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## The Future of Jihadism in Europe: A Pessimistic View

by Thomas Hegghammer

### Abstract

*This article presents a ten-year forecast for jihadism in Europe. Despite reaching historically high levels in recent years, violent Islamist activity in Europe may increase further over the long term due to four macro-trends: 1) expected growth in the number of economically underperforming Muslim youth, 2) expected growth in the number of available jihadi entrepreneurs, 3) persistent conflict in the Muslim world, and 4) continued operational freedom for clandestine actors on the Internet. Over the next decade, the jihadi attack plot frequency in Europe may follow a fluctuating curve with progressively higher peaks. Many things can undercut the trends and lead to a less ominous outcome, but the scenario is sufficiently likely to merit attention from policymakers.*

**Keywords:** Europe; jihadism; forecasting

### Introduction

Europe has recently experienced something of a jihadi terrorism crisis, marked by several mass-casualty attacks and a veritable exodus of foreign fighters to Syria. Now that foreign fighter flows are subsiding and Islamic State is weakening, many are hoping that the worst is over. In this speculative article I argue that it is probably not. Things may calm down in the short term, but four macro-trends point to a future with even larger radicalization and terrorism challenges than today. While this pessimistic scenario need not materialize, policymakers would be well advised to brace themselves for it.

The article starts with a description of recent developments and a reflection on the short-term prospects. After presenting the framework for the long-term assessment, I describe the four macro-trends that underpin the assessment. Then I ask how exactly the long-term increase may play out, before discussing reasons why the prediction may be wrong. The conclusion reflects on the value of the prediction and its policy implications.

### The Jihadism Crisis

The last few years have seen historically high levels of jihadi activity in Europe. There has been a negative development on a range of indicators, including:

- *Deaths:* Between 2014 and 2016, jihadi attacks killed 273 people, more than in all previous years combined (267).[1]
- *Attacks:* In 2015 and 2016, there were 14 jihadi attacks, about 3.5 times more than the biannual average (6) for the preceding fifteen years.[2]
- *Plots:* In 2015 and thus far in 2016, there were 29 well-documented attack plots, about 2.5 times more than the biannual average (12).[3]
- *Execution rate:* In 2015 and 2016 about half of the serious plots reached execution, compared with less than a third in the preceding fifteen years.[4]
- *Foreign fighters:* Between 2011 and 2016 over 5,000 European Muslims went to fight in Syria; about five times more than the number that went to all previous destinations combined.[5]

- *Arrests:* Between 2011 and 2015, almost 1,600 people were arrested in jihadism-related investigations in the EU (excluding the UK); an increase of 70% compared with the previous five-year period.[6]

There have also been ominous qualitative changes to jihadi operations. The November 2015 Paris attack, which involved nine operators, all equipped with functioning suicide vests, who struck near-simultaneously in three separate locations, was one of the most complex terrorist operations ever carried out in Europe.[7] Some plots were even more ambitious, and one network may even have taken active steps toward acquiring radioactive materials.[8] Moreover, the Paris and Brussels attacks in November 2015 and March 2016 were probably the first case since 1995 of the same jihadi cell being able to strike hard twice (most previous cells were dismantled after their first major attack). All this happened while European security services were larger and more experienced with counterterrorism than perhaps at any time in their history.

Nobody before 2011 predicted this jihadi resurgence, and its precise causes remain unclear. In retrospect, three factors seem to have played a particularly important role. The first and most obvious was the eruption of the Syria war in 2011, which provided European Islamists with an unusually visible and accessible foreign fighter destination.[9] The second was the social media revolution of around 2010, which facilitated recruiting by allowing for more propaganda distribution and safer communication between activists.[10] The third was the rise of Islamic State in 2013-2014, which provided an appealing new brand of jihadism and a territory from which to plot attacks in Europe.

### ***Short-term Decline?***

The jihadism crisis has been met with a range of countermeasures. Governments have adopted tougher legislation and more aggressive prosecution practices against foreign fighters.[11] Security services have been given larger budgets, and some, especially the French ones, have been granted more intrusive powers.[12] The same services have worked actively to root out recruitment networks and dismantle so-called “gateway groups” such as *Islam4UK* and its many spin-offs across Europe.[13] Many countries have developed countering violent extremism (CVE) strategies involving prevention and rehabilitation programs.[14] Several European states are also involved in the military effort against Islamic State and probably run intelligence operations in and around IS’s territory. Meanwhile, intelligence services have no doubt learned much about the networks that emerged in the first half of the 2010s. All these efforts have presumably made it harder for European jihadis to recruit, to travel, and to plot.

