



Criminal Pasts, Terrorist Futures: European Jihadists and the New Crime-Terror Nexus

*The authors of this report are
Rajan Basra, Peter R. Neumann,
and Claudia Brunner.*

CONTACT DETAILS

For questions, queries and additional copies of this report, please contact:

ICSR
King's College London
Strand
London WC2R 2LS
United Kingdom

T. +44 20 7848 2065

E. mail@icsr.info

Twitter: [@icsr_centre](https://twitter.com/icsr_centre)

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Executive Summary

About this Study

- The presence of former criminals in terrorist groups is neither new nor unprecedented. But with Islamic State and the ongoing mobilisation of European jihadists, the phenomenon has become more pronounced, more visible, and more relevant to the ways in which jihadist groups operate. In many European countries, the majority of jihadist foreign fighters are former criminals.
- The purpose of this report is to describe the nature and dynamics of the crime-terror nexus, and understand what it means. To do so, a multi-lingual team of ICSR researchers compiled a database containing the profiles of 79 recent European jihadists with criminal pasts.
- What we have found is not the merging of criminals and terrorists as organisations but of their social networks, environments, or *milieus*. Criminal and terrorist groups have come to recruit from the same pool of people, creating (often unintended) synergies and overlaps that have consequences for how individuals radicalise and operate. This is what we call the *new crime-terror nexus*.

Radicalisation and Recruitment

- The profiles and pathways in our database suggest that the jihadist narrative – as articulated by the Islamic State – is surprisingly well-aligned with the personal needs and desires of criminals, and that it can be used to curtail as well as license the continued involvement in crime.
- For up to ten of the individuals in our database, we found evidence for what we termed the ‘redemption narrative’: jihadism offered redemption for crime while satisfying the same personal needs and desires that led them to become involved in it, making the ‘jump’ from criminality to terrorism smaller than is commonly perceived.
- Whether or not jihadist groups are reaching out to criminals as a deliberate strategy remains unclear.

Prisons

- Fifty-seven per cent of the individuals in our database (45 out of 79 profiles) had been incarcerated prior to their radicalisation, with sentences ranging from one month to over ten years, for various offences from petty to violent crime. More significantly, at least 31 per cent of those who spent time in prison (14 out of 45 profiles) radicalised there, although the process often continued and intensified after their release.

- Our database highlights different ways in which prisons matter:
(1) they are places of vulnerability in which extremists can find plenty of ‘angry young men’ who are ‘ripe’ for radicalisation;
(2) they bring together criminals and terrorists, and therefore create opportunities for networking and ‘skills transfers’; and (3) they often leave inmates with few opportunities to re-integrate into society.
- Given the recent surge in terrorism-related arrests and convictions, and the rapidly expanding number of convicted terrorists in custody, we are convinced that prisons will become more – rather than less – significant as ‘breeding grounds’ for the jihadist movement.

‘Skills Transfers’

- There are many ‘skills’ that terrorists with criminal pasts may have developed. For example, criminals tend to have experience in dealing with law enforcement, and more importantly, may be familiar with the limits of police powers. Criminals are also innovative, and often have an ability to control nerves and handle pressure.
- Beyond these, there are three ‘skills’ which our database provides evidence for: (1) that individuals with a criminal past tend to have easier access to weapons; (2) that they are adept at staying ‘under the radar’ and planning discreet logistics; and (3) that their familiarity with violence lowers their (psychological) threshold for becoming involved in terrorist acts.

Financing

- The vast majority of terrorist attacks in Europe does not require large sums of money or rely on the largesse of Islamic State’s leadership or central command. Whether small-scale or sophisticated, as part of its wider strategy, Islamic State and other jihadist groups are trying to keep financial barriers to entry low, making it possible for all their supporters – no matter how rich or poor – to participate.
- Jihadists not only condone the use of ‘ordinary’ criminality to raise funds, they have argued that doing so is the ideologically correct way of waging ‘jihad’ in the ‘lands of war’. Combined with large numbers of former criminals in their ranks, this will make financing attacks through crime not only possible and legitimate but, increasingly, their first choice.
- Already, up to 40 per cent of terrorist plots in Europe are at least part-financed through ‘petty crime’, especially drug-dealing, theft, robberies, the sale of counterfeit goods, loan fraud, and burglaries. Based on our database, jihadists tend to continue doing what they are familiar with, which means that terrorist financing by criminal means will become more important as the number of former criminals is increasing.

Recommendations

- **Re-thinking radicalisation:** The emergence of the new crime-terror nexus and its associated dynamics should compel researchers, analysts, and policymakers to re-think long-held ideas about how terror, crime, and radicalisation have to be understood. Being 'pious' is no guarantee that criminal behaviour has stopped, while acting like a 'gangster' does not preclude involvement in terrorism.
- **Safer prisons:** With increasing numbers of terrorism-related convictions, the significance of prisons is likely to increase. To make sure they do not become incubators of radicalisation, it is vital that prisons avoid overcrowding; staff are well-trained; prison officers maintain direct channels of communication with security agencies; mainstream prison imams are available in every prison; and probation services are adequately resourced.
- **Targeting ALL streams of financing:** Countering terrorist finance needs to be broadened beyond the banking system to counter all sources of funding, including small-scale and 'petty crime', such as drug dealing, theft, robberies, and the trade in counterfeit goods. Not only will doing so help to counter terrorist funding, but also reduce 'ordinary' crimes and enable law enforcement agencies to operate a so-called 'Al Capone approach'.
- **Data sharing:** Just like the lines between crime and terrorism have become blurred, relevant agencies need to break down institutional silos and become more effective at sharing relevant information across departments and 'disciplines'. Counter-terrorism, customs, intelligence services, criminal police, and even outside actors need to share information, conduct joint training, and participate in early warning systems.
- **Cooperation with local authorities:** Equally important are relationships with civil society and local authorities who know more about communities, local dynamics and relationships, than law enforcement and the intelligence agencies. Conversely, security agencies may help to address local tensions, address grievances, and establish positive relationships with community leaders.
- **Public-private partnerships:** Another potentially valuable tool are public-private partnerships. Businesses are affected by many of the crimes described in this report, and – in addition to wanting to be seen as good 'citizens' – they typically have a commercial interest in countering smuggling, fraud, or the trade in counterfeit goods. They also often collect and possess information that can be useful to law enforcement agencies.



Source: Facebook

1 Introduction

*'Sometimes people with the worst pasts create the best futures'.
Propaganda poster of British jihadist group
Rayat al-Tawheed¹*

On the morning of Wednesday, 31 August 2016, two plain-clothes police officers approached a suspected drug dealer in Christiania, an alternative district of Denmark's capital Copenhagen. Without warning, the man pulled out a pistol, opened fire at the police, and ran away. A bystander and both officers were hit. (One of the officers was critically injured by a bullet wound to the head.) The suspect was eventually tracked down, and died from wounds that he received during a shootout.² His name was Mesa Hodzic, a 25-year old Danish-Bosnian, who was known to the police as a drug dealer.

Two days later, the jihadist³ group Islamic State (which is often abbreviated as ISIS, ISIL, IS, or Daesh) claimed responsibility for Hodzic's actions, proclaiming him a 'soldier' of the Caliphate.⁴ At first, this appeared like a flagrant contradiction. Weren't jihadists meant to be religious, and refrain from drugs and 'ordinary' crime? It soon turned out that Hodzic was not just a prolific drug dealer, but also a member of a Salafist group who had expressed sympathies for Islamic State and appeared in propaganda videos.⁵ Rather than being a contradiction, his case demonstrates how blurred the lines between crime and extremism have become.⁶ Was he a criminal? A terrorist? Or both?

Hodzic is far from the only case in which a petty criminal has turned jihadist. German Federal Police stated that of the 669 German foreign fighters for whom they had sufficient information, two-thirds had police records prior to travelling to Syria, and one-third had criminal convictions.⁷ The Belgian Federal Prosecutor said that half of his country's jihadists had criminal records prior to leaving for Syria.⁸ A United Nations report suggested a similar pattern amongst French foreign fighters.⁹ Officials from Norway and the Netherlands told us that 'at least 60 per cent' of their countries' jihadists had previously

1 ICSR foreign fighter database, March 2014.

2 'Mesa Hodzics liv vidner om en forrâet lobebane', *Berlingske*, 3 September 2016.

3 The terms jihadism/jihadists have been contentious ever since they entered into common usage during the late 1990s. One of the most frequent complaints is that they unfairly associate the religious concept of 'jihad' with acts of terrorism and extreme violence. For the purposes of this study, it is important, therefore, to distinguish between 'jihadism', a modern revolutionary ideology, and 'jihad', an Islamic concept which means 'struggle' and can refer to all kinds of religiously inspired effort – be they spiritual, personal, political, or military. Indeed, the only ones who argue that 'jihad' and 'jihadism' are identical are 'Islamophobes' (who want to portray Islam as inherently violent) and the jihadists themselves. See Thomas Hegghammer, 'Jihadi-Salafis or Revolutionaries? On Religion and Politics in the Study of Militant Islamism' in Roel Meijer (ed.), *Global Salafism: Islam's New Religious Movement* (London: Hurst, 2009), pp. 244–66; John Esposito, *Unholy War: Terror in the Name of Islam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 26–8.

4 'IS-nyhedsbureau: Mistænkt Christiania-skudmand var IS-soldat', *Berlingske*, 2 September 2016.

5 As reported by SITE Intel Group, cited in 'Jihadists claim Christiania shooter was "soldier of ISIS"', *The Local*, 2 September 2016.

6 Interestingly, the Islamic State news agency Amaq only claimed Hodzic's actions *after* he was pronounced dead.

7 BKA, BfV & HfKE, 'Analyse der Radikalisierungshintergründe und -verläufe der Personen, die aus islamistischer Motivation aus Deutschland in Richtung Syrien oder Irak ausgewandert sind', 2015, p. 17.

8 Christophe Lamfalussy, 'Un djihadiste belge sur deux a un passé de délinquant', *La Libre*, 14 August 2015.

9 United Nations Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team, 'Analysis and recommendations with regard to the global threat from foreign terrorist fighters', 2015, p. 11.

been involved in crime.¹⁰ It was for this reason that Alain Grignard, the head of Brussels Federal Police, described Islamic State as ‘a sort of super-gang’.¹¹

The phenomenon may not be entirely new. In the mid-1990s, French newspapers referred to operatives of the Armed Islamic Group (GIA) as ‘gangster terrorists’ because many had previously been involved in local gangs.¹² Likewise, several of the perpetrators of the Madrid train attacks in 2004 were former criminals, and financed their operation by selling drugs.¹³ The merging of terrorism and crime is not without precedent, therefore. Nor can we offer reliable statistics by how much the share of ‘gangsters’ may have risen. Yet it seems clear that their role has become more pronounced, more visible, and more relevant to the ways in which groups like Islamic State operate and frame their message. Furthermore, we believe that the crime-terror nexus – whether entirely new or not – has been under-researched, and that its political and practical implications have not been understood.

The purpose of this report is not to quantify this nexus, but to describe its nature and dynamics, and understand what it means for the terrorist threat and the ways it should be countered. How does criminality facilitate radicalisation and recruitment? What is the role of prisons? Do criminals possess skills that make them more effective as terrorists? How does the convergence between crime and terrorism affect the financing of terrorist attacks?

To help answer these questions, a multi-lingual team of ICSR researchers compiled a database containing the profiles of 79 recent European jihadists with criminal pasts. As far as we know, it is the first database that focuses on criminals who have become jihadists during the post-2011 period. By analysing their pathways, motivations and actions, we were able to ascertain the key factors and dynamics that define the terror-crime nexus in the context of the current jihadist threat.

Argument and Structure

The conclusions are clear. The convergence of criminal and terrorist milieus – the *new* crime-terror nexus – is real, and has profound implications for how jihadist groups in Europe operate. For the first time, there is complete alignment between a group like Islamic State, which – despite its name – has dropped any pretence at engaging in serious theological discourse, and the people who are attracted by its core counter-cultural message of redemption through strength, power, and violence.

Rather than in universities or among religious students, Islamic State and/or its successors increasingly find recruits in European ‘ghettos’, in prisons, as well as among the European ‘underclasses’ and those who have previously engaged in violence and illegal acts. Those who are thus becoming part of the jihadist counter-culture can use their criminal skills for terrorist purposes.

¹⁰ Interviews with Dutch and Norwegian police officers; 1–2 September 2016.

¹¹ Paul Cruickshank, ‘A view from the CT foxhole: an interview with Alain Grignard, Brussels Federal Police’, *CTC Sentinel*, 21 August 2015.

