

# Jihadist Foreign Fighter Phenomenon in Western Europe: A Low-Probability, High-Impact Threat

**Edwin Bakker and Jeanine de Roy van Zuijdewijn**

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The phenomenon of foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq is making headlines. Their involvement in the atrocities committed by terrorist groups such as the so-called “Islamic State” and Jabhat al-Nusra have caused grave concern and public outcry in the foreign fighters’ European countries of origin. While much has been written about these foreign fighters and the possible threat they pose, the impact of this phenomenon on Western European societies has yet to be documented.

This Research Paper by Edwin Bakker and Jeanine De Roy van Zuijdewijn explores four particular areas where this impact is most visible: a) violent incidents associated with (returned) foreign fighters, b) official and political responses linked to these incidents, c) public opinion, and d) anti-Islam reactions linked to these incidents. The authors conclude that the phenomenon of jihadist foreign fighters in European societies should be primarily regarded as a social and political threat, not a physical one. They consider the phenomenon of European jihadist foreign fighters a “low-probability, high-impact” threat.

## About the Authors

**Edwin Bakker** is Professor of (Counter-)Terrorism Studies at Leiden University, Director of the Centre for Terrorism and Counterterrorism (CTC) of that same university and Research Fellow at ICCT. He studied Economic Geography (Netherlands) and Political Geography (Netherlands and Germany). In 1997, he defended his PhD thesis on minority conflicts in Slovakia and Hungary. He taught classes in international policies on preventing and managing separatism and intra-state war in the Balkans at the Centre for International Conflict Analysis and Management (CICAM), Nijmegen University. Between 2003 and 2010 he was a fellow at the Netherlands Institute of International Relations 'Clingendael' where he headed the Clingendael Security and Conflict Programme (since 2007). His research interests at Leiden University and the ICCT are, amongst other, radicalisation processes, jihadi terrorism unconventional threats to security and crisis impact management.

**Jeanine de Roy van Zuijdewijn** is a Research Fellow at ICCT. She is also a Researcher at the Centre for Terrorism and Counterterrorism (CTC) of Leiden University. Jeanine studied International Relations in Historical Perspective at Utrecht University and finished her degree with a thesis foreign fighters (cum laude). At ICCT, she has continued this research on foreign fighters which has translated into a number of publications. Jeanine also assists in two projects: countering lone actor terrorism and transitions from military interventions to long-term counter-terrorism policies, focusing on Libya (2011- now). She also helps Prof. Dr. Edwin Bakker with a MOOC – a massive open online course – called “Terrorism and Counterterrorism: Comparing Theory & Practice” and assists in teaching this course in blended learning format at Leiden University. Furthermore, she is editorial board member of the Leiden Safety and Security Blog.

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## Contact

ICCT – The Hague  
Zeestraat 100  
2518 AD The Hague  
The Netherlands

T +31 (0)70 342 0300  
E [info@icct.nl](mailto:info@icct.nl)

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## 1. Introduction

The phenomenon of foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq is making headlines around the globe. Their involvement in the fighting in these two countries and their participation in the atrocities committed by jihadist groups such as the so-called “Islamic State” (IS)<sup>1</sup> and Jabhat al-Nusra<sup>2</sup> have caused grave concern and public outcry in the foreign fighters’ countries of origin. In particular, the beheading of James Foley, allegedly by a British foreign fighter, and other similar incidents have affected the way the general public, politicians, and policymakers view the threat of terrorism and religious extremism. The same holds for the attack on the Jewish Museum in Brussels and threats made by European jihadist fighters and the leadership of Islamic State.<sup>3</sup> They add to a general perception of foreign fighters and jihadism as today’s largest terrorism-related threat to Europe. While much has been written about these foreign fighters and the possible threat they pose, the impact of this phenomenon on Western European societies<sup>4</sup> has yet to be documented.

In order to document the impact of the phenomenon on European societies, this paper will explore four particular areas where this impact is most visible: a) violent incidents associated with (returned) foreign fighters, b) official and political responses linked to these incidents, c) public opinion, and d) anti-Islam reactions linked to these incidents.<sup>5</sup> These themes together comprehensively address the incidents and the political and public reactions to them, and in doing so, addresses the effects this phenomenon is having on European societies.

Before moving to these sections, we will first define the term “jihadist foreign fighter” and provide a short overview of the size and shape of the group of European jihadist foreign fighters who have left for Syria and Iraq. In the following sections, we will give an overview of the main violent incidents associated with (returned) foreign fighters targeting European interests to map the actual physical threat they have posed so far. Then we move to reactions as expressed or reflected in elevated threat levels, new counterterrorism measures taken by governments, and statements made by politicians on the link between the threat from foreign fighters and Islam. The third section addresses public opinion, comparing degrees of fear related to terrorism, as well as anti-Muslim and anti-Islam sentiments between 2011 – the year before the rise of the foreign fighter phenomenon – and 2015, after the Paris attacks. This is followed by an overview of the main anti-Islam rallies and incidents in Western Europe in recent years. Finally, we assess the overall nature and impact of the phenomenon of jihadist foreign fighters on Western European societies and reflect on the outcome of the assessment. We conclude that terrorist incidents related to the phenomenon of jihadist foreign fighters in Western Europe is a “low-probability, high-impact” threat.

## 2. Jihadist Foreign Fighters

The phenomenon of foreign fighters is not new. Over the course of history, there have been several examples of conflicts where we see the presence of foreign fighters – defined by David Malet as “noncitizens of conflict states

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<sup>1</sup> The so-called “Islamic State” (IS) is also known by the names Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) or by its derogatory Arabic equivalent “Daesh”.

<sup>2</sup> Jabhat al-Nusra is an Al Qaeda-affiliated organisation that has been designated as a terrorist organisation by, amongst others, the US and UN.

<sup>3</sup> M. Kaplan, “ISIS Threatens Germany: Islamic State Jihadists Vow Attacks on European Soil for 'Spilling the Blood of Muslims' In Afghanistan”, *International Business Times*, 6 August 2015, <http://www.ibtimes.com/isis-threatens-germany-islamic-state-jihadists-vow-attacks-european-soil-spilling-2041662>.

<sup>4</sup> The United Nations Regional Information Centre (UNRIC) lists the following Western European countries: Belgium, Cyprus, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, the Holy See, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, Malta, Monaco, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, San Marino, Spain, Sweden and United Kingdom.

<sup>5</sup> The authors would like to thank Pietro Moro for his research assistance.

who join insurgencies during civil conflicts”<sup>6</sup> – ranging from individual cases to relatively large and organised groups.<sup>7</sup> The most well-known historical example of an organised foreign fighter movement is that of those who fought in the Spanish Civil War. It has been estimated that around 35,000 non-Spanish citizens joined the International Brigades to fight alongside the Republican government against the Nationalists led by General Francisco Franco.<sup>8</sup> Lesser-known is the fact that the other side also attracted a few thousand foreign fighters.<sup>9</sup> According to Malet, all historical examples of foreign fighters have something in common; the idea of a transnational identity that connects individuals and groups to foreign communities and the perceived need to support fellow members of that community when they are under threat.<sup>10</sup> In recent decades, the ideological background of this identity ranged from communism and left-wing activism, to Catholicism and ethno-nationalism. The transnational identity that is present in the conflicts in Syria and Iraq is that of the *ummah* – the community of Muslims. Defending that community is related to the concept or belief in the so-called “violent jihad”.<sup>11</sup>

Most of today’s foreign fighters are fighting under the banner of what has been called “Jihadist-Salafism”. This branch of Islam and sub-branch of Salafism is described by Stern and Berger as one “that believes that any government that does not rule through Sharia is an illegitimate infidel regime” and that such regimes should be overthrown.<sup>12</sup> Until recently, this particular form of jihad was primarily associated with the fight in Afghanistan against the Red Army of the Soviet Union (1979–1989), and, after its withdrawal, a wide range of other warring parties. Since the 1990s, new conflicts have attracted jihadist foreign fighters in Chechnya, Iraq (in the period after the US-led invasion in 2003), Yemen, Libya, Somalia, Mali, and others. Their numbers were relatively small until the Arab Spring, the outbreak of the current civil war in Syria and the rise of the so-called “Islamic State” in Iraq, which resulted in thousands of foreign fighters entering the Syrian and Iraqi battle zone.<sup>13</sup>

### 3. Western European Jihadist Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq

Today, the number of jihadist foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq is without precedent, exceeding that of those who went to wage jihad in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq, Yemen or Somalia.<sup>14</sup> This truly globalised conflict has attracted fighters from all around the world, most of whom have joined jihadist groups, in particular the previously mentioned organisations Jabhat al-Nusra and IS. The rise of the latter has closely connected the Syrian and Iraqi theatre, especially after it proclaimed the caliphate in the summer of 2014. This event, and the unexpected successes of IS on the battlefield, resulted in an increase in the number of foreign fighters. The February 2015 estimate of the International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence (ICSR) speaks of 20,730

<sup>6</sup> D. Malet, *Foreign Fighters. Transnational Identity in Civil Conflicts*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p.9.

<sup>7</sup> For more on the history of the phenomenon of foreign fighters see D. Malet, *Foreign Fighters. Transnational Identity in Civil Conflicts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

<sup>8</sup> D. Malet, *Foreign Fighter Project: Observation Set (August 2011)*, [http://davidmalet.com/The\\_Foreign\\_Fighter\\_Project.php](http://davidmalet.com/The_Foreign_Fighter_Project.php).

<sup>9</sup> C. Othen, *Franco’s International Brigades: Adventurers, Fascists and Christian Crusaders in the Spanish Civil War* (London: Hurst Publishers, 2013).

<sup>10</sup> D. Malet, *Foreign Fighters*.