The combined effect of these measures may well be a decline in jihadi activity in the short run, i.e., in the next two to five years. There are already signs that this is happening; foreign fighter departures have been down for at least a year, and the past few months have seen slightly fewer and less potent attack plots than late 2015 and early 2016.[15] Some fear that the Islamic State may lash out as Mosul and Raqqa come under attack, but it is not clear whether the group has spare capacity to further escalate in Europe under the current constraints. This is certainly not to say that jihadi attacks will cease in the near future, only that it would be reasonable to expect a moderate decline compared with the plot frequency of 2015 and early 2016. After all, strong states such as those of Europe virtually always “win” against known terrorist adversaries, because the resource asymmetry is so large. The reason terrorism persists and often comes in waves is that states have an information problem in the early phase of terrorism campaigns. When new groups and networks emerge, states do not know exactly who and where the rebels are, and this gives the latter an advantage until the states have mapped the networks.[16]

### ***The Risks and Limits of Long-term Prediction***

The main question, as far as the long-term future is concerned, is to what extent we will see new jihadi networks emerge in Europe. The problem, however, is that speculating about such long-term futures involves

great uncertainty. There is also an ethical dimension to such speculation, because it can veer into alarmism, something for which terrorism analysts have a well-earned reputation.[17] Alarmism in counterterrorism is costly; it can lead to over-expenditure, human rights abuses, undermining of the rule of law, and polarization between groups in society. In this particular case, however, the trends pointing in a negative direction are unusually strong, and it is arguably better to discuss them than to ignore them.

The following sections will describe four macro-trends which, if they continue, may in combination facilitate the emergence of more jihadi activism in Europe some five to fifteen years from now. I identified the trends one by one over the past two years as I conducted my own research and read that of others. It was when I realized there were several of them, and that they combined to a worrying whole that I decided to write this article. The four trends are: 1) a growth in the number of economically underperforming Muslim youth, 2) a growth in the number of veteran activists, 3) persistent armed conflict in the Muslim world, and 4) persistent operational freedom on the Internet.

While the list of trends is inductively generated, its relevance is to some extent theoretically underpinned. The four trends all touch on elements prominent in “resource mobilization” approaches to political activism. Resource mobilization is a perspective from the social movements literature that views surges of activism less as a response to broader socio-political strains and more as a function of the ability of entrepreneurs to craft activist networks and exploit protest technologies.[18] The first of the four trends concerns the availability of recruits; the second affects the number of entrepreneurs available to build networks; the third relates to the availability of political grievances and safe havens outside the West, while the fourth affects operational capacity. In an ideal-type jihadi network-building effort, each of these variables is presumably important: activism requires entrepreneurs; entrepreneurs need manpower; manpower comes more easily with political grievances; and both recruitment and operations are improved by online freedom.

Are there other salient variables? Perhaps, but many of the factors usually invoked to explain jihadism are in fact constants. Jihadi ideology, for example, is practically always available. There will “always” be a variety of jihadi ideologies around, with bodies of literature to back them up and firebrands to promote them. The degree to which larger numbers of people embrace a given jihadi ideology at a given time is arguably a function less of the doctrine’s finer points than of the resources available to spread it and the political developments that give it empirical credibility. Similarly with the various motivations or processes by which individuals are recruited to jihadi groups; for example, we know that many are attracted to the adventure or camaraderie of clandestine activism, but these rewards are found in all radical groups, and they presuppose the existence of a group in the first place. By contrast, the four factors highlighted here are variables, and they affect central aspects of the network-building enterprise.

The prediction exercise is complicated by the fact that jihadi activism can take at least three different forms – attack plots in Europe, foreign fighting, and non-violent agitation – and that each ideal type of activism involves different types of constraints. Non-violent agitation is relatively constraint-free, so the level of agitation depends primarily on the supply of motivated activists, and is therefore more predictable. The level of foreign fighter flows, however, depends on the availability of foreign fighter destinations and the ease with which these can be reached. This is unpredictable, as the Syrian war demonstrated. The level of plot activity, meanwhile, depends on the countermeasures that governments are willing and able to muster. The relationship between plotting and countermeasures is strategic, which means that what government do depends on what the terrorists do. For example, a surge in plotting is typically followed by police repression, which brings the plotting frequency down, at least temporarily. The point is that while macro-trends probably can indicate the expected general level of activism, it is very hard to say exactly which specific types of activism will be prevalent at any one place and time.

**Macro-trend 1: A Larger Recruitment Pool**

The first macro-trend is that the main demographic pool from which European jihadis have historically been recruited, namely economically underperforming Muslim youth, seems to be growing. We know that the majority of European jihadis are young Muslim men of immigrant background from the lower half of the socioeconomic ladder. We do not yet know whether or not their economic underperformance has a causal effect on radicalization, but we know that a majority of them are drawn from this demographic. Tens of large-n studies have found European jihadis, as a group, to score worse than national averages on indicators such as education level, employment rate, and criminal conviction rate.[19]

We also know that the size of the European Muslim population is increasing as a result of immigration and relatively high (but declining) fertility rates. According to Pew Research, the Muslim population in Northern, Western and Southern Europe is set to increase with around 50% from 2010 to 2030, from around 25 million to 37 million.[20] The highest relative increase is expected in Northern and Western Europe, with a 98% and 45% increase respectively (3.8 to 7.5 million in Northern Europe, and 11.3 to 16.4 million in Western Europe). The share of the total population is expected to increase from 3.8% to 7% in Northern Europe, from 6% to 8.6% in Western Europe, and from 6.9% to 8.8% in Southern Europe.

Pew also projected the Muslim population in all European countries except the Balkans to have a male surplus in 2030, albeit a slightly smaller one than in 2010. Some countries such as the UK, Norway, Spain and Italy expect sex ratios of over 120 men per 100 women in 2030. The Muslim population is also generally younger than the non-Muslim population, and although the gap is expected to decrease slightly compared with today, the proportion of the European Muslim population under age 30 in 2030 is expected at around 42%, compared with 31% for non-Muslims. The Pew analysis was conducted before the refugee crisis in 2015, which brought around 1 million asylum seekers from Muslim-majority countries to the European Union, over 60% of whom were men under 35.[21]

Most important, we have good reason to expect the European Muslim population to continue to be economically underperforming on average. In most European countries, Muslims are the most economically disadvantaged major religious group.[22] This is likely the result of three factors: first, that many Muslim immigrants arrived with low education; second, that social mobility in the EU is generally mediocre (except in Scandinavia)[23]; and third, that there is documented anti-Muslim discrimination in the labour market.[24] Put more simply, many early Muslim immigrants entered the labour market as working class, and their children were not able to climb the social ladder. This situation is likely to persist, because first-generation Muslim immigrants continue to arrive with relatively low education on average, and there is little to suggest social mobility will increase or anti-Muslim discrimination will decrease in the EU in the coming decade. We therefore have good reason to believe that the number of economically disaffected Muslim youth in Europe will be larger in 2030 than today.

None of this needs to matter. Only a tiny fraction of European Muslims become involved with militancy, and the proportion varies across host countries and between ethnic subsets of the Muslim community.[25] There is also a substantial minority of converts in European jihadi networks.[26] It is therefore not a given that the jihadi community will grow proportionally, or even at all, if the Muslim population increases. Socio-economic discontent on its own is more likely to lead to crime or the occasional riot than to terrorism. The size of the jihadi community is presumably affected much more by intervening variables such as the availability of radical organizations and recruitment networks. However, if we expect such networks to exist in 2030, then these demographic trends may make their recruiting task somewhat easier.

**Macro-trend 2: More Entrepreneurs**

A second and more important trend is that the number of people who can serve as entrepreneurs and local network-builders may be larger in the coming ten years than it was in the previous decade. This is because the recent jihadi crisis has produced an unprecedented number of foreign fighters and other activists who will command authority if and when they try to rebuild jihadi networks in the future.

We know recruitment usually happens through social networks and that former foreign fighters and other veteran activists often play important roles in the formation of new radical communities.[27] This is presumably because their experience and reputation afford them authority vis-à-vis younger recruits. This mechanism has thus far ensured a remarkable historical continuity in the networks that have made up European jihadism. Activists from the 1980s radicalized a new generation of militants in the 1990s, who in turn built new networks in the 2000s, who in turn influenced new recruits in the 2010s.[28] With several of the networks operative today we can trace a network genealogy going all the way back to the 1990s.[29]

Historically, a proportion of European jihadis appear to have been “in it for life,” in the sense that they continued with their activism over many years, both during and after serving prison time. Such veterans often stayed clear of direct involvement in attack plots, because they knew they were on the radar of the authorities, but they continued to recruit and advise new networks. The proportion of new activists who went on to become entrepreneurs and network-builders appears to have been small. Some were killed in action, some got very long prison sentences, and many demobilized. However, the few who kept going were able to do considerable damage. There is arguably no reason why the most recent generation of European jihadis should not also include a certain percentage of people who are in it for the long haul.

There are presumably two main types of activists who can obtain veteran status and serve as future network-builders, namely, foreign fighters and people imprisoned on terrorism-related counts. The past five years have seen both of these groups grow very large. Between 2011 and 2016 around 5,000 European Muslims went to Syria, most of them to join radical groups such as Islamic State or Jabhat al-Nusra.[30] By contrast, the total number of Islamist foreign fighters from Europe for the entire 1990-2010 period was probably less than 1,000.[31] To be sure, the number of radical Syria veterans in Europe will be smaller than 5,000, because not everyone comes back, and not everyone comes back a committed jihadi. According to some reports, between 20% and 30% (i.e., between 1,000 and 1,500) of the Syria travellers have returned thus far.[32] The number of returnees will presumably increase somewhat in the next few years, but it is difficult to estimate the final number. In any case, many will be potential future activists; a recent study by German authorities suggested only about 10% of foreign fighters returning from Syria were disillusioned with jihadi ideology.[33]

As far as detainees are concerned, Europol reported that between 2011 and 2015, 1,579 individuals were arrested in connection with Islamist terrorism investigations. The figure for the previous five-year period (2006-2010) was 937.[34] These figures exclude data from the UK, which does not report disaggregated arrest data to Europol. However, the UK has separately reported that it made 1,199 terrorism-related arrests between 2011/12 and 2015/16 (and 932 in the previous five-year period).[35] Not all were Islamism-related, but we know that in the 2001-2012 period, 88% of the people arrested in the UK in terrorism-related cases and for whom the religion was known, were Muslims.[36] Of course, not all arrests end with a conviction, and some individuals may have been detained more than once, so these figures must be treated with caution.

Another measure is the number of people currently serving time for jihadism-related terrorism crimes. In the UK, for example, there were 152 such convicts as of September 2016.[37] An additional 1,000 people in UK prisons were considered “at risk of radicalization” to various ideologies, including both jihadism and neo-Nazism.[38] In France, the number of inmates on terrorism crimes was 349 as of October 2016, with an additional 1,336 individuals detained on radicalization counts (“prévenus et condamnés radicalizes”), and another 359 “radicalized” individuals in open detention.[39] In Belgium, the number of detainees on terrorism counts (including individuals awaiting trial) was 117 in June 2016.[40]

A conservative back-of-the-envelope calculation would suggest Europe has today at least a couple of thousand radical Islamists with either foreign fighter experience or prison experience, or both. Perhaps only a small proportion of them will be lifelong militants, but the absolute numbers are such that the number of surviving veterans who can potentially take on an entrepreneurial role will be substantial. We have to bear in mind that the operational networks we have seen in the past emerged on the back of much smaller numbers of veterans.

The challenge of veterans serving as entrepreneurs is compounded by two features of the European criminal justice system, namely prison radicalization and relatively short sentences (at least compared with the United States and the Middle East). There has long been widespread concern about Islamist radicalization in European prisons.[41] Many who enter prison with jihadi convictions do not deradicalize, and some common criminals radicalize through interaction with ideologically committed inmates.[42] *Sky News* recently reported that:

*Around three-quarters of the 583 people imprisoned on terror charges in the years since the 9/11 attacks have now served their sentences and been released from UK prisons, many still holding the same extremist beliefs that got them jailed in the first place. [...] around two-thirds of those released refused to engage with prison deradicalisation programmes aimed at addressing their extremist behaviour.*[43]

Moreover, many inmates with radical convictions serve sentences of a few years only. In 2012, according to Europol, the average sentence in terrorism cases in Britain, Germany, and France was six, six, and five years respectively, and in 2013 it was nine, four, and seven respectively.[44] Moreover, few convicts serve their full sentence, and some serve as little as half. In the past, several individuals committed or plotted terrorist attacks after serving time in prison.[45]

We do not have sentencing length data for the last few years, but there is every reason to think that they are relatively short on average, because they involve many cases of foreign fighting or attempted foreign fighting, which is usually considered a less serious crime than plotting attacks inside Europe. This gives reason to believe that the next 5-10 years will see the release of many individuals with jihadi credentials who are still in their late twenties or early thirties, i.e., with potentially many years left in their militant careers. If history is a guide, some of these individuals may well become the jihadi entrepreneurs of the 2020s.

### **Macro-trend 3: Persistent Conflict in the Muslim World**

The third major trend is the apparent persistence of armed conflict in parts of the Middle East, North Africa, and South Asia. Existing conflicts show few signs of ending, and new ones may erupt. The region therefore looks set to supply European jihadis with both rallying causes and training opportunities for the foreseeable future, as it has in the past.

The evolution of jihadism in Europe has always been closely connected with political developments in the Muslim world. For a start, jihadism arguably first came to Europe in the late 1980s and early 1990s with Islamist insurgents who found in Europe a fundraising ground and a refuge.[46] After Europe developed an indigenous jihadi community from the mid-1990s onward, conflicts in the Muslim world continued to affect this community in two important ways. The first was by providing grievances that interested Muslim immigrants in Europe and gave resonance to jihadi narratives about an Islam under attack from infidels and apostates. European jihadis have arguably always been more preoccupied with wars and insurgencies in the Muslim world than with “domestic” European issues such as headscarf bans. Conflicts such as the Algeria war in the 1990s, the second Palestinian intifada from 2000, and the war in Syria after 2011 all featured very prominently in internal discussions among European jihadis and in radicalization accounts by militants.[47]

Conflicts that involve Western military intervention, such as Afghanistan after 2001 or Iraq after 2003, have tended to have a particularly strong mobilizing effect on European jihadism.[48] In fact, when European

jihadis justify attacks in Europe, it is most often with reference to European countries' military actions in the Muslim world. The post-9/11 era has seen a vicious cycle whereby terrorist attacks in the West directed by jihadi groups in the Muslim world prompt Western military action against those groups, which in turn fuels radicalization in the West. The ongoing war against Islamic State in Iraq and Syria suggests that this vicious cycle is far from broken. However, even if we assume zero Western military action in the Muslim world in the coming decade, history suggests European jihadism could still thrive on external conflicts. The post 2011 Syria war, for example, drew record numbers of European foreign fighters before European militaries started bombing IS targets in Syria in late 2014.

The second mechanism by which conflicts in the Muslim world affect European jihadism is by facilitating the rise of jihadi organizations that can host European foreign fighters. Many conflicts that erupted in the Muslim world after 1990 saw the involvement of one or more jihadi groups. Not infrequently, those groups proved willing to host foreign fighters from Europe. As a result, European foreign fighters have trained and fought in a variety of conflict zones over the past 25 years, including in Tajikistan, Bosnia, Chechnya, Afghanistan, Kosovo, Somalia, Palestine, Iraq, Lebanon, Yemen, Mali, Libya, and Syria.[49] Foreign fighting fuels European jihadism by transferring military skills to the foreign fighters, by radicalizing some of them, and by giving them a social status they can exploit for recruitment purposes when they return. We know that returning foreign fighters are overrepresented among plotters of jihadi attacks in Europe, that their attacks are deadlier on average than other attacks, and that some of them have become important recruiters and authority figures.[50] Some jihadi groups outside Europe, such as al-Qaida and Islamic State, have also sought to systematically attack the West and have trained European foreign fighters for sophisticated attack missions in Europe. Conflict zones outside the Muslim world thus function as safe havens and capacity-boosters for European jihadis. This strategic depth is particularly valuable in an era when Western societies are highly regulated and well-policed, and it goes a long way toward explaining the resilience of European jihadism. Other radical movements in Europe, such as the extreme right, have not enjoyed the same strategic depth and thus found themselves "caught" in Europe, where their organizational structures were at the mercy of security services. (That, incidentally, may be part of the reason why some Western European neo-Nazis recently jumped to the chance of foreign fighting in the Ukraine, but the numbers, in the high tens, are still too small to make a difference.[51])

The past five years has seen the eruption of several new conflicts in the Middle East and North Africa, especially in Syria, but also in Yemen, the Sinai Peninsula, Libya, Mali, and Northern Nigeria. Meanwhile, few if any of the existing conflicts – be it in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq, Palestine, or Somalia – have been resolved. The result is a belt of wars and insurgencies from Mali to Afghanistan, all of which feature one or more militant Islamist groups. There has been a measurable increase in the number, size, and activity of jihadi groups in the region.[52] The most egregious example is Islamic State, which in the course of a few years grew from a small Iraq-based militia to a proto-state with tens of thousands of soldiers. But jihadi activity increased in many other locations. According to the Global Terrorism Database, terrorist incidents in the Middle East, North Africa and South Asia skyrocketed from about 3,500 incidents in 2010 to 12,000 in 2014. Other conflict datasets show similar trends.[53]

At the current time of writing, few of these conflicts seem likely to end any time soon. The Syria war, for example, has many of the features associated in the civil war literature with conflict longevity, such as rebel fragmentation and external interference.[54] In Afghanistan, the Taliban has made major advances in recent years, presumably setting the country on track for more war.[55] The Iraqi government looks set to recapture most of the territories lost to Islamic State in 2014 within a year or two, but uncertainties remain about the country's long-term stability.[56] The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is militarily cold, but politically as bitter as ever.[57] Yemen is in total disarray.[58] In Somalia, al-Shabaab has recently achieved a comeback.[59] Libya has no central government and is torn by two even-sized warring parties—another recipe for lengthy conflict.[60]



Meanwhile, several of the countries in the region that have avoided major conflict face problems of various kinds that suggest we should not take their stability for granted. Several of them, especially Egypt, have moved in a more authoritarian direction since the so-called Arab spring in 2011.[61] Many countries face severe economic problems, either because of lower oil prices, declines in tourism, or the refugee burden.[62] Regional instability after 2011 has reduced foreign direct investment in many countries.[63] Several countries face large youth waves and suffer endemic youth unemployment.[64] In short, many of the strains that were invoked to explain the Arab uprisings in 2011 are present today, in many cases to an even greater degree than before.

None of this is to say that the situation in the Middle East, North Africa and South Asia will necessarily deteriorate. It could improve, for the world is unpredictable and this part of the world arguably even more so. However, it is very unlikely that the entire region stabilizes and all jihadi groups are decimated in the course of the next decade. In ten years' time there will presumably be at least a few conflicts in which jihadi groups can thrive. That may be sufficient to provide European jihadism with the political inspiration and training opportunities it needs to keep going.

#### ***Macro-trend 4: Continued Operational Freedom on the Internet***

The fourth macro-trend is greater freedoms for clandestine actors on the Internet, which, if these persist, will continue to allow European jihadis to spread propaganda, recruit, and plan operations online.

The internet comes with a wide range of potential benefits for terrorist groups. It is a faster, cheaper, longer-range, and more scalable communication technology than most analogue alternatives. It can dramatically reduce the transaction costs of key rebel tasks such as propaganda distribution, recruitment, fundraising, reconnaissance, and operational coordination. In practice, however, terrorist groups have never been able to tap the Internet's full potential, because of government countermeasures such as denial, surveillance, infiltration and counter-messaging. In the face of online repression, rebels face several problems, including an access problem (making sure they are not blocked from online services), a security problem (making sure police is not listening in on communications), a trust problem (making sure their interlocutors are not infiltrators), and a saturation problem (making sure their propaganda is not drowned out by competing messages). The degree to which terrorist groups are able to overcome these problems at any given time depends on the level of online repression and on the quality of the available technologies. Because repression is shaped by politics and because technological developments come in bursts, terrorists' ability to exploit the Internet has varied over time. At times, they have enjoyed more freedoms, at other times less. In the early 2000s, when the Internet was fairly new, jihadi groups were leading the cat-and-mouse game between states and rebels. In the second half of the 2000s the tables turned, and jihadis were far more constrained in their Internet use.[65] Stable websites were blocked, discussion forums were infiltrated, communications were often intercepted, and many people were arrested as a result, including for "minor" crimes such as propaganda distribution.

Around 2010, however, the situation changed again in what I have previously labeled "the jihadi digital empowerment revolution." [66] It happened gradually as a result of several changes. One was the advent of social media, which gave jihadis a wider range of user-friendly communications platforms. Paradoxically, social media also offered more security, at least for small-fish radicals, because governments could not hack or monitor Twitter and Facebook as easily as they had jihadi discussion forums in the 2000s. Another change was the increased availability of encryption, for example in the form of end-to-end encrypted messaging apps such as WhatsApp and Telegram. This increased the online stealth capability of actors seeking to avoid surveillance.[67] A third change was the sheer increase in the number of jihadi activists after 2011, both inside and outside Europe. The combination of more surveillance targets and a larger variety of

communication platforms left security services overwhelmed and forced them to reduce digital policing of all but the most serious suspects.

The result was a general easing of the constraints which had hampered jihadis in the late 2000s; they simply got away with much more than they had just a few years earlier. From 2010 onward, jihadi groups were able to distribute propaganda on much larger scale than they had before, and they could post sensitive tactical information on blogs and websites without it being taken down.[68] And because they could communicate more securely one-on-one, they could recruit, fundraise, and even coordinate operations over the Internet to a larger extent than in the 2000s. For example, in 2013 and 2014 foreign fighters in Syria could communicate with friends back home with an ease that would have been unthinkable for foreign fighters in Waziristan or Yemen in the 2000s. This particular capability probably helped increase the number of foreign fighters, because it allowed for a “bridgehead effect” whereby recruits back home could be inspired, persuaded, or reassured to go to Syria by personal conversations with friends who had gone before them.

An ominous recent development has been the increasing boldness with which jihadis in Europe use digital communications in operational settings. In the 2000s, attackers generally avoided discussing tactical matters over the phone or over the Internet in the last stages of a planning process for fear of being intercepted. Recently, however, we have seen jihadis coordinate things over the phone right before or even during an operation (for example during the Paris attacks in November 2015).[69] Similarly, in the 2000s, when al-Qaida dispatched an attack team to Europe, they seemed to limit communication with the team to an absolute minimum after their departure. Recently, by contrast, IS appears to have communicated extensively with operatives in Europe. There have even been cases of IS cadres in Syria grooming IS sympathisers in Europe via the Internet for attacks, without them ever having met in real life.[70] This type of behavior was rare in the 2000s and reflects a greater confidence in the security of digital communications. It is presumably for this and other reasons that several European security services have recently complained about occasionally “going dark” on surveillance targets.[71]

If jihadi groups continue to enjoy a similar level of online freedom over the next ten years, it will be relatively easy for committed entrepreneurs to build networks and plan operations. Jihadi groups outside Europe will also be able to recruit foreign fighters and direct attacks in Europe. Of the four trends presented here, this is probably the most uncertain, because it can be partially reversed with technological innovations (which are hard to predict) or with a political decision to allow more digital surveillance. Still, at this point it is difficult to see how, given the proliferation of encryption, we would return to pre-2010 levels of online policing.

### ***How European Jihadism Returns***

If these four trends are accurate, and if they hold for the coming decade, we have reason to expect extensive jihadi activity in Europe also in the mid- and long-term future. We may even see higher activity levels, at least periodically, than we have seen thus far.

It is impossible to predict exactly how such a resurgence might occur, but my guess is that future jihadi entrepreneurs will follow a strategy similar to that of the so-called “gateway groups” of the late 2000s, that is, to establish organizations that operate just within the boundaries of the law, whatever national law is at that point. The gateway groups, such as *Islam4UK* and its spin-offs such as *Sharia4Belgium*, *Fursan al-Izza*, and the *Prophet’s Umma*, were probably an adaptation to the anti-al-Qaida repression in the early and mid-2000s. Radical Islamists appeared to have learned that organizational structures which dabbled with things like training, fundraising, or foreign fighter recruitment quickly got taken down, while groups that limited themselves to *verbal* support for jihadi causes were left alone. Gateway group leaders such as Anjem Choudary became masters at knowing exactly how far they could go without getting into trouble. As a result, these groups were able to grow quite large, and it was only when they “gave in to the temptation” of militancy

and started sending people to Syria that governments could clamp down on them. Thus even Choudary was sentenced in September 2016 to over five years in prison. Future entrepreneurs may draw lessons from this and try the gateway group strategy again, but with more discipline.

Of course, European governments will also learn and will likely emerge from the jihadism crisis of 2011-2016 with somewhat sharper counterterrorism tools and new laws to constrain grey area activism such as gateway groups and foreign fighting. For example, they will probably try to lower the “incrimination bar” further in order to prevent the re-emergence of gateway groups. However, there are presumably limits to how low the bar can be set without infringing on freedom of speech and other human rights, so there will likely be room for new, more cautious gateway groups to arise. These groups will be careful not to engage in unlawful activity, but they will propagate jihadi ideology and quietly encourage the emergence of clandestine operative networks around them. It is probably from these clandestine networks that the militant activity will arise.

It is important to note that “increased activity” need not mean more successful terrorist attacks. European security services will adapt to the threat and ask for more resources to prevent violent activity. They will likely get it, because publics will not tolerate high terrorism levels over time. We may therefore see an increase in plots, but most of them will be foiled, as has long been the case in Europe. We may also see other types of activity such as foreign fighting or non-violent agitation. The bottom line is that we need not see substantially more violence, but we probably will see security services grow very large – and high-security prisons too.

Beyond the vague notion of “an increase on a five to fifteen-year timeline” it is difficult to say precisely how activity levels might evolve. If we envisage a diagram with years on the x-axis and the number of plots on the y-axis, it is unlikely to be a straight line or a clean exponential curve, because periods of high plotting activity will likely be met with government counteroffensives that bring the level down again. Most likely it will be a fluctuating curve with high years and low years, but with progressively higher peaks. Even in this pessimistic scenario, activity is unlikely to increase forever, but it is hard to say when it may start declining. One hypothesis is that it will continue to increase for as long as the activists that were recruited in the early 2010s are politically active, that is, for another fifteen to twenty years. This hypothesis is based on the assumption that the jihadism crisis of the early and mid-2010s produced an exceptional number of new activists due to legal loopholes on foreign fighting and the accessibility of the Syria war. But this is only a guess; the increase could last shorter or longer than fifteen-twenty years.

### ***How this Prediction May Prove Wrong***

It is not certain that this pessimistic scenario will materialize, because unexpected things can happen. For one, each of the four trends might be broken in various ways. For example, the economic integration of young Muslims in Europe may go better than expected and leave a smaller pool of people susceptible to jihadi recruitment. The number of future entrepreneurs may turn out to be smaller than anticipated, for example if the current numbers include more opportunists and fewer true believers than assumed, or if we develop more effective de-radicalization programs. Conflicts in the Middle East, North Africa and South Asia may end sooner than expected, by negotiation, by one side winning, or by war fatigue. And governments can regain control over the digital sphere, either by a technological breakthrough or by a political decision.

For another, governments may prove better at policing future jihadi networks than expected. This could happen either through learning, i.e., by their knowledge of networks accumulating past a major effectiveness threshold, through some technological breakthrough, for example with new analytical tools, or by a political decision to allow more heavy-handed or intrusive policing methods that today are still considered beyond the pale. France’s implementation of a state of emergency in the wake of the Paris attacks is an indication of the lengths to which certain European governments are willing to go if the perceived threat is large enough.

However, heavy-handed policing can also backfire and worsen the radicalization problem by creating grievances and undermining trust between police and the Muslim community.

A third possibility is that the Muslim world or European Islam is swept by a normative shift toward even more comprehensive rejection of radical Islamism. Today the vast majority of the world's Muslims reject violence in the name of Islam, but a substantial minority does not, as is evidenced by the sheer size of jihadi groups and by Pew polls that find popular support for groups like al-Qaida in the several percent (and in some countries over 20%).<sup>[72]</sup> In Europe, too, the reality is that thousands of individuals have been seduced by "jihadi cool" in recent decades.<sup>[73]</sup> It is conceivable that the excesses of Islamic State or a series of particularly bloody terrorist attack in Europe will prompt a normative backlash that stigmatizes participation in jihadism to an even greater degree than it does today.

There are also unpredictable factors that could make things worse. The most obvious is a further rise in anti-Muslim xenophobia and more terrorism against Muslims in Europe by the extreme right. There has been much concern about a possible polarization between European jihadis and European far-right extremists.<sup>[74]</sup> There has long been a steady stream of violent attacks by the far right against ethnic minorities in general and Muslims in particular, and some countries, especially Germany, have seen a dramatic rise in such attacks in the past year.<sup>[75]</sup> So far, however, the far right and the jihadis have not entered into a conflict dynamic comparable to that between the European far right and the far left.<sup>[76]</sup> We have not seen clear examples of jihadi cells being motivated primarily by the actions of the far right, and the far right has thus far responded to jihadi terrorist attacks with relatively low-level violence.<sup>[77]</sup> The dynamic could change, however, in the event of mass-casualty attacks by the far right against Muslim targets.<sup>[78]</sup>

## Conclusion

I have discussed four macro-trends which, if extrapolated some ten years into the future, would appear to create favourable circumstances for somewhat increased levels of jihadi activism in Europe compared with current levels. Of course, nobody can know what the future will bring, and for this particular phenomenon, a large number of intervening factors can change the outcome. The prediction presented here should be considered a "likely worst-case scenario" for jihadism in Europe. There are worse scenarios that involve more violence, but they are unlikely because they presuppose that European security services do not adapt to the threat along the way.

Drawing up a likely worst-case scenario has several benefits. For one, it may preempt complacency among policymakers by showing that, even if the situation improves in the short run, there are good reasons why it might deteriorate in the longer term. We should not, in other words, take a decline of European jihadism for granted, however much we all wish for it. Furthermore, laying down some assumptions – in this case, the four macro-trends – gives us something specific to discuss. The ensuing debate will hopefully bring objections and new arguments to the table and produce a more refined understanding of European jihadism.

This exercise in forecasting has some social scientific value in that it implicitly challenges some common assumptions about rebel movement lifecycles. Several scholars have suggested that rebellions have expiry dates. For example, terrorism scholar David Rapoport's famous article "The Four Waves of Modern Terrorism" suggests that successive ideological paradigms replaced one another as major inspirations for terrorism.<sup>[79]</sup> Audrey Cronin's book *How Terrorism Ends* departs from the premise that all terrorism campaigns do end, and Brian Price has measured the average terrorist group life at about 14 years.<sup>[80]</sup> Sociologists such as Charles Tilly have suggested social movement go through successive stages from emergence to decline.<sup>[81]</sup> While all these observations pertain to slightly different units of analysis than that represented by jihadism, they have arguably contributed to an expectation that jihadism will end in the not too distant future. This expectation was probably behind the view among some commentators in mid-2011

that the Arab spring and the killing of Osama bin Ladin would finally bring about the decline of jihadism. [82] For the record, I too was influenced by the lifecycle hypothesis when I wrote, in a Congressional testimony in mid-2013, that “I see [...] the macro-trend for the jihadi movement as downward-pointing. However, I also see the decline as a long and slow one with plenty of opportunities for temporary surges in activity.” [83] I have since changed my views and become agnostic on the issue of jihadism’s decline. This article reflects my current position that the end of jihadism is by no means imminent, and that it may continue to exist for many decades. By staking out a prediction for the evolution of jihadism in Europe, I am putting forth a hypothesis that only time can test.

One should be careful about proposing specific policy recommendation based on speculation about the future. Still, the analytical framework used here can at least be used as a heuristic tool for thinking about countermeasures in the event that things move in the direction outlined in this article. More specifically, policymakers might then want to think creatively about ways in which each of the four macro-trends might be broken. Is there not more that the EU can do to promote social mobility among immigrants? Are there ways to prevent imprisoned jihadis from becoming network-builders upon their release? Could we find other approaches to conflict resolution in the Muslim world than we have pursued throughout the War on Terror? And how can governments regain some of the digital policing capability they had in the late 2000s?

If the jihadi radicalization problem in Europe does indeed get worse, it may be worth considering radical new approaches, both of the soft and the hard kind. Perhaps Europe needs to spend significantly more to improve education in immigrant-heavy areas. Perhaps we must consider longer prison sentences for terrorism offences. I do not purport to know exactly what might work. However, continuing as we do today, with small, incremental policy adjustments, arguably has a predictable outcome. It is a Europe with much larger intelligence services, an entrenched Muslim economic underclass, and more anti-Muslim sentiment.

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## Notes

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[2] Ibid.

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