¹² Kjøk Åshild and Lia Brynjar, ‘Islamist Insurgencies, Diasporic Support Networks, and their Host States: The Case of the Algerian GIA in Europe 1993–2000’, *FFI Report, Norwegian Defence Research Establishment*, 2001, p. 28.

¹³ ‘Madrid bombers financed operation with drug sales, Spain says’, *Associated Press*, 14 April 2004.

As a consequence, countering terrorism is, more than ever, a social problem, which coincides with the existence of 'ghettos' and a 'Muslim underclass' in the big European cities. But more attention also needs to be paid to prisons and countering 'petty' and organised crime. Institutional silos – for example, the separation between countering crime, customs, and counter-terrorism – need to be broken down. With criminal and terrorism milieus converging, the fight against crime has become a national security issue.

The report's structure is as follows. The first two chapters explain how this study relates to previous ones, as well as the methods that were used in constructing the database. The following four chapters deal with the principal areas in which we believe the merging between criminal and terrorist milieus has implications for the terrorist threat: (1) radicalisation and recruitment; (2) prisons; (3) 'skills transfers'; and (4) the financing of attacks. In the last chapter, we make a series of conceptual as well as practical recommendations for how approaches towards countering crime, terrorism, and the nexus between the two, need to change.

2 The Crime-Terror Nexus

The concept of a crime-terrorism nexus is not new. It emerged in the early 1990s after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the birth of the Information Age. Amidst shifting geopolitics and newfound transnational reach, non-state actors adapted criminal *modus operandi* to further their aims. As early as the 1980s, during the rise of Pablo Escobar and the Colombian drug cartels, scholars tried to define ‘narco-terrorism’ and debated whether it represented a true case of blurring criminal-terrorist lines.¹⁴ In more recent years, the term ‘criminal insurgency’ has been used to describe the way in which criminal organisations represent strategic security threats to states.¹⁵

Moreover, it is no secret that the Taliban have at times depended on Afghanistan’s heroin production; that Hezbollah has invested into South America’s illicit narcotics industry since the 1980s; and that groups like the Irish Republican Army (IRA) have been involved in smuggling petrol, cigarettes, and counterfeiting consumer goods.¹⁶

Despite these developments, the concept has not only failed to gain significant traction among scholars, many have dismissed it as being overly broad. Among its major deficiencies are the assumptions that terrorist or criminal groups operate as monolithic, hierarchically structured entities, and that ideological and criminal motivations are mutually exclusive. In addition, many studies of terrorism and radicalisation have perpetuated the notion of terrorists as well-educated intellectuals, typically from middle or upper class backgrounds, and that – therefore – the overlap with under-class or even criminal milieus must be negligible.

In our view, the crime-terror nexus is a useful concept, but its nature and dynamics are different from how it has traditionally been conceived. What we have observed in the case of jihadist recruits in Europe is not the convergence of criminals and terrorists as organisations but of their social networks, environments, or *milieus*. In other words: rather than being one or the other, criminal and terrorist groups have come to recruit from the same pool of people, creating (often unintended) synergies and overlaps that have consequences for how individuals radicalise and operate. This is what we call the *new* crime-terror nexus.

14 John Picarelli, ‘Osama bin Corleone? Vito the Jackal? Framing Threat Convergence Through an Examination of Transnational Organized Crime and International Terrorism’, *Terrorism and Political Violence*, Vol 24, Issue 2, 2012, p. 183. Also refer to Sylvia Longmire and John Longmire, ‘Redefining Terrorism: Why Mexican Drug Trafficking is More than Just Organized Crime’, *Journal of Strategic Security*, Vol 1, Issue 1, 2008, pp. 35–51.

15 John Sullivan, ‘Criminal Insurgency: Narcocultura, Social Banditry, and Information Operations’, *Small Wars Journal*, December 2012, pp. 1–13. Sullivan uses Los Zetas of Mexico as an example of a criminal insurgency.

16 Ron Moreau, ‘The Taliban’s New Role as Afghanistan’s Drug Mafia’, *Newsweek*, 12 June 2013; Matthew Levitt, ‘Iranian State Sponsorship of Terror’, *Testimony of Levitt, Joint Hearing of the Committee on International Relations*, 16 February 2005; Levitt, ‘Hizbullah Narco-Trafficking: A growing cross-border Threat’, *The Washington Institute*, September 2012; ‘Want to know what the IRA is now? It’s a trust fund’, *The Irish News*, 27 August 2015.

Groups vs. Networks

One of the most prominent pioneers of the notion of a crime-terror nexus is Tamara Makarenko. On her 'crime-terror continuum', she identifies three areas of the nexus: *cooperation, convergence, and transformation*. At one end, criminal and terrorist groups cooperate, either in limited, transaction-based alliances, or in more sophisticated coalitions. Nearing the middle, convergence indicates when groups adapt skills belonging to the other group. They become hybrid criminal-terrorist groups, each utilising criminal or terror tactics to further their disparate motivations. Finally, at the other end of the continuum lies transformation, in which a group has completely transformed into the other by way of a shift in motivation.¹⁷

Similarly, Louise Shelley and John Picarelli have examined ways in which terrorists adapt criminal methods. They found that in the majority of cases, terrorist groups appropriate activities for tactical reasons.¹⁸ Steven Hutchinson and Pat O'Malley support this claim, and indicate that any cooperation is a last resort.¹⁹ While they agree that today's terrorists will choose to profit from almost any illicit opportunity, they argue that most groups do not retain strategic, entrepreneurial ambitions. Therefore, *symbiotic* relations, or long-term alliances between these groups, are unlikely.

None of these accounts reflect how terrorist structures, radicalisation and recruitment have changed. Jihadist groups such as al-Qaeda and Islamic State operate not wholly as top-down organisations but also in the form of dispersed, autonomous cells who pursue strategies and tactics that are not always – or necessarily – aligned with those of their leadership. The traditional literature has failed to recognise this, and – consequently – tells us little about the merging of criminal and terrorist milieus in places like the suburbs of Paris or Brussels.

Ideology vs. Profit

Another misconception, which has limited avenues of research, is the 'profit vs. ideology' dichotomy: while criminal organisations aim to profit, terrorist groups pursue ideological objectives.²⁰ For a long time, this dichotomy fomented conclusions that Islamist or jihadist groups would not engage in criminal activity as it is contrary to their ideological aims.²¹ As Daniella Bove-LaMonica stated, 'Research shows that the international community is historically reluctant to do anything more than speculate on Al-Qaeda's involvement in organised crime'.²²

It is only relatively recently that scholars have started to reinvestigate the extent to which al-Qaeda affiliates are invested in criminal markets. Samuel Aronson, for example, concluded that the aims of Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb – a group which has engaged in the smuggling of cigarettes and counterfeit products since its founding –

17 Tamara Makarenko, 'The Crime-Terror Continuum: Tracing the Interplay between Transnational Organised Crime and Terrorism', *Global Crime*, Vol 6, No 1, 2004, pp. 129–145.

18 Louise Shelley and John Picarelli, 'Methods and Motives: Exploring Links Between Transnational Organized Crime and International Terrorism', *Trends in Organized Crime*, Vol 9, No 2, 2005.

19 Steven Hutchinson and Pat O'Malley, 'A Crime-Terror Nexus? Thinking on Some of the Links between Terrorism and Criminality', *Studies in Conflict Terrorism*, Vol 30, Issue 12, 2007, p. 1096.

20 Santiago Ballina, 'The-Crime Terror Continuum Revisited', *Journal for Policing, Intelligence and the Power of Informal Networks*, Vol 6, No 2, 2011, pp. 121–124.

21 Steven Hutchinson and Pat O'Malley, 'A Crime-Terror Nexus? Thinking on Some of the Links between Terrorism and Criminality', *Studies in Conflict Terrorism*, Vol 30, Issue 12, 2007, pp. 1095–1106; Chris Dishman, 'Terrorism, Crime, and Transformation', *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, Vol 24, No 1, 2001, pp. 43–58.

22 Daniella Bove-LaMonica, 'Al-Qaeda and Drug Trafficking, a Dangerous Partnership', *Policy.Mic*, 4 June 2011.

are alternating from criminal to ideological.²³ Even so, Chris Dishman and other prominent advocates of the crime-terror nexus seem reluctant to accept that groups – and the various networks within them – can pursue a diversity of aims. In his own words, ‘drug barons and revolutionary leaders do not walk on the same path to success’.²⁴

Rich vs. Poor

For terrorism researchers, one of the main obstacles to investigating crime-terror convergence has been the conventional wisdom that terrorists are not poor and uneducated, but – rather – originate from middle and upper class milieus who are rarely, if ever, involved in ‘petty crime’. This notion originates in the early 1980s when Saad Eddin Ibrahim, an Egyptian sociologist, discovered that a high percentage of imprisoned Egyptian Islamists were engineers and doctors who came from well to do families.²⁵ Marc Sageman, the American former CIA operative turned academic, arrived at similar conclusions in the early 2000s: of the 172 profiles of al-Qaeda members in his sample, less than a third were ‘lower class’, and nearly 40 per cent had university degrees.²⁶ The fact that Osama bin Laden, the long-time leader of al-Qaeda, was the son of a millionaire, and that many of the 9/11 attackers were university students with no criminal records perfectly fit this narrative.

As a result, and despite growing evidence to the contrary, researchers have historically shown little interest in the convergence of criminal and terrorist milieus. With the exception of prisons, which have long been identified as potential ‘breeding grounds’ for terrorism, most researchers have been content to reiterate the notion of ‘middle class’ terrorism; insisted that overlaps between terrorist and criminal milieus were ‘anecdotal’ rather than systemic; or dismissed the entire idea of terrorism being correlated, in certain instances, with *any* social, economic or demographic factors as ‘futile’, repeating the oft-stated mantra that there is ‘no one profile’ of a terrorist.²⁷

The consequence of these various ‘failures of imagination’ has been that the convergence of criminals and jihadists in Europe has gone largely un-noticed: while the merging between criminal and terrorist milieus in Europe is real, few scholars have – thus far – shown any interest in studying it. We are confident, therefore, that our report will make a significant contribution to enhancing our understanding of the crime-terrorism relationship.

23 Refer to Samuel Aronson, ‘AQIM’s Threat to Western Interests in the Sahel’, *CTC Sentinel*, 7 April 2014, p. 9.

24 Chris Dishman, ‘Terrorism, Crime, and Transformation’, *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, Vol 24, No 1, 2001, p. 45.

25 Saad Eddin Ibrahim, ‘Anatomy of Egypt’s Militant Islamic Groups: Methodological Note and Preliminary Findings’, *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, Vol 12, No 4, 1980, pp. 423–53.

26 Marc Sageman, *Understanding Terror Networks* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press), p. 89.

27 See, for example, Jonathan Rae, ‘Will It Ever Be Possible to Profile the Terrorist’, *Journal of Terrorism Research*, Vol 3, Issue 2, 2012, pp. 64–72.

3 The Database

The empirical basis for this report is a database containing profiles of 79 European jihadists with criminal pasts. While this is not a representative survey of European ‘gangster’ jihadists (and should not be presented as such), it has provided the source material for the different dynamics and developments that are described in the following chapters. In this chapter, we explain what the database contains, and how the process of data collection and coding was conducted. This is followed by a table (see Table 1) with a simplified overview of all entries and the categories for which they were coded.

Method

The principal aim of this study was to gain insights into the current ‘wave’²⁸ of European jihadists. As a result, our database only includes individuals who have: 1) travelled, or attempted travel, to a foreign ‘battlefront’ as a jihadist fighter and/or been involved in terrorism in Europe; 2) had a criminal history prior to their mobilisation into extremism; 3) been active as jihadists any time after the start of the current ‘wave’ in the year 2011.

Data collection took place between the months of March and July 2016, and was conducted by a multi-lingual team of King’s College London graduate students: Adam Alayli, Kavish Bisseswar, Juliette Deroo, Lasse Nielsen, and Maximilian Ruf. For reasons of time and resources, we decided to focus on the European countries that have been affected most severely, using estimates of the number of jihadist foreign fighters as a proxy.²⁹ As a result, the database (n = 79) includes individuals from Belgium (13), Denmark (11), France (13), Germany (15), Netherlands (11), and the UK (16).

All data was gathered from open sources, such as newspaper articles, court documents, and government reports. Having obtained ethical approval,³⁰ we then conducted a series of interviews with current and former counter-terrorism officials, in order to assess the implications of the findings, and check database entries. This became necessary because information concerning criminal pasts is often either unknown, incomplete, classified, difficult to research, or forthcoming. Moreover, information that is reported in the media can be a reflection of journalistic biases, where the most ‘headline-worthy’ criminal pasts receive the most attention, while other – potentially more important – activities are left unmentioned. To prevent such cases from distorting the overall picture, we omitted over 30 individuals whose trajectories we judged to be too incomplete to allow for systematic evaluation.

28 See Peter R. Neumann, *Radicalized: New Jihadists and the Threat against the West* (London: IB Tauris, 2016), Chapter 1.

29 Peter R. Neumann, ‘Foreign fighter total in Syria/Iraq now exceeds 20,000; surpasses Afghanistan conflict in the 1980s’, ICSR, 26 January 2015; ‘Foreign Fighters: An Updated Assessment of the Flow of Foreign Fighters into Syria and Iraq’, *The Soufan Group*, December 2015, pp. 7–10.

30 King’s College London ethical approval number LRU-15/16–3260.

Another problem related to clusters whose members had near identical criminal (and terrorist) trajectories. While this study is not meant to be a perfect representation of European jihadists, we were conscious of the need to maintain balance and avoid obvious overrepresentations, and therefore omitted 5 individuals from a large cluster in the Dutch city of Delft.³¹

Coding

The idea of erring on the side of caution also guided the coding process. It started with an empirical probe of five cases for which members of the research team were asked to generate variables. Following discussion, several of these were grouped together, while others were eliminated for being too similar or tautological. The final result were 30 variables which attempted to capture three aspects of an individual's profile or pathway: (1) biographical information; (2) involvement in jihadism; and (3) criminal history.

All coding decisions were checked by a senior researcher (typically Rajan Basra), and adjudicated by another senior researcher if disagreements persisted. Most of the issues and difficulties arose not in relation to individuals' biographical data but their histories of crime and extremism. For example, simply because individuals travelled to Syria or Iraq does not – in and of itself – mean that they were 'foreign fighters'. In the first two years of the Syrian civil war, many travelled to be doctors or humanitarian workers. As a result, we have, in each case, looked for evidence of the intention to fight, and only included individuals in which this could be established beyond reasonable doubt.

Similarly, whether or not an individual was involved in a terrorist plot creates its own set of questions and difficulties. Halil Ibrahim D. from Germany, for example, had a functional pipe bomb in his basement, alongside 9mm ammunition and parts of a G3 assault rifle, and police surveillance had observed him conspicuously alongside the planned route of a cycling race in the town of Oberursel.³² He had also bought three litres of hydrogen peroxide (an ingredient in the explosive TATP) in a hardware store, explaining that he needed this to clean his pond, despite his house not having a pond.³³ He was arrested prior to the bike race, yet the exact details of his plot remain unknown.

To assess individuals' criminal histories, we coded for time spent in prison (as well as the number of stays); criminal convictions; involvement with firearms; types of crime, such as violent (for example, assault, robbery) or petty crime (for example, trespassing, theft), drug dealing, trafficking, and white-collar crime (for example, identity theft or financial fraud).

These categories were sufficiently broad to mitigate the limitations of the data, which often did not allow for further sub-categorisation. For example, open-sources may disclose that an individual was *involved* in drugs but do not reveal their specific role (for example, user or dealer). Similarly, when open sources mention that an individual trafficked stolen goods, they rarely specify which goods they were. As a result, it was difficult to analyse the range

³¹ Andreas Kouwenhoven, 'Daar waren we dan, in het gezegende land', *NRC Handelsblad*, 5 July 2014

³² Hannelore Crolly, Thorsten Jungholt, and Florian Flade, 'Der entscheidende Fehler des verhinderten Attentäters', *Welt*, 12 February 2016.

³³ *Ibid.*

of criminality *within* particular categories, nor was it possible to reconstruct exact dates and timelines in all cases, which made it difficult to determine whether they ceased, continued, or escalated their criminality while radicalising.

Results

No uniform profile emerges from the sample, though it is possible to discern patterns. All individuals are male and predominantly young: the eldest individual was 38 at the time of his mobilisation, with the youngest being approximately 16. The average (as well as median) age was 25. The high proportion of converts (19–22 per cent) is in line with estimates of converts amongst jihadist foreign fighters from the European Union.³⁴

Of the 79 individuals, two-thirds (67 per cent) had travelled, or attempted to travel, to Syria as foreign fighters. Many of these also numbered in the 38 per cent who were involved in domestic terrorist plots. Nine per cent were convicted of terrorism related offences without having travelled or taken part in a specific plot.

The intensity of criminality varies, from ‘one-time’ criminals, to repeat offenders, and more sustained ‘career criminals’. Given the age of those involved, it is likely that many were at the beginning of their criminal ‘careers’. Furthermore, the vast majority were low level, local criminals, with only very few operating on a national or transnational level. While the majority were at some point involved in petty crime (68 per cent), the prevalence of violent histories (65 per cent) is notable – especially when considering that we only accounted for people involved in *perpetrating* violence as opposed to those that have been *exposed* to it.

Prison plays an important role, with the majority of the individuals in our sample (at least 57 per cent) having been incarcerated on at least one occasion. In fourteen cases (18 per cent of the total, or 31 per cent of those who spent time in prison), we are confident that they embraced jihadism in prison, though most of them continued (and intensified) their radicalisation after being released. Notably, eight of those individuals were subsequently involved in a domestic plot, which means that they are significantly overrepresented among those involved in domestic plotting.

Nearly 30 per cent of the individuals in our sample had experience with firearms, and half of them subsequently became involved in domestic plotting. By contrast, ‘white-collar crime’ seemed to be a marginal issue, with just 6 per cent involved in either credit card fraud or identity theft. (Actual figures are likely to be higher because data on this category of crime is often difficult to obtain.)

Collating these figures was a good way of acquiring a systematic overview of the different experiences and types of criminal history that are prevalent among current European jihadists. Most importantly, it generated the pool of information and case studies from which the analytical insights in the following chapters are drawn.

³⁴ Bibi van Ginkel and Eva Entenmann (eds.), ‘The Foreign Fighters Phenomenon in the European Union’, *International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague (ICCT)*, April 2016, p. 52.

Table 1: Simplified Database

#	Name	Country	Involved in plot	Foreign fighter	Time in prison	Radicalised in prison	Involved in firearms	Violent crime	Petty crime	Trafficking	White collar crime
1	Ayoub El-Khazzani	BEL / FRA	X	X	X				X		
2	Reda Kriket	BEL / FRA	X	X	X		X	X	X	X	
3	Salah Abdeslam	BEL / FRA	X		X				X		
4	Brahim Abdeslam	BEL / FRA	X		X		X	X	X	X	X
5	Mohamed Abrini	BEL / FRA	X		X		X	X	X	X	
6	Sofiane Amghar	BEL	X	X	X		X	X	X		
7	Khalid Ben Larbi	BEL	X	X			X	X	X		
8	Khalid Zerkani	BEL							X		
9	Abdelhamid Abaaoud	BEL	X	X	X			X	X	X	
10	Ibrahim El Bakraoui	BEL	X	Attempted	X	X	X	X		X	
11	Khalid El Bakraoui	BEL	X		X	X	X	X		X	
12	Fouad Belkacem	BEL							X		
13	Osama Krayem	BEL / SWE	X	X					X		
14	Moez Salah Melawi Mohamed Saleh	DEN			X					X	
15	Abderrozzak Benarabe	DEN		X	X		X	X			
16	Cevdet Onurlu	DEN							X		
17	Ahmed Samsam	DEN		X	X		X	X		X	
18	Hamza Samsam (Andres Vo Riis)	DEN		X				X			
19	Ali Sakandar Malik	DEN		X	X		X	X	X	X	
20	Abdul-Magid Fadel al-Ali	DEN		X					X		
21	Omar Abdel Hamid el-Husseini	DEN	X		X	X		X			
22	Michael Chau	DEN		X	X	X		X	X		
23	O.S.	DEN		X	X	X	X	X			

#	Name	Country	Involved in plot	Foreign fighter	Time in prison	Radicalised in prison	Involved in firearms	Violent crime	Petty crime	Trafficking	White collar crime
24	(Name Unknown)	DEN	X	X	X			X			
25	Salim Benghalem	FRA		X	X	X	X	X	X		
26	Mohamed Merah	FRA	X		X	X	X	X	X	X	X
27	Flavien Moreau	FRA		X	X			X			
28	Mehdi Nemmouche	FRA	X	X	X	X	X	X	X		
29	Omar Osman	FRA		X	X	X	X	X	X		
30	Kevin Chassin	FRA		X				X	X		
31	Alexandre Dhaussy	FRA	X			X	X	X			
32	Ismaël Omar Mostefai	FRA	X	X				X	X		
33	Armedy Coulibaly	FRA	X		X	X	X	X	X	X	
34	Chérif Kouachi	FRA	X		X			X	X	X	
35	Moussa Coulibaly	FRA	X					X	X		
36	Larossi Abballa	FRA	X		X			X	X		
37	Mohammed Lahouaiej Bouhlel	FRA	X					X			
38	Walid D.	GER		X			X	X	X		
39	Ebrahim H. B.	GER		X					X		
40	Marco René Gäbel	GER	X		X			X	X		
41	Samir A.	GER		Attempted				X	X		
42	Nils D.	GER		X	X			X	X		
43	Denis Cuspert	GER		X	X		X	X	X		
44	Emrah Erdoğan	GER		X	X	X		X	X		
45	Salim O.	GER						X	X		
46	Mustafa K.	GER		X					X		
47	Murat K.	GER	X		X			X	X		

#	Name	Country	Involved in plot	Foreign fighter	Time in prison	Radicalised in prison	Involved in firearms	Violent crime	Petty crime	Trafficking	White collar crime
48	Sebastian B.	GER		X					X		
49	Ismail Issa	GER		X					X		
50	Halil Ibrahim D.	GER	X				X	X	X		
51	Aria Ladjevardi	GER		X				X	X		X
52	Harry Sarfo	GER		X	X	X		X	X		
53	Mohamed Aden	NED		X	X		X	X			
54	Reda Nidalha	NED		X				X		X	
55	Abdellah Rahmani	NED		X					X		
56	Choukri Massali	NED		X					X		
57	Mourad Massali	NED		X				X	X		
58	Soufian El Fassi	NED		X				X	X		
59	Benyamine Fadlaoui	NED		X					X		
60	Nourredin Benzouagh	NED		X					X		
61	Az Eddine Benaissa	NED		X					X		
62	Jordi de Jager	NED		X					X		
63	Rudolph Holierhoek	NED			X			X			
64	Jermaine Grant	UK	X		X	X	X	X			
65	Hamayun Tariq	UK		X	X		X	X			X
66	Ali Almanasfi	UK		X	X			X	X		
67	Mohammad Emwazi	UK		X				X	X	X	
68	Mohammad El Araj	UK		X	X			X	X	X	
69	Choukri Elleklifi	UK		X				X	X		
70	Michael Adebowale	UK	X		X			X	X		
71	Michael Adebolajo	UK	X					X			
72	Aine Davis	UK	X		X	X	X	X			
73	Mohommod Nawaz	UK		X	X		X	X			
74	Ondogo Ahmed	UK		X	X		X	X			
75	Junaid Hussain	UK		X	X		X	X			
76	Imran Khawaja	UK		X	X			X	X		
77	Abdullah Deghayes	UK		X	X			X	X		
78	Daha Essa	UK		X	X			X	X		X
79	Brusthom Ziamani	UK	X		X			X		X	

4 Radicalisation and Recruitment

The recent mobilisation of foreign fighters for the conflict in Syria has been extraordinary: over the past five years, an estimated 5,000 Western Europeans have travelled to the Middle East in order to join jihadist groups such as Islamic State and *Jabhat al-Nusra*. No other conflict in which jihadists have been involved has attracted as many foreigners. In addition, there is an unknown number of 'stay-home supporters' who are often part of the same jihadist milieus from which the foreign fighters are recruited but have decided to remain in their home countries.³⁵

Both 'stay-home supporters' and 'returnee' fighters have played prominent roles in the series of terrorist attacks that has taken place in Europe since the middle of 2014. And both groups include a disproportionate number of people with 'criminal pasts' (see Introduction). One of the most important – and compelling – questions in relation to the crime-terror nexus is, therefore, how criminal pasts contribute to processes of radicalisation, that is, the personal circumstances, experiences, narratives, networks and other factors that explain an individual's involvement in extremism and their mobilisation into violence.³⁶

The profiles and pathways in our database offer some tentative answers. They suggest that the jihadist narrative – as articulated by the Islamic State – is surprisingly well-aligned with the personal needs and desires of criminals, and that it can be used to condone as well as curtail continued involvement in crime. Among the individuals in our database are cases in which becoming a jihadist justified and legitimised continued criminal activity, but also the opposite, that is, for radicalisation to serve as a means of 'redeeming' past 'sins'.

Whether or not jihadist groups are reaching out to criminals as a deliberate strategy remains unclear: we have found anecdotal evidence that recruiters are framing their appeals to suit the needs of people with criminal pasts, but no systematic evidence of how successful such approaches have been. In the absence of such evidence, the most likely – and plausible – explanation for the high number of 'gangster' jihadists remains the merging of criminal and jihadist milieus: both criminals and jihadists are recruited from the same demographics – and often in the same places.

35 See Peter R. Neumann, 'Foreign fighter total in Syria/Iraq now exceeds 20,000; surpasses Afghanistan conflict in the 1980s', ICSR, 26 January 2015; 'Foreign Fighters: An Updated Assessment of the Flow of Foreign Fighters into Syria and Iraq', *The Soufan Group*, December 2015, pp. 7–10; and Joseph A. Carter, Shiraz Maher, and Peter R. Neumann, '#Greenbirds: Measuring Importance and Influence in Syrian Foreign Fighter Networks', ICSR, 2014.

36 For a discussion of definitions, see Peter R. Neumann, 'The Trouble with Radicalization', *International Affairs*, 89(4) (2013), pp. 873–93.

The Redemption Narrative

For up to ten of the individuals in our database, we found evidence for what we called the ‘redemption narrative’. These were criminals who had experienced what Quintan Wiktorowicz termed a ‘cognitive opening’, a shocking event or personal crisis that prompted them to re-assess their entire life and become open for a radical change of values and behaviour.³⁷ In our case, they realised how their criminal behaviour had been harmful, that they needed to break with their past, and make up for their ‘sins’. This then provided the rationale for their turn to religion and justified the involvement with jihadist groups.

That they sought redemption in jihadism instead of other, more mainstream forms of religion or spirituality, may be explained with the strong alignment of needs and narratives. In other words: involvement in jihadism offered redemption from crime while satisfying the personal needs and desires that led them to become involved in it. Just like the criminal gangs of which they used to be members, jihadist groups offered power, violence, adventure and adrenaline, a strong identity, and – not least – a sense of rebellion and being anti-establishment. This made the ‘jump’ from criminality to terrorism smaller than is commonly perceived – especially when considering that, unlike al-Qaeda, Islamic State required practically no religious knowledge or learning, and cared little about the complexities of theological discourse. For criminals with a guilty conscience, the jihadism of the Islamic State could seem like a perfect fit.

Among the most prominent examples is Abderrozak Benarabe, locally known as ‘Big A’, a long-time criminal from Copenhagen who decided to turn to jihadism after his brother was diagnosed with cancer. When explaining why he became a foreign fighter, he immediately referred to his criminal past: ‘It’s not good enough just praying with all the shit I’ve done’ (see Case Study 1). Others used very similar justifications. Ali Almanasfi, for example, a British-Syrian from West London, turned to jihadism after participating in the violent assault of an old man for which he received a long prison sentence. When he told a friend about his trip to Syria and his recruitment as a foreign fighter, he said: ‘I want to do something good for once. I want to do something pure’.³⁸ Almost identical words were used by Reda Nidalha, a Dutch teenager who fled his hometown of Leiden for Brussels after being extorted by his criminal associates. His new ‘friends’, however, were jihadists, who quickly convinced him that becoming a foreign fighter was a way of ‘redeeming’ his criminal past: ‘Look, dad’, he reportedly told his father, ‘I am going to the mosque. I am finally [doing something good]. I am finally on the right path’.³⁹

37 Quintan Wiktorowicz, *Radical Islam Rising: Muslim Extremism in the West* (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005), p. 20.

38 As relayed to Tam Hussein, quoted in Luke Harding, ‘From Acton to Aleppo: how one British Muslim’s quest to Syria ended in death’, *The Guardian*, 31 May 2013 (note: the reports of Almanasfi’s death in May 2013 were incorrect).

39 Brenda Stoter, ‘The making of an Islamic State terrorist’, *Al-Monitor*, 30 March 2016.

Case Study 1: Abderrozak 'Big A' Benarabe

In August 2012 Abderrozak 'Big A' Benarabe flew from Denmark to Turkey to fight 'jihad' against the Syrian government. He arrived in Antakya, which he used as a staging post to cross over into Syria. After being smuggled across the border, Benarabe was taken to a safe house. Speaking of his intention to fight, he stated: 'I hope Allah will forgive us for what we did. Because I did many bad things back at home'.⁴⁰

Benarabe had a long history of criminality, with convictions for assault, extortion, and drug trafficking, alongside multiple stays in prison.⁴¹ Born in 1973, he and his brother – known as 'Little A' – were involved with the criminal milieu around Blågårdsgade, Copenhagen, from an early age. The police often spoke with their parents about the trouble the two boys were getting into. At the age of 15, 'Big A' was convicted of a stabbing, and a couple of years later shot a man in the leg after he had threatened his brother.⁴² As an adult, he was considered one of the leaders of the Blågårds Plads gang in Nørrebro, Copenhagen, and despite never having a formal job, lived a comfortable lifestyle from the proceeds of his criminality.⁴³

Benarabe's radicalisation was prompted by a cognitive opening after his brother's diagnosis with cancer, which made him promise to change his criminal ways in return for Allah healing his brother:

*I really don't know what's gonna happen. Maybe I'm gonna die there... so what? Because, you know, some people have died of my hands. This is a big problem when I meet Allah ... I've gotta try and make a difference. I think about Judgement Day ... But at least I can say I went down there and did what I could.*⁴⁴

Although his desire for redemption was prompted by a personal crisis, it is unclear exactly how Benarabe came to regard non-violent action as inadequate in his quest for atonement. It is possible that radical networks *catalysed* and *escalated* his internal 'redemption narrative', leading Benarabe to choose violent jihad over non-violent action. Similarly, the concept of jihad itself may have had an intrinsic appeal to Benarabe, given its promise of martyrdom and instant salvation from previous sins.

Once in Syria, he took part in frontline clashes against Syrian government forces: Benarabe needed no instruction on how to operate an AK-47. Yet his real utility to the group began once he returned to Denmark: Benarabe then trafficked supplies to his jihadist friends in Syria. He was able to raise approximately €55,000 from his criminal contacts, bought three mini-vans, loaded them with military paraphernalia and medical supplies, and travelled overland through Turkey to deliver them.⁴⁵

40 Nagieb Khaja, 'On the frontline in Syria: The Danish gangster who turned jihadi', *The Guardian*, 7 July 2014.

41 *Ibid.*

42 Natascha Rée Mikkelsen, 'Historien om "Store A"', *Berlingske*, 28 November 2010.

43 *Ibid.*

44 Nagieb Khaja, 'On the frontline in Syria: The Danish gangster who turned jihadi', *The Guardian*, 7 July 2014.

45 *Ibid.*

Legitimising Crime

While the jihadist narrative can be a source of redemption, several of our cases suggest that it may also serve as a *legitimiser* of crime. This is nothing new. Anwar al-Awlaki, the radical cleric who helped to create al-Qaeda's online magazine *Inspire* and incited young Western Muslims to become jihadist 'lone wolves' during the late 2000s, repeatedly told his followers that 'stealing from your enemies' is not only permitted but, in certain cases, obligatory; that Muslims are 'not bound by the covenants of citizenship'; and that any effort to support the jihad – be it by stealing or killing the disbelievers – must not be condemned as long as it takes place in the *dar al-harb* – the 'lands of war' (see Chapter 7).⁴⁶

Islamic State draws on the same logic, except that the current wave of jihadist mobilisation has provided the kinds of supporters that are capable of turning al-Awlaki's prescription into reality. Our database contains many cases in which this type of justification may have played a role, and we believe that it has the potential to become even more significant in future, because it offers criminals an opportunity for 'redemption' without requiring any change of behaviour.

The most prominent example is the network around Khalid Zerkani. Born in Morocco in 1973, he moved to Belgium as an adult and made money as a small-time criminal. After becoming radicalised, he used his criminal 'skills' (and considerable charisma) to recruit young men, mostly with Moroccan backgrounds, as jihadist foreign fighters. In particular, he encouraged them to commit thefts and robberies,⁴⁷ which he justified on religious grounds. As a witness in his trial testified, Zerkani told his recruits that 'to steal from the infidels is permitted by Allah'.⁴⁸ The proceeds were then redistributed amongst the group and used to fund their travel to Syria, leading to Zerkani's nickname of *Papa Noël* (Father Christmas).⁴⁹

Prior to his 2014 arrest, Zerkani had become a hugely influential figure within the jihadist scene in Brussels, and was responsible for the recruitment and mobilisation of up to 72 foreign fighters.⁵⁰ His most infamous protégé was Abdelhamid Abaaoud, a key coordinator of the network that organised the attacks in Paris in November 2015 and Brussels in March 2016. More than any other example, the structures that he created illustrate the near-perfect merging of criminal and terrorist milieus that took place in Belgium and help explain why this relatively small country has produced nearly 500 jihadist foreign fighters in just four years.

Recruitment

Does this mean that criminals are deliberately targeted and recruited by extremists? The evidence remains sporadic. Indeed, propaganda specifically targeting criminals is relatively rare. *Rayat al-Tawheed*, a network of British jihadists in Syria that joined the Islamic State in 2014, is the only group which has consistently adopted this tactic. One of its videos, for example, was dedicated 'to all the ... brothers who are

46 Al-Awlaki cited in Thomas Joscelyn, 'Anwar al-Awlaki: Jihadists should steal from disbelievers', *Long War Journal*, 17 January 2011.

47 Patrick J. McDonnell, "'Papa Noel' – the militant recruiter in Brussels who groomed young men for violence", *Los Angeles Times*, 28 March 2016.

48 Andrew Higgins and Kimiko De Freytas-Tamura, 'A Brussels Mentor Who Taught "Gangster Islam" to the Young and Angry', *New York Times*, 11 April 2016.

49 Pieter Van Ostaeyen, 'Belgian Radical Networks and the Road to the Paris Attacks', *CTC Sentinel*, 16 June 2016.

50 Pieter Van Ostaeyen and Guy Van Vlierden, 'Belgian Fighters in Syria and Iraq – An Important Review of Our Data', published on <https://pietervanostaeyen.com/2016/08/03/belgian-fighters-in-syria-and-iraq-an-important-review-of-our-data/>, 3 August 2016.

asking for advice on how to leave that “gangster life” behind and join the life of jihad’. While loading a handgun with bullets, a balaclava-clad man states:

The reality is you’re all in sin. Because deep down, you know what you’re doing, and you’re not changing ... Where are you when they are slaughtering our children, and our fathers? ...

And you still walk around boasting that ... you live this so-called gangster life – you’re listening to Styles P [an American rapper] in your bedroom, or in your jail cell ... I invite you all over to the land of jihad.⁵¹

The group also used the slogan ‘sometimes people with the worst pasts create the best futures’, alongside text explaining that ‘jihad is a purification no matter who you are or what sins you have, no good deeds are needed to come before it’.⁵² It remains unknown, however, how effective Rayat’s this type of online recruitment was, given that all the supporters we have information on were recruited not through internet propaganda but friendship networks.⁵³

A similar example is that of the Danish Salafist group *Kaldet til Islam* (Call to Islam).⁵⁴ The group would write letters to members from two imprisoned immigrant gangs in Copenhagen, targeting their guilty consciences, and encouraging them to return to Islam. The group’s Facebook page publicised their prison outreach, writing that Muslims in prisons ‘[are] getting off track, so we thought we could write letters to [them] and remind them of Allah. [After all, they] have plenty of time to read’.⁵⁵ While, again, it remains unknown how effective this approach was (the group did see *non-prison* recruits with prior criminality travel to Syria), it represents a novel way at reaching out to criminals.

Overall, therefore, deliberate efforts to target criminals – whether through propaganda or direct face-to-face engagement – may be more limited than one would suspect, and little is known about their success. In our view, this suggests that the outreach is not systematic but – rather – results from the (mostly unintended) convergence of milieus and narratives that has produced the new nexus.

51 Rayat al-Tawhid video, available at: http://www.liveleak.com/view?i=9e3_1397571049#, (date unknown)

52 Aris, Roussinos, ‘Behead First, Ask Questions Later: The Disturbing Social Media of British Jihadists’, *Vice News*, 15 April 2014.

53 For the limits of propaganda in recruitment, see Charlie Winter, ‘The Virtual “Caliphate” – Understanding Islamic State’s Propaganda Strategy’, *Quilliam Foundation*, 2015, p. 35.

54 Tariq himself did not have a criminal record, though many in *Kaldet til Islam* did, and are included in the research sample.

55 Simon Bedtsen, Mette Dahlggaard, and Kasper Krogh, ‘Fængslede muslimer skal have brev fra ekstreme islamister’, *Berlingske*, 2 October 2013.

5 Prisons

For nearly a decade, European prisons have been in the spotlight as places where extremist radicalisation, recruitment, and – in some cases – operational planning, have taken place.⁵⁶ The principal reason why prisons have become so important is that, in contrast to separatist-nationalist groups such as the IRA or Basque Homeland and Liberty (ETA) who regarded their fighters as ‘political’ prisoners and, therefore, wanted nothing to do with ‘ordinary’ murderers, rapists, and thieves, jihadists have embraced prisons as locations in which they can propagate their ideology and recruit members. For example, the radical cleric Abu Qatada – who was often referred to as Osama bin Laden’s ‘Ambassador to Europe’ – talked about ‘see[ing] the signs of Allah’ within British prisons: ‘Young men enter into Islam and then... learn Arabic and the Sharia in a short number of months’.⁵⁷

That prisons are significant places for people with criminal pasts seems obvious. 57 per cent (45 out of 79 profiles) of the individuals in our database had been incarcerated prior to their mobilisation, with sentences ranging from one month to over ten years, for various offences from petty to violent crime. More significantly, at least 31 per cent of those who spent time in prison (14 out of 45 profiles) radicalised there, although – in the majority of cases – the process continued and intensified after their release. Given the recent surge in terrorism-related arrests and convictions, and the rapidly expanding number of convicted terrorists in custody, prisons are likely to become more – rather than less – significant as centres of gravity for the jihadist movement.

The cases in our database highlight different ways in which prisons matter. First, they are places of vulnerability in which extremists can find plenty of ‘angry young men’ with criminal pasts who may experience cognitive openings and are ‘ripe’ for extremist radicalisation and recruitment. Second, they bring together criminals and terrorists, and therefore create opportunities for collaboration and ‘skills transfers’. And finally, they often leave people who have served their sentences with few opportunities to re-integrate into society and become productive citizens.

Vulnerability

For many new inmates, the very fact of imprisonment is a personal crisis, which raises profound questions about their lives while providing ample time to search for meaning. They are cut off from their immediate family, friends, and wider society, while finding themselves in an environment which is often hostile, unfamiliar, and tribal in nature, with divisions along religious or ethnic lines. Simply put, prisons are places in which new inmates are mentally and physically vulnerable, and may be more likely than elsewhere

⁵⁶ See Peter R. Neumann, *Prisons and Terrorism: Radicalisation and De-radicalisation in 15 Countries* (London: ICSR, 2010).

⁵⁷ Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 25.

to experience ‘cognitive openings’ – the willingness and desire to identify with new ideas, beliefs, and social groups.⁵⁸

For the same reason, jihadist recruiters view prisons as places of opportunity. Not only are inmates vulnerable and experience cognitive openings, making them receptive to jihadist ideas, they also tend to be part of the demographic that jihadist groups are keen to attract: young men, from Muslim backgrounds, who are unfamiliar with their own religion yet impulsive, confident, willing to take risks, and have been in conflict with the state and established authorities.⁵⁹ Far from being an obstacle, their criminal pasts have de-sensitised them to law-breaking and violence, and may in fact have provided them with skills that can be used in terrorism. In short, from the jihadists’ perspective, prisons are the perfect ‘breeding ground’.

The problem has long been recognised, though little seems to have been done to rectify it (see Case Study 2). One of the principal difficulties for prison authorities is to distinguish between religious conversion and radicalisation. Cognitive openings lead many inmates to seek out spiritual answers, and a significant number subsequently convert to Islam, which has become the fastest growing religion behind prison walls. In many places, prison staff find it difficult to ‘spot the signs’ and distinguish between (legitimate) religious conversion and (potentially problematic) radicalisation, especially since the outward signs can be similar or – indeed – the same. Furthermore, many prison systems still have not managed to resolve the dilemma between separating convicted terrorists (which risks creating or re-creating terrorist command-and-control structures) or integrating them with ‘ordinary’ criminals (which offers extremists opportunities for approaching potential recruits).⁶⁰

⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 26

⁵⁹ See Andrew Silke, ‘Holy Warriors: exploring the psychological processes of jihadi radicalization’, *European Journal of Criminology*, Vol 5, No 1, 2008, p. 107.

⁶⁰ Neumann, ‘Prisons and Terrorism’, pp. 13–21, 25–34.

Case Study 2: Harry Sarfo

Harry Sarfo from the northern German city of Bremen travelled to Turkey in April 2015 on a friend's passport, and then used smugglers to cross the Turkish-Syrian border.⁶¹ He then began his training with Islamic State, and was offered a role within the group's internal police, though he eventually joined the *quwat khas* (special forces). While he maintains that he neither fought in any battles nor executed anyone, he appears in an Islamic State propaganda film holding a black flag, and was photographed filming an execution in Palmyra.⁶²

Sarfo apparently grew disenchanted with Islamic State over its treatment of recruits, and the gulf between reality and its propaganda.⁶³ Intent on leaving, Sarfo managed to escape Islamic State territory by crossing the Turkish border on foot. Since his return to Germany, he has been imprisoned on terrorism charges, and has been cooperating with the authorities.⁶⁴

Harry Sarfo's journey towards extremism began in prison. He had been sentenced to two years for aggravated theft: in 2010, alongside friends, he robbed a supermarket and escaped with €23,500.⁶⁵ Just a few weeks prior to his 2015 travel to Syria, he reminisced about his time in prison, posting an Instagram picture of him reading in prison, alongside the caption: 'Remembering Allah (SWT), reading Qur'an and praying *salah*, got me through my prison time in Germany. The time in prison as a Muslim brought me closer to my creator'.⁶⁶

Sarfo's own account of his radicalisation emphasises the importance of belief, yet omits the face-to-face socialisation with a known extremist. Indeed, only in prison did he meet René Marc Sepac, a German jihadist who had been sentenced for terrorism-related offences. Sepac connected with Sarfo during his first week in prison and convinced him that the Islam he was practicing was wrong. He gave him Salafist books and sat down with him every day, working through the material and getting him excited about the new faith he was discovering. 'The books explained everything', Sarfo later told his police interrogators: 'Very precise and to the point.... And I thought, wow, I didn't know any of this stuff. I hadn't had any knowledge [prior to meeting Sepac]'.⁶⁷

This led to prison authorities noting a change in Sarfo's behaviour. Sarfo's actions once he left prison further underline the importance of social dynamics: he became a regular at the *Islamischer Kultur- und Familienverein* (IKF), a small extremist mosque on the outskirts of Bremen, as part of a clique that eventually sent 27 people to Syria.

61 Jörg Diehl, Julia Jüttner, Fidellius Schmid, and Wolf Wiedmann-Schmidt, 'Back from the "Caliphate": Returnee Says IS Recruiting for Terror Attacks in Germany', *Der Spiegel*, 16 December 2015.

62 Harald Doornbos and Jenan Moussa, 'Present at the Creation: The never-told-before story of the meeting that led to the creation of ISIS, as explained by an Islamic State insider', *Foreign Policy*, 16 August 2016.

63 Lizzie Dearden, 'Former Isis militant reveals reality of 'staged' propaganda videos and brutal life under the "Islamic State"', *The Independent*, 30 April 2016.

64 Jörg Diehl et al., 'Back from the "Caliphate": Returnee Says IS Recruiting for Terror Attacks in Germany', *Der Spiegel*, 16 December 2015.

65 Ibid.

66 Harry Sarfo Instagram post, available at <https://www.instagram.com/p/ydHvQgqRxA/> and archived at <http://oi65.tinypic.com/205tbw6.jpg>, posted approximated February 2015.

67 'Vernehmungprotokoll der Beschuldigtenvernehmung vom 15. Dezember 2015', *Generalbundesanwalt*, 15 December 2015.

Networking

Unless extremists are entirely separated from the rest of the prison population, which – as mentioned above – is not always be possible or advisable, prison environments have the potential to institutionalise a nexus between terrorists and criminals, enabling the flow of information, people, and skills. This is of greater benefit to the extremists than the criminals: not only do they get access to potentially fruitful opportunities and targets for radicalisation, they can also take advantage of the criminals' skills and underground connections, facilitating access to forged documents, weapons, money, goods, or even safe houses (see Chapter 6). More so than anywhere outside, prisons are places where criminal and terrorist milieus converge, and have the potential to produce more terrorists that are also better skilled and equipped.

The most significant example is that of Chérif Kouachi, Amedy Coulibaly, and Djamel Beghal. Kouachi and Coulibaly first met inside Fleury-Mérogis prison near Paris in 2007, and formed a friendship after spending seven months on the same wing.⁶⁸ Coulibaly had a history of armed robberies, and was imprisoned for aggravated theft, receiving stolen goods, and using false number plates.⁶⁹ Kouachi, meanwhile, was on remand awaiting trial over a 2005 attempt to travel to Iraq to become a foreign fighter.⁷⁰ The pair – one an 'ordinary' criminal, the other an extremist – were then mentored and radicalised in prison by Djamel Beghal, an al-Qaeda recruiter.⁷¹ In other words, prison allowed the initial network to be established, which culminated in Kouachi and Coulibaly coordinating the January 2015 Paris attacks, killing 17 people.

Despite this, it took more than eight years after their first encounter for them to mobilise into terrorist violence. In the meantime, several other events furthered their radicalisation: they continued to meet with Beghal after being released;⁷² became involved in a jailbreak of a jihadist prisoner in 2010, which included the stockpiling of weapons and ammunition;⁷³ and Chérif, along with his brother Saïd, travelled to Yemen in 2011, personally met al-Awlaki and received training in an al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) camp.⁷⁴ In short, the developments that occurred after their release were just as crucial as those that came before.

Post-Release

In all the relevant cases in our sample, processes of radicalisation that started during stays in prison did not end there. What's more, in four cases, individuals had been 'flagged' for radicalisation by the prison authorities but neither police nor intelligence agencies followed up. The gravest example is Mehdi Nemmouche, a French citizen who killed four people at the Jewish Museum in Brussels in May 2014. He had been flagged as 'radical' by the prison authorities, but succeeded in travelling to Syria three weeks after his release.⁷⁵

68 Angeliue Chrisafis, 'Charlie Hebdo attackers: born, raised and radicalised in Paris', *The Guardian*, 12 January 2015.

69 Ibid.

70 Scott Bronstein, 'Chérif and Saïd Kouachi: Their path to terror', *CNN*, 14 January 2015.

71 Angeliue Chrisafis, 'Charlie Hebdo attackers: born, raised and radicalised in Paris', *The Guardian*, 12 January 2015.

72 'Ce que l'on sait sur la radicalisation des frères Kouachi', *Le Monde*, 9 January 2015.

73 Emeline Cazi, Jacques Foliorou, Matthieu Suc, and Elise Vincent, 'La fratrie Kouachi, de la petite délinquance au djihad', *Le Monde*, 8 January 2015.

74 'Both brothers behind Paris attack had weapons training in Yemen – sources', *Reuters*, 12 January 2015.

75 Upon his return to Europe, he killed four people at the Jewish Museum in Brussels. See Scott Sayare, 'Suspect Held in Jewish Museum Killings', *New York Times*, 1 June 2014.

Equally noteworthy is the case of Omar el-Hussein, who killed two people during shootings at a cultural centre and a synagogue in Copenhagen in February 2015. As a teenager, el-Hussein joined the *Brothas* gang in Mjølnerparken, Copenhagen, and was involved in burglaries, petty crime, and drugs.⁷⁶ In November 2013, he stabbed a man on a train in an apparently unprovoked attack, and after two months on the run, was eventually arrested.⁷⁷ Having been sentenced to two years in prison,⁷⁸ he openly – and repeatedly – spoke of his desire to fight in Syria, prompting the authorities to flag him as potentially radicalised.⁷⁹ Over the course of his imprisonment, he was reported three times, but none of these alerts were ever investigated.⁸⁰

When el-Hussein was released, he had no access to probation services because he was technically on parole. Homeless and jobless, he appeared at the local job centre, asking for a place to stay and something to do.⁸¹ The job centre could not accommodate his request, and scheduled a new meeting. But instead of showing up, he carried out his attack – just two weeks after he had been released.

El-Hussein's rapid mobilisation demonstrates how potentially 'explosive' the convergence between criminal backgrounds and jihadist motivations can become. Prisons are the place where the two milieus are at their closest, and all the phenomena and social dynamics that are referenced in this report are most likely to manifest themselves. With increasing numbers of terrorists receiving sentences and becoming incarcerated, these problems are likely to become more pronounced.

76 'Overblik: Det ved vi om gerningsmandens 22-årige liv', *Politiken*, 23 February 2015.

77 *Ibid.*

78 'Baggrund: Her er hvad vi ved om Omar Abdel Hamid El-Hussein', *DR*, 16 February 2015.

79 'Omar ville til Syrien for at kæmpe', *Berlingske*, 16 February 2015.

80 'PET: Omar havde planer om at flygte efter terror-angreb', *BT*, 4 November 2015.

81 'Omar El-Hussein bad kommunen om hjælp kort før terrorangreb', *Berlingske*, 11 March 2015.

6 Skills Transfers

One of the most disturbing aspects of the new crime-terror nexus is the potential for criminal ‘skills’ to be transferred to terrorists. The academic literature on the crime-terror nexus has largely neglected this phenomenon. Where it has been considered, it has been to say that terrorist groups may seek to compensate for a lack of in-house skills by collaborating with organised crime. Should this be impossible or seen as too risky, terrorist groups would seek to develop in-house capabilities.⁸² The involvement of former criminals – whether intentionally recruited or not – is rarely discussed, because it bypasses the debate over collaboration between terrorist and criminal groups.

In our view, this understanding of the crime-terror nexus ignores the potential value that individuals with a criminal past can provide for terrorist groups, and how the merging of criminal and terrorist milieus increases terrorist groups’ capacity to carry out more – and more lethal – attacks. Indeed, there are many skills that a terrorist with a criminal past may have developed: criminals have experience dealing with law enforcement, and more importantly, may be familiar with the limits of police powers. Criminals are also innovative, and often have an ability to control nerves and handle pressure.

Beyond these, there are three themes which our database provides evidence for: first, that individuals with a criminal past tend to have easier access to weapons; second, that they are adept at staying ‘under the radar’ and planning discreet logistics; and third, that their experience and familiarity with violence lowers their (psychological) threshold for becoming involved in terrorist acts.

Weapons

Needless to say, not all terrorist attacks require firearms. Islamic State has frequently encouraged its supporters to use everyday objects, most infamously during a speech by the group’s late spokesman, Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, in which he said: ‘If you are not able to find... a bullet, then ... [s]mash his head with a rock, or slaughter him with a knife, or run him over with your car, or throw him down from a high place, or choke him, or poison him’.⁸³ The enormous carnage that can be caused by following these instructions was illustrated in the French city of Nice in July 2016, when 85 people were killed by an attacker who drove a lorry into a crowd. Even so, guns and bombs continue to be prominent in jihadist operations, and guns in particular have recently become more popular.

As early as 2013, Danish intelligence warned that the large numbers of criminals who were joining jihadists groups would lead to the proliferation of firearms among would-be terrorists.⁸⁴ Two years later, the warning came true. Between Omar el-Hussein’s two gun attacks (see previous chapter), he went to his neighbourhood of Mjølnerparken,

⁸² Makarenko, p. 33

⁸³ Abu Muhammad Al-Adnani, ‘Indeed Your Lord Is Ever Watchful’, 9 September 2014.

⁸⁴ PET Center for Terroranalyse, ‘Truslen mod Danmark fra personer udrejst til Syrien’, 23 October 2015, p. 3.

where he disposed of an M95 rifle that he had stolen during a home robbery and used during the first attack.⁸⁵ He then visited an internet café to meet with former gang associates, who likely supplied him with the ammunition that he used in the second attack. In short: without his criminal past, el-Hussein would have found it much harder – if not impossible – to acquire the means with which he carried out his attacks.

The same is true for Amedy Coulibaly. For the arms dealer that sold him his weapons, the ‘profit vs. ideology’ dilemma (see Chapter 2) was a moot point, because he had no idea that Coulibaly was a terrorist. Upon seeing the media reports that followed the attacks in January 2015, he pre-emptively turned himself in to the police, and confessed to supplying Coulibaly with Škorpion submachine guns, a rocket propelled grenade launcher, and the two AK-47s that the Kouachi brothers used.⁸⁶ He calculated that the attacks would eventually have led the police to him anyway. Indeed, had he known Coulibaly’s true intentions, he might have been more hesitant in supplying the weapons.

Even Islamic State itself has acknowledged the value of their operatives appearing like ‘ordinary’ criminals. The July 2015 issue of *Dar al-Islam*, the group’s French language magazine, featured instructions on acquiring weapons in which operatives were advised to conceal all external displays of religiosity, and instead adopt the look of a *jeune de cité* (a man from the estate) who is ‘looking to make a robbery with a weapon’.⁸⁷ As it turned out, this advice proved to be unnecessary, as many of their supporters – including el-Hussein and Coulibaly – genuinely fit this profile.

Staying ‘Under the Radar’

In addition to procuring firearms, there are other skills-transfers that are valuable to terrorist groups. They include, for example, the use of fake documents and access to safe houses, which enable terrorists to evade the authorities, and therefore increase the likelihood of a plot turning into a successful attack. Put simply, access to criminal skills makes it easier for terrorists to ‘stay under the radar’.

What matters in this regard are not specific abilities that former criminals may (or may not) possess themselves, but – rather – their access to (criminal) networks through which they can be mobilised. The production of forgeries, for instance, is difficult for terrorists to develop in-house. (Our database contains only three criminals who used identity theft prior to their radicalisation.)⁸⁸ Instead, it is more likely that terrorist networks would ‘out-source’ this capability to people who are experts – and who can typically be found in criminal milieus.

According to Harry Sarfo (see previous chapter), the Islamic State understands this. He told journalists that, instead of looking for forgers, the group was trying to cultivate former criminals who ‘have ties to organised crime and... know how to get fake IDs’.⁸⁹ In the case of the network that carried out the attacks in Paris in November 2015 and Brussels in March 2016, this

85 ‘Terrortiltalt hjalp Omar El-Hussein’, *Berlingske*, 17 March 2016; Michala Rask Mikkelsen, ‘Riffel fra terrorangreb blev stjålet under hjemmerøveri’, *Berlingske*, 18 February 2015. The rifle model is otherwise known as an RK 95 TP.

86 ‘Charlie Hebdo – Un Carolo se rend à la police prétendant avoir eu des contacts avec Amédée Coulibaly’, *La Libre*, 14 January 2015.

87 Al-Hayat, ‘Dar al-Islam Numéro 5’, 2015, p. 33.

88 Brahim Abdeslam (fraud/stealing IDs), Aria Ladjevardi (passport forgery) and Mohammed Merah (passport forgery). It is possible that the actual figure is higher.

89 Rukmini Callimachi, ‘How a Secretive Branch of ISIS Built a Global Network of Killers’, *New York Times*, 3 August 2016.

clearly succeeded (see Case Study 3). Here, as in other cases, the skills transfer consisted not of *manufacturing* forgeries, but of having access to a criminal network that was in a position to *acquire* forgeries.

Case Study 3: The Paris-Brussels Network

One month before the November 2015 attacks in Paris, Belgian police were conducting an investigation into a large-scale forgery ring in Brussels. Inside an apartment in the district of Saint-Gilles, investigators discovered a sophisticated factory that had been creating hundreds of fake identification cards, drivers' licences, and social security cards. The apartment was complete with a hot press, computers, and ID card printers, as well as hundreds of printing rolls and negatives of fake IDs. Among those negatives were IDs that had been produced for the 'supercell' that perpetrated the attacks in Paris in November 2015 and Brussels in March 2016.⁹⁰

It was only in the immediate aftermath of the Paris attacks, when one of its organisers, Salah Abdeslam, was on the run from police, that investigators revisited the forgery operation and discovered its connection to terrorism. As it turned out, the network had used fraudulent documents throughout their attack planning in order to wire money, travel between countries, rent cars, and – crucially – acquire safe houses.⁹¹

For example, one of the operatives, Khalid el-Bakraoui, used fake identification – adopting the name 'Ibrahim Maaroufi' – to rent an apartment in Charleroi, which was used by at least two of the Paris attackers.⁹² Another apartment in Schaerbeek – rented under the pseudonym 'Fernando Castillo' – was used as a bomb factory to manufacture the TATP explosives and suicide vests for the Paris attacks.⁹³

Even after those attacks, and the much greater risk of compromise, the network maintained the same *modus operandi*, again renting an apartment in Schaerbeek, which served as a bomb factory for their TATP suitcase bombs.⁹⁴ When signing the contract, Khalid's brother, Ibrahim el-Bakraoui, used a fake Belgian ID, adopting the pseudonym of a Portuguese 'Miguel Dos Santos', complete with wig and glasses.⁹⁵

Rather than becoming forgers themselves, the Paris-Brussels network had used their contacts within the criminal milieu to reach out to forgers that supplied people traffickers. This is how they came across Djamel Eddine Ouali, an Algerian who ran the forgery operation in Saint-Gilles. The supposed 'profit vs. ideology' dichotomy, which is frequently debated in the academic literature (see Chapter 2), was no barrier to this. In fact, there is no evidence that Ouali knew of their true intentions, or was even interested in them. Instead, it is likely that they simply appeared as 'ordinary' customers from a criminal milieu. As the Belgian investigator in charge of Ouali's case has said: '[He] was a professional document falsifier whose main goal was to make as much money as possible'.⁹⁶

90 Maia de la Baume and Giulia Paravicini, 'Inside the Brussels flat where terrorists scored fake IDs', *Politico*, 31 March 2016.

91 Lori Hinnant, 'Piecing together Salah Abdeslam's itinerary in Paris attacks: Days on end at the wheel and months of planning', *Associated Press*, 10 December 2015.

92 'Ibrahim and Khalid el-Bakraoui: From Bank Robbers to Brussels Bombers', *New York Times*, 24 March 2016

93 Michael Wolgelenter, 'ISIS Militant Returned to Belgium Before Paris Attacks', *New York Times*, 13 January 2016.

94 'Terrorista de Bruxelas usou nome português para arrendar apartamento', *tvi24*, 31 March 2016

95 'Ibrahim El Bakraoui usou um documento belga falso', *tvi24*, 31 March 2016.

96 Maia de la Baume and Giulia Paravicini, 'Inside the Brussels flat where terrorists scored fake IDs', *Politico*, 31 March 2016.

Familiarity with Violence

These practical and logistical skills are supplemented by a more intangible 'skill': that of familiarity with violence. Sixty-five per cent of the individuals in our database were involved in violent crime. Among the 30 individuals that were involved in domestic plotting, this figure rises to 80 per cent.

This does not mean that former criminals are necessarily using the same types of violence as terrorists: a terrorist using a knife does not always correlate to that person using a knife as a criminal. What we are suggesting is that, having engaged in violence repeatedly and routinely as a criminal can lower the (psychological) threshold for becoming involved in violence as a terrorist. In other words: for someone who is familiar with using violence and has become de-sensitised to its use, the 'jump' from cognitive to violent extremism will be smaller, and the process of mobilisation therefore quicker and less difficult.

The argument is hard to substantiate based on individual trajectories alone, given all the other potential influences that may have caused a person to engage in terrorism. Nevertheless, our database shows that the period of mobilisation – that is, the time between joining a jihadist group and becoming involved in violence – among the 30 individuals involved in domestic plotting was, in many cases, extraordinarily short, often less than four months or even just a few weeks. Furthermore, while there was no 'like-for-like' use of violence, the terrorist use of violence was always *more violent* than someone's criminal use of violence. These findings support the idea that familiarity with (criminal) violence produces terrorists that are not only more volatile but also more violent.

The case of Mohammed Merah – who killed seven people, including three Jewish children, near his home town of Toulouse in March 2012 – illustrates the often extreme histories of violence that can be found in our database. Merah was killed after a 30-hour standoff, during which he told police that he regretted 'not having claimed more victims'.⁹⁷ It was the culmination of a life that had been characterised by routine violence, two stays in prison, and 18 convictions for assaults, robberies, and thefts.⁹⁸ As a teenager, Merah was reported at least 15 times for violent acts, and was described as having 'a violent profile from childhood and behavioural troubles'.⁹⁹ This would continue into adulthood: in 2006, he beat his uncle in the face with a fire extinguisher after being asked to stop making noise with his quadbike.¹⁰⁰ In 2010, he left a teenage girl blind after assaulting her.¹⁰¹ By the time Merah had radicalised and received terrorist training in Pakistan in 2011, no one needed to 'persuade' him using violence was justified.

At the time of his attacks, Merah's transformation from petty criminal to terrorist seemed so unusual that the *New York Times* called his life story a 'bitter puzzle'.¹⁰² Yet in reality, Merah was a harbinger of things to come: whereas previous generations of terrorists regarded violence as a means to a (political) end, people like him saw it as an end in itself.

97 'Obituary: Toulouse gunman Mohamed Merah', *BBC News*, 22 March 2012.

98 Alex Jordanov, 'Mohamed Merah, de cas social à idole du jihad', *Les Inrocks*, 17 June 2015; and Virginie Andre and Shandon Harris-Hogan, 'Mohamed Merah: from petty criminal to neojihadist', *Politics, Religion & Ideology*, Vol 14, Issue 2, 2013, pp. 307–319.

99 'Obituary: Toulouse gunman Mohamed Merah', *BBC News*, 22 March 2012.

100 Alex Jordanov, 'Mohamed Merah, de cas social à idole du jihad', *Les Inrocks*, 17 June 2015.

101 John Rosenthal, 'Merah: The 'Untold Story' of a French Jihadist Icon', *World Affairs*, Winter 2016.

102 Dan Bilefsky, 'Toulouse Killer's Path to Radicalism a Bitter Puzzle', *New York Times*, 29 March 2012.

7 Financing

If we accept that criminal pasts facilitate access to weapons, help obtain fraudulent documents, and lead to a familiarity with violence, we should not be surprised that they also enable terrorist financing. Solid empirical examinations of this phenomenon are surprisingly rare, though two recent studies have started cataloguing the funding of jihadist activities in Europe. A report by Magnus Normark and Magnus Ranstorp focuses on how European foreign fighters have funded their travel to Syria: in addition to loans, private donations, bank fraud, and business fraud, they consistently emphasise the role of petty crime.¹⁰³

Emilie Oftedal's study examined the financing of 40 jihadist plots between 1994 and 2013: though nearly three-quarters generated at least some of their income from legal sources,¹⁰⁴ she shows that criminality played a significant role, with nearly 40 per cent of the plots drawing on the proceeds of crime.¹⁰⁵ Indeed, some of the most devastating plots were almost exclusively financed by illegal activities, including Mohammed Merah's attacks in the south of France (see previous chapter).

This chapter argues that funding through crime will become more significant. Our argument consists of three inter-related points. First, the vast majority of terrorist attacks in Europe does not require large sums of money or rely on the largesse of Islamic State's leadership. Whether small-scale or sophisticated, as part of its wider strategy, Islamic State and other jihadist groups are trying to keep financial barriers to entry low, making it possible for all their supporters – no matter how rich or poor – to become involved. Second, jihadists not only condone the use of 'ordinary' criminality to raise funds, they have repeatedly stated that doing so is the ideologically correct way of waging 'jihad' in the 'lands of war'. Combined with the large numbers of current jihadists with criminal pasts, this will make financing attacks through crime not only possible and legitimate but, increasingly, their first choice. Finally, there is evidence among the cases in our database that jihadists continue doing what they know and are most familiar with, which means that terrorist funding by criminal means will become more important as the number of jihadists with criminal pasts is increasing.

Strategy

Running a terrorist *organisation* can be expensive. Hierarchically structured groups like the IRA or ETA had million dollar budgets that were spent on a wide range of activities, including not just weapons and military operations, but also training camps, salaries,

¹⁰³ Magnus Normark and Magnus Ranstorp, 'Understanding terrorist finance: Modus operandi and national CTF regimes', *Swedish Defence University*, 18 December 2015.

¹⁰⁴ Emilie Oftedal, 'The financing of jihadi terrorist cells in Europe', *FFI Report, Norwegian Defence Research Establishment*, p. 3 & p. 26.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

and benefits for the families of dead or imprisoned fighters.¹⁰⁶ Moreover, whenever terrorist groups have evolved into insurgent armies or even quasi-states – such as Islamic State in Syria in Iraq, al-Shabaab in Somalia, or Hezbollah in Lebanon – those organisations have turned into de facto governments, paying for everything from schools to infrastructure. It may be true, therefore, that Islamic State is the ‘richest terrorist organisation in the world’,¹⁰⁷ but its control over people and territory indicates that it likely incurs more expenses as a result.

None of this, however, is necessarily relevant to the funding of terrorist attacks in the West, which has been largely separate and autonomous from the centralised budgets of groups like al-Qaeda and Islamic State. Indeed, for more than a decade, jihadist groups have encouraged their Western supporters to self-finance, while simultaneously promoting types of attacks that are cheap and easy to carry out. In the early 2000’s, al-Qaeda’s leading strategist Abu Musab al-Suri proclaimed the idea of ‘individual terrorism jihad’, with individuals and small cells raising their own money and operating ‘completely and totally separated from each other’.¹⁰⁸ Towards the end of the decade, al-Awlaki’s *Inspire* magazine regularly provided instructions for what the magazine termed ‘open source jihad’, teaching readers how to ‘build a bomb in the kitchen of your mom’.¹⁰⁹

Islamic State is no different: while expending enormous amounts of resources on running their ‘state’ in Syria and Iraq, it has promoted loose networks, cell structures and ‘low-cost’ attacks among its supporters abroad. This is reflected in Oftedal’s analysis, which found that 90 per cent of jihadist plots in Europe involved ‘an element’ of self-funding, with nearly half being *entirely* self-financed.

The reason this strategy has worked to the extent that it has is that jihadist activities in Europe aren’t expensive. Becoming a foreign fighter requires little more than buying an airline ticket to Turkey. An AK-47 machine gun can be acquired for less than €2,000, and a pistol for less.¹¹⁰ The costs of buying a knife or renting a vehicle are negligible. Oftedal’s study found that three-quarters of European plots between 1994 and 2013 cost less than €9,000.¹¹¹ The French Finance Minister stated that even the November 2015 Paris attacks were financed by a ‘sum not exceeding €30,000’.¹¹² These are amounts that do not usually require external funding or a dedicated terrorist fundraising operation: they can be raised from personal assets and savings, legitimate sources such as work or loans, or small-scale criminal activities that jihadists with a criminal past used to make their living with.

106 See, for example, John Horgan and Max Taylor, ‘Playing the Green Card: Financing the Provisional IRA, Part 1’, *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 11(2) (1999); Andrew Silke, ‘In Defense of the Realm: Financing Loyalist Terrorism in Northern Ireland, Part 1: Extortion and Blackmail’, *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, 21(4) (1998).

107 ‘World’s Richest Terror Army’, *BBC2 This World*, 22 April 2015.

108 See the excerpts from Suri’s ‘The Global Islamic Resistance Call’ reproduced in Al-Malā’im Media, ‘Inspire Magazine – Issue 4’, 2011, p. 31.

109 See the various issue of Al-Malā’im Media’s ‘Inspire Magazine’.

110 ‘France seeks new powers to monitor terror suspects’ bank accounts’, *Financial Times*, 23 November 2015.

111 Oftedal, p. 26.

112 ‘Paris terrorists needed just €30,000 for assault’, *The Local*, 3 December 2015.

Ideology

For many would-be terrorists, it would not be necessary to become involved in crime to afford the (relatively modest) cost of travelling to Turkey or funding a terrorist attack. Yet curiously, jihadist groups often encourage their followers to do so.

This relates to an ideological doctrine which states that stealing from 'unbelievers' is not only permissible but worthy of commendation. Theft – or any form of crime – is equated with *ghanimah*, which translates as 'the spoils of war'. As mentioned in Chapter 4, al-Awlaki justified this notion in his 'Ruling on Dispossessing the Disbelievers', which sanctioned the use of crime for the sake of 'jihad' – 'whether by means of force or by means of theft or deception'.¹¹³ He went as far as saying that living off *ghanimah* was preferable to seeking a regular salary, which would involve paying taxes to the 'disbelievers' and thereby funding their wars and oppression of the Muslim world.¹¹⁴

Islamic State shares this doctrine, and has turned it into practical advice by telling operatives to use fraudulent documents to obtain cash. Its French language magazine, *Dar al-Islam*, states: 'You should (if possible) try to obtain false documents, in order to reap the easy spoils, such as opening a bank account and paying by cheque in societies with low restrictions' [emphasis added].¹¹⁵ Far from being a sin, some jihadists regard involvement in crime as a religious duty.

Among the individuals in our database, we identified three cases in which crime was explicitly justified in religious terms. The most prominent one is the Zerkani network whose 'godfather', Khalid Zerkani, encouraged young Moroccans to steal from 'disbelievers' by saying that doing so was permitted for the sake of 'jihad' (see Chapter 4). Reda Kriket, a French 'returnee' who was arrested in March 2016 while planning a terrorist attack, was 'living off *ghanimah*' by stealing jewellery.¹¹⁶ And another Frenchman, who used false payslips to open bank accounts, tried to explain his actions by stating: 'Those are the spoils of war. And it is halal [permitted], you see!'.¹¹⁷

113 Al-Malā'īm Media, 'Inspire Magazine – Issue 4', 2011, p. 59–60.

114 Ibid., p. 60.

115 Al-Hayat, 'Dar al-Islam Numéro 5', 2015, p. 33.

116 Philippe Engels, 'Projet d'attentat déjoué: Reda Kriket, au coeur d'un énorme réseau de recrutement djihadiste', *Marianne*, 25 March 2016.

117 Guillaume Gendron, 'Le crédit à la consommation, bon plan des jihadistes', *Libération*, 16 January 2015

Case Study 4: Amedy Coulibaly and the Kouachi Brothers

In 2008 the French newspaper *Le Monde* interviewed prisoners inside Fleury-Mérogis about conditions within the infamous prison. One inmate stated:

*Prison is the best ****ing school of crime. In the same walk, you can meet Corsicans, Basques, Muslims, robbers, small-time drug dealers, big traffickers, murderers ... Over there, you learn from years of experience.*¹¹⁸

That prisoner was Amedy Coulibaly, who was imprisoned for receiving stolen goods, drug trafficking, and robbery. Within Fleury-Mérogis, he began socialising with extremists, and was mentored by Djamel Beghal, an al-Qaeda recruiter.¹¹⁹ He would form a friendship with Chérif Kouachi, who he spent seven months alongside on the same wing.

Upon release from prison, Coulibaly continued to associate with both criminal and extremist milieus, and was encouraged in doing so by his mentor Beghal, who provided him with an ideological licence to commit crimes to promote 'jihad'.¹²⁰ Coulibaly would go on to carry out a series of terrorist attacks in January 2015, which killed five people, culminating in a hostage crisis in a kosher supermarket in Paris. These attacks seemed to have been coordinated with the Kouachi brothers, who killed 12 people at the offices of Charlie Hebdo.

The attackers' sources of finance were mixed. The Kouachi brothers initially received the equivalent of €15,000 from AQAP after a 2011 trip to Yemen, although this money is likely to have been spent by the time of the Charlie Hebdo attacks.¹²¹ Potentially more significant is the fact that Said Kouachi was involved in running a counterfeiting operation, whereby he was importing fake Nike shoes from China. The proceeds from this trade are reported to have been used for buying the weapons that were used in the January 2015 attacks.¹²² French Customs discovered the operation in 2013, resulting in a fine for Kouachi. His wider connections – and the ultimate purpose of his trade – were never discovered because repeated requests for support from France's domestic intelligence service were never considered, despite counterfeiting being a well-established funding method of terrorist groups across the world.¹²³

Amedy Coulibaly, on the other hand, was selling drugs only a month before the attacks, in addition to being owed street debts worth €30,000.¹²⁴ Notably, he and his wife raised funds via two consumer loans: €6,000 from *Cofidis* in December 2014, and €27,000 from *Financo* in September 2014.¹²⁵ The *Financo* loan was used to purchase a car, which was then exchanged for weapons.¹²⁶

118 Luc Bronner, 'Amedy Coulibaly: "La prison, c'est la putain de meilleure école de la criminalité"', *Le Monde*, 13 January 2015.

119 Angelique Chrisafis, 'Charlie Hebdo attackers: born, raised and radicalised in Paris', *The Guardian*, 12 January 2015.

120 Guillaume Gendron, 'Le crédit à la consommation, bon plan des jihadistes', *Libération*, 16 January 2015

121 Eric Schmitt, Mark Mazzetti, and Rukmini Callimachi, 'Disputed Claims Over Qaeda Role in Paris Attacks', *New York Times*, 14 January 2015.

122 Katrin Bennhold and Eric Schmitt, 'Gaps in France's Surveillance Are Clear; Solutions Aren't', *New York Times*, 17 February 2015.

123 *Ibid.*

124 'Paris attacks: Investigators turn up new leads', *BBC News*, 19 January 2015; and 'J-12 jours avant "Charlie" et l'Hyper Cacher: récit d'un effroyable compte à rebours', *L'Obs*, 24 February 2015.

125 *Ibid.*

126 'Coulibaly: une voiture achetée à Bordeaux échangée contre des armes', *France 3*, 19 January 2015.

Though Coulibaly provided genuine identification for the *Cofidis* loan, he used a fraudulent payslip listing a monthly income of €2,978 at a company called Naxos. Even a cursory check could have raised suspicions: publicly available records show that Naxos had no employees, and that the phone number provided was not in use. Around the same time as the *Cofidis* loan, Coulibaly also tried to obtain credit from *Crédipar*, again by listing Naxos as his employer. On that occasion, Naxos' parent company Telcité was contacted, and confirmed that Coulibaly was not an employee. If the system had worked, this attempt would have been flagged, alerting other agencies and possibly prompting an investigation.¹²⁷

Continuity

The principal difficulty in detecting crime as a means of terrorist financing is that it does not involve a change of behaviour but merely one of purpose: individuals with criminal pasts often continue what they were doing in their earlier lives, except that the profits are used to finance terrorist attacks or trips to Syria. As a result, it can be difficult to separate funds that were raised for terrorism from money that is spent on other, often entirely mundane purposes. Saïd Kouachi, for example, sold counterfeit goods, received money from AQAP, engaged in bank fraud, and was involved in theft (see Case Study 4). Not all of his money went into the funding of the Charlie Hebdo attack, but some of it did. How is it possible to distinguish one from the other? Did Kouachi, in his own mind, separate the different streams of income? The merging of criminal and terrorist milieus, together with the self-financing of attacks, makes it hard to maintain traditional notions of terrorist financing: rather than tying particular transactions and streams of income to terrorism, it might be more fruitful to concentrate on individuals, their backgrounds and financial histories.

This is borne out by the individuals in our database, whose terrorist fundraising methods often mirrored their criminal pasts. Even before becoming a terrorist, Kouachi made a living by trading with counterfeit products, and continued doing so when he needed to find money for his attacks. The same logic applied to the British jihadist Choukri Ellekhli, who had convictions for several robberies, and financed his trip to Syria by doing more of them.¹²⁸ Similarly, a group of would-be foreign fighters from Germany worked in construction, and funded their journey by selling copper they had stolen from a building site.¹²⁹ In all of these cases, the common thread was not any particular source of funding (be it counterfeit, copper, or robberies) but individual consistency. If today's jihadists are former criminals, we should not be surprised if this is how they finance their 'jihad'.

127 'Amedy Coulibaly avait contracté un prêt de 6000 € qui aurait pu financer ses attentats', *La Voix Du Nord*, 14 January 2015; Guillaume Gendron, 'Le crédit à la consommation, bon plan des jihadistes', *Libération*, 16 January 2015; 'Amedy Coulibaly avait contracté un prêt de 6000 € qui aurait pu financer ses attentats', *La Voix Du Nord*, 14 January 2015.

128 'The Al Qaeda fanatic from Britain who funded jihad trip to Syria by mugging Londoners with a Taser', *Mail Online*, 30 November 2013.

129 'Die Säulen des Islamismus im Norden', *NDR*, 3 December 2015.

8 Recommendations

As this report has shown, many of today's jihadists are no longer middle-class intellectuals but petty criminals and former gang members who have spent time in prison and carry convictions for violent crime. All over Europe, criminal and terrorist milieus have merged, producing a crime-terror nexus whose different facets and implications this report has sought to describe.

The existence of this nexus and its associated dynamics should compel researchers, analysts, and policymakers to re-think long-held ideas about how terror, crime, and radicalisation have to be countered. In the following, we are offering a series of recommendations that may be useful in addressing the consequences.

Re-thinking Radicalisation

Many assumptions about radicalisation need to be reconsidered. This concerns not only the type of people who may be susceptible to jihadism and the places where they can be found, but also their behaviour. The individuals in our database often contradicted the notion that involvement in extremism correlates with religious behaviour. Some of them smoked cigarettes, drank alcohol, or took drugs. Others, in turn, observed religious rules but continued engaging in crime. Simply put: being pious is no guarantee that criminal behaviour has stopped, while acting like a 'gangster' does not preclude involvement in terrorism.

Similarly, the time it takes for extremists to mobilise into action seems to have shortened. Many of the individuals in our database no longer needed to become familiar with violence because they had violent pasts. The prospect of committing acts of violence was not only no barrier to their involvement, but something they positively embraced. Rather than years, it took them months, sometimes weeks, to become foreign fighters or prepare for domestic attacks.

Mapping the Crime-Terror Nexus

One of the most needed resources is a comprehensive, searchable database that tracks all criminal/terrorist interaction. With anecdotal histories and few studies, such as this one, that gather quantifiable data — it is difficult to identify crime-terror trends, and visualise network interactions, especially on a transnational scale. Developing such a resource would reinforce, and augment comparative analysis — for example, in understanding geographic idiosyncrasies of the nexus — and help identify the nature and dynamics of the threat.

Aside from the structural aspect, it is increasingly relevant to investigate the complex matrix of influencing factors — the social and the criminal — in the radicalisation process, answering questions such as: how do jihadists reconcile the contradiction between committing crimes, non-Islamic behaviour, and their ideological beliefs? Is it only criminals becoming terrorists, or are there terrorists who become criminals as well? Is there a particular psychological profile associated with former criminals who turn to terrorism?

Safer Prisons

As this study has shown, prisons are like a microcosm of the crime-terror nexus where radicalisation, recruitment, networking and even terrorist plotting have taken place. With increasing numbers of terrorism-related arrests and convictions, the significance of prisons in terrorist trajectories is unlikely to diminish. To make sure they do not become incubators of radicalisation or facilitate terrorist plots, we recommend a concerted effort to make prisons safe(r) from the risks associated with the new crime-terror nexus.

Based on ICSR's 2010 report on prisons and radicalisation,¹³⁰ this involves:

- Ensuring that all prisons within a prison system are well-staffed and avoid over-crowding;
- Training staff on issues related to radicalisation and terrorism, so they are able to spot early signs and distinguish between religious conversion and violent radicalisation;
- Assigning prison security officers who maintain direct channels of communication with security agencies;
- Making available mainstream prison imams, so that extremists have no opportunity to fill the 'spiritual vacuum' and exploit cognitive openings;
- Providing probation services with adequate resources to understand, and deal with, the challenge of re-integrating potentially radicalised criminals.

Targeting All Streams of Financing

Efforts at countering terrorist finance have traditionally focused on the international financial system – with meagre results. The limited cost of attacks, together with the merging of criminal and jihadist milieus, demonstrates more clearly than ever that the focus on financial transactions is insufficient, and should be replaced with an all-streams approach. Our recommendation is that countering terrorist finance needs to be broadened to counter all potential sources of funding, including small-scale and 'petty crime', such as drug dealing, theft, robberies, and the trade in counterfeit goods like clothes, bags, watches, perfumes, cigarettes, electrical items, and computer games.

Doing so has multiple benefits: it counters the financing of terrorist attacks, reduces 'ordinary' crimes, and enables law enforcement agencies to operate a so-called 'Al Capone approach', that is, bringing lesser charges against individuals in cases in which terrorism related offences are difficult to prove.¹³¹ In fact, the mayor of the Brussels district of Molenbeek, where several of the terrorists involved in the Paris and Brussels attacks had lived, made precisely this point when she argued that 'radicalisation thrives on other forms of criminality', and that 'one way to tackle terrorism is to first target lower offences'.¹³²

¹³⁰ See Peter R. Neumann, *Prisons and Terrorism: Radicalisation and De-radicalisation in 15 Countries* (London: ICSR, 2010)

¹³¹ Al Capone is the name of the notorious American mobster who was eventually caught and convicted for tax crimes.

¹³² Quoted in Nikolaj Nielsen, 'Molenbeek mayor opens new front on extremism', *EU Observer*, 9 September 2016.

Information Sharing

As the lines between terrorism and ‘ordinary’ crime have become blurred, relevant agencies need to become more effective at sharing relevant information across departments and ‘disciplines’. This report has provided several examples in which counter-terrorism agencies have failed to act on alerts provided by the prison authorities, customs, and police. It is essential, therefore, that government agencies review existing channels and systems of information exchange, reach out beyond ‘traditional’ partners, and make appropriate changes reflecting the new – and multi-dimensional – nature of the threat.

According to Jürgen Storbeck, Europol's founding Director, this should involve common databases and training, mandatory information exchange in risk areas (for example, suspicious transactions and travel), and early warning systems.¹³³ Another suggestion is for crime and terrorism related databases to be integrated and routinely cross-referenced, as well as populated with real time data and digital evidence.¹³⁴ Where laws on privacy and civil liberties permit, such databases could be designed to include relevant information from non-security agencies, such as local authorities and even the private sector (see below), in addition to utilising technology in order to manage – and make sense of – disparate sources of data.

Creating New Coalitions

Beyond data sharing, a key challenge lies in forming new ‘coalitions’ of partners that may not be used to working with each other. In our view, the merging of criminal and terrorist milieus requires a breaking down of the institutional silos that prevent the most relevant institutions and agencies from being effective partners. Achieving this will require leadership and the will to overcome cultural and political obstacles.¹³⁵

– Among security agencies

As mentioned above, countering terrorism and countering crime are no longer entirely separate, which means that the agencies responsible for fighting terrorism and those in charge of countering crime need to collaborate more systematically than has hitherto been the case.

Intelligence, law enforcement, customs, and prison authorities need to institutionalise links, develop channels of communication and data sharing, as well as engage in the systematic building of human capital, for example through exchanges, joint training, exercises, and simulations which can all help to foster mutual trust and co-operation. ‘Fusion centres’ and ‘cross-crime teams’ may be useful to facilitate the flow of information and ensure that collaboration becomes deeply embedded with all relevant parts of government.

– Between government, local authorities, and civil society

Security agencies need to reach beyond ‘their own’. Many crimes have local roots, and its perpetrators are sometimes known by the communities in which they occur. A key objective is therefore to create awareness of the potential links between ‘ordinary’ crimes and the

¹³³ Interview with Jürgen Storbeck, 15 July 2016.

¹³⁴ Egmont Institute conference, 26 September 2016.

¹³⁵ Interview with British counter-terrorism official, 25 July 2016.

funding of terrorism, and help mobilise local populations in preventing them. This may be done, for example, through advertising, targeted outreach, and/or community policing.

Equally important are relationships with local authorities who are certain to know more about communities, local dynamics and relationships, than law enforcement and the intelligence agencies. Conversely, security agencies may help to address local tensions, address grievances, and establish positive relationships with community leaders.

– *Public-Private Partnerships*

Another potentially valuable tool are public-private partnerships. Businesses are affected by many of the crimes described in this report, and – in addition to wanting to be seen as good ‘citizens’ – they typically have a commercial interest in countering smuggling, fraud, the trade in counterfeit goods, and/or intellectual property infringements. They also often collect and possess information that can be useful to law enforcement agencies.

However, in contrast to all other areas in which this report has made recommendations, there is currently little understanding or awareness among European officials and policymakers as to what public-private partnerships are and how they work. Beyond protecting critical infrastructure and dealing with banks and telecommunications companies, many security agencies find it hard to imagine collaborating with business or understanding how they might play a role in countering crime and/or terrorism. Not least, there are few examples or best practices that could be drawn upon.¹³⁶

As a result, a first step towards exploring the potential for this kind of cooperation should be an in-depth stock-taking and analysis of existing public-private partnerships, both in Europe and abroad. We recommend conducting interviews and workshops with stakeholders from both sides – that is, businesses and governments – in order to better understand their interests, needs and potential contributions. This could, then, be the basis for the development and promotion of pilots. Doing so would provide opportunities to discuss challenges and obstacles, such as issues of public and commercial confidentiality.

If successful, those partnerships have the potential to become a useful channel for exchanging best practices and/or coordinating efforts at generating awareness and developing self-regulation. They may also be helpful in engaging across sectors and developing successful community engagement. Most importantly, they would make it possible to involve an entirely new category of actors in countering a rapidly changing threat.

¹³⁶ Workshop at FBINAA conference, 27 September 2016.

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The views expressed in this report, as well as any and all mistakes, are the authors' alone.



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