<sup>11</sup> Following J. Stern and J.M. Berger, *ISIS: The State of Terror* (New York: HarperCollins, 2015), p. xi. The authors use the term jihad to refer a broad range of actions, from spiritual struggles to armed conflict.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xii.

<sup>13</sup> E. Bakker and M. Singleton, “‘Foreign Fighters’ in the Syria and Iraq Conflict: Statistics and Characteristics of a Rapidly Growing Phenomenon”, in A. de Guttery, F. Capone and C. Paulussen, eds., *Foreign Fighters under International Law and Beyond* (The Hague: TMC Asser Press and Springer/Verlag, Forthcoming).

<sup>14</sup> “20,000 Foreign Fighters Flock To Syria, Iraq”, *Huffington Post*, 10 February 2015, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/02/10/foreign-fighters-syria-iraq\\_n\\_6656114.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/02/10/foreign-fighters-syria-iraq_n_6656114.html); B. Murphy, “Official: Over 20,000 Foreign Fighters Lured by Militant Factions in Syria”, *The Washington Post*, 11 February 2015, [http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/official-over-20000-foreign-fighters-lured-by-militant-factions-in-syria/2015/02/11/8f12eaa0-b212-11e4-827f-93f454140e2b\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/official-over-20000-foreign-fighters-lured-by-militant-factions-in-syria/2015/02/11/8f12eaa0-b212-11e4-827f-93f454140e2b_story.html).

foreign fighters, most of them from North Africa and the Middle East. With approximately 4,000 citizens and residents coming from Western European countries, these are also a relatively significant 'source' of jihadist foreign fighters.<sup>15</sup> Among this group of Western European countries, France has seen most jihadist foreign fighters go to Syria or Iraq (1,200), followed by Germany (500–600), the United Kingdom (500–600), and Belgium (440). Other countries with more than hundred foreign fighters who left for Syria or Iraq are the Netherlands (200–250), Sweden (150–180), Austria (100–150), Denmark (100–150), and Spain (50–100).<sup>16</sup>

The February 2015 estimate of the ICSR also provides figures on returnees and the number of foreign fighters that have died in Syria and Iraq. Neumann and others assume that between five to ten percent of jihadist foreign fighters have lost their lives and that a further ten to thirty percent have left the conflict zone.<sup>17</sup> Among the latter category are so-called "returnees". Their return and the potential threat they pose to their countries of origin, is one of the main concerns of counterterrorism officials in Europe. Will they cause trouble or will they reintegrate into society? A number of violent incidents involving returning jihadist foreign fighters, as well as calls by jihadists to raise havoc in Western (European) countries, legitimise concern about the phenomenon of (returning) jihadist foreign fighters to their countries of origin. At the same time, violent reactions to these threats and incidents are also a reason for concern.

## 4. Violent Incidents Associated with Jihadist Foreign Fighters

There have been a number of incidents associated with (returned) foreign fighters since 2011. It is important to note that Western foreign fighters were not directly involved in all cases. What links these incidents, however, is that they have all been viewed through the lens of the foreign fighter phenomenon. These incidents have either been attributed to this phenomenon or they have led to a recalibration of certain countries' positions regarding foreign fighters. In addition to this list of violent incidents, it is important to note that there have also been numerous threats made by Western foreign fighters from within Syria and Iraq directed at their countries of origin. For instance, some have asked their "brothers" to rise up against a particular government, or target the local police.<sup>18</sup> Consequently, it is not simply the violent incidents, but also the persistent threats made by foreign fighters that affect how this phenomenon is being perceived in European countries.

### 4.1. Incidents within Western Europe<sup>19</sup>

- The first violent attack that was linked to the recent growth of European jihadist foreign fighters was perpetrated by Mohamed Merah, a 23-year-old French man of Algerian descent. On March 11, 2011, he shot a French paratrooper in the city of Toulouse. Four days later, three other paratroopers were shot in the small city of Montauban, which led to the deaths of two of them. Merah then continued this violence

<sup>15</sup> P.R. Neumann, "Foreign Fighter Total in Syria/Iraq Now Exceeds 20,000; Surpasses Afghanistan Conflict in the 1980s," *International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence (ICSR)*, King's College London, 26 January 2015, <http://icsr.info/2015/01/foreign-fighter-total-syriairaq-now-exceeds-20000-surpasses-afghanistan-conflict-1980s/>.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid. In addition there is an increasing number of European foreign fighters that go to Syria and Iraq to fight jihadist groups, including non-Muslims and ethnic Kurds, see E. Bakker and M. Singleton, "'Foreign Fighters' in the Syria and Iraq conflict".

<sup>17</sup> P.R. Neumann, "Foreign Fighter Total in Syria/Iraq Now Exceeds 20,000". For an overview of the different options for foreign fighters after leaving the conflict zone, see the ICCT paper by A. Reed, J. De Roy van Zuijdewijn and E. Bakker, "Pathways of Foreign Fighters: Policy Options and Their (Un)intended Consequences", ICCT, 30 April 2015. <http://www.icct.nl/download/file/ICCT-Reed-De-Roy-Van-Zuijdewijn-Bakker-Pathways-Of-Foreign-Fighters-Policy-Options-And-Their-Un-Intended-Consequences-April2015.pdf>.

<sup>18</sup> See for instance the statement by a Belgian foreign fighter threatening the Dutch government: "Jihadist Roept Nederlandse en Belgische Broeders op tot Actie", *HLN*, 23 September 2014, <http://www.hln.be/hln/nl/960/Buitenland/article/detail/2060564/2014/09/23/Jihadist-roept-Nederlandse-en-Belgische-broeders-op-tot-actie.dhtml>.

<sup>19</sup> This selection is based on the Europol TE-SAT reports in the period 2011 – 2014.

when he entered a Jewish school in Toulouse on March 19, killing the rabbi of the school and three small children. Following a three-day manhunt, and a 32-hour standoff in Merah's apartment, he was fatally shot by the police. It turned out that Merah was a petty criminal who had been imprisoned twice. Merah had already been on the watch list of the French domestic intelligence agency (DCRI) as he had visited Afghanistan and Pakistan in 2011.<sup>20</sup> Although it was known that he had travelled to an area that had a strong Taliban and Al Qaeda presence, Merah claimed he had been on a holiday trip.<sup>21</sup> During the standoff with the police, Merah told them he had wanted to die as a mujahideen and said he was part of Al Qaeda.<sup>22</sup> Although tangible links with Al Qaeda have never been proven, his acts have been interpreted as those of a foreign fighter who turned violent after returning to his home country.

- In Spain, in August 2012, security forces arrested three individuals on suspicion of intending to commit a terrorist attack in the EU. The suspects, two Russian citizens – one of Dagestani and the other of Chechen origin – and a Turkish national had been trained in Pakistan or Afghanistan according to the Spanish authorities.<sup>23</sup>
- From 2012 on, more such arrests would follow, either to stop persons from going to foreign jihadist battlefields or to prevent returnees staging an attack in Europe. Between June and September 2013, nine individuals were arrested in Spain, suspected of belonging to a network dedicated to sending volunteers to Syria to fight alongside groups including Jabhat al-Nusra and Islamic State.<sup>24</sup> In addition, there were a number of arrests and convictions (starting late 2013)<sup>25</sup> in other European countries including Belgium, France, Germany, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom in connection to travelling to and participating in the conflict in Syria.<sup>26</sup>
- In May 2013, a British soldier, Lee Rigby, was run down by a car and stabbed to death in Woolwich, London. Adding to the horror of the act was the fact that the two perpetrators filmed it and managed to get their message broadcast all around the world. One of the perpetrators claimed the act was an “eye for an eye” and that he was avenging the acts of British soldiers in Muslim countries. The perpetrators, Michael Adebolajo and Michael Adebawale, were both known to the British security services.<sup>27</sup> One of them, Adebolajo, had tried to join Al Shabaab in Somalia 2010 but was arrested by the Kenyan authorities and sent back to the United Kingdom. The case of Adebolajo could be interpreted as that of a “failed” foreign fighter who was frustrated in his attempts to “undertake jihad” abroad and thus chose a battlefield closer to home, namely the streets of London.

<sup>20</sup> “Obituary: Toulouse Gunman Mohamed Merah”, *BBC News*, 22 March 2012, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-17456541>.

<sup>21</sup> H. Samuel, “Toulouse Killer Mohamed Merah Was ‘Traced’ to Al Qaeda Stronghold”, *The Telegraph*, 5 June 2012, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/france/9312399/Toulouse-killer-Mohamed-Merah-was-traced-to-al-Qaeda-stronghold.html>.

<sup>22</sup> L. Smith-Spark, “Who Was French Gunman Mohammed Merah?”, *CNN*, 23 March 2012, <http://edition.cnn.com/2012/03/21/world/europe/france-shooting-suspect-profile/>.

<sup>23</sup> Europol, *TE-SAT 2013 – EU Terrorism and Trend Report*, 25 April 2013, <https://www.europol.europa.eu/content/te-sat-2013-eu-terrorism-situation-and-trend-report>.

<sup>24</sup> Europol, *TE-SAT 2014 – EU Terrorism and Trend Report*, 28 May 2014, <https://www.europol.europa.eu/content/te-sat-2014-european-union-terrorism-situation-and-trend-report-2014>.

<sup>25</sup> C. Paulussen, “The Syrian Foreign Fighters Problem: A Test Case from The Netherlands”, *ICCT*, 2 December 2013, <http://icct.nl/publication/the-syrian-foreign-fighters-problem-a-test-case-from-the-netherlands/>.

<sup>26</sup> Europol, *TE-SAT 2014*; Europol, *TE-SAT 2015 – EU Terrorism and Trend Report*, 6 July 2015, <https://www.europol.europa.eu/content/european-union-terrorism-situation-and-trend-report-2015>.

<sup>27</sup> “Woolwich Attack: Suspects Known to Security Services”, *BBC News*, 23 May 2013, <http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-22634468>.

- In May 2014, Brussels witnessed the first deadly terrorist attack in Europe perpetrated by a (suspected) returned foreign fighter from Syria. Mehdi Nemmouche, a 29-year-old French national of Algerian origin allegedly opened fire in the Jewish Museum in the Belgian capital. Four people died in this attack which shocked the world. Six days later, Nemmouche was arrested. Information started to come out indicating that Nemmouche had been in Syria where he had joined the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL; which would become IS in June 2014), and had allegedly been involved in torturing prisoners.<sup>28</sup>
- This attack was followed by a series of even more deadly jihadist attacks in and around Paris. In January 2015, two men stormed into the offices of the satirical magazine “Charlie Hebdo,” killing twelve people. They managed to escape, and in response, France raised its *Vigipirate* terror level to its maximum and deployed the army in the region. Two days later, the men were found in the building of a printing house. After nine hours, police stormed into the building and shot the perpetrators: two brothers, Cherif and Said Kouachi, who claimed to be part of Al Qaeda in Yemen. Running parallel to these attacks were those by Amedy Coulibaly. The day after the attack on Charlie Hebdo, he fatally shot a police officer near Paris.
- On the same day that the Kouachi brothers were found, Coulibaly went to a Jewish supermarket in Port de Vincennes where he killed four customers and took others hostage. After a gunfight with the police, Coulibaly was killed. In contrast to the Kouachi brothers, Coulibaly is said to have been acting in support of Islamic State. He recorded a video prior to the attacks in which he swore allegiance to the group.<sup>29</sup> Coulibaly said that he had synchronised his acts with those of the two brothers but operational links have not yet been proven. The media were fast to claim that these acts proved the danger of those returning from Syria and Iraq although it later emerged that none of the three perpetrators had actually been involved in the current conflict. One of the Kouachi brothers, Said, supposedly travelled to Yemen in 2011 to meet up with members of Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP).<sup>30</sup> Cherif was part of the Buttes-Chaumont gang that tried to send people to Iraq to fight the Americans, for which he was imprisoned in 2005.<sup>31</sup> He himself never made it to the battlefield. In prison, he met Coulibaly, who was jailed after committing armed robbery. Coulibaly also never made it to the battlefield. Despite the lack of a direct link to foreign fighting, the link with foreign activities and networks, and Coulibaly’s claim to have been acting in name of Islamic State, resulted in these terrorist acts being associated with the foreign fighter phenomenon.
- Less than a week after the Paris attacks, Belgian police arrested thirteen individuals near Verviers, and killed two in a large anti-terror raid after the suspects opened fire on the police.<sup>32</sup> The prosecutor later reported that “the group was on the point of committing a major, imminent attack in Belgium,” aimed at the police.<sup>33</sup> Kalashnikovs, bomb-making equipment and police uniforms were supposedly found.<sup>34</sup> The police said these

<sup>28</sup> K. Rawlinson, “Jewish Museum Shooter Suspect ‘is Islamic State Torturer’”, *The Guardian*, 6 September 2014,

<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/sep/06/jewish-museum-shooting-suspect-islamic-state-torturer-brussels-syria>.

<sup>29</sup> D. Gauthier-Villars and R. Abdulrahim, “Islamic State Releases Video Calling Grocery Store Gunman Its ‘Soldier’”, *Wall Street Journal*, 11 January 2015, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/video-appears-to-show-paris-kosher-grocery-attack-suspect-coulibaly-swearing-allegiance-to-islamic-state-1420977506>.

<sup>30</sup> A. al-Mujahed, “Yemeni Official: Said Kouachi Visited Yemen in 2011, Linked up with al-Qaeda”, *The Washington Post*, 9 January 2015, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle-east/yemeni-official-said-kouachi-visited-yemen-in-2011-linked-up-with-al-qaeda/2015/01/09/12397f9a-983f-11e4-927a-4fa2638cd1b0\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle-east/yemeni-official-said-kouachi-visited-yemen-in-2011-linked-up-with-al-qaeda/2015/01/09/12397f9a-983f-11e4-927a-4fa2638cd1b0_story.html).

<sup>31</sup> “Paris Attacks: Investigators Turn up New Leads”, *BBC News*, 19 January 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-30832444>.

<sup>32</sup> “Belgium on High Alert after Deadly Anti-Terror Raid”, *BBC News*, 16 January 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-30843370>.

<sup>33</sup> I. Traynor, J. Borger and A. Topping, “Two Dead in Belgium as Police Foil ‘Grand Scale’ Terrorist Plot”, *The Guardian*, 16 January 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jan/15/three-killed-belgium-counter-terror-raids-reports-verviers>.

<sup>34</sup> “Belgium on High Alert after Deadly Anti-Terror Raid”, *BBC News*.

individuals had just recently returned from fighting in the conflict in Syria.<sup>35</sup> Despite the police successfully thwarting the attack, this situation once again ignited fears about returning foreign fighters launching attacks in their home countries.

- A few months later, Belgium and France were again targeted in an attack that was linked to the foreign fighter phenomenon. In August, a man attempted a mass shooting in a Thalys train between Brussels and Paris. The suspect, Ayoub El Khazzani, was a 25-year-old man from Morocco who had resided in Europe (Spain and France) since 2007. He had reportedly spent time in Syria between May and July 2015<sup>36</sup> and had been on the radar of several European intelligence agencies. According to the prosecutor of the city of Paris, Khazzani had listened to a “YouTube audio file in which an individual exhorted his followers to raise arms and fight in the name of the prophet” while on the train.<sup>37</sup> He was preliminarily charged for attempted murder in connection with terrorism, possession of weapons in connection with terrorism, and participation in a terrorism conspiracy.<sup>38</sup>

## 4.2. Incidents Involving European Citizens outside Europe

Foreign jihadists have also created havoc outside Europe. One of the most shocking events in 2014 was the decapitation of journalist James Foley by Islamic State. In a video titled “A Message to America”, Foley was seen kneeling down in the desert. An IS fighter, later known as “Jihadi John,” explained that Foley would be beheaded because the United States “ha[d] been at the forefront of the aggression towards the Islamic State”.<sup>39</sup> It is assumed that the masked “Jihadi John” is the 26-year-old, Kuwaiti-born Londoner Mohammed Emwazi.<sup>40</sup> The fact that Jihadi John turned out to be from the United Kingdom added to the fear that Western foreign fighters might be capable of committing serious atrocities, either at home or abroad. In the weeks and months after this tragic killing, the same would happen to Steven Sotloff, another American journalist, as well as to British aid workers David Haines and Alan Henning, and US aid worker Peter Kassig. More beheadings and recordings of these murders by Islamic State would follow, including those of Syrian and Kurdish soldiers, Japanese journalists, and Coptic and Ethiopian Christians. Some of these videos featured foreign fighters from various countries around the world, including European ones.<sup>41</sup>

Also outside Syria, Europeans and other Westerners fell victim to attacks by foreign jihadist fighters. In June 2015, a man shot sunbathing tourists at a beach resort near the Tunisian town of Sousse. Almost forty people died, all of

<sup>35</sup> I. Traynor, J. Berger and A. Topping, “Two Dead in Belgium as Police Foil ‘Grand Scale’ Terrorist Plot”.

<sup>36</sup> R. Ellis, F. Karimi, A. Fantz, “Train Heroes ‘Gave Us an Example of What is Possible’, says French President”, *CNN*, 24 August 2015, <http://edition.cnn.com/2015/08/24/europe/france-train-shooting/>.

<sup>37</sup> E. Izadi and M. Birnbaum, “Suspect in High-Speed Train Attack Had ‘Terrorist Intent’, French Officials Say”, *The Washington Post*, 25 August 2015, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2015/08/25/train-suspect-listened-to-radical-message-before-thwarted-attack-french-officials-say/?hpid=z3>.

<sup>38</sup> A. Nossiter, “French Train Attack Suspect Viewed Jihadist Video, Officials Say”, *The New York Times*, 25 August 2015, [http://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/26/world/europe/france-train-attack-suspect-viewed-jihadist-video-official-says.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/26/world/europe/france-train-attack-suspect-viewed-jihadist-video-official-says.html?_r=0); “Moroccan Man Charged With Terrorism Offences After ‘Targeted and Premeditated’ Attack on French Train”, *ABC News*, 26 August 2015, <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2015-08-26/france-train--man-charged-with-terrorism-offences/6725008>.

<sup>39</sup> C. J. Carter, “Video Shows ISIS Beheading U.S. Journalist James Foley”, *CNN*, 20 August 2014, <http://edition.cnn.com/2014/08/19/world/meast/isis-james-foley/>; P. Farrell, “James Foley Dead: 5 Fast Facts You Need to Know”, *Heavy*, 19 August 2014, <http://heavy.com/news/2014/08/james-foley-behead-video-isis-rip/>.

<sup>40</sup> A. Topping, “Who is Mohammed Emwazi? From ‘Lovely Boy’ to Islamic State Killer”, *The Guardian*, 2 March 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2015/mar/02/who-is-mohammed-emwazi-from-lovely-boy-to-islamic-state-executioner>.

<sup>41</sup> P. Allen et al., “ISIS’ International Death Squad: Jihadist Executioners in Beheading Video Include Two Britons, Two Frenchmen and a German”, *The Daily Mail*, 17 November 2014, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2837742/Now-two-Frenchmen-German-jihadist-identified-ISIS-executioners-sick-beheading-video-Extremist-killers-came-Europe.html>.



them European tourists, including thirty British citizens.<sup>42</sup> It is believed that the perpetrator, Seifeddine Rezgui, had trained as a foreign fighter with Islamic militants in Libya, demonstrating that targeting Western interests is not only possible within Western countries, but also from abroad.<sup>43</sup> This was not the first incident in Tunisia that sparked fears about foreign fighters. In March 2015, two perpetrators entered the Bardo museum in Tunis and killed 22 people, among those 20 foreign tourists. It has been suspected that the perpetrators had received weapons training in Libya just like Rezgui did.<sup>44</sup> As with the attack on the beach resort, IS claimed responsibility, but concrete evidence is lacking.<sup>45</sup>

## 5. Reactions by Politicians, Practitioners and Experts

### 5.1. Threat Levels Rising

The presence of high numbers of foreign jihadist fighters in Syria and Iraq, among them many Europeans, has raised serious concerns in many Western European countries. European governments and security services are particularly worried about the threat that returning fighters could pose. The first public warnings by experts and representatives from police and intelligence organisations came in 2012 and 2013. Europol, for instance, in its 2012 *Terrorism Situation and Trend Report* warned that returning fighters “have the potential to utilize their training, combat experience, knowledge and contacts for terrorist activities inside the EU”.<sup>46</sup> Since 2012, several European countries raised their terrorism threat level due to concerns over radicalisation of foreign fighters returning from Syria.<sup>47</sup> In the Netherlands, the National Coordinator for Security and Counterterrorism (NCTV) designated jihadists travelling to Syria who at some point in time will return home as “one of the most salient potential threats”.<sup>48</sup> In March 2013, it raised the terror threat level from “limited” to “substantial”.<sup>49</sup> The same year, the French Interior Minister Manuel Valls, now Prime Minister, released a statement in which he warned of the potential threat of French nationals leaving to undertake jihad in Syria.<sup>50</sup> Valls’ opinion came in light of several terrorist attacks in 2013, such as the Woolwich attack, and an attack on a French soldier in Paris three days later. In Germany, Minister of the Interior Hans-Peter Friedrich expressed fear over the scenario of Syrian jihadi veterans returning to Europe after being trained in “deadly handwork”, which would enable them to convert their hatred into action, making them “ticking time bombs”.<sup>51</sup> The President of Germany’s domestic intelligence service Hans-Georg Maaßen was worried over the possibility that returned fighters would be seen as heroes in Germany’s militant Muslim scene and would

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<sup>42</sup> “Tunisia Attack: The British Victims”, *BBC News*, July 10, 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-33300776>.

<sup>43</sup> T. Parfitt and R. Perring, “Tunisia Gunman Trained at SAME Libyan Terror Camp as Bardo Museum Attackers”, *Express*, 30 June 2015, <http://www.express.co.uk/news/world/587728/Seifeddine-Rezgui-Tunisia-terror-attack-Saifallah-Ben-Hassine-Fighting-Group-London>.

<sup>44</sup> F. Karimi, T. Lister and G. Botelho, “2 Tunisia Museum Attack Suspects Got Weapons Training in Libya, Official Says”, *CNN*, 20 March 2015, <http://edition.cnn.com/2015/03/20/africa/tunisia-museum-attack/>.

<sup>45</sup> “ISIS Claims Responsibility for Tunisia Museum Attack in Audio Message”, *The Huffington Post*, 19 March 2015, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/03/19/isis-tunisia-museum-attack\\_n\\_6902244.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/03/19/isis-tunisia-museum-attack_n_6902244.html).

<sup>46</sup> Europol, *TE-SAT 2013*.

<sup>47</sup> I. Opstelten, “Letter of 13 March 2013 from the Minister of Security and Justice to the House of Representatives of the States General Containing a Summary of the March, 2013 Edition of the Terrorist Threat Assessment for the Netherlands (DTN32)”, *National Coordinator for Security and Counterterrorism – Ministry of Security and Justice*, 13 March 2013, <http://english.nctv.nl/publications-products/TerroristThreat-Assessment-Netherlands/index.aspx>.

<sup>48</sup> C. Lynch, “Europe’s New ‘Time Bomb’ Is Ticking in Syria”, *Foreign Policy*, 9 January 2013, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2013/07/09/europes-new-time-bomb-is-ticking-in-syria/>.

<sup>49</sup> “Dreigingsniveau Terrorisme Verhoogd”, *NCTV*, 13 March 2013, <https://www.nctv.nl/actueel/persberichten/dreigingsniveau-terrorisme-verhoogd.aspx>.

<sup>50</sup> M. Klostermayr, “French Minister: Enemies of Syria Perhaps Also Enemies of France”, *SyriaNews*, 20 September 2013, <http://www.syrianews.cc/enemies-syria-france-extremists/>.

<sup>51</sup> N. Busse, “Diese Leute Sind Tickende Zeitbomben in Europa”, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 7 June 2013, <http://www.faz.net/im-gespraech-hans-peter-friedrich-csu-diese-leute-sind-tickende-zeitbomben-in-europa-12213789.html>.

be emotionally charged to engage in terrorism, incite terrorism, or worse, return with a direct fighting mission.<sup>52</sup> In August 2014, the British national security intelligence agency MI5 reported the terrorist threat level in the United Kingdom had been raised from “substantial, to severe”.<sup>53</sup> In Belgium, the terror threat level has been fluctuating in response to national events, such as the anti-terror operation in Verviers, Liège in January 2015. Following the operation, the level was raised from two to three, being lowered to two again in March 2015.<sup>54</sup> In Denmark, the Center for Terroranalyse,<sup>55</sup> in response to the February 2015 jihadist attacks in Copenhagen, stated that the terror threat to Denmark is significant<sup>56</sup> and that returnees from “Syria and Iraq pose a particular terror threat to Denmark because of the skills they may have obtained”.<sup>57</sup>

## 5.2. More Measures

Raising threat levels and expressing concern over the possibility of returning foreign fighters staging attacks in Europe could not prevent a number of subsequent violent incidents. Following these events, politicians, practitioners and experts showed their determination to defend society and its values. Often, more measures were announced intended to make the chance of repetition as small as possible and prevent people from leaving for Syria, Iraq or other foreign battlefields. Measures that were taken range from the confiscation of passports and tracking returning foreign fighters, to some more soft-handed approaches, such as investing in good relationships with local Muslim communities.<sup>58</sup>

While investing in these relationships, several EU member states have also taken specific measures against radical Islam and jihadist scenes. In Belgium, law-enforcement agencies have tried to curb the spread of subversive, racist, and extremist ideas by nationals returning from Syria by way of a combination of preventive, proactive, and repressive measures.<sup>59</sup> In the Netherlands, the authorities focused, amongst others, on criminal-law intervention in case of hate speech and inciting violence in an extremist context. Displaying flags of banned terrorist organisations, for instance, is now punishable.<sup>60</sup> They also took measures to disrupt the activities of facilitators and distributors of jihadist propaganda (both online and offline), refuse visas for foreign preachers who incite hatred and violence and counteract the distribution of the jihadist messages by radical preachers.<sup>61</sup> In France, the authorities also took measures against mosques and religious figures inciting hatred, deporting at least forty persons between 2012 and January 2015.<sup>62</sup>

These examples show that some European countries feel the need to crack down on those organising or supporting attacks and atrocities committed in the name of Islam. Striking a balance between cracking down on violent extremists within certain communities and maintaining the support of the communities they belong to or

<sup>52</sup> “Islamisten Sind Die Größte Gefahr”, *RP Online*, 24 June 2013, <http://www.rp-online.de/nrw/landespolitik/islamisten-sind-die-groesste-gefahr-aid-1.3488609>.

<sup>53</sup> *Security Service MI5*, “Threat Levels”, <https://www.mi5.gov.uk/home/the-threats/terrorism/threat-levels.html>.

<sup>54</sup> D. Blyth, “Belgium to Lower Terror Threat Level to Two”, *Flanders Today*, 10 March 2015, <http://www.flanderstoday.eu/current-affairs/belgium-lower-terror-threat-level-two>.

<sup>55</sup> The Center for Terroranalyse is part of the Danish Security and Intelligence Service PET.

<sup>56</sup> “Assessment of the Terror Threat to Denmark”, *Danish Security and Intelligence Service*, 19 March 2015, <https://www.pet.dk/~media/Engelsk/20150319VTDengelskpdf.ashx>.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, p.1.

<sup>58</sup> C. Paulussen and E. Entenmann, “Addressing Europe’s Foreign Fighter Issue: Legal Avenues at the International and National Level”, *Security and Human Rights*, vol. 25, no. 1. (2015), pp. 86-118.

<sup>59</sup> C. Lynch, “Europe’s New ‘Time Bomb’ Is Ticking in Syria”.

<sup>60</sup> “The Netherlands Comprehensive Action Programme to Counter Jihadism”, *Ministry of Security and Justice*, 29 August 2014, p. 13.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 14.

<sup>62</sup> A. Morrison, “Europe Terror Threat: France Departs 40 Imams for ‘Preaching Hatred’, Interior Minister Says”, *International Business Times*, 29 June 2015, <http://www.ibtimes.com/europe-terror-threat-france-deports-40-imams-preaching-hatred-interior-minister-says-1987822>.

claim to represent is perhaps one of the most difficult aspects of counterterrorism.<sup>63</sup> Spectacular or dramatic attacks that evoke fearful reactions among the general public and its leadership can make it extremely difficult to strike that balance.

### 5.3. Politicians on the Link with Islam

The attacks on Charlie Hebdo and the Jewish supermarket in Paris elicited a chorus of European leaders condemning the act and the extremist ideology behind it. French President François Hollande and British Prime Minister David Cameron were joined by EU Council President Donald Tusk in framing it not only as an attack on all of France, but also on the ideal of freedom of expression.<sup>64</sup> German Chancellor Angela Merkel and Norwegian Prime Minister Erna Solberg reaffirmed their commitment to stand by France, and to persevere in upholding the values of “freedom in general and the dignity of man”.<sup>65</sup> As these attacks were executed in the name of Islam, there were also many and often highly critical or even derogatory reactions towards (radical) Islam and Muslim communities. At governmental level, France reacted to the shootings by raising its security alert level to its highest, and by placing security at places of worship, public transportation, and media offices.<sup>66</sup> The purpose of the latter measure was not only to deter further terrorist attacks, but also to protect the country’s Muslim population from an anti-Muslim backlash. After the Charlie Hebdo attacks, the French Muslim population was not only regarded by some as a potential threat, it was also considered a potential victim. Prime Minister Manuel Valls made clear that “France is not at war against Islam and Muslims”<sup>67</sup> labelling the protection of the nation’s Muslims as urgent, and denouncing the aggressions as defying French core values.<sup>68</sup> Conversely, Marine Le Pen, leader of the National Front, attributed the attacks to Islamic fundamentalism and exhorted “the absolute refusal of Islamic fundamentalism”.<sup>69</sup> Earlier, in the aftermath of the 2012 attacks in Toulouse and Montauban, she had identified the widespread growth of Islamic fundamentalism as the root cause of terrorism, pointing at the shooters’ identities as evidence.<sup>70</sup>

Not only in France, but also elsewhere in Europe, the Charlie Hebdo and the Jewish supermarket attacks have divided politicians over how to react to jihadist terrorist incidents and the link with Islam. In some cases, the events in Paris and other jihadist terrorist incidents provoked rather extreme reactions regarding the presence of Islam and Muslim communities in European societies. This holds in particular, but not exclusively, for politicians and activists on the right side of the political spectrum. Those critical of Islam find some support in negative feelings towards, or even fear of, this religion and its followers among a considerable minority within the general public in Europe, as we will see in the next section.

<sup>63</sup> For an earlier discussion about terrorism and religion, see B. Hoffman, “Holy Terror”: *The Implications of Terrorism Motivated by a Religious Imperative* (RAND, 1993), <http://130.154.3.14/content/dam/rand/pubs/papers/2007/P7834.pdf> and M. Ranstorp, “Terrorism in the Name of Religion”, *Journal of International Affairs*, vol. 50, no.1 (1996).

<sup>64</sup> “French, World Leaders Condemn Attack at Charlie Hebdo”, *France 24*, 7 January 2015, <http://www.france24.com/en/20150107-charlie-hebdo-paris-attack-journalist-terror->

<sup>65</sup> H. Line, “Charlie Hebdo: World Leaders’ Reactions to Terror Attack”, *The Telegraph*, 8 January 2015, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/france/11332726/Charlie-Hebdo-world-leaders-reactions-to-terror-attack.html>.

<sup>66</sup> “French, World Leaders Condemn Attack at Charlie Hebdo”, *France 24*, 7 January 2015, <http://www.france24.com/en/20150107-charlie-hebdo-paris-attack-journalist-terror->

<sup>67</sup> “France - We Are at War with Terrorism Not Islam, PM Valls Says”, *BBC News*, 13 January 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-30794973>.

<sup>68</sup> T. McNicoll, “After Charlie Hebdo Attacks, French Muslims Face Increased Threats”, *The Daily Beast*, 25 January 2015, <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2015/01/25/after-charlie-hebdo-attacks-french-muslims-face-increased-threats.html>.

<sup>69</sup> H. Saul, “Charlie Hebdo Shooting: Far-Right Front National Leader Marine Le Pen ‘Wants to Offer France Referendum on the Death Penalty’”, *The Independent*, 8 January 2015, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/charlie-hebdo-shooting-farright-front-national-leader-marine-le-pen-wants-to-offer-france-referendum-on-the-death-penalty-9965607.html>.

<sup>70</sup> B. Pitt, “Marine Le Pen Exploits Shootings to Incite Fear of French Muslim Communities”, *Islamophobia Watch*, 22 March 2012, <http://www.islamophobiawatch.co.uk/category/france/page/35/>.

## 6. Public Opinion: Fear of Terrorism and Perspectives on Islam

Many academic and governmental definitions of terrorism refer to the creation and dissemination of fear, anxiety, and intimidation of a government or population. These definitions echo the insight of Brian Jenkins who argued in 1975 that “[t]errorism is theatre” and that “[t]errorists like to see a lot of people watching, not a lot of people dead”.<sup>71</sup> As stated in an earlier ICCT publication by Bakker and De Graaf, this maxim still rings true today and terrorists know this and aim to provoke reactions to certain threats and attacks by third parties: the general public, politicians, opposing groups, or the media.<sup>72</sup> The authors state that the impact of any terrorist activity is the product of the perception, imagination and vulnerability of targeted audiences or otherwise-involved parties. In order to assess that impact, it is necessary to look at the reactions and perceptions among the general public in relation to terrorist incidents.

In Europe, the public is confronted with jihadist foreign fighters and jihadist terrorism through a wide range of channels: conventional media reporting, propaganda by foreign fighters and IS-related media, visible counterterrorism measures such as heightened threat levels and increased (and increasingly visible) security measures, statements by politicians and experts, and, most importantly, the previously mentioned violent incidents associated with jihadist foreign fighters. These incidents have reached a wide audience and may have influenced public opinion on security and terrorism, as well as other topics. This section looks at what European citizens see as the most important security threat and to what extent they fear terrorism. As jihadist foreign fighters have been linked, by politicians and others – including the fighters themselves – to Islam, we also look into European public opinion on this particular religion and its followers. Furthermore, we study public opinion on relations between different cultural and religious groups to explore the wider impact of the jihadist foreign fighter phenomenon on European societies.

### 6.1. Threat to Security

Within the European Union, there are several international public opinion polls that look into the worries and concerns of citizens and what they regard as the most important challenges to their lives and their societies. The source that probably most frequently and consistently captures these perceptions is the Eurobarometer. This survey of the European Commission monitors changes in public opinion within the EU since 1973. Some of these surveys specifically ask citizens about what they regard the most important threat to security both on a European level and with regard to their nation’s security. According to a Eurobarometer survey conducted in June 2011, the year before the rapid growth of the phenomenon of jihadi foreign fighters, Europeans considered economic and financial crises to be the most important challenge to security of the EU (34 percent) and their country (33 percent).<sup>73</sup>

The second-most-often mentioned challenge both on the EU and national level was terrorism, mentioned by respectively 33 and 25 percent of those interviewed. There are, however, substantial differences between EU member states. With regard to EU’s security, Danish respondents regarded terrorism to be the most important challenge (53 percent), followed by Bulgaria, the United Kingdom (both 41 percent) and the Czech Republic (40 percent). Terrorism was the least mentioned as the most important challenge to the EU in Cyprus (16 percent), Greece (17 percent) and Luxembourg, Austria and Poland (all 18 percent). Regarding terrorism as a threat to their

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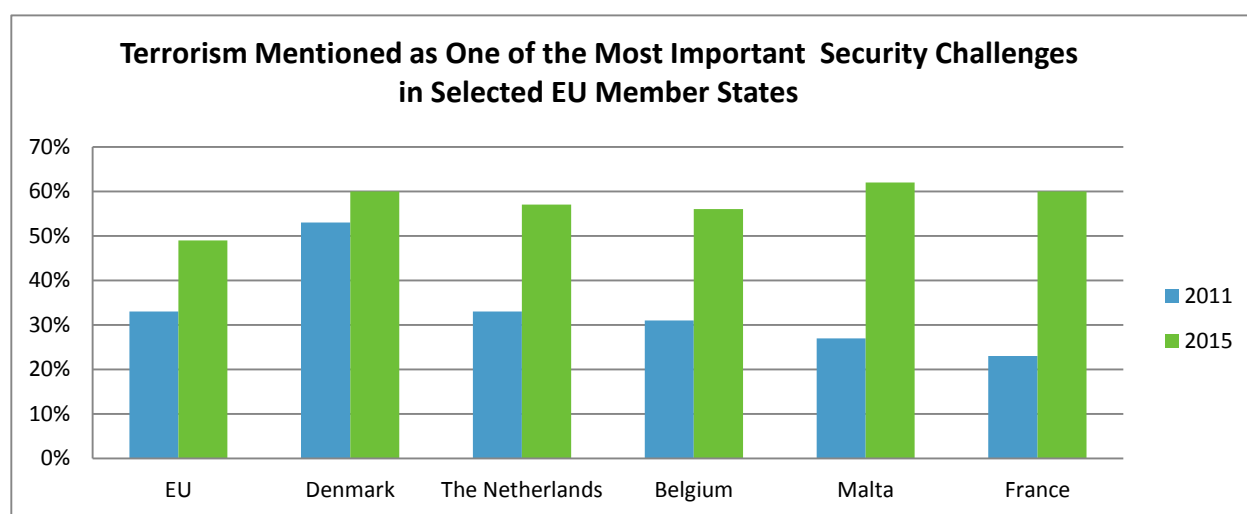
<sup>71</sup> B. M. Jenkins, “International Terrorism: A New Mode of Conflict”, in: D. Carlton and C. Schaerf (eds.), *International Terrorism and World Security* (London: Croom Helm, 1975), p. 16.

<sup>72</sup> E. Bakker and B. De Graaf, “Towards a Theory of Fear Management in the Counterterrorism Domain: A Stocktaking Approach”, *ICCT Research Paper*, January 2014, <http://www.icct.nl/download/file/ICCT-Bakker-de-Graaf-Towards-A-Theory-of-Fear-Management-in-CT-January-2014.pdf>, p. 2.

<sup>73</sup> “Internal Security” *Special Eurobarometer 371*, European Commission, November 2011, [http://ec.europa.eu/public\\_opinion/archives/ebs/ebs\\_371\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/ebs/ebs_371_en.pdf).

own country, the highest scores were found in Denmark (55 percent), followed by the United Kingdom (47 percent) and Germany (34 percent). The lowest scores were recorded in Latvia (2 percent), Slovenia (3 percent) and Luxembourg and Bulgaria (4 percent).

In March 2015, a few weeks after the January 2015 Paris attacks, European citizens were again surveyed about their attitudes towards security (Eurobarometer 432). This time, the questions only related to the threat posed to the EU's security. The results showed that terrorism (mentioned by 49 percent of the respondents) had overtaken the financial and economic crisis as the main security concern (27 percent).<sup>74</sup> In some countries these changes were larger than in others. In France, 23 percent of the respondents in 2011 mentioned terrorism as one of the most important security challenges compared to 60 percent in 2015. In the Netherlands these figures increased from 33 to 57 percent, and in Belgium from 31 to 56 percent. In Denmark, terrorism was mentioned by 60 percent of the respondents as the most important security challenge, an increase of 7 percent compared to 2011. In Malta it increased from 27 to 62 percent, the highest level within the EU.<sup>75</sup>



**Figure 1:** Terrorism Mentioned as One of the Most Important Challenges to the Security of EU Citizens<sup>76</sup>

Furthermore, the Eurobarometer indicated that 65 percent of all respondents rated terrorism – including the foreign fighter phenomenon – to be a very important challenge to EU's internal security (an increase of seven percentage points).<sup>77</sup> Two thirds of Europeans expected the threat of terrorism to rise in the following three years (68 percent),<sup>78</sup> an increase of 17 percentage points compared to 2011.<sup>79</sup>

The 2015 Eurobarometer on attitudes towards security also shows that many Europeans are very worried about religious extremism, and very much more so than in 2011. Four years ago, 6 percent mentioned it as one of the most important security challenges. Early 2015 it had increased to 20 percent for the EU as a whole. In some countries the increase was much larger: in the Netherlands (from 15 to 38 percent), Denmark (11 to 32 percent) Belgium (12 to 30 percent), Germany (7 to 29 percent) and Austria (9 to 27 percent).<sup>80</sup> In France it increased from a relatively low 7 to 17 percent after the Paris attacks.

<sup>74</sup> "Europeans' Attitudes towards Security", *Special Eurobarometer 432*, European Commission, April 2015, [http://ec.europa.eu/public\\_opinion/archives/ebs/ebs\\_432\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/ebs/ebs_432_en.pdf).

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

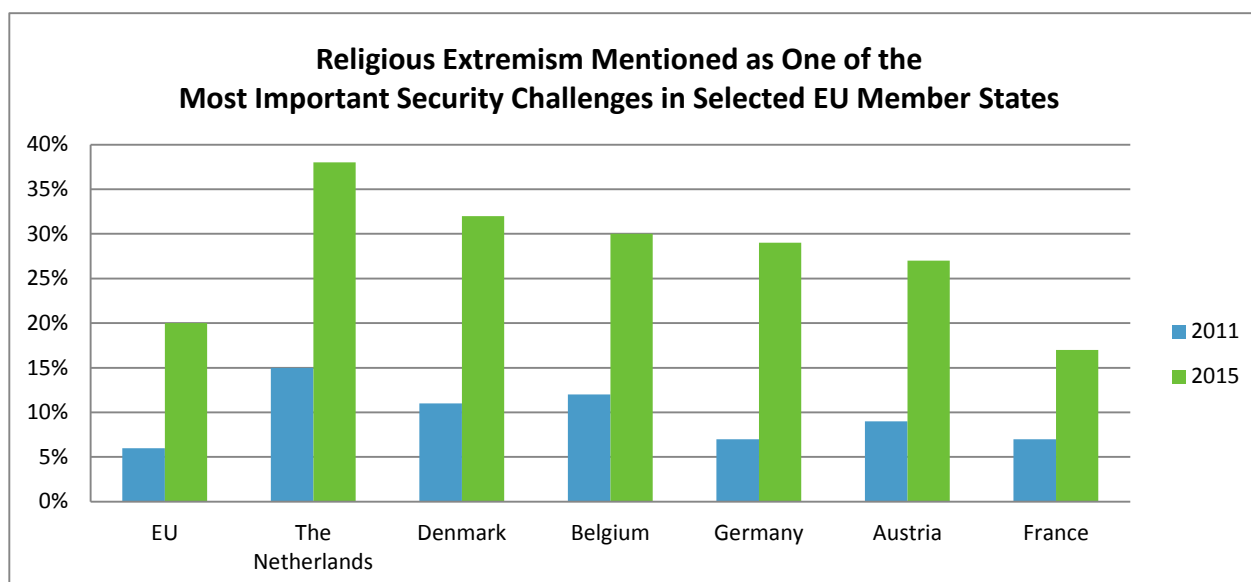
<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> "Internal Security", *Special Eurobarometer 371*.

<sup>80</sup> "Europeans' Attitudes towards Security", *Special Eurobarometer 432*.



**Figure 2:** Religious Extremism Mentioned as One of the Most Important Challenges to the Security of EU Citizens<sup>81</sup>

These results show a significant increase between 2011 and early 2015 in fear of terrorism and of religious extremism. The explicit mentioning of the foreign fighter phenomenon in the 2015 survey makes it possible to determine that Europeans are increasingly worried about it, even more so than about economic and financial issues.<sup>82</sup> According to Eurobarometer 432, “rising concern about certain security threats, especially terrorism and religious extremism, no doubt reflect[s] recent incidents such as the Paris attacks”.<sup>83</sup>

## 6.2. Perceptions on Religious and Cultural Groups

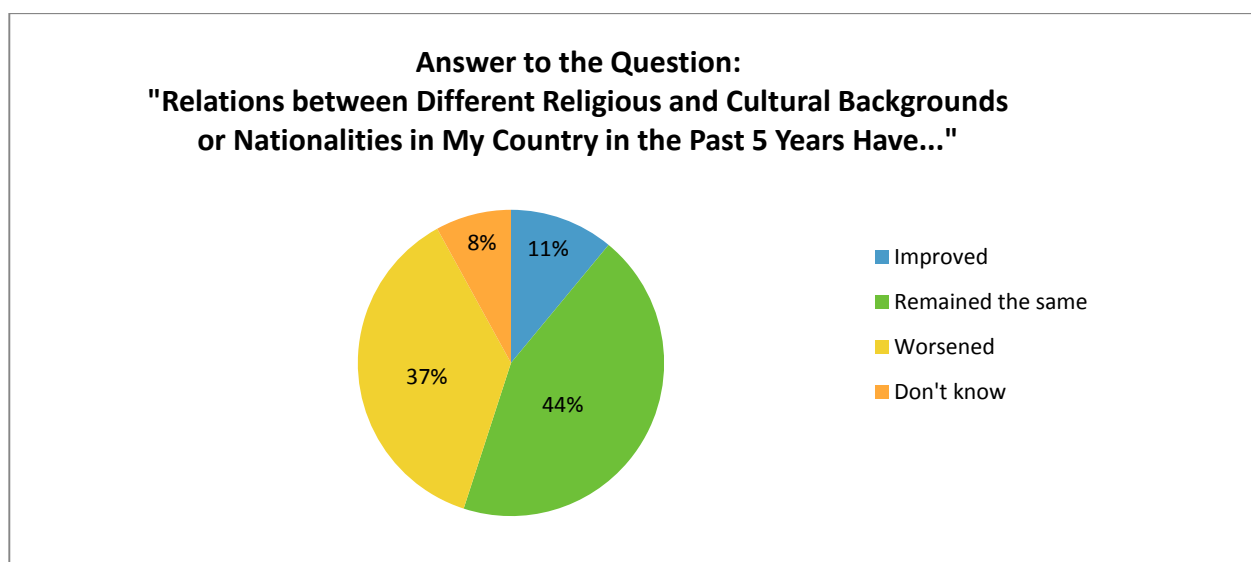
Now that we have mapped changes in perceptions on security, we will move to changes in perceptions on relations between religious and cultural groups in general, and perceptions on Islam in particular. As already explained, there are a number of actors that have linked the foreign fighter phenomenon and Islam. Some politicians, mainly on the right side of the political spectrum, have done so but more importantly, the foreign fighters themselves claim they are acting in the name of Islam. Therefore, it is interesting to see whether these ideas have been adopted by European citizens as well and to see to what extent perceptions on Islam have changed in the past years. Given the sensitivity of the issue at hand, the Eurobarometer has not directed its questions to draw conclusions about views on specific religions and religious and ethnic groups within countries. However, it has more broadly surveyed relations between people from different cultural or religious backgrounds or different nationalities. Europeans were asked if they felt relations between these groups in their country had changed in 2014 compared to five years earlier. The predominant impression among the interviewees was that nothing had changed (44 percent). Still, almost two fifths (37 percent) found that things got worse whereas only 11 percent felt relations had improved.<sup>84</sup>

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> It is important to add that the rise of the position of terrorism as a security threat is possibly both an absolute as well as a relative increase that could also be influenced by the relative decline of the perception of economic issues as security threats.

<sup>83</sup> “Europeans’ Attitudes towards Security”, *Special Eurobarometer 432*.

<sup>84</sup> “Social Climate”, *Special Eurobarometer 418*, European Commission, November 2014, [http://ec.europa.eu/public\\_opinion/archives/ebs/ebs\\_418\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/ebs/ebs_418_en.pdf).



**Figure 3:** Development of Relations between Different Religious and Cultural Backgrounds or Nationalities<sup>85</sup>

These results touch on relations between different groups in general and give an impression of social peace and polarisation within the EU. They do not single out Islam or specifically mention Islam and there are no reliable pan-European surveys that do so. Hence, the data that follows are the results of public opinion polls in a smaller number of EU countries. One such poll, by the French newspaper *Le Monde* and the marketing firm *Institut français d'opinion public* (IFOP), gained a lot of attention. The results of the survey showed some very negative feelings towards Islam among the interviewees from France and Germany. When asked whether Muslims were well integrated into their societies, a large majority of the French (68 percent) and German (75 percent) respondents believed this was not the case.<sup>86</sup> Also, 42 percent of the French and 40 percent of the Germans considered the presence of Muslim communities a "threat" to their national identities.<sup>87</sup> In another question, respondents had to choose three words from a list, which they felt corresponded most closely to their perception of Islam. The options listed were "rejection of western values, fanaticism, submission, violence, justice, liberty, protection of women, democracy and don't know". The first four were mentioned significantly more often than the latter four.<sup>88</sup> However, the listed options do raise questions about the objectivity and neutrality of this particular poll.

The well-known and respected polling agency the Pew Research Center surveyed European views on Muslims in 2014. In France and Germany, respectively 72 and 58 percent were reported to have mostly or very favourable views compared to only 27 and 33 percent who had mostly or very unfavourable views of Muslims.<sup>89</sup> Strikingly, a follow-up study in 2015 found an improvement in views towards Muslims in both countries. The number of unfavourable views dropped in France and Germany to 24 percent, whereas the number of favourable views increased to respectively 76 and 69 percent.<sup>90</sup> In France, the number of respondents who held very favourable views of Muslims increased between 2014 and June 2015 from 14 to 25 percent, months after the Charlie Hebdo attack.<sup>91</sup> The United Kingdom also showed a similar pattern with unfavourable views dropping from 26 to 19 percent and favourable views increasing.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

<sup>86</sup> F. Dabi and J. Fourquet, "Comparative Survey France/Germany on Islam", *Ifop/Le Monde*, 13 December 2010, [http://www.ifop.com/media/poll/1365-2-study\\_file.pdf](http://www.ifop.com/media/poll/1365-2-study_file.pdf).

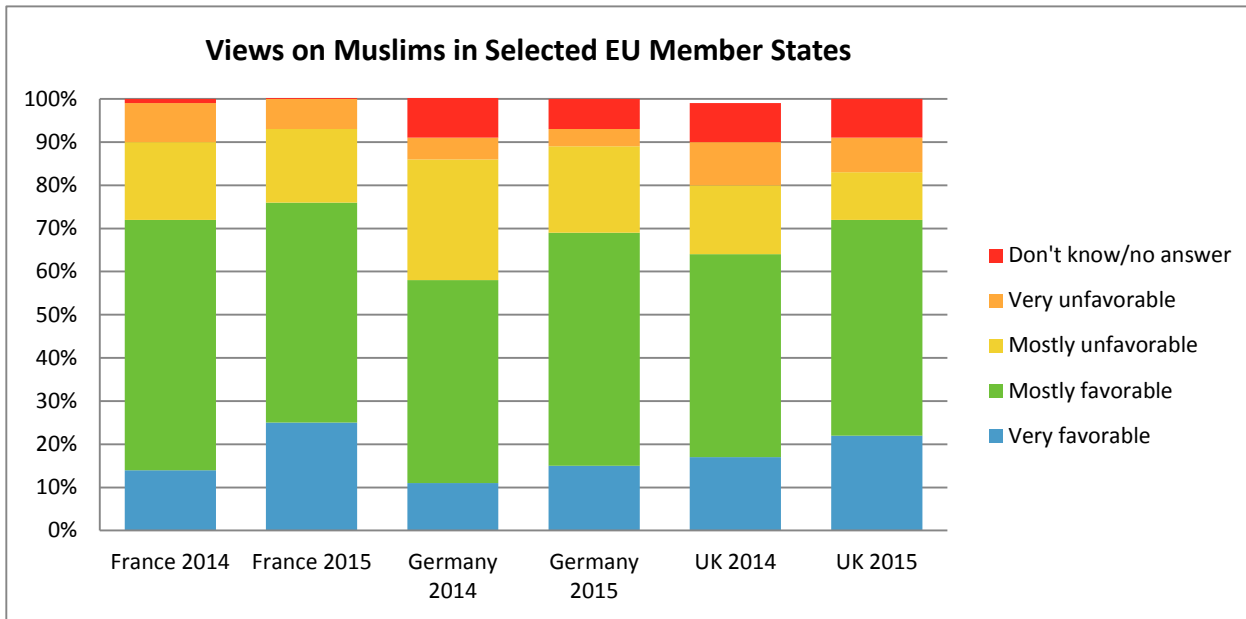
<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

<sup>89</sup> "Chapter 4. Views of Roma, Muslims, Jews", *Pew Research Center - Global Attitudes & Trends*, 12 May 2014, <http://www.pewglobal.org/2014/05/12/chapter-4-views-of-roma-muslims-jews/>.

<sup>90</sup> "Chapter 3. Anti-Minority Sentiment Not Rising", *Pew Research Center - Global Attitudes & Trends*, 2 June 2015, <http://www.pewglobal.org/2015/06/02/chapter-3-anti-minority-sentiment-not-rising/>.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid.



**Figure 4:** Views on Muslims in France, Germany and the UK<sup>92</sup>

Another polling agency, YouGov, surveyed British citizens just weeks after the Woolwich attacks to understand how they perceived terrorist threats and to map their attitudes towards Muslims. The overwhelming majority (78 percent) perceived the chances “of themselves, a family member or a good friend being killed in a terrorist attack as being fairly low, very low or almost non-existent”.<sup>93</sup> However, when asked about their views on British Muslims, only 20 percent indicated that they feel “practically all British Muslims are peaceful, law-abiding citizens who deplore Wednesday’s killing as much as everyone else”. The overall majority (60 percent) chose the statement that “the great majority are peaceful and law-abiding citizens but there is a dangerous minority who feel no sense of loyalty to this country and are prepared to carry out, or at least condone, acts of terrorism”. Fourteen percent answered that “[a] large proportion of British Muslims feel no sense of loyalty to this country and are prepared to condone or even carry out acts of terrorism”.<sup>94</sup> Another survey by YouGov conducted in 2015 found similar results by probing the perceived compatibility of Muslim values and British society. More than half (55 percent) of the respondents perceive a fundamental clash between Islam and the values of British society, while 22 percent believes the two are generally compatible.<sup>95</sup>

To return to the question of whether we have seen a shift in European citizens’ perceptions towards relations between different groups in their country and their view on Islam, the results are mixed. When it comes to relations between different groups, most respondents indicated that not much has changed. Overall, the views on Muslims seem to (have remained to) be favourable. However, some polls do indicate very negative responses pertaining to the perceived compatibility of Islam and Western values and the attitude of Muslims towards violence. It must be noted that some of these polls only related to a particular country and that it remains hard to assess to what extent these polls capture the overall sentiment in Europe. However, as these surveys were conducted in the three largest EU Member States one could say there are quite negative feelings towards or even fear of Islam and its followers among a considerable minority in Europe.

<sup>92</sup> Source: Pew Research Center (2015).

<sup>93</sup> W. Dahlgreen, “Public Calm in Face of Terror”, *YouGov UK*, 26 May 2013, <https://yougov.co.uk/news/2013/05/26/public-calm-face-terror/>.

<sup>94</sup> “YouGov/Sunday Times Survey Results”, *YouGov UK*, 24 May 2013, [http://d25d2506sfb94s.cloudfront.net/cumulus\\_uploads/document/pdc1opqf1w/YG-Archive-Pol-Sunday-Times-results-240513.pdf](http://d25d2506sfb94s.cloudfront.net/cumulus_uploads/document/pdc1opqf1w/YG-Archive-Pol-Sunday-Times-results-240513.pdf).

<sup>95</sup> “YouGov Survey Results”, *YouGov UK*, 23 March 2015, [http://cdn.yougov.com/cumulus\\_uploads/document/ogqzisd2xq/Islam%20and%20British%20values.pdf](http://cdn.yougov.com/cumulus_uploads/document/ogqzisd2xq/Islam%20and%20British%20values.pdf).



## 7. Anti-Muslim Rallies and Incidents

The Paris attacks evoked strong reactions. Great support was shown for the values of the French Republic, particularly regarding freedom of expression, in the days after the attacks. Millions of French citizens took to the streets throughout the country. In Paris, forty world leaders joined more than 1.6 million citizens in a “march of unity”.<sup>96</sup> Another 100,000 people all over the world with a variety of religious and cultural backgrounds participated in similar marches.<sup>97</sup> Increasingly, there were indications of division and lack of unity. The attacks have also provided an opportunity for some (new) political movements to show anger and fear over violence in the name of Islam and even the mere presence of Islam in Europe. In Denmark, just after the Paris attacks, the movement *Stop Islamiseringen af Danmark* (Stop Islamisation of Denmark, SIAD) organised a protest meeting in Copenhagen. They had requested permission to congregate outside Denmark’s first grand mosque during its inauguration; the police rejected their application fearing it could lead to personal attacks and vandalism. Proposed slogans included “no terrorist centers in Denmark” and “no sharia in Denmark.”<sup>98</sup> In Germany the *Patriotische Europäer gegen die Islamisierung des Abendlandes* (Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamisation of the West, PEGIDA) movement has been holding Monday night marches since October 2014, protesting against what they regard as the Islamisation of Germany and the rest of Europe.<sup>99</sup> In Slovakia, dozens of people were arrested in June 2015 after an anti-immigration rally under the slogan "Stop Islamisation of Europe; Together Against Dictate of Brussels; Europe for Europeans!" turned violent.<sup>100</sup> These are just three examples of a growing number of smaller and larger groups, organisations and movements that have organised rallies in relation to manifestations of radical Islam and jihadist terrorism-related incidents. Increasingly, we see that anti-immigrant statements are linked to statements about the threat of terrorism. During the summer of 2015, when the number of refugees trying to come to Europe reached a new high, concerns were voiced that there might be terrorists “hiding” among the refugees. In Poland, protesters shouted “Today refugees, tomorrow terrorists”.<sup>101</sup>

Some of these rallies turned violent. Even worse, there also seems to be a rise in violent anti-Muslim incidents or intimidation of Muslims throughout Europe. According to the Pew Research Center, individuals have been assaulted or displaced from their homes or places of worship in almost half of Europe in 2013.<sup>102</sup> It must be noted that Jews faced harassment in no less than 34 European countries and were even more often harassed.<sup>103</sup> Another organisation that monitors anti-Muslim violence is the European Network Against Racism. It claimed that Islamophobia has been on the rise in Europe, with one in three Muslims having been confronted with this in 2014.<sup>104</sup> Following the January 2015 Paris attacks, incidents of Islamophobia skyrocketed by five hundred percent totalling 222 incidents in the first quarter of 2015.<sup>105</sup> In one of these incidents, a week after the Paris attacks, a man of

<sup>96</sup> “Paris Attacks: Millions Rally for Unity in France”, *BBC*, 11 January 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-30765824>.

<sup>97</sup> “Charlie Hebdo Shootings: Worldwide Marches from London to Washington in Solidarity with France”, *ABC*, 12 January 2015, <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2015-01-12/worldwide-marches-solidarity-with-france-charlie-hebdo-victims/6012164>.

<sup>98</sup> B. Pitt, “Stop Islamiseringen Af Danmark Banned from Protesting at Copenhagen Mosque Opening”, *Islamophobia Watch*, 19 January 2014, <http://www.islamophobiawatch.co.uk/stop-islamiseringen-af-danmark-banned-from-protesting-at-copenhagen-mosque-opening/>.

<sup>99</sup> “Growing Islamophobia in Europe: Recent Developments in Germany, Sweden and France”, *European Network Against Racism*, January 2015, <http://www.scribd.com/doc/260743208/GROWING-ISLAMOPHOBIA-IN-EUROPE#scribd>.

<sup>100</sup> “Slovak Police Detain 60 People at March against Immigration Quotas”, *Reuters*, 20 June 2015, <http://uk.reuters.com/article/2015/06/20/uk-europe-migrants-slovakia-idUKKBN0P000O20150620>.

<sup>101</sup> K. Gander, “‘Today Refugees, Tomorrow Terrorists’: Eastern Europeans Chant Anti-Islam Slogans in Demonstrations against Refugees”, *The Independent*, 14 September 2015, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/refugees-crisis-pro-and-anti-refugee-protests-take-place-in-poland-in-pictures-10499352.html>.

<sup>102</sup> A. Theodorou, “5 Facts about Religious Hostilities in Europe”, *Pew Research Center*, 27 February 2015, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/02/27/5-facts-about-religious-hostilities-in-europe/>.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>104</sup> “Growing Islamophobia in Europe”, *European Network Against Racism*.

<sup>105</sup> C. Harris, “Islamophobic Attacks Rocket by 500% since Charlie Hebdo Murders”, *Euronews*, 16 April 2015, <http://www.euronews.com/2015/04/16/islamophobic-attacks-in-france-rocket-by-500-percent-since-charlie-hebdo-murders/>; T. McNicoll, “After Charlie Hebdo Attacks, French Muslims Face Increased Threats”.

Moroccan background was stabbed to death by someone shouting “I am your God, I am your Islam”.<sup>106</sup> Throughout Europe, mosques were threatened, and worse, became the targets of arson attacks. For instance, in Sweden, there were three attempts to burn down mosques in the week after the Paris attacks.<sup>107</sup>

## 8. Concluding Remarks: Low-Probability, (Too) High-Impact Threat

In recent years, Europe has experienced several terrorism-related incidents that have been linked to the phenomenon of jihadist foreign fighters. The number of violent incidents and the number of victims have, so far, been relatively low: Since 2011, there have been six violent attacks killing 33 persons, including four perpetrators. Of these six attacks, just two are allegedly directly linked to the foreign fighter phenomenon in Syria and Iraq (Nemmouche and El Khazzani), which resulted in the deaths of four of the 33 persons. Half of the attacks specifically targeted the Jewish community (Merah, Nemmouche and Coulibaly). A higher number of Europeans died in attacks or beheadings outside Europe: in Syria and Tunisia. These victims, more than fifty persons, were mainly from the United Kingdom, Italy, France and Poland. Although every victim of terrorism is one too many, the figures indicate that jihadist foreign fighters have not (yet) posed a significant physical threat to Europe and European citizens.

However, terrorism is not mainly about killing but primarily about making an impact on people and societies and provoking (over)reactions. If we look at public opinion polls in recent years, we see that fear of terrorism has increased and that, according to Eurobarometer, “terrorism (including the “foreign fighters” phenomenon)” today is regarded as Europe’s most important security challenge. Also, fear of religious extremism has risen significantly.

With these figures in mind, it is safe to say that the impact of the phenomenon of jihadist terrorism and jihadist foreign fighters is very large. By way of repeated threats followed by relatively small incidents and attacks aimed against symbols of Western society and so-called “soft targets”, European foreign fighters have managed to create a level of fear among the general public and concerns among security experts that go far beyond the physical threat they pose. These terrorists know how to employ various channels to spread their message. Social media and traditional media play an important role, but so do experts, professionals, and politicians who warn the general public or express their worries and concerns about terrorism and religious extremism. The specific impact of these channels and that of the rhetoric and measures that are part of Europe’s counterterrorism policies need further study. Have they made Europe safer, for instance by increasing awareness of the threat, or have they mainly added to increasing worries over terrorism and religious extremism?

Two particular groups in society perhaps seem to have specific reasons to worry about terrorism and the impact of terrorism in Europe. The Jewish community, more than any other group, has been a direct victim of violence and intimidation by jihadist foreign fighters several times. The other group is that of the Muslim community who is perhaps the most important indirect victim of the activities of jihadist foreign fighters. Muslims have been confronted with anti-Islam rallies and attacks on both individuals and places of worship, and an increase in negative feelings towards Islam and Muslim communities in a number of European countries. Moreover, they are also overrepresented among the direct victims of jihadist terrorism: Mohamed Merah killed three paratroopers of North African origin, one of the victims of Mehdi Nemmouche had an Algerian Berber father, and the Kouachi brothers shot a policeman and a copy editor both also of Algerian origin. Finally, there are unknown numbers of Syrian and Iraqi Muslims who have fallen victim to the violence caused by the more than 4,000 European foreign fighters who have joined the ranks of Jabhat al-Nusra, Islamic State and other jihadist organisations. This group of victims of

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<sup>106</sup> S. Linning, “Moroccan Man in France Brutally Stabbed to Death by Neighbour in ‘Horrible Islamophobic Attack’”, *Daily Mail Online*, 17 January 2015, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2914616/Moroccan-man-France-brutally-stabbed-death-neighbour-horrible-Islamophobic-attack.html>.

<sup>107</sup> B. Pitt, “Sweden Hit by Third Mosque Arson Attack in a Week”, *Islamophobia Watch*, 1 January 2015, <http://www.islamophobiawatch.co.uk/sweden-hit-by-third-mosque-arson-attack-in-a-week/>.

European jihadist foreign fighters is often overlooked and their number is most likely much higher than that of the European victims.<sup>108</sup>

The question as to what extent the violence by and threats from jihadist foreign fighters has affected the view of most Europeans regarding Islam and Muslim communities is difficult to answer. Some polls show an increase in negative feelings towards this religion and its followers, whereas others show more favourable feelings. It should also be mentioned that negative opinions on Islam and Muslim communities is not a new phenomenon. In the past decade, we have seen this in a number of European societies, as reflected in the rising popularity of a number of right-wing movements with anti-immigrant and sometimes anti-Islam political agendas. It is therefore not possible to conclude from the polls that the foreign fighter phenomenon and recent attacks have contributed to an increase in anti-Islam sentiment. Nonetheless, it is safe to say that the jihadist foreign fighter phenomenon in general, and particular terrorism incidents, have provoked anti-Islam rhetoric and rallies, and have thus threatened social peace and contributed to further polarisation in societies.

Against this backdrop, the phenomenon of jihadist foreign fighters is not only to be regarded as a physical security threat, but also, if not primarily, a social and political threat to European societies. It could be called a “low-probability, high-impact” threat or, in other words, a phenomenon whose impact is not proportional to the physical threat it poses.

### 8.1. Reflection

With the effect of jihadist foreign fighters on Jewish and Muslim communities in mind, and given the high levels of fear and worry over terrorism and religious extremism among European citizens, it seems high time not only to further reduce the physical threat posed by jihadist foreign fighters, but also its societal and political impact. To that end, we should critically investigate the role of certain actors – media, politicians - that have contributed to the very high impact of this phenomenon. We have to specifically look into ways to increase resilience against this phenomenon, which is currently a “low-probability/(too) high-impact” threat and that, ideally, should become a “very low-probability/low-impact” threat. To that end, we should not only further invest in traditional counterterrorism measures to deal with the first part of this equation, but also invest in decreasing the second part, for instance by looking at communication strategies. For suggestions on how to do this, we refer to a previous ICCT Research Paper by Bakker and De Graaf “Towards a Theory of Fear Management in the Counterterrorism Domain: A Stocktaking Approach” that stresses the importance of improving coping mechanisms.<sup>109</sup> The authors show that although the recognition and acknowledgment of concepts such as resilience and self-efficacy are widespread, it is still a challenge to apply them.<sup>110</sup> Perhaps recent experiences such as the Paris attacks can help us to distinguish best practices and improve efforts to decrease the impact of jihadist terrorism and jihadist foreign fighters. The demonstration of resilience after these attacks by millions of citizens who went to the streets, both inside and outside France, could be regarded as a sign that resilience and self-efficacy can be triggered.

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<sup>108</sup> D. Obeidallah, “ISIS’s Gruesome Muslims Death Toll”, *The Daily Beast*, 7 July 2014, <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2014/10/07/isis-s-gruesome-muslim-death-toll.html>.

<sup>109</sup> E. Bakker and B. De Graaf, “Towards a Theory of Fear Management”.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15.

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