several high-profile attacks. In addition, there are still tens of thousands of jihadist fighters in the Middle East, Africa, and South Asia, raising the possibility of future planned or inspired jihadist attacks in Europe and the West.⁷³ Indeed, there are vastly more jihadists today than on September 11, 2001, and their operating locations have expanded.⁷⁴ Europe will also likely face a future threat from extremists that have been (or will be) released from prison, foreign fighters and their families returning from abroad, and others that have been radicalized online, through in-person social networks in local communities, or in prison.

Second, the threat from right-wing terrorism varies across Europe. As highlighted in this analysis, right-wing terrorist incidents have been highest per capita in countries like Sweden, Greece, the United Kingdom, Finland, and Germany. The German government, for example, assesses that there are over 12,000 violence-oriented right-wing extremists in the country.⁷⁵ Minister of Interior Horst Seehofer concluded that “the threat posed by far-right extremism, anti-Semitism, and racism is very high in Germany.”⁷⁶ Yet right-wing terrorist networks in much of Europe are poorly organized, inept, and diffuse. As a Dutch counterterrorism assessment concluded, “the Dutch right-wing extremist scene is characterized by fragmentation, weak leadership, personal animosity and the absence of a consistent organizational structure.”⁷⁷

Third, the internet and social media platforms will likely remain important forums for far-right terrorists and other types of extremists.⁷⁸ These platforms have allowed extremists in Europe and other locations—including the United States—to spread propaganda and coordinate their actions more effectively.⁷⁹ European and other countries need to continue encouraging social media companies to crack down on far-right and other types of extremist ideology. In addition, some European governments have banned right-wing extremist networks. The United States has not banned any far-right organizations, though it has considered designating at least one white supremacist group—Atomwaffen—as a foreign terrorist organization.⁸⁰ Some European governments have also placed sanctions on right-wing extremist groups, which allows governments to freeze financial assets and criminalize individuals who are members of designated groups, provide the groups with financial or other types of assistance, or express support for their causes.

All of these issues—the continuation of jihadist terrorism, variation in the right-wing threat across Europe, and the growing use of the internet and social media platforms—make it critical for governments across the West to continue counterterrorism cooperation. There has been a temptation, including in the United States, to shift the focus of intelligence, military, diplomatic, and law enforcement agencies from terrorist networks such as the Islamic State and al-Qaeda to major powers such as Russia and China. As this analysis concludes, however, terrorism in various forms remains a persistent challenge.

Appendix: Methodology

Data Selection

This research effort sought to identify the scope, nature, and orientation of the terrorism threat in Europe. We sought to compile a data set that included terrorist incidents, perpetrators, what methods were used to carry out the attack, the number of casualties, where the attack occurred, and other relevant data. Our team identified existing data sets developed by scholars, such as the START Global Terrorism Database (GTD) at the University of Maryland, the Terrorism in Western Europe: Events Data (TWEED), the Right-Wing Terrorism and Violence (RTV) data set, the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED), the Global Terrorism Index by the Institute for Economics & Peace, and Jane's Terrorism and Insurgency Centre.

Jane's Terrorism and Insurgency Events data set, for example, provides non-state actor group terrorist event data. The database allows for the following data to be manipulated for a non-state actor group (NSAG) action: event (date, type, significance, and location); group (family, name, scope, orientation, nationality, and role); casualties (killed, wounded, detained by actor type); and other data. We chose to alter Jane's Terrorism and Insurgency Centre events database to produce a modified data set. We refer to this as the "TNT data set." The TNT data set and Jane's terrorism database differ in two major ways.

First, there are methodological differences. The TNT data set assigns different values than the Jane's data set to certain variables due to differing definitions. For example, whereas the Jane's data set assigns the value "Unknown" to the variable "Group Orientation" for a majority of events, the TNT data set reassigns new values to many of the events. More specifically, Jane's terrorism data set largely defines terrorist attack perpetrators in Europe from January 2009 to February 2020 by the following group orientation variables: Anarchist, Ethical, Unknown, Ethnocultural, Nationalist, and Sunni Islamic. We found these categories insufficient to categorize the orientation of the actors perpetrating terrorist attacks. We instead reassessed each event within the geographic and temporal scope of our research area and redefined the group orientation variable as one of the following: ethno-nationalist, jihadist (religious), left-wing, right-wing, and other. Definitions for each group orientation variable are outlined in this report except for the "other" category. We included terrorist attacks that could not be ascribed to any of the other four categories to the "other" category. For example, the Comité d'action viticole

(or CAV, Committee for Viticultural Action) in France perpetrated numerous terrorist attacks within the time period of our data set to protest economic conditions impacting the price of wine. Other methodological modifications to the Jane's data set included providing updated fatality data for specific events, as well as deleting events that we assessed were criminal activity but not terrorist activity under the definition provided in this report. This led to a smaller data set than the original Jane's data set.

Second, the TNT data set also differs from the Jane's terrorism database due to observed errors in the Jane's terrorism data set, such as double-logging events or incorrect data entry. Both of these errors were observed when we fact-checked specific events listed in the Jane's terrorism data set.

In sum, the overall modifications led to a few key differences between the data sets: (1) new values in most of the "group orientation" variable for each event; (2) updated fatality data for each event; and (3) a decrease in the number of events in the respective databases. The Jane's data set for NSAG attacks in Europe from January 2009 through February 2020—where the NSAG actor played an active role (i.e. initiated an attack)—included 2,971 events. After editing the data set, our modified data set included 2,241 events.

Limitations

There are still potential limitations with the TNT data set. The first is possible selection bias. Jane's terrorism database features a significant number of terrorist events that occurred in Northern Ireland. Though a vast majority of these events constituted terrorist attacks, it is possible that the availability of open-source media reporting in Northern Ireland contributed to a more detailed recording of terrorist events in that area as opposed to other countries. A second potential limitation is gray area between terrorism and hate crimes. As noted in the body of this analysis, there is some overlap between terrorism and hate crimes. The analysis defines terrorism as the deliberate use—or threat—of violence by non-state actors in order to achieve political goals and create a broad psychological impact. Some hate crimes include the use or threat of violence, but they can also include non-violent activities like graffiti. While we only included incidents that involved the threat or use of violence, we recognize that there is gray area regarding when an incident involves (and doesn't involve) violence.

Despite these limitations, we believe that our data set of 2,241 events represents a reasonable sample of the universe of terrorism incidents in Europe between January 2009 and February 2020.

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