

Drugs and Terrorism: The Overlaps in Europe

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Terrorist groups throughout the world have, at times, involved themselves in the drug trade, to either prohibit, passively tolerate, or profit from the business. The situation in Europe, however, is largely unknown and has been the subject of speculation and conjecture. Seeking to remedy this, this report finds no widespread crossovers between terrorism and the European drug trade.

A minority of European jihadists have backgrounds in low-level drug dealing. Wholesale importation very rarely occurs. A minority also have histories of using illicit drugs, with their consumption broadly in line with that of the general European population, meaning there is nothing exceptional about their personal drug use.

Of the 75 perpetrators of jihadist attacks in Europe between 2012 and 2018, toxicology reports suggest that at least 5 individuals (7% of the total) consumed illicit drugs in the days or hours prior to their attack. This appears to be a continuation of pre-existing habits; it is unclear whether it was to “prepare” them for their attack. This demonstrates that extremists do not automatically break from familiar and possibly addictive patterns, and that radicalisation is no guarantee of an abrupt, absolute, and permanent change in lifestyle.



A minority of jihadists have also funded their activities through small-scale drug dealing, which tends to be a continuation of their pre-radicalisation activities. Their fundraising is therefore not a change in behaviour but a change in purpose.

The only area in Europe with sustained and long-term crossovers is Northern Ireland, where paramilitary groupings have sought to either prohibit or profit from the drug trade. Prohibition typically manifests in vigilante ‘punishment’ attacks on suspected drug dealers, which remain a persistent issue even two decades after the 1998 Good Friday Agreement.

Where paramilitaries are involved in the supply of drugs, it is only one crime among many they carry out. It is not always clear whether this behaviour is sanctioned by a group’s leadership, though various paramilitary groupings not only traffic drugs themselves, but also extort or ‘tax’ drug dealers looking to operate in their areas of control.

There is some evidence that Hezbollah, and to a lesser extent, the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) have, at least indirectly, profited from the drug trade in Europe. It is unclear whether this activity is centrally coordinated or condoned.