

THE THREAT OF TERRORISM IN EUROPE

The spread of religious extremism in Europe is fuelled by the continuing armed conflicts in the Middle East and Africa.

Radicals already in Europe are a source of danger.

In Estonia the level of terrorist threat is currently low.

THE IMPACT OF THE EVENTS IN AFGHANISTAN ON THE TERRORIST THREAT IN EUROPE

The Taliban's victory in Afghanistan has encouraged terrorist groups and Islamic radