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IS EUROPE WINNING THE WAR ON TERROR:
A STUDY OF THE CURRENT STATE OF THE JIHAD

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AQI: Al Qaeda in Iraq.

CT: Counterterrorism.

EIJ: Egyptian Islamic Jihad.

EU: European Union.

FTF: Foreign Terrorist Fighters.

GTI: Global Terrorism Index.

ISI: Islamic State of Syria.

ISIS: Islamic State of Irak and Syria.

JFT: Jihad Feminist Theory.

MS: Member States.

P/CVE: Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism.

RAN: Radicalization Awareness Network.

TE-SAT: European Union Terrorism Situation and Trend Report.

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INTRODUCTION

When the concept of *jihadist terrorism* is mentioned, for many, the first thing to come across their minds are probably some of the most terrible and mediatic attacks that are popularly known: New York 9/11, Madrid 3/11, Paris 11/13, Manchester 5/22. These are only some examples. As well, the average person will have a well-pictured and stereotyped image of what a “jihadist” looks like: middle aged, male, Muslim, migrant, criminal. However, arguably, this is a distorted image, increasingly far from reality and anchored in past fears and stereotyped assumptions.

Another common perception, specially coming from Westerners, is that jihadist terrorism is an open war against the West, this being their only target. Needless to highlight that the Eurocentric belief that the West is the most affected by this type of terrorism is not very accurate: most attacks of jihadist terrorism take place in countries of Muslim majority. For instance, the 2023 and 2024 Global Terrorism Index points out that Pakistan, Afghanistan, Mali, and Burkina Faso are the most affected by this type of violence. In fact, according to these reports, none of the 20 deadliest attacks, neither in 2023, nor in 2024 were set in any Western country¹.

Probably, the last widely spread assumption to be highlighted is that jihadist attacks in the West always consist of massive, organized plots, commonly targeting civilians in concurred places. On the contrary, in reality, this type of violence has been substituted by more improvised and individualized attacks, carried out by autonomous attackers so-called lone wolves. In fact, the last attack of a massive and organized nature that Western countries, most specifically Europe, have suffered, dates back to the 2017 Manchester arena bombings, whose authorship pertained to ISIS². Later that year, and with the same claimed authorship, in Barcelona and Cambrils, another attack of massive nature took place³. The windings of a vehicle over the streets of Barcelona were the mistake of a much more ambitious frustrated plot that planned massive bombings on different points of the city⁴.

¹ Institute for Economics & Peace, “Global Terrorism Index 2023: Measuring the Impact of Terrorism”, 2023 (pages 4 to 15). Institute for Economics & Peace, “Global Terrorism Index 2024: Measuring the Impact of Terrorism”, 2024 (pages 4 to 15).

² Smith, Rory, Chan Sewell, “Ariana Grande Manchester Concert Ends in Explosion, Panic and Death”, The New York Times, 2017.

³ Police press release, “Nota informativa sobre los atentados en Barcelona y Cambrils”, Departamento de Seguridad Nacional, 2017.

⁴ Reinares, Fernando and García-Calvo, Carola. “Un análisis de los atentados terroristas en Barcelona y Cambrils”, Real Instituto Elcano, 2018.

Those attacks were deadly and left Europe in absolute shock. However, these were the last attacks of massive nature and directly linked to ISIS that have taken place in European soil up to date. It is true that from 2017 until present day, several jihadist motivated attacks have occurred. According to the aforementioned reports, up to 40 other attacks have happened since⁵. But these were all perpetuated by single individuals or lone wolves, not directly linked, but rather inspired by ISIS jihadist ideology, causing very few casualties.

Therefore, the premise of this Final Dissertation Project is that arguably there has been an evident change in how jihadi terrorism is acting over Europe. The above cited reports underline that not only a more individualized terrorism is today more prominent, but also that other types of extremisms are a growing trend in Europe. Conscious of this evolving state of the terrorist threat, it is clear that those mainstream assumptions about the jihad seem outdated and anchored in the past.

This analytical study aims to provide an updated overview of the current state of the jihad in Europe and its present challenges, assessing whether if the EU is providing an effective and coordinated response to these new security threats. Additionally, we intend to consider the gender perspective of this matter. This Final Dissertation Project considers essential to be gender conscious. We consider that we cannot observe a reality excluding women from it. Therefore, this study will be specifically addressing the reality of women involved in the ISIS phenomena in Europe and assess whether if European Union counterterrorism (CT) policies adequately observe the involvement of women as active individuals in jihadist terrorist networks.

To fulfill these objectives, this study poses two sets of research questions. On the one side, concerned with the overall counterterrorism strategy of the European Union, we pose the following interrogatives:

- a) What is the current state of the global jihad?
- b) What are the main challenges facing Europe today in terms of jihadist terrorism?
- c) Is the EU counterterrorism strategy updated to face these challenges efficiently?

⁵ Institute for Economics & Peace (2023), “Global Terrorism Index 2023...”, (pages 4 to 15). Institute for Economics & Peace, (2024), “Global Terrorism Index 2024...” (pages 4 to 15).

The second block of questions are specific to the gender issue:

- a) In which forms are women relevant actors of today's jihad?
- b) In which ways is it relevant for gender to be featured in counter-terrorism policies and deradicalization programs?
- c) Are EU's counterterrorism and deradicalization policies conscious of the specific characteristics, roles and needs of women in the jihad?

Regarding to the first block of questions, the first hypothesis suggests that the current state of the jihad differs widely from the pictured image of Al Qaeda or ISIS in the early 2000's. The global jihad has evolved into a diluted and less networked state. Past hotspots have lost their one-time attraction, and new conflicts will emerge to substitute former ones. Europe will be forced to adapt and face new challenges. These challenges are related to the aftermath of ISIS decline, mainly the return of Foreign Terrorist Fighters (FTF) and the need for their deradicalization. However, these returnees include a wide proportion of women and children, and EU policies may be forced to include, maybe for the first time, a gendered perspective. Our hypothesis argues that the EU counter-terrorism strategy observes the evolution of the jihad and its current nature but might still struggle to give an adequate response.

Concerning the second issue, the second hypothesis depicts that women are increasingly relevant in today's jihad, especially as they conform a big proportion of potential FTF returnees. For that reason, they will be key targets of present CT and deradicalization programs. This hypothesis suggests that the EU is increasingly making efforts to include gender as a relevant element of its CT policies. However, the complexity and full dimension of female roles and needs are not completely understood or assessed, as there have always been undervalued misconceptions of women in the jihad, who have been viewed as "mere brides" and passive subjects. A crucial part of gender being adequately included in CT strategies is depicting women as multidimensional and rational actors, just like their male counterparts. This has been a mistake that has made it impossible for European policies to target female actors in their CT agenda.

In the pursue of our objectives we will adopt a methodology based on a qualitative analysis of primary and secondary sources, that vary from Europol's European Union Terrorism Situation and Trend Reports (TE-SAT) to academic publications and other analytical sources. Thus, we will achieve the purpose of contextualizing and analytically exposing the evolution of the global jihad, its impact on Europe and the EU policy on this matter. To this end, it will also be important the examination of reports and news outlets. For the examination of the current challenges, a more analytical use of Europol reports and EU publications will be given, to extract relevant conclusions. Therefore, it can be said that this study mixes an observation and a bibliographic review with an analytical approach.

The first part of this Final Dissertation Project will provide a general overview of the jihad, since its emergence, until its objective shifted towards the West, more specifically in Europe. As well, the average profile of the European jihadist will be provided. Plus, the profile of female sympathizers will be differentiated. The second part of this work is devoted to expose the European CT strategy, and how it has evolved since the jihad started being one of its central points of concern until present day. Afterwards, the current challenges of the jihad in Europe will be presented individually, together with the response that the EU is providing to combat each of them. The third and last part of this work will conclude the analysis, aiming to answer the research questions posed before, assessing if the EU policies are adequately facing the current threats of the jihad, and plus, if gender is being considered as a relevant element of this strategy.

PART 1: CONTEXTUALIZING THE JIHAD IN EUROPE

1.1 Defining the jihad

Jihad, concept repeatedly addressed in the Qur'an, has the literal translation of "struggle", or "strive". According to the doctrine, it is a relevant element of the path Muslims must follow to act in accordance with God's guidance's. It refers to the individual effort to follow Islam, but it can also be interpreted as a communal or militant duty to defend the Muslim community⁶. But how does this religious concept transform into a violent ideology that inspires an organized transnational terrorist movement?

It is a complex and multidimensional process, but we will aim to briefly summarize the birth of the jihad as a violent and terrorist ideology. The jihad, as we understand it today, emerged in the late 1970s, when several groups began to launch campaigns to overthrow the Arab World's regimes and establish Islamic states⁷.

As mentioned in the introduction, jihadist terrorism is often mistaken with the hatred towards the West. However, this is not its main nor originative focus. The first militant jihadists emerged in the post-colonial era, in a moment of forced transitions and failed democratizing processes, as in the case of Egypt, with the birth of the "Egyptian Islamic Jihad" (EIJ), and one of its most relevant figures, Ayman Al Zawahiri, who would later become one of the most relevant leaders of Al Qaeda, successor of Osama Bin Laden. This was the case of many political and militant movements in several countries. Where secularization policies were perceived as failing, Islam was seen as a solution⁸.

In the case of Egypt, during the 1970's, several Islamic civil and political movements emerged. Some of them were more radical than others. Ones advocated for a more peaceful transformation of the society into an Islamic state, and others, like the EIJ defended a more militant or drastic change. This was the faction that ended assassinating the Egyptian president Sadat⁹. Many of its militants were put in prison, but some would manage to flee and join other sympathizing militants aboard, as it will later be explained.

The case of Afghanistan is very notorious as well. During the Soviet occupation of the country, the Afghan jihad exerted great armed resistance. Many foreign fighters, amongst who, many of the aforementioned EIJ militants, traveled to the Afghan warzone

⁶ Morrissey, Fitzroy, "The Many Meanings of Jihad", Engelsberg Ideas, 2023.

⁷ BBC News, "A history of modern jihadism", BBC News, 2014.

⁸ Sageman, Marc. "Understanding Terror Networks", University of Pennsylvania Press, , 2004 (Chapter 2 "The Evolution of the Jihad").

⁹ History.com Editors, "The president of Egypt is assassinated", HISTORY, 2023.

to support their resistance¹⁰. The jihad was understood as the common aim for Muslims to resist the foreign invasion. In this context, around 1988-1989, following the Soviet withdrawal from the Afghan war, Al Qaeda would be founded, bringing together militants from different Islamist movements. It was designed as a paramilitary organization whose main aim was, *a priori*, overthrowing many of the governments in different Arab countries, freeing Muslims from foreign occupation or from secular leaders. The final aim would be the establishment of a caliphate¹¹.

At this point, Al Qaeda's target is what is referred to as the "near enemy": those that stand against their understanding of the jihad in Muslim majority countries. Al Qaeda served as "the base" to finance and prepare operations, as well as to train militants.

In the late 90's however, Al Qaeda would go under a change of paradigm. In 1998, Osama Bin Laden, its leader, launched a communicate of religious ruling (*fatwa*) declaring the "jihad against Jews and Crusaders"¹². Through this statement, issued in an Arabic newspaper published in London, there was a call for the world's Muslim community to engage in a violent and militant jihad, as a duty for every Muslim. This communiqué provides a justification to exert violence against Westerners, as they are portrayed as the enemy of Muslims. This publication was a call to "kill Americans and their allies, civilians and military"¹³. The jihad had now to be fought against the "far enemy". The United States were seen as a clear target due to their direct involvement and occupation of Iraq, as well as their allies. Not only that, but Western values and lifestyle were seen as radically opposite to the Salafi interpretation of a moral way of living, and therefore, Westerners, even if just simple civilians, were a target of the jihad¹⁴.

The first attack against the far enemy materialized in August 1998 when simultaneous bombs blew up in front of the American embassies of Kenya and Tanzania. It would not be until 2001 when Al Qaeda finally dared to directly attack the "far enemy" in their own homeland, at the September 11 bombings¹⁵. Shortly after, in 2004, in Madrid, the March 11 train bombings took place¹⁶.

With this, Al Qaeda established itself as a threat to the West, with a well-linked external operations body that was capable of perpetuating terrible attacks wherever it

¹⁰ BBC News (2014) "A history of modern jihadism"...

¹¹ Nesser, Petter, "Islamist Terrorism in Europe: A History", Journal of Muslims in Europe, 2017 (Chapter 1).

¹² Bin Laden, "Jihad Against Jews and Crusaders, World Islamic Front Statement", Federation of American Scientists, 1998.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ FBI History, "East African Embassy Bombings", FBI.gov, 2023.

¹⁵ History.com Editors, "September 11 Attacks", HISTORY, 2023.

¹⁶ Ruiz Anderson, Roberto, "Qué pasó el 11-M: cronología de los atentados del 11 de marzo de 2004 en Madrid", El Confidencial, 2024.

planned to. Plus, it had the financial resources to do so, as well as a variety of training camps, where many individuals attended to get military and ideological instruction. In sum, in the early 2000's, Al Qaeda was established as a powerful transnational terrorist organization. However, in 2011, with the death of its leader, Osama Bin Laden, Al Qaeda would see itself heavily weakened. Plus, a competitive force in the Jihad scenario would emerge shortly after: ISIS¹⁷.

ISIS roots are in Al Qaeda's faction in Iraq (AQI)¹⁸. This faction started acting in the early 2000's against the US occupation of the country. AQI would merge with other Islamist groups in Iraq adopting the name of Islamic State of Iraq (ISI), while still maintaining ties to the central command and financing of Al Qaeda. The 2011 revolutions of the Arab Springs served as a great opportunity for ISI to expand over Syria in support of the rebels. The group started growing, incorporating new militants in the area, as well as gaining factual control over many territories and the exercise of state-like competences. By 2014, ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria) had taken Mosul in Iraq and Raqqa in Syria¹⁹. ISIS was now operating in a completely autonomous manner, separate from Al Qaeda's command. It was a moment of "bipolar" state in the global jihad²⁰.

However, ISIS was proving to be more effective in its purposes. Not only was it closer to the establishment of a territorial Caliphate that Al Qaeda hypothetically intended to build but was never capable²¹. ISIS also proved to have a mobilization and radicalization potential, via internet and social media, that was never seen before. A virtual and global jihad was now a reality. Just between the years 2014 to 2017, ISIS executed more than 800 people in front of its cameras²². These recordings of almost cinematographic quality were published on the Internet and quickly became viral, becoming mass consumption content. This has been one of the most characteristic propaganda instruments of this group. ISIS technologically adapted to the means and tools that the 21st century puts at its disposal, through the development of a digital and virtual jihad, ensuring its expansion and preservation, along with the creation of an ideology and identity that can be universally accessed²³. A "jihadist subculture", an identity that brings together like-minded individuals, regardless of their geography²⁴.

¹⁷ BBC News (2014) "A history of modern jihadism"...

¹⁸ Hanna, Jason, "Here's how ISIS was really founded", CNN, 2016 (accessed 26 March 2024).

¹⁹ Al Jazeera Editors, "The rise and fall of ISIL explained", Al Jazeera, 2017.

²⁰ Clarke, Colin and Moghadam Assaf, "Mapping today's jihadi landscape and threat", Foreign Policy Research Institute, 2018.

²¹ Chulov, Martin, "The rise and fall of the Isis 'caliphate'", The Guardian, 2019.

²² Martín, Miguel, "Fashions, Ways and Means of ISIS Visual Violence", Actes Semiotiques No 125, 2021.

²³ Kapsokoli, Eleni, "ISIS' digital jihad", National security and the future No 24, 2023.

²⁴ Cottee, Simon "The Western Jihadi Subculture and Subterranean Values", The British Journal of Criminology No 781, 2020 (accessed through ResearchGate 3rd April 2024).

It can be stated that ISIS reached its peak of influence between 2014 and 2015: they were capable of exercising territorial control over the self-declared Caliphate. Also, as it will later be explained, they were capable of mobilizing sympathizers into and outside of Europe (only in 2015, 326 individuals were arrested in EU territory for ISIS linked terrorism offences²⁵); terrorist attacks attributed to jihadists in the European Union increased from four in 2014 to seventeen in 2015, while the number of people killed increased from 4 to 150²⁶.

It is true that at its peak, ISIS achieved a truly lethal potential for radicalization, mobilization, and global action. With a project and an ideology that seemed attractive and feasible for its sympathizers, thousands of individuals globally wanted to join its ranks. However, in 2019 the control that ISIS exercised over the self-proclaimed Caliphate came to an end when the American forces, together with the Syrian Democratic Forces, took their last stronghold in Syrian territory²⁷. With the loss of territorial control came the decline. Many sympathizers lost faith in their project. The ability for ISIS to mobilize and terrorize clearly diminished. Some sources point out that, since 2019, ISIS has become a “dead threat”, with no real potential to damage Europe with the strength it had on its highest point²⁸. Of course, this matter will be later assessed, but first, how did the jihad arrive in Europe?

1.2 The jihad in Europe

As previously mentioned, since the early stages of the jihad, the notion of Europe in jihadist thought has changed. At first, when Al Qaeda was born, Europe was a side topic on their understanding of the global jihad²⁹. It would not be until the declaration of the “Jihad against Jews and Crusaders” that the West would be portrayed as a legitimate target. The first jihadist attack in Europe was the 2004 Madrid train bombings, perpetrated by Al Qaeda. Despite the Spanish authorities had been previously working to dismantle other jihadist cells, they could neither foresee nor prevent an attack of such dimensions³⁰. Madrid’s 3/11 was evidence that Al Qaeda was well established in European soil and with a high potential to perpetuate massive attacks.

²⁵ Rekawe, Kacper; Szucs, Viktor and Babíková, Martina “EUROPEAN JIHAD: FUTURE OF THE PAST? From Criminals to Terrorists and Back? Final Report” GLOBSEC, 2019.

²⁶ EUROPOL. “European Union Terrorism situation and Trend Report (TE-SAT)”, 2015, (pages 21 to 23).

²⁷ Hassan, Mohammed, “Why ISIS Cannot Bring the Caliphate Back to Life”, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2023.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ Nesser, Petter, “Islamist Terrorism in Europe: A History”, Journal of Muslims in Europe, 2017 (Chapter 1).

³⁰ Reinares, Fernando “11M, La venganza de Al Qaeda”, 2021 (Chapters 2-5).

Some scholars, including professor Fernando Reinares, affirm that before the Madrid train bombings, Europe was already working as a logistical and support arena for the global Jihad. Some cells were spotted to have operated in support of the 9/11 attacks happening in the United States three years prior. After 2004, it was proven that operative cells with attacking potential had also been instituted³¹. The awakening of a new consciousness that the threat was now in European soil motivated the EU to develop a stronger CT strategy, which will be later detailed.

However, as previously explained, Al Qaeda would be replaced by the force of ISIS in the landscape of the global jihad. As mentioned, ISIS methods and reach were more innovative and global than those of its predecessor. But when did Europe stop worrying about Al Qaeda and started observing ISIS as a threat? In 2013 ISIS was still not a key priority in the EU fight against terrorism. As reflected in 2014's EU Terrorism Situation and Trend Report (TE-SAT) report (concerning 2013's activity), ISIS was not referenced. Rather, "Al Qaeda and like-minded groups" was the exact wording used³². Still, the report reflected an initiating and growing trend: amongst individuals travelling for terrorist purposes, Syria started being a recurring destination³³.

The situation in 2014 was drastically different (as reflected by 2015's TE-SAT, on the previous year): ISIS is mentioned as a growing threat with "intent, capability and resources to carry out attacks in Europe"³⁴. The trend of traveling for terrorist purposes to Syria and Iraq experienced a clear increase, including, as an innovative characteristic, the mobilization of women and children. The management of returnees started to awaken fears when an attack (Belgium, 24 May 2014) was carried out by a returnee from the Syrian conflict³⁵. As well significant increase in arrests for jihadist related causes was noticeable, with a surplus of 150 people with respect to the previous year³⁶.

The year 2015 is key: it was the peak year of European jihadism. As according to 2016's TE-SAT, Jihadi terrorism and the flow of Foreign Terrorist Fighters to conflict zones meant an increasing threat to European security, and an upward trajectory was expected³⁷. In 2015, around 16 attacks of ISIS linked or related cells were perpetuated,

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² EUROPOL. "European Union Terrorism situation and Trend Report (TE-SAT) "Publications Office of the European Union, 2014, (page 35).

³³ *Ibid* (page 23).

³⁴ EUROPOL. "European Union Terrorism situation and Trend Report" Publications Office of the European Union (TE-SAT) "2015 (page 5).

³⁵ Smith-Spark Laura, Lopez Elwyn and Meilhan Pierre, "3 dead in shooting at Jewish Museum of Belgium", CNN, 2014.

³⁶ EUROPOL (2015), "European Union Terrorism situation and Trend Report", (page 9).

³⁷ EUROPOL. "European Union Terrorism situation and Trend Report (TE-SAT) "Publications Office of the European Union, 2016 (page 27).

being the ones in Paris the deadliest. For the first time, Europol was studying ISIS behavior and drawing conclusions on it:

It observed that ISIS cells operating in Europe were locally based, including a wide proportion of naturalized individuals, either born in Europe or with obtained European citizenship. When selecting targets, a preference for soft targets is observed, with the purpose of instilling fear in the population. Foreign Terrorist Fighters or travelers are a clear worry for European security across borders. The report observes that there is an increase in the proportion of women in the FTF phenomena, emphasizing this is not an only male circumstance. The report speculates that these women might not be directly involved in combat, but that they can be trained in the use of weapons and used for other purposes as well. The report also shows a worry on FTF's children, due to their vulnerability to radicalization. The increasing involvement of women and children as FTF and potential returnees was an issue that already started to rise questions on how to be managed³⁸.

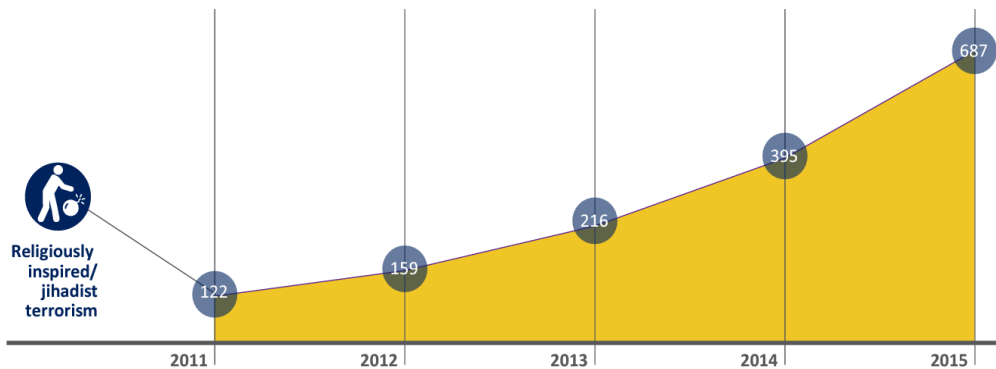


Figure 1: Number of suspects arrested for religiously inspired / jihadist terrorism (2011-2015)³⁹.

In 2016 (as according to 2017's TE-SAT), there is a clear continuity of the predictions and trends presented⁴⁰. The European jihad continued to be pictured as the most relevant terrorist threat, killing 135 people in 13 different attacks. More than 700 individuals were arrested for jihadist terrorism offences. As well, the influx of FTF to the Syrian conflict kept rising. It was estimated that around 5000 people emanating from the EU travelled to the area⁴¹. Attacks were observed to be perpetuated by both networked cells and others merely inspired by their ideology, probably radicalized online, influenced by ISIS propaganda. The use of the internet and social media is understood as a weapon for radicalization. This is tightly linked to the rise in lone wolf terrorism, that was

³⁸ *Ibid* (pages 23 to 29).

³⁹ *Ibid*, (page 23).

⁴⁰ EUROPOL. "European Union Terrorism situation and Trend Report (TE-SAT) "Publications Office of the European Union, 2017, (pages 5 to 8).

⁴¹ *Ibid* (pages 12 to 14).

predicted to increase. Also, it was observed how women were playing increasingly operational roles within these networks, although not exact profiles could be drawn⁴².

The matter of FTF returnees seems to become a primordial focus for the first time. Many individuals are observed to return due to disenchantment with their situation in the Caliphate, although the report clearly states that their motivations were not yet clear⁴³. The reality, however, is that a big proportion of individuals were returning, often taking advantage of irregular migration flows and false documentation. These individuals are likely to be highly radicalized and to have been in direct contact with the conflict zone. It could not be predicted if they were resigning from violent action, or they were still prone to terrorism.

In the following years (2017⁴⁴, 2018⁴⁵ and 2019⁴⁶) prior to the dismantling of the self-proclaimed Caliphate in 2019, some common tendencies are appreciated:

In the first place, the threat of Jihadist terrorism starts to be replaced by other types of violence (separatist, anarchist, and extreme left). Additionally, a clear decrease in the number, sophistication and intensity of Jihadist attacks is noticed, and therefore, in the number of victims. The massive and organized attacks have progressively been substituted by individualized attacks carried out by lone wolves. The degradation of ISIS organizational structures was predicted to reduce the attractiveness of the group. However, online propaganda remains relevant, so even if the group lost strength, many individuals would still share the ideology, and might decide to act on their own. Additionally, due to the loss of territory of ISIS in Syria and Iraq a reduction of FTF travelling to the conflict area can clearly be observed. The situation in Europe regarding Jihadi terrorism is influenced by external shifts and developments⁴⁷.

2019 is, therefore, a turning point for the situation of ISIS and its impact in Europe. Since then, until present day (according to the TE-SAT reports concerned with years

⁴² *Ibid* (pages 21 to 32).

⁴³ *Ibid* (pages 13 and 14).

⁴⁴ EUROPOL. "European Union Terrorism situation and Trend Report (TE-SAT) "Publications Office of the European Union, 2018.

⁴⁵ EUROPOL. "European Union Terrorism situation and Trend Report (TE-SAT) "Publications Office of the European Union, 2019.

⁴⁶ EUROPOL. "European Union Terrorism situation and Trend Report (TE-SAT) "Publications Office of the European Union, 2020.

⁴⁷ Radio 5, "En 2019, la caída del autodenominado Estado Islámico", RTVE 2019.

2020⁴⁸, 2021⁴⁹ and 2022⁵⁰) Europol observes a different reality, picturing a clear shift in the nature of the Jihad in Europe.

In the first place, the ties between jihadist networks were weakening and increasingly loose. In fact, the last report published states that that affiliation to groups like ISIS is increasingly less common. Almost the totality of the attacks perpetuated since 2020 have been carried out by lone wolves in an improvised manner, rather than by complex cells with meticulous training and planning. Even if fewer attacks have been perpetuated in comparison to the previous years (specially, those between 2014 to 2017, when numbers reached 700⁵¹), still a wide proportion of individuals (between 200 and 300 per year⁵²) have been arrested for pertaining or being involved in jihadist activities as well as due to the sharing of radical content online. Therefore, it is being observed that even if less individuals are perpetuating attacks, online radicalization and the use of propaganda are still active affairs of the European jihad.

Plus, with regard to FTF and travelers: since 2019 a clear descend in the number of individuals traveling to Syria and Iraq has been noticed. Reports speculate that some individuals might be choosing other destinations, although in general terms, the FTF phenomenon could be said to have lost almost complete appeal in these last years⁵³. It can be therefore stated that the present stage of the jihad is quite different from its years of peak threat:

A more decentralized jihad is observed, where lone wolfs are observed as the main perpetrators, rather than networked cells. Online radicalization and sharing radical content through online communities is still a mayor issue. Some scholars (like Marion Van San), asses that a big proportion of young European jihad sympathizers are openly and widely involved in a virtual jihad, but do not and would not take violent action in real life⁵⁴.

Regarding the FTF phenomenon, it has been significantly reduced, although being conscious of the current international context, wars and tensions, it is speculated that new destinations might be chosen to engage in a militant jihad. Return of former FTF to EU

⁴⁸ EUROPOL. “European Union Terrorism situation and Trend Report (TE-SAT) “ Publications Office of the European Union, 2021.

⁴⁹ EUROPOL. “European Union Terrorism situation and Trend Report (TE-SAT) “ Publications Office of the European Union, 2022.

⁵⁰ EUROPOL. “European Union Terrorism situation and Trend Report (TE-SAT) “ Publications Office of the European Union, 2023.

⁵¹ EUROPOL (2016) “European Union Terrorism situation and Trend Report...” (page 22).

⁵²EUROPOL (2022) and EUROPOL (2023) “European Union Terrorism situation and Trend Report...” (pages 26 and 27).

⁵³ EUROPOL (2023) “European Union Terrorism situation and Trend Report...” (page 36).

⁵⁴ Van San, Marion, “Striving in the Way of God: Justifying *Jihad* by Young Belgian and Dutch Muslims”, Studies in Conflict and Terrorism (Volume 38), 2015.

territory (specially of women and children), is another issue of fervorous topicality. Overall, this would be the main topics or challenges configuring the present state of the European jihad, which will be later examined carefully.

1.3 The European jihadist: average profile and motivations

Many studies and statistics have been made aiming to define the average profile of the “European jihadist”. The main characteristics that are normally agreed by most reports are the following: the European jihad is mostly male, young, homegrown (although it also involves migrants or foreign elements), with no higher education nor highly skilled employed, and often with a criminal background⁵⁵. Of course, as the jihad has been evolving, the profiles of the individuals related have shifted accordingly. Still, some clear conclusions can be drawn to depict the average portrayal.

The totality of the jihadist attacks perpetrated in Europe have been carried out by male attackers. The average age has been reduced significantly in the last couple of decades: from an average of 28 at the beginning of the 2000’s to an average of 25 years old more recently, proving that radicalization processes are taking place at earlier ages. Online engagement and radicalization also lower the average, as it is mostly popular amongst teenagers aged 16 to 21⁵⁶. Despite online radicalization (or self-radicalization as it is sometimes referred) is a growing reality, radicalization processes remain widely social. Ties of kinship and friendship are common links. The first cells instituted had a big migrant or foreign component, but progressively a larger proportion of European nationals (second or third generation migrants born in Europe or event reverts) make up those cells, proving that the European jihad is a homegrown phenomenon⁵⁷.

When it comes to psychological profiles, ideological understandings and motivations, a common set of characteristics are often pointed out. The vast majority of the individuals arrested for jihadist terrorism offences show no signs of mental illness, therefore, their radicalization and their thrive to violence are not a result of a psychological imbalance⁵⁸.

⁵⁵ Rekawe, Kacper; Szucs, Viktor and Babíková, Martina “European jihad, future of the past? From Criminals to Terrorists and Back? Final Report” GLOBSEC, 2019.

⁵⁶ Mauricio, Natalia, “Evolution of the Jihadist profile in Europe”, Instituto Español de Estudios Estratégicos, 2017.

⁵⁷ Bakker, Edwin, “Jihadi terrorists in Europe, their characteristics and the circumstances in which they joined the Jihad: an exploratory study”, Netherlands Institute of International Relations Clingendael, 2006.

⁵⁸ Ashraf, Afzal and Aslanova, Indira “Why we went and why we returned: Radicalization and Deradicalization – Learning from Foreign Terrorist Fighters”, European Union publications and Research Center for Religious Studies of Kirgizstan, 2021.

Concerning ideological motives, as previously mentioned, the jihad has given birth to a very specific subculture, in which the hatred towards the West, the romanticization of martyrdom, the seek for revenge, are common motivations to perpetuate attacks in Europe⁵⁹. The incentive of martyrdom, reputation and status are also alleged motivations, especially amongst FTF. Revenge, status or identity seekers, are some of the most common profiles observed by scholars.⁶⁰

Other interpretations point out that individuals might get involved in the jihad not only for the spiritual or religious reward of martyrdom, but rather due to a material reward. Many of these individuals, especially in the case of FTF, are promised a certain status or reputation, as well as brides and descendancy⁶¹.

Therefore, even though the European jihad is pictured mainly as a male phenomenon, the reality is that women are also involved, even if their profiles are often invisibilized. Women are sometimes used as an incentive to become brides of jihadist combatants. ISIS is also known to have trafficked with women to force them into sexual slaves, brides, or even as a source of finance⁶². This does not mean that women cannot join ISIS ranks voluntarily or be involved in operation roles as well. It is needed to address female profiles, understanding their dimensions and complexity, to have a full understanding of the jihad. The mobilization and involvement of Western women has been a burning issue.

1.4 Jihad brides, more than wives?

Talking about numbers, it is true that the amount of women involved in the jihad is lower than that of men. However, the participation of women has an important ideological and strategic component that is worth being observed. Indeed, ISIS was particularly successful in recruiting female members, including women in Europe.

Despite women are a minority within the group, their participation and mobilization to Syria and Iraq is much higher than to any other previous conflict⁶³. In July 2018, it was estimated that of the 52,808 foreigners who had joined the Caliphate (more than 5000 departing from Europe), 6,577 were women from various countries.

⁵⁹ Cottee, Simon “The Western Jihadi Subculture and Subterranean Values”, *The British Journal of Criminology* No 781, 2020.

⁶⁰ Van San, Marion (2015) “Striving in the Way of God...”.

⁶¹ Cottee, Simon, (2020) “The Western Jihadi Subculture...”.

⁶² Binetti, Ashley and Rodham, Hillary “A New Frontier: Human Trafficking and ISIS’s Recruitment of Women from the West”, *Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace & Security*, 2015.

⁶³ Van Ginkel, Bibi and Entenmann, Eva, “The Foreign Fighters Phenomenon in the EU - Profiles, Threats & Policies”, *International Center for Counter-Terrorism*, 2016.

Some sources suggest that women constituted 20 per cent of the European citizens who joined ISIS, not only as FTF but also in locally instituted cells⁶⁴.

Aiming to define the profile and features of Western women joining ISIS, both similarities and differences with respect to their male mates can be found. Most Western citizens joining ISIS, regardless of their gender, share a set of characteristics: young, unmarried, mostly second or third generation migrants, aged 18 to 29. However, the age average for women was lower, with ages between 16 to 24⁶⁵.

Other relevant difference is that, unlike their male counterparts, most of the Western women who joined ISIS had no previous criminal records, so their profiles were mostly unknown to the authorities⁶⁶. As well, a bigger proportion of converts is observed among female recruits (around a third of the total), while on men it meant less than a quarter⁶⁷.

From a Western perspective, it seems difficult to understand why these women would get involved in a movement or organization that openly promotes a patriarchal structure and values. Jihad Feminism Theory (JFT) aims to explain the relationship between these women that voluntarily adhere to the movement and the promotion of patriarchal practices and values within the ISIS structure and subculture⁶⁸. JFT departs from the notion that men and women have separate roles for divine nature and a drastic rejection to Western feminism. Among the “divine duties” a woman must perform, we find being household nurturers, wives of fighters, mothers, and educators of the future jihad. Obedience, respect, dignity, and solidarity are valued principles ruling on their behavior. Through the exercise of this duties, women are placed equally to men in the exercise of the jihad. JFT is the means and end that sustains male domination within ISIS. Women are “empowered” through the exercise of their duties.

However, simplifying this interpretation to the believe that women in ISIS are mere brides and passive subjects, is completely mistaken. Interpreting this phenomenon under the misconception that “jihadi brides” are mere tool at the disposal of their male

⁶⁴ Gaub, Florence “Women in Daesh: Jihadist 'cheerleaders', Active Operatives?”, European Union Institute for Security Studies, 2022.

⁶⁵ Barret, Richard, “Beyond the Caliphate: Foreign Fighters and the Threat of Returnees”, The Soufan Center, 2017 (pages 24 and 25).

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Peresin, Anita, “Fatal Attraction: Western Muslimas and ISIS”, Perspectives on Terrorism (Vol 9), 2017 (pages 3 to 6).

⁶⁸ Makanda, Joseph, “The Jihad Feminist Dynamics of Terrorism and Subordination of Women in the ISIS”, GÉNEROS Multidisciplinary Journal of Gender Studies (Vol 8), 2019.

companions obscures its real complexity, just like researcher Carola Gracia-Calvo has emphasized in several publications⁶⁹.

It must be considered that ISIS primary goal was to attract Muslims from around the world to the areas it occupied in Syria and Iraq, where it focused its efforts and resources on consolidating its territory. In order to attain this, the organization needed the presence of women to carry out different tasks that were crucial for the consolidation of the Caliphate: nurses, educators, administrators. These all were roles that women could perform withing the newborn proto state. Of course, a growing populat was also a crucial objective for the workings of the Caliphate, for that reason, women were encouraged to marry and have a wide descendancy⁷⁰.

Female profiles are also very relevant in other of the key areas of ISIS activity: propaganda. Women are prominently featured in IS propaganda more frequently than in other jihadi organizations, both as “models” in the content published, and as content creators themselves⁷¹. ISIS clearly acknowledges the significance of women and their contribution to the production and dissemination of propaganda. In these propagandistic materials the roles ISIS expect women to exercise are quite clear:

Primarily, and as mentioned, they are called to engage as mothers. A great importance is given to motherhood and the care to the new generation of fighters of the jihad. Their role as supporters is highlighted in every sense of the word: as unconditional supporters of their husbands, as supporters of their households, and as supporters of ISIS operations. Their role as educators as well as their education is promoted; mothers cannot instruct their children on a set of values or an ideology they haven’t been thought previously. Many women adhere to ISIS to receive a religious education, many others serve as educators themselves. And lastly, they have a role in combat. This might not be the majoritarian case, but still, ISIS does not picture as illegitimate the use of violence exercised by women. Therefore, they are encouraged to support and perpetuate attacks against the enemies of the jihad⁷².

In sum, women in ISIS have played a significant role in the organization’s state-building enterprise as well as in producing and disseminating propaganda. They appear to be proactive regarding operational roles. Not only that, but it has also been observed that women are key actors during the radicalization processes: scholars observe that

⁶⁹ García-Calvo, Carola, “Facetas de la movilización de mujeres europeas hacia grupos extremistas y terroristas: un estado de la cuestión”, Real Instituto Elcano, 2022.

⁷⁰ Antunez Moreno, Juan Carlos, “Western DAESH Women: Ideology, Profile and Motivation”, *Revista de Estudios en Seguridad Internacional* (Vol 6), 2020.

⁷¹ Europol, “Women in Islamic State propaganda: roles and incentives”, Publications Office of the European Union, 2019.

⁷² *Ibid* (pages 20 to 30).

women engage in ISIS due to more personal motivations, while men pursue a more rational or utilitarian approach. These personal motivations are often shared in social contexts with other women; therefore, they have been proved to be an effective link for the radicalization of other women⁷³. Something similar happens with online radicalization processes: ISIS used hundreds of women to take care of the social networks and public relations of the organization, whose main role was recruitment and fundraising as found out in Perisin and Cervone's research work⁷⁴.

There is evidence that, despite the mainstream understanding that women in the jihad are "only brides", their involvement is much more than that: they participate in the dissemination and making of propaganda, they are crucial links for the mobilization and radicalization of new individuals, they are educators and supporters, and they can serve, if wanted, for operational and combat roles. Even if they were "just brides", women would serve a crucial ideological role as ISIS ideology gives great importance to motherhood and caretaking. They would be the ones ensuring the continuity of the jihad.

For these reasons, female profiles should not be undervalued just because they do not take part in violent action as much as their male counterparts. Their ideological and supportive relevance is crucial for the prevalence of the ideology. In fact, some scholars, referencing again Carola Gracia-Calvo's work, point out that the evolving participation of women may pose a new challenge⁷⁵.

We shall not forget that a relevant proportion of women traveled from Europe to Syria in these last years, and that EU and member states (MS) policies are now realizing that their return (often accompanied by their children) is an upcoming reality they should be prepared for. Initially, security forces and intelligence services did not consider the activities and personal experiences of these women who migrated to the Caliphate to be relevant. They were not considered a security threat, as was the case for male fighters. This has led to a very scarce availability of information and evidence of their activities on the grounds upon repatriation to Europe. The observation and collection of information of evidence of both male and female IS activists is necessary, especially in the current context, where the "repatriation dilemma" is a hot topic, and it specially concerns women returnees. This question will be later explained in detail⁷⁶.

In sum, female profiles are as complex as those of their male counterparts, even if they are lesser in number. Women may be involved in the new challenges presented by

⁷³ García-Calvo, Carola (2022) "Facetas de la movilización de mujeres europeas..."

⁷⁴ Perisin and Cervone, "The Western muhajirat of ISIS", *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* (Vol 38), 2015.

⁷⁵ García-Calvo, Carola (2022) "Facetas de la movilización de mujeres europeas..."

⁷⁶ *Ibid*

the current state of jihad in Europe, and therefore, the European Union's CT strategy must understand them as a relevant target to provide an effective response.

PART 2: ANALYSING THE EU COUNTERTERRORISM STRATEGY AND THE CURRENT STATE OF THE JIHAD

Having already introduced what jihadi terrorism is and how its impact in Europe has evolved over the years, in this second part of the Final Dissertation Project, the EU response will be exposed. A brief evolution of the European CT policy until present day will be provided. After that, each of the present challenges will be assessed, analyzing whether if the EU policies are adequately targeting these menaces.

2.1 EU counter-terrorism strategy

Prior to introducing what the EU counterterrorism strategy consist of, it is first needed to establish some premises. It must be considered that MS are primarily responsible of their own security and CT policies. The EU offers additional tools, enhancing the cooperation, coordination, and harmonization of state policies. Through the authorization of directives, the EU also imposes binding legislation which must be complied by all its members, being transposed into their national laws. It also provides financial support to fight common cross-border menaces⁷⁷. It shall also be considered that the European CT strategy is devoted to combat all terrorist menaces, regardless of their motivation or pertinence (meaning it targets separatist, anarchist, extreme left, religious motivated terrorism, etc).

Many of its policies are of a general character, devoted to all kinds of terrorism, while some others might be specific to combat the jihad. Thus, this analysis departs from the premise that there are some limitations to the European Union's CT strategy, as its mandate is limited (over the sovereignty and legislation of MS themselves) and its targets are very wide and diverse (considering there are many kinds of terrorisms which act and appear differently in different countries or regions).

After the first massive attacks suffered in Europe in the early 2000's, in 2005, the first European CT strategy was adopted. It observed four main pillars: prevention, addressing the causes of radicalization; protection, reducing vulnerabilities of the population, infrastructures, borders, and strategic targets; pursuit, a cross-border effort to chase terrorists and related offenders; and response (being prepared for the aftermath of a potential attack). It also enhanced engagement with international partners⁷⁸.

⁷⁷ European Parliament, "Understanding EU counter-terrorism policy", Publications Office of the European Union, 2023 (pages 3 to 9).

⁷⁸ European Council, "Counter-terrorism strategy 2005", EUR-Lex, 2018.

However, this last point was furtherly enhanced after 2015. In fact, 2015 is often highlighted as a shift for the European CT strategy, which became more intensive and a key priority in the EU security agenda⁷⁹. The attacks happening that year (which as previously mentioned, was one of the peak years for IS activity), evidenced the need of strengthening the pillars of EU action and the lack of operational consistency. Increased operational cooperation and an enhanced share of information were exposed as necessary upgrades. The FTF issue was highlighted as a priority, mentioning that “while the issue is not new, the scale and the flow of fighters to ongoing conflicts, in particular in Syria and Iraq, as well as the networked nature of these conflicts, are unprecedented”⁸⁰. A proposal for a European Counter-Terrorism Centre within Europol was made for the purpose (among other aspects) of tracking the movement of FTF and travelers and their networking with groups inside and outside of Europe (this institution materialized in 2016). The prevention of radicalization was other of the priority lines of work, which aimed to be targeted at a local level, being especially incisive in the more vulnerable communities⁸¹.

Since then, the EU strategy has been focused on the establishment of a security union, where terrorism is placed as a key priority and understood as a multidimensional threat⁸². Along with the previously mentioned issues, updating and harmonizing legislation on the typification of terrorist criminal offences, enhancing information exchange, cutting and tracking access of terrorists to firearms and explosives were as well introduced in the security agenda.

All these measures are furtherly developed by the 2023-2027 CT strategy, with the additional goal to keep adapting to the latest threats and challenges⁸³. This strategy considers three pillars: prevention (disrupting attacks or their preparation), prosecution (ensuring the penalization of terrorist offenders) and protection (guaranteeing the security of individuals, infrastructures and assisting victims). As well, it establishes some innovative areas of focus:

In the first place, it acknowledges the “changing *modus operandi*” of terrorism, noticing an acceleration of post-organizational terrorism, which is to say, a shift from large-scale organized attacks to more improvised, individualized ones, perpetuated by lone actors or individuals with no affiliation to any specific group. Since the debilitation

⁷⁹ Andreeva, Christine, “The evolution of information-sharing in EU counter-terrorism post-2015: a paradigm shift?”, *Global Affairs* (Vol 7), 2021.

⁸⁰ European Commission, “The European Agenda on Security”, EUR-Lex, 2015 (page 12).

⁸¹ *Ibid*, (pages 12 to 21).

⁸² European Commission, “Delivering on the European Agenda on Security to fight against terrorism and pave the way towards an effective and genuine Security Union”, EUR-Lex, 2016 (page 4).

⁸³ Council of Europe Committee on Counter-Terrorism, “Council of Europe Counter-Terrorism Strategy (2023-2027)”, Council of Europe, 2023.

of ISIS organizational structure, the European jihad has mainly consisted of lone wolf attacks⁸⁴. Plus, recent reports have shown that affiliation to groups like IS is increasingly unpopular among sympathizers⁸⁵. This is not only the case of jihadist terrorism, but it is being observed the wide increase of other types of extremisms, in particular, far-right and far-left that act in the same manner⁸⁶.

The use of technology for terrorist purposes is other of the main areas of concern. The jihad gives an extensive use to internet and social media for the sharing of radical content, facilitating radicalization and mobilization processes, as well as the creation of sympathizing virtual communities. It has mastered the practice of continuously deleting and creating profiles on social networks so that they are almost untraceable. Still today, despite IS has been weakened and affiliation is no longer a popular path, the “virtual Caliphate” is still a worrying reality. For that reason, the EU puts great efforts in improving content moderation systems⁸⁷.

The return and relocation of FTF is another mayor issue⁸⁸. It has already been explained how, at the height of the Syrian conflict, circa 2015, around 5000 individuals traveled from Europe to the conflict area. A big proportion are believed to have returned to their countries of origin. Their relocation, penalization and reintegration are still a developing subject, which will be analyzed later. Still, the EU is compromised to embrace the cooperation of judicial authorities to bring all those individuals to justice. Related to the issue of FTF returnees, the current European strategy is especially concerned with the reintegration of women and children. As previously explained, one of IS most intensive recruitment campaigns was devoted to women, embracing them to become mothers of the next jihad generation. Today this populate to be the most affected by the so called “repatriation dilemma”, as it will later be explained.

Lastly, the European CT strategy highlights that terrorism is not an isolated phenomenon, but it interacts with a wide range of cross-cutting issues, as for instance, armed conflicts and growing tensions happening outside of Europe. The interplay of the European jihad with the Syrian conflict was clear example, but growing tensions in other areas, like Palestine, might change the existing dynamics⁸⁹.

⁸⁴ Council of Europe Committee on Counter-Terrorism, “Report on Emerging Terrorist Threats in Europe”, Council of Europe, 2022, (page 9).

⁸⁵ EUROPOL (2022), “European Union Terrorism situation and Trend Report...” (page 82).

⁸⁶ *Ibid*, (page 8).

⁸⁷ Council of Europe Committee on Counter-Terrorism, (2022) “Report on Emerging Terrorist Threats...”, (pages 19 and 20).

⁸⁸ *Ibid*, (page 10).

⁸⁹ Council of Europe Committee on Counter-Terrorism, (2023) “Council of Europe Counter-Terrorism Strategy (2023-2027)...”

Besides these specific targets, the new European CT strategy maintains the continuity of previous points of focus, namely, the EU terrorist list, information exchange, prosecuting terrorist financing, strengthening judicial cooperation, and cooperation with non-EU countries⁹⁰. In sum, the EU is indeed conscious of the evolving nature of jihadist terrorism and observes some of the new challenges that the current situation consists of. But is it being truly responsive?

2.2 Defining and responding to current challenges

Hereinafter, we will proceed to the individual analysis of the main challenges that the current jihad poses for Europe and the specific policies that aim to target them. The Council of Europe Committee on Counter-Terrorism's "Report on Emerging Terrorist Threats in Europe" provides an overview of the latest challenges observed⁹¹:

The current context is clearly prompted by the territorial decline of ISIS, which as previously explained, has led to a significant shift on jihadist terrorism in Europe since 2017-2019. Today's reality is marked by a post-organizational jihad, in which ISIS-linked structures are disappearing. Still, a wide proportion of ISIS-inspired groups and lone actors prevail. Despite the shift in the organization and nature of the jihad, its online presence, and uses of the internet to disseminate propaganda and maintain virtual communities is still a mayor issue, which keeps evolving. The return of FTF is a mayor issue, specially concerning the repatriation of women and their children, provided their special necessities. On another hand, even if the outflow of FTFs or travelers from Europe seemed to be a past issue (provided the decline of the territorial Caliphate), there is growing concern that current crises will motivate a resurgence of FTFs willing to join a new jihad scenario.

Having introduced all these matters, we will now proceed to their individual analysis.

a. Lone wolf terrorism: a decentralized jihad

As observed by the last published TE-SAT, jihadist sympathizers are becoming less prominent to affiliate to specific organizations like ISIS⁹². All completed jihadist attacks since 2020 have been carried out by lone wolves.⁹³. The European jihad today is clearly decentralized and characterized by lone actors which perpetuate attacks and

⁹⁰ European Council, "The EU's response to terrorism", European Council, 2024.

⁹¹ Council of Europe Committee on Counter-Terrorism, "Report on Emerging Terrorist Threats in Europe", Council of Europe, 2022.

⁹² EUROPOL (2023) "European Union Terrorism situation and Trend Report...", (page 9).

⁹³ *Ibid* (page 29).

disseminate propaganda on their own account, and whose range of action is more limited than formerly. Hence, even if affiliation or direct membership to ISIS seems like a past trend, its ideology and radical content is still capable of inspiring many.

As lone wolves act in an individual manner, with no belonging to any organization, targeting them is complicated. Even if they might share some of the characteristics previously defined (mostly male, young), it is difficult to determine a standard profile. Plus, their lack of belongingness makes them untraceable by the authorities. Therefore, lone wolf terrorism is to a big extent very difficult to systemize or predict. One of the few commonalities of lone wolf terrorism is that these individuals are often very active participants of radical virtual communities⁹⁴.

When combating lone wolves, the EU strategy is focused on two points: on one hand, detecting individuals planning or preparing attacks, and on another, preventing their radicalization. Overall, lone actors' capabilities are limited in comparison to organizational attacks. Plus, they are less professionalized as well, often committing the mistake of leaking details of their plans, both online and offline, leading to their detection and arrest. More than half of the detected lone wolves since 2014 leaked sensible details⁹⁵. These oversights due to a lack of professionalization facilitate the tracking of the authorities, which rely on tracing their online presence, purchase of weapons and other materials. This tracking has been proved to be quite effective in the detection of planned attacks.

As previously referenced, all jihadist terrorist attacks carried out since 2020, have been perpetuated by lone actors. In 2020, out of 13 total detected attacks, a majority of 9 were carried out successfully by lone wolves. However, in the following years, the detection of lone actors has been more successful: in 2021 only 3 attacks were completed, while 8 were detected and foiled. In 2022, out of 6 attacks, a majority of 4 were detected and foiled, while only 2 were completed. All these individuals were brought to justice⁹⁶. Therefore, authorities are proving to be increasingly effective foiling lone actors' attacks.

⁹⁴ Bakker, Edwin and de Graaf, Beatrice, "Lone Wolves: How to Prevent This Phenomenon?", International Center for Counter-Terrorism, 2010.

⁹⁵ Ellis, Clare and Pantucci, Raffaello "Lone-Actor Terrorism Final Report", Royal United Services Institute for Defence and Security Studies, 2017.

⁹⁶ EUROPOL (2023), "European Union Terrorism situation and Trend Report..." (page 25).

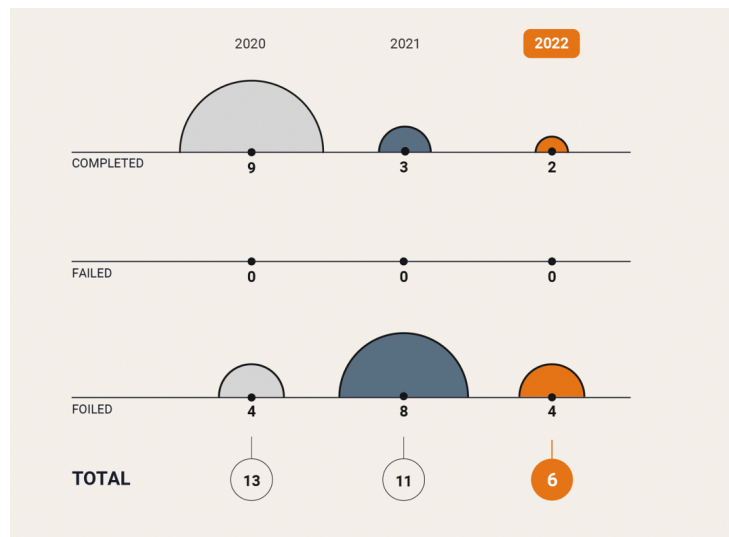


Figure 2: Jihadist terrorist attacks in the EU (2020 – 2022)⁹⁷.

On the other hand, the prevention of their radicalization and thriving to violence is still a big challenge for the European P/CVE policies. The most relevant EU instrument on this issue area is the Radicalization Awareness Network (RAN), which connects, experts, social workers, civil society organizations, law makers, and many others, for the purpose of countering radicalization and violent extremism. It works through a set of working groups in different areas (youth, rehabilitation, prisons, local authorities, mental health) for a direct and multidisciplinary approach to this issue⁹⁸. Concerning lone actors, the RAN aims to develop risk assessment tools to enable a standardized and practical procedure to detect individuals vulnerable to solo radicalization or thriving to violent action⁹⁹.

While still no standardized protocol has been determined, the RAN has been able to provide some recommendations:

Despite not having many common characteristics that can be drawn among lone wolves, it has been found out that they are often prone to psychological disorders or behavioral changes. For this reason, it is recommended to increase mental health awareness and vigilance of conduct shifts in education, work, and family environments. Also, the setting up of helplines for friends, family, etc is recommended, as communication channels with professionals and authorities to inform and identify profiles that are on the threshold of radicalization and violence. Related to the leakage of sensible

⁹⁷ EUROPOL (2023) “European Union Terrorism situation and Trend Report...”, (page 24).

⁹⁸ Radicalization Awareness Network Practitioners, “Introducing the Radicalization Awareness Network”, European Commission, 2024.

⁹⁹ Radicalization Awareness Network Health and Social Care Work Group, “Risk assessment of lone actors”, RAN, 2017.

information, RAN's recommendations raise awareness on the need to take these leakages seriously and to communicate them to the competent authority¹⁰⁰.

Apart from preventing radicalization, RAN's strategy aims to provide tailor-made rehabilitation plans, to divert individuals who have already been radicalized away from the use of violence and get them to abandon the radical ideology¹⁰¹.

In sum, these recommendations emphasize the identification of mental health needs, the vigilance of suspect behaviors and the development of effective communication channels with authorities which are reliable and trustworthy. The positive aspect of this strategy is that it focuses on a local and direct response, as well as a case-by-case analysis. However, the responsibility to detect radicalization patterns widely relies on the social environment of the person concerned, and their capability to identify and communicate their observations. Although these recommendations are logical and pertinent, there is no way to enforce them or ensure their effectiveness.

Therefore, when it comes to lone wolf terrorism, despite European authorities have proved to be effective when detecting and foiling attacks, detection in earlier stages of radicalization and an effective P/CVE strategy is still a pending challenge.

b. Internet, social media, and propaganda

As mentioned, despite the European jihad seems to have lost strength in other aspects, as the number or intensity of its attacks, its online presence for propagandistic purposes, remains high. In fact, the most common charges for individuals arrested in 2022 for jihadist related offences were production and dissemination of propaganda¹⁰². Despite the number of messages directly launched by IS authorities has severely reduced, many individuals disseminate their own content or even recycle previously shared content, produced by the organization¹⁰³. MS themselves report that jihadist suspects were collecting and disseminating propaganda produced by IS and Al Qaeda even decades ago¹⁰⁴. This individual cooperation with the jihadist cause allows ISIS to maintain its ideological presence, despite having noticeably lost influence during these last years.

¹⁰⁰ RAN "The RAN Declaration of Good Practices for Engagement with Foreign Fighters for Prevention, Outreach, Rehabilitation and Reintegration", Publications Office of the European Union, 2022.

¹⁰¹ Radicalization Awareness Network Practitioners, "Lone Actors as a Challenge for P/CVE", Publications Office of the European Union, 2021.

¹⁰² EUROPOL (2023), "European Union Terrorism situation and Trend Report...", (page 13).

¹⁰³ EUROPOL "Jihadist Online Propaganda 2021 in review" Publications Office of the European Union, 2022.

¹⁰⁴ EUROPOL (2022), "European Union Terrorism situation and Trend Report...", (page 13).

Today, radicalization processes and radical networking are more likely to happen in closed online channels and groups. Encrypted messages and alternative and less regulated social media platforms are some of the latest innovations in the terrorist uses of the internet¹⁰⁵. This forces authorities to continuously update their content moderation systems. The EU puts big efforts on this matter. Indeed, in 2022, the European Council launched a specific regulation addressing the dissemination of terrorist content online. This legislation provides a clear and uniform definition of terrorist content and specific measures to be taken¹⁰⁶.

Radical content includes texts, images, transmissions, and audios that “incite or contribute to terrorist acts, provide instructions on how to commit offences or solicit participation in terrorist groups”¹⁰⁷. Each of the EU members designates a competent authority that will oversee the upload of radical content online. In case of detecting any publication that matches the aforementioned definition, the authority will contact the platform where the content has been posted. Within an hour, said platform must have removed and deleted the post. In case of systemized breaches, the platform will be penalized with up to 4% of its turnover. This applies to all platforms, regardless of their origin, even if they are not of European ownership¹⁰⁸.

Therefore, it can be said, that concerning the online presence of the jihad, its uses of social media and the dissemination of propaganda, the EU is doing great and functional efforts to combat this challenge. By instituting specific legislation and a protocolary response to delete radical content, we can ensure the prosecution of the individuals that share this propaganda and prevent others from accessing it. Even if the jihad keeps innovating to maintain an alive online presence, the EU is keeping up to its upgrades.

c. Foreign terrorist fighters and returnees: future of the past?

As it has been mentioned throughout this work, FTF have been one of the biggest challenges Europe has had to face in relation to the jihad, especially after the proclamation of the Caliphate. It is estimated that around 5000 to 5500 individuals traveled from Europe to the conflict area around 2014-2015. About a quarter, were women¹⁰⁹. In 2016, it was estimated that around 30% of these FTF returned to their countries of origin, usually under

¹⁰⁵ Council of Europe Committee on Counter-Terrorism, “Council of Europe Counter-Terrorism Strategy (2023-2027)”, Council of Europe, 2023.

¹⁰⁶ European Council, “EU measures to prevent radicalisation” European Council, 2024.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ European Council “Addressing the dissemination of terrorist content online”, Publications Office of the European Union, 2024.

¹⁰⁹ Rekawe, Kacper; Szucs, Viktor and Babiková, Martina (2019) “European jihad, future of the past?...”, (page 9).

false documentation and using established irregular migration flows¹¹⁰. As of today, some EU states estimate that returnees exceed 40%¹¹¹. Still, exact numbers remain difficult to establish.

Returnees posed a threat to Europe because their intentions remained unknown: they could have been instructed to attack, to disseminate propaganda, they could decide to do so on their own account, or they could serve as radicalization and requirement agents. Often, returnees are portrayed as “force multipliers”¹¹².

The issue of returnees awakened a new awareness when it was found some of these individuals were directly linked to the networks that perpetrated the Paris and Brussels attacks in 2015 and 2016¹¹³.

For this reason, in 2016 the EU developed a broad tissue of measures to combat the threat posed by the mobilization of FTF. Together with the general CT strategy, special emphasis was made on the detection of traveling for terrorist purposes and enhancing cooperation with third countries. Other measures include a coordinated judicial response (among EU members and third parties), improved cross-border information exchange (updating the capacities of the Schengen Information System)¹¹⁴, strengthening external borders control as well as instructing border guards and other competent workers to identify potential FTF through a set of protocols and risk indicators¹¹⁵.

However, these measures were often complex to implement due to incompatibilities with state competences. It was sensible for MS to share travelers’ data and border security information, as these are key competencies on states’ security policies. Cooperating in these areas in favor of a communitarian harmonization was difficult to attain. For that reason, many states advocated for harder measures at a national level¹¹⁶.

Some examples include the confiscation of passports and travel documents of suspect individuals (as was the case of Denmark and Germany). Some (like the UK, Netherlands or France) went even further, making it possible to revoke the nationality of

¹¹⁰ European Parliament, “Foreign fighters—Member State responses and EU action”, Publications Office of the European Union, 2016.

¹¹¹ Council of Europe Committee on Counterterrorism, (2022) “Report on Emerging Terrorist Threats...”.

¹¹² Council of Europe Committee on Counter-Terrorism, “Report on Emerging Terrorist Threats in Europe”, Council of Europe, 2022.

¹¹³ EUROPOL (2016) “European Union Terrorism situation and Trend Report...”, (page 5).

¹¹⁴ Council of Europe Committee on Counter-Terrorism (2023), “Council of Europe Counter-Terrorism Strategy...”

¹¹⁵ European Commission, “Practical Handbook for Border Guards (Schengen Handbook)”, Publications Office of the European Union, 2019.

¹¹⁶ Dworkin, Anthony, “Beyond good and evil: Why Europe should bring ISIS foreign fighters’ home”, European Council on foreign Relations, 2019.

said individuals. MS also adopted sets of “soft measures” which enhanced mechanisms to prevent radicalization, provide mental health support and awareness-rising campaigns in collaboration with NGO’s and civil society organizations to prevent individuals from joining the jihad as FTF or travelers¹¹⁷.

Therefore, when the mobilization of FTF was at its highest, both the EU, and the individual MS launched strong responses to this issue. However, the situation has changed enormously since ISIS decline, as FTF mobilization has been clearly reduced. Consequently, it is believed that the current situation is not as marked by the outflow of FTF, but rather by their return and repatriation. Many individuals of European citizenship remain in Syrian refugee camps, especially women and children. This is what scholars refer to as the “repatriation dilemma”. We will now go deeper into this issue and the response given to it.

After 2019, FTF encountered a complex reality: either they faced the Syrian authorities, they managed to return to their countries of origin, or they were stuck in Syrian prisons and refugee camps. As mentioned, around a 30% of these FTF had returned to Europe before this happening. But still many remained abroad. Around 500 adults (both, men and women) and 700 children with EU citizenship had been detained in Syria, unable to return to Europe on their own means¹¹⁸. They remained in Syrian camps where living conditions are very harsh: lack of sanitization, inadequate medical facilities, often a violent environment and widespread trauma, especially among children¹¹⁹. In sum, a situation of humanitarian crisis. And here is where the dilemma emerges.

	Adults	Children
Austria	3+	n/a
Belgium	57	69
Denmark	8+	13
Finland	11-13	33
France	130	270-320
Germany	124	138
Italy	6	n/a
Netherlands	50	90
Spain	4	17
Sweden	31-45	57
UK	8+	10+
Sub-Total	432-448+	697-747+
TOTAL	1129-1195+	

Figure 3: European adults and children detained in Syria and Iraq¹²⁰.

¹¹⁷ Council of Europe Committee on Counter-Terrorism (2023), “Council of Europe Counter-Terrorism Strategy...”

¹¹⁸ Renard, Thomas, “New figures on European nationals detained in Syria and Iraq”, Egmont Royal Institute for International Relations, 2019.

¹¹⁹ Dworkin, Anthony, (2019) “Beyond good and evil...”.

¹²⁰ Renard, Thomas (2019), “New figures on European nationals detained in Syria...”

Many of these individuals have been directly engaged or related to ISIS activity; therefore, they could be prosecuted for terrorist offences. Many others (mainly children and women) have not been engaged in combat or operational activities, but they have been nourished into the radical ideology and are strongly traumatized by war and violence. They might require other kinds of assistance (psychological, consolation, relocation). The stay of these individuals in refugee camps under precarious conditions require, regardless of their involvement in a terrorist organization, measures of humanitarian assistance. Plus, it must be highlighted that we are talking about European citizens, whose states have the responsibility to assist, repatriate or judicially process if needed, as would be the case any other citizen. This is a reality that EU states cannot neglect: states are equally responsible of all their citizens.

The prosecution of their crimes overlaps with humanitarian needs and the issue of repatriation. Human rights, criminal law and morality intersect to face this challenge¹²¹.

The EU has not launched any binding directive concerned with the issue of repatriation, but rather a set of recommendations and good practices¹²². To begin with, the EU acknowledges that the profiles and motivations for return are very varied. These recommendations aim to facilitate the rehabilitation and reintegration of returnees, through a tailor-based approach that assesses the radicalization and engagement level of every individual¹²³. The main goal is to make returnees abandon the jihadist ideology or to refrain them from violent action, ensuring they will not commit attacks in European soil. A special emphasis is made on women and children's profiles, provided their special necessities and given that their involvement is mostly different from that of men. Indeed, one of the main innovations of the current European CT strategy is developing gender-sensitive and age-sensitive programs, conscious that disengagement and reintegration initiatives have so far been solely directed at men¹²⁴.

The EU has no capacity to mandate what conduct MS should adopt concerning repatriation. Still, it observes the possible responses and provides guidelines for their performance:

On the one hand, there is the "prosecution route"¹²⁵. States conduct an investigation, and in the moment of repatriation, returnees will directly face justice. This

¹²¹ Special Rapporteur on counterterrorism and human rights, "Return and Repatriation of Foreign Fighters and their families", United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, 2023.

¹²² RAN "The RAN Declaration of Good Practices for Engagement with Foreign Fighters for Prevention, Outreach, Rehabilitation and Reintegration", Publications Office of the European Union, 2022.

¹²³ RAN, "RAN Manual Responses to returnees: Foreign terrorist fighters and their families" European Union Publications Office, 2017.

¹²⁴ Council of Europe Committee on Counter-Terrorism, "Council of Europe Counter-Terrorism Strategy (2023-2027)", Council of Europe, 2023.

¹²⁵ RAN, (2017), "RAN Manual Responses to returnees...", (pages 37 to 52).

process aims to determine their engagement in terrorist activities abroad. However, this prosecution faces some challenges, mainly, the difficulty for gathering sufficient and reliable evidence of their activities abroad. Despite there are records that reflect returnees' membership to IS or traveling documents that evidence their stay in Syria, in many cases, no further information can be found of the specific task performed (whether they were involved as combatants or simply as cooks or assistants). This lack of evidence often results on shorter sentences, therefore a special effort must be put on rehabilitation and deradicalization programs in prison¹²⁶.

On another hand, we find the “non prosecution route” or “resocialization”¹²⁷. This is the approach given to individuals who have been found not guilty of terrorist offences; to individuals towards who a prosecution has not (yet) been conducted; and individuals who have been in prison and released. The main purpose of this approach is to ensure the resocialization, rehabilitation, and reintegration of returnees, working in the areas of mental health, consolation, deradicalization, family support, always through a tailor-made approach¹²⁸.

These are the main paths observed upon return. In many cases, the repatriation of these individuals is complex, and many states were not favorable of it¹²⁹. In the first place, because their identification, localization and transport are difficult to effectuate. As well, because the public opinion has shown not to be favorable to repatriation, putting great pressure on decision-makers¹³⁰. However, some EU states like Germany, Spain, or France, have increasingly turned favorable to repatriation, especially among women and children¹³¹.

The only consensus when it comes to repatriation, is on children. Countries like Belgium, Netherlands, Sweden, or UK where the repatriation of adults is not a feasible reality, have, in contrast, repatriated children¹³². Again, the EU stipulates a series of recommendations and guidelines for an adequate treatment. It recognizes the fact that children are often very radicalized and indoctrinated, as they have been socialized and brought up in the jihadist ideology. Plus, they are likely to show trauma due to the harsh

¹²⁶ Radicalization Awareness Network Health and Social Care Work Group, “Risk assessment of lone actors”, RAN, 2017.

¹²⁷ *Ibid*, (pages 53 to 67).

¹²⁸ Radicalization Awareness Network Health and Social Care Work Group, “Risk assessment of lone actors”, RAN, 2017, (pages 53-55).

¹²⁹ Dworkin, Anthony, (2019), “Beyond good and evil...”

¹³⁰ France Info et Le Figaro, “Les Français approuvent massivement le jugement des djihadistes par l’Irak et ne veulent pas voir leurs enfants revenir”, Odoxa, 2019.

¹³¹ Encina, Carlota, Stainberg, Federico and García- Calvo, Carola, “Estado Islámico: el dilema de la repatriación de mujeres”, Real Instituto Elcano, 2022.

¹³² Dworkin, Anthony, (2019), “Beyond good and evil...”

conditions to which they have been exposed to at early ages¹³³. Recommendations observe that resocialization and psychological assistance are primordial, although they warn that deconstructing their former identity and transitioning to a new deradicalized one, far from a familiar environment, is a complex and long-term process¹³⁴.

Concluding with the matter of FTF and returnees, is it an issue from the past? Definitely not. It has only transformed its nature. It is true that at the highest peak of FTF mobilization, both, the EU, and the individual MS, launched strong and effective responses to detect these individuals. However, the reality is very different today. The outflow of FTF to Syria has been reduced almost to the point of cease. But Europe is now concerned with their return. Not only detecting those that returned on their own means, but most importantly, facing the issue of their repatriation and potential prosecution for terrorist offences. While the EU has well observed this issue and provides a long list of recommendations to address all cases on a tailored way, no unique response is being provided. Rather, MS are in charge of the repatriation of returnees, their prosecution and deradicalization. While many states were not favorable of repatriation at first, increasing efforts are being made in this direction, especially concerning women and children. A diversification of targets can be observed in these policies and strategies, which were formerly just concerned with men.

Therefore, it can be said that Europe oversees and adapts to this challenge, despite the difficulties to balance humanitarian and human rights needs with criminal prosecution. As well, great progress is being made on gender-specific policies. However, the issue of FTF shall not be undervalued. The jihad in Europe is not an isolated reality, but it evolves accordingly to foreign happenings. Syria is no longer a preferred destination for jihadist fighters, but increasing crisis in other regions might revive the FTF willingness to join new fronts. This should not be considered a battle that has already been won.

d. Female jihad: an unevaluated issue?

As mentioned in the introduction, a complex phenomenon cannot be understood leaving women aside from the analysis. The gender issue has very often been neglected from the study of CT, or widely simplified. When it comes to terrorism and CT, women

¹³³ RAN, (2017), "RAN Manual Responses to returnees...", (pages 68 to 80).

¹³⁴ RAN, "The RAN Declaration of Good Practices for Engagement with Foreign Fighters for Prevention, Outreach, Rehabilitation and Reintegration", Publications Office of the European Union, 2022.

are traditionally understood as victims, as if the exercise of violence or their radicalization is incompatible with womanhood¹³⁵.

In this simplified approach, women are only understood as passive subjects, whose radicalization or thrive to violence are an emotional or romantic response linked to their dimensions as wives or mothers, while their male counterparts are understood as active subjects, whose radicalization and motives are a conscious and logical effort¹³⁶. This failure to consider women as violent actors and thus, as an active part of terrorist networks, excludes women and their experiences from the design of CT policies and deradicalization policies. This programs, often described as “gender neutral”, are indeed designed to target men, as they have been the only populate observed as relevant for this matter¹³⁷.

On a worldwide level, women make up 30 – 40% of terrorist networks¹³⁸. As for the European jihad, it was estimated that around a 20% of the FTF traveling to Syria were women as well¹³⁹. Therefore, there is evidence of women’s participation in terrorist organization, and that should be enough to consider them as a relevant variable for the design of CT policies.

Concerning ISIS, it should be reminded that women exercise a wide variety of roles, from nurses to educators, and most importantly, propaganda disseminators and as recruitment agents. As exposed previously, ISIS has widely featured women as the images and creators of their propagandistic content, with a special aim to target western women, for their mobilization to the former Caliphate area¹⁴⁰. Also, women have been involved in ISIS propagandistic structure as social media managers and mediators of online communities. They have been as well key actors for the recruitment of other women, both on and offline¹⁴¹. While it is true that the most common roles are those not directly linked to violence or the perpetuation of attacks, women’s use of violence is not forbidden by ISIS ideology¹⁴².

¹³⁵ Ortals, Candice and Poloni-Staudinger, Lori “How gender intersects with political violence and terrorism”, department of Political Science and International Affairs of Northern Arizona University, 2018.

¹³⁶ López de Zubiría Díaz, Sandra, “Mujeres combatientes terroristas extranjeras: ¿una amenaza real a la seguridad (inter)nacional?”, REC: Revista Electrónica de Criminología, Vol 6, 2022.

¹³⁷ Huckerby, Jayne, “Gender, counter-terrorism and international law”, Research Handbook on International Law and Terrorism, 2014.

¹³⁸ Europol, “Women in Islamic State propaganda: roles and incentives”, EU Publications Office, 2019.

¹³⁹ Rekawe, Kacper; Szucs, Viktor and Babiková, Martina (2019) “European jihad: future of the past?...”, (page 9).

¹⁴⁰ Europol, (2019), “Women in Islamic State propaganda...”

¹⁴¹ Gracia-Calvo, Carola, “Radicalización violenta y políticas de prevención. Una cuestión de género”, Real Instituto Elcano, 2021.

Most importantly, to understand women's involvement in the jihad, and why it presents a challenge today for Europe, we must address again aftermath of their mobilization to Syria and the repatriation dilemma.

ISIS enhanced a mobilization campaign to attract women, embracing them to become wife's and mothers to the future jihad. It must be understood that a growing population is key for the creation of a new "state", as the Caliphate intended to be. Despite a great part of ISIS interest of these women participation is for them to become mothers or wives, this shall not be mistaken or reduced to the fact that these women's motivation to become FTF is motherhood. They share the rational ideology of their male counterparts: they believed in the jihad and the creation of a Caliphate ruled under its principles. This is a crucial understanding not to mistake women as passive subjects. Even there might be some different gendered motivations, it is an error to affirm that women do not share the same core understandings of their male counterparts. Plus, after the fall of the Caliphate, women are understood as valuable ideological actors, as they are rising and educating their descendants in the values of the jihad. Today, women and children are extremely relevant keeping the jihad's legacy and ideology alive¹⁴³.

For that reason, the repatriation of those hundreds of women and children that is a delicate subject. First, because their level of radicalization needs to be assessed to ensure the security of the country of return, preventing them from engaging again into a violent jihad. Secondly, because the crimes and activities performed by these women needs to be assessed, determining their liability. As mentioned, states are not very favorable to repatriation as the localization of this individuals and their nationality are complex. No exact numbers are known of how many FTF are remaining to come back to Europe. Plus, it is even more complex to determine the number of women, as they were not observed as a target of the FTF detection strategy in the first place¹⁴⁴. For instance, Spain has been capable of repatriating 18 women, but all of them were detected after 2015 and with big efforts, as they had not been detained or observed as suspects of being involved in the jihad ever before. It was proved that they had not been involved in combat roles, but rather in support roles¹⁴⁵.

This clearly evidences how not understanding women as participants or sympathizers of a radical organization is a misconception that further hinders the need to provide an effective response to an ongoing security challenge. Therefore, ensuring the collection of evidence and intelligence that understands both, male and female ISIS

¹⁴³ Gracia-Calvo, Carola, *El dilema de repatriar a mujeres vinculadas a Estado Islámico desde los campos de Al Hol y Al Roj en Siria*, Real Instituto ELcano, 2022.

¹⁴⁴ RAN, (2022), "The RAN Declaration of Good Practices for Engagement with Foreign Fighters...".

¹⁴⁵ López de Zubiría Díaz, Sandra, (2022), "Mujeres combatientes terroristas extranjeras...".

militants as relevant, would help mitigate this bias, and a more effective response to the repatriation dilemma could have been provided¹⁴⁶. In other words, years of “vacuum” in which no information related to female ISIS sympathizers and recruits has been collected, leads to the impossibility of providing an effective response to a complex issue, as a big proportion of FTF were not even suspect of being so, just for being women.

In a context where one of Europe’s main concerns when it comes to CT is the aftermath of the jihadist mobilization to Syria, a gender perspective must be incorporated, not only because there is evidence of the involvement of female jihadists, but because deradicalization and resocialization processes take place within families and societies, where women have a place, and their perspectives and roles must be considered.

The studies and the design for European CT and P/CVE policies have had men as their main target. However, a clear and growing participation of female in the current challenges of the jihad evidence the need to include a gender perspective. Despite they are usually related to the performance of less violent and more supportive roles than their male counterparts, women are rational subjects as well, whose radicalization needs to be considered equally as rational or serious. Europe is facing the return of FTF and the spread of an ideology contrary to democratic values, and the gender perspective is essential both in research and analysis of violent extremism and in prevention policies. This implies considering how radicalization factors or biases affect men and women differently, adapting prevention and rehabilitation strategies accordingly¹⁴⁷.

Conscious of this need, the RAN is recently featuring specific research devoted to determining the specific gendered drivers in P/CVE. The EU strategy is, for the first time, diversifying the targets of its CT and P/CVRE policies, including women and children, but still more specific efforts should be done to specifically address the matter of return¹⁴⁸.

e. A glimpse into the future: the risk of a “new jihadist agenda”

Besides defining the different challenges that characterize today’s reality, it is needed to take a glance at the future to fully assess the efficiency of the European CT strategy. Of course, it is impossible to predict the future, but based on the analysis of the present situation, and the characteristics presented in this work, we can depict some possibilities.

¹⁴⁶ Gracia-Calvo, Carola, (2021), “Radicalización violenta y políticas de prevención...”

¹⁴⁷ Gracia-Calvo, Carola, (2021), Radicalización violenta y políticas de prevención...”

¹⁴⁸ RAN “Ex Post Paper: The role of gender in extremism and P/CVE”, Publications Office of the European Union, 2019.

It is clear that, after years of peak influence, ISIS is no longer capable of mobilizing and reaching sympathizers as it used to. Many of the FTF that served its ranks, are now willing to return to their countries of origin. There is a general understanding of the fact that ISIS is not likely to return to the jihadist arena with the same strength and shape. Not only the political and civil context in Syria and Iraq has changed precluding the revival the Caliphate. On a worldwide level (and most specifically in Europe), individual interest in membership or belonging to the organization is almost null. ISIS has lost its direct influence over the territory of the former Caliphate and over the global network it created to attack abroad, including Europe¹⁴⁹.

Still, its ideology is not dead. jihadist propaganda and the sharing of radical content is one of the challenges that remains unsolved¹⁵⁰. This ideology is still capable of inspiring many to perpetuate attacks, although as mentioned, these attacks will have an individual rather than a networked nature.

As well, as a result of the decline of ISIS, we should remain vigilant to the return of FTF. On the one side, Europe must solve its uncertainties concerning the repatriation of many of its citizens that remain in Syria, especially women and children and, consequently, their resocialization and deradicalization. As European citizens, their states have a set of humanitarian and judicial responsibilities they must comply with. In the absence of an orderly repatriation and deradicalization campaign, the possibility of irregular return, using false documentation, and without knowledge of the level of their radicalization, could become a dangerous reality¹⁵¹. On another hand, scholars also speculate that some FTF, on regards of an impossibility to return to Europe, would choose other destinations, other conflict areas as alternatives to keep engaged in a combating jihad. Yemen, Libya and, most importantly, Afghanistan, are some of the predicted destinations. Therefore, some of this ISIS fighters will not let the jihad to die, but rather, they would change to a different setting¹⁵².

The European jihad is not an isolated phenomenon. We cannot understand this issue without taking into consideration the reality outside of Europe. Indeed, today's reality is increasingly characterized by open conflicts. It must be considered that the European jihad interacts with the events happening abroad. Many speculate that ISIS has lost its mobilizing capacity and influence towards Syria, as this is today an "extinguished

¹⁴⁹ Hassan, Mohammed, (2023), "Why ISIS Cannot Bring the Caliphate Back..."

¹⁵⁰ EUROPOL "Online Jihadist Propaganda, 2022 in Review", Publications Office of the European Union, 2023.

¹⁵¹ European Parliament, "Parliamentary question - E-000427/2022, European Parliament Islamic terrorist alert: ISIS using fake passports to come to the EU", Publications Office of the European Union, 2022.

¹⁵² Vicente, Álvaro, "Afganistán tras el declive del califato y la amenaza yihadista global", Real Instituto Elcano, 2017.

fire”. However, new hot spots can arise, motivating a new sympathy and mobilization campaign. Today, all eyes are on Gaza, due to the conflict between Hamas and Israel. Although no evidence has been yet found, some already speculate that Palestine could be the setting for a “new Jihadist agenda”, targeting the mobilization of individuals worldwide to this conflict area¹⁵³. Not only that, but the most alarmists fear that this issue will also motivate a growing wave of attacks in Europe, in reaction to European governments and their pro-Israel responses¹⁵⁴.

In sum, while we cannot foresee what the future will hold, it is true that Europe cannot assume that the “war on terror” has been won already. ISIS might have lost the capacity it used to have, but the international panorama keeps evolving. Not only Europe should remain aware of the challenges remaining of the aftermath of ISIS (returnees, repatriation, propaganda), but it should also be attentive of the emergence of new menaces or outbreaks resulting from an international arena marked by growing conflicts, in many cases, identarian conflicts, that might be appealing for the sympathizers of the violent jihad.

¹⁵³ Baudon, Antoine “Hamas global jihad – An impact in France?” International Center for Counter-Terrorism, 2023.

¹⁵⁴ Zsiros , Sandor , “Europa debe prepararse para una nueva oleada de terrorismo, según un experto” (Claude Moniquet), Euronews, 2023 .

PART 3: CONCLUSIONS

Hereinafter, the research questions introduced in the beginning of this work will be answered. As for the two thematic blocks, on the one side, the questions concerned with the European CT strategy and its present challenges, and on the other side, the gender issue in CT policies; they will be assessed separately. Finally, some general remarks will also be exposed.

3.1 Is the EU counter-terrorist strategy up to date?

As posed in the introduction, the first block of questions was the following:

- a) What is the current state of the global jihad?
- b) What are the main challenges facing Europe today in terms of jihadist terrorism?
- c) Is the EU counterterrorism strategy updated to face these challenges efficiently?

The hypothesis on this respect suggested that the current state of the jihad differs widely from the pictured image of Al Qaeda or ISIS in the early 2000's. The global jihad has evolved into a diluted and less networked state. Past hotspots have lost their one-time attraction, and new conflicts will emerge to substitute former ones. Europe will be forced to adapt and face new challenges. These challenges are related to the aftermath of ISIS decline, mainly the return of Foreign Terrorist Fighters (FTF) and the need for their deradicalization. However, these returnees include a wide proportion of women and children, and EU policies may be forced to include, maybe for the first time, a gendered perspective. Our hypothesis argues that the EU counterterrorism strategy observes the evolution of the jihad and its current nature but might still struggle to give an adequate response.

Just like the hypothesis suggested, the current state of the jihad is widely different from how it presented itself in the previous decades. Its present challenges are widely marked by a post-organizational nature, result of ISIS decline. The dissolution of the Caliphate meant the end of the project in which many believed, making the direct membership to the organization and the direct command over cells disseminated abroad increasingly less common, especially in Europe. The EU is making great efforts to adapt to this new scenery, developing an overall effective CT strategy.

Answering to the first question posed (what is the current state of the global jihad?), it is simple to observe it is a decentralized and post organizational stage, characterized, as mentioned, by the aftermath of the dissolution of ISIS Caliphate. Rather

than an organizational terrorism, today's jihad is surviving in Europe due to the activity of lone actors who aim to carry out attacks, of a rather improvised nature, and who disseminate online propaganda and radical content on their own account.

Despite the organizational structure of ISIS can be said to be "a dead man walking", its ideology and the message it stands for are not dead at all. Indeed, it is strongly alive, being shared and reproduced online, still inspiring many lone actors. Plus, the hundreds of FTF that left Europe to join ISIS ranks and are now waiting to be repatriated, are also alive and standing. This is to say, even if ISIS and the jihad have been weakened in some respects, Europe has still challenges to face, and cannot trust to have won the war on terror.

Answering to the second question of this block (what are the main challenges facing Europe today in terms of jihadist terrorism?), throughout the analysis, we have found these are the main ones:

First, we find the need to combat lone-actor terrorism, as it is a logical consequence of a post-organizational jihad. Indeed, all jihadist attacks perpetuated in Europe since 2019 (namely, the dissolution of the Caliphate) have been carried out by lone actors. These individuals share many of the characteristics of the average jihadist, showing a continuity of the involved profiles. Due to its individual and unprofessional nature, the impact and scope of this attacks is much more limited than the massive and calculated attacks that used to characterize jihadist terrorism. European authorities have proved to be increasingly effective foiling lone actors' attacks. Since 2020, the proportion of foiled attacks with respect of the total planned or detected attacks has notoriously increased. However, preventing their radicalization is still a pending issue, especially as it takes place online.

This leads to the second challenge: the virtual Caliphate. The sharing of online radical content and propaganda is a long-standing problem, that keeps evolving and sophisticating to avoid being traceable. However, EU authorities have been able to adapt to these innovations, keeping updated content monitorization systems capable of tracking encrypted content. Plus, recent EU directives enable the penalization of online platforms that allow the publication of radical content, establishing a specific authority for this purpose. Therefore, in what concerns the virtual threat of the jihad, the EU is making great and efficient efforts to respond to it.

Still, detecting and preventing individualized radicalization paths is a difficult task, for which the EU has no specific strategy, but rather a set of recommendations. This can be defined as the third challenge: preventing radicalization. These guidelines aim to promote or raise awareness on mental health needs, drastic behavioral changes, and information leakages to detect and prevent lone actors from attacking. However, all efforts are placed on the social environment of the subject in question, who are not

professionals and sometimes might not know to which authorities attend. Therefore, this is a soft strategy that cannot be enforced or proved effective. Now that the foiling of attacks has been proved to be under control, more efforts should be put in the area of P/CVE to detect and prevent radicalization on earlier stages.

Apart from this and without any doubt, the fourth and most complex challenge now facing Europe is the matter of FTF returnees. As mentioned, hundreds of individuals that traveled to Syria remain today in refugee camps and built-in prisons under very precarious conditions. Regardless of their terrorist involvement, it is a reality that these individuals (among which, an important proportion are women and children) are living in a situation of humanitarian need. Not only that, but many are European citizens and therefore, MS have a responsibility towards them. This issue, namely the repatriation dilemma, is a complex mixture between human rights, criminal law, and morals. When it comes to how the EU has reacted to this issue, no binding or unanimous line of action has been instructed.

It is true that circa 2015, the peak of FTF outflow departing from Europe, the EU made great efforts to provide assistance and worked to provide tools to detect FTF, refraining them from exiting EU's external borders. Despite the EU had strong intentions, individual MS saw problems on sharing sensible information regarding borders control. For that reason, the harmonization and cooperation of a unitary action was not completely achievable, and the individual states opted for independent policies, some more punitive than others.

Something very similar is taking place now with the issue of returnees. The EU has not launched any directive or binding instruction. There is no harmonized response to the repatriation dilemma. Rather, individual MS are acting on their own account.

However, the EU has been capable of providing a set of recommendations and good practices that states can follow to ensure an adequate resocialization and deradicalization of returnees once they are back in European soil. Plus, the EU provides guidelines observing the main paths of action states are opting for: the "prosecution route" and the "resocialization route". Despite these are the two main alternatives observed, many complications are found for the return of this individuals: lack of reliable evidence of their terrorist involvement, complications for their localization and mobilization, public opinion pressures, etc. Therefore, there is no unanimity, and many are still not favorable of investing resources on the repatriation of FTF. However, many stress a lack of action by the EU to prosecute or repatriate these individuals will result in a "breeding ground" for the strengthening of jihad radicals, increasing the instability in the region.

The only point in which all MS seem to agree on, is the repatriation of children, for which specific deradicalization and resocialization guidelines are being provided. For the first time, the EU is diversifying the targets of its deradicalization programs on an age

and gender specific criteria, as formerly these were only concerned with adult men. The EU is indeed conscious of this reality but is not being capable of harmonizing a response. Its scope of action is limited, and therefore, MS are individually taking action.

Concluding with the last question (is the EU counterterrorism strategy updated to face these challenges efficiently?), the answer is not an absolute. It is true that the EU and some of its specialized bodies concerned with security, counterterrorism and preventing radicalization (as for instance, Europol or the RAN) are doing a great job as observers of the present challenges and threats, drawing an accurate picture of the current state of the jihad, and making it easier to design a response. Implementing this response is a more difficult task.

The EU current strategy is aware of these challenges and adapts progressively to this new reality. However, in some respects, the EU range of action is still very limited and incapable of harmonizing MS policies (as with the issue of returnees) or cannot do nothing but promoting soft tools. But overall, it can be concluded that EU is well aware of the evolving nature of this phenomena and aims to adapt. In many fields of action, its response has proved to be adequately progressing, which is a great sign of success.

3.2 Gender and counter-terrorist policies.

Continuing with the second thematic block, concerned with the gender issue, the questions posed in the beginning were the following:

- a) In which forms are women relevant actors of today's jihad?
- b) In which ways is it relevant for gender to be featured in counter-terrorism policies and deradicalization programs?
- c) Are EU's counterterrorism and deradicalization policies conscious of the specific characteristics, roles and needs of women in the jihad?

On this regard, the hypothesis suggested that women are increasingly relevant in today's jihad, especially as they conform a big proportion of potential FTF returnees. For that reason, they will be key targets of present CT and deradicalization programs. This hypothesis suggests that the EU is increasingly making efforts to include gender as a relevant element of its CT policies. However, the complexity and full dimension of female roles and needs are not completely understood or assessed, as there have always been undervalued misconceptions of women in the jihad, who have been viewed as "mere brides" and passive subjects. A crucial part of gender being adequately included in CT strategies is depicting women as multidimensional and rational actors, just like their male counterparts. This has been a mistake that has made it impossible for European policies to target female actors in their CT agenda.

In terrorism studies, the role of women has traditionally been terribly simplified, depicting an image that is widely far from reality. The wrongful assumption that women involved in terrorist networks act due to emotional drivers, always tied to their roles of mothers or brides, assuming them incapable of violence itself or mere passive actors, is a grave mistake. Women must be understood as relevant actors, despite normally being lesser in number than their male companions.

Most studies on the ISIS phenomena have had male sympathizers as their focus. Their profiles and motivations are well detailed, as well as the variety of roles they can perform within the organization. On the other hand, women profiles have been underestimated because they are lesser in number, and therefore they have not been considered as a substantial populate. Their roles and motivations are reduced to brides and mothers. However, this is simplistic and erroneous.

As mentioned by the hypothesis, women will be forming an increasingly relevant part of CT and P/CVE policies, and their specific needs and profiles must be fully understood, aside from simplistic biases, to be effective. However, it is not because women sympathizers have a growing role in today's jihad, as they have always been part of this phenomena, but rather because for the first time, they are being observed and addressed. Contrary to what was depicted in the hypothesis, it is not that women in the jihad have a new role today, only that today they are becoming more visible. Specially, due to the aftermath of the FTF phenomena, where women and children are the wider proportion of returnees. Therefore, there is a need to specifically address their needs.

Concerned with the first question posed on this matter (in which forms are women relevant actors of today's jihad?), it is true that women within ISIS act as mothers, wives, care givers and household nurturers. But they can also take part in combat and operational roles, as the doctrine does not prohibit them to violence. Plus, they have played key roles in the production and dissemination of propaganda, requirement and radicalisation of individuals, specially attracting other women. As well, they are in charge of the moderation of radical communities, both online and offline. All these are key areas of ISIS activity, especially in Europe. Therefore, they have been active participants in some of the most relevant fields of action for ISIS.

Plus, ISIS proved to be especially successful in the requirement and mobilization of Western women. As mentioned, an important proportion of the FTF leaving Europe were women. However, they were mostly untraceable and undetectable, as the EU protocols for the detection of FTF considered only male suspects. This has led to years of information vacuum. European MS now find out hundreds of women pending to be repatriated from Syria from whom they had no evidence of leaving nor for being ISIS sympathizers. This has been due to the failure of understand women as suspects of radical activity and appropriately include women in CT protocols.

Despite this, today the EU is doing great efforts to include female profiles in deradicalization initiatives, to respond to the returnees' challenge. Therefore, as mentioned in the second hypothesis, positive efforts are being made on this direction.

Answering to the second question posed (in which ways is it relevant for gender to be featured in counterterrorism policies and deradicalization programs?), it is relevant because there are women involved in these terrorist networks and radical communities, and their profiles must be rationally understood and assessed. If not, EU efforts are not being applied on the whole population. The assumption that they are merely driven by the romantic pulse of becoming wife's and mothers drives us away of a sensible approach. Deconstructing this biased idea will help us design policies to adequately address female profiles. Plus, gender must be featured in deradicalization programs because these aim to protect us as a society, of which women are also a part. As mentioned in this work, the jihadist subculture and even the JFT often presents and sustains a sexist ideology, justifying the submission of women and even demonizing Western women in some respects. Gender equality, freedom and human rights are fundamental principles that the EU stands for. For that reason, it is crucial that gender is featured as a key aspect of deradicalization programs and initiatives.

Summing up, and answering to the last question posed (are EU's counterterrorism and deradicalization policies conscious of the specific characteristics, roles and needs of women in the jihad?), we can say yes, the EU is conscious of the gender approach. The RAN has launched specific guidelines addressing the needs of women returnees, understanding their radicalization and socialization patterns vary from those of men. For the first time, the EU is deepening a diversification of targets of its CT policies, not leaving women aside, observing them as logical actors, equally complex to their male counterparts, even still greater efforts and progress can be made.

In conclusion, a reality cannot be understood excluding women from it or assuming they are passive subjects. Therefore, it is a must to include the female population in security and terrorism studies.

3.3 Final remarks

Besides responding the research questions posed in the beginning, which was the main objective of this analysis, some additional remarks must be highlighted.

Jihadist terrorism in Europe has been one of the main security challenges in the past decades. Characterized by its great adaptability and usage of new tools and strategies, from the dissemination of linked cells abroad, to the use of online propaganda and encrypted messages in social media; it has managed to remain a constant and latent threat.

Therefore, designing policies to adequately respond to new emerging challenges is a great effort, to which the EU is devoting intensive resources.

The EU is mostly being successful when observing and detecting shifts in the jihad's nature, identifying the new tendencies of its action. Thanks to the development of specialized bodies devoted to this issue, as Europol or the European Counterterrorism Centre, this task is easier to fulfill. On another hand, it is true that when developing a strategy to combat those challenges, the EU does not manage to be as effective in all fields of action. It still struggles to harmonize all MS policies. As mentioned throughout this work, this is still part of the EU's nature itself, as its competences are not universal and the sovereignty of states themselves sometimes limit the EU scope of action, especially when it comes to sensible issues, as border security, travelers' information, etc. The EU is an integration process that keeps developing today, and despite some areas are still difficult to coordinate, the fact that the EU has been able to harmonize a security agenda and strategy, common to all members, is a sign of great success.

Part of this adaptation to current challenges includes the diversification of targets of CT and P/CVE programs as well, which have been traditionally devoted to adult men. As mentioned in the introduction, the collective has a stereotyped image of what a jihadist looks like. But institutions cannot fall into such simplistic prejudices. The returnees' issue highlights the need of this diversification, as children and women are the main populate involved, and they present special needs when it comes to deradicalization and resocialization, especially in the case of minors. The EU, thanks to the observation work of the RAN, is today addressing a wider spectrum of individuals on its P/CVE programs.

Another detail that must be highlighted, is the fact that no CT effort can interfere with the respect for human rights. As mentioned, the repatriation dilemma overlaps humanitarian needs and criminal liability for terrorist actions. Human rights, criminal law and morality intersect. Even if it is complex to find an equilibrium, the EU, whose one of its foundational principles is the respect and promotion of human rights, cannot lose this priority when acting in the interest of its security.

Lastly, it is needed to remind that the EU is not an isolated actor in the international arena, and any event happening abroad can have repercussion inside of the Union. Some state that the jihad is a dead threat, as ISIS activity and mobilization was strongly related to the Syrian conflict, which has ceased to be a hot spot, and therefore there is no need to furtherly worry. However, the current international context, not only is extremely globalized and interconnected, but also it is increasingly characterized by conflicts and crisis. The war in Gaza or the migratory crisis are only a couple of examples which some speculate can transform into the new scenarios of the jihad.

In sum, the EU must remain vigilant and observing, as it is today, conscious that the current international context requires the understanding that everything is interconnected, and both, its foreign action and security policy must be aware of this fact.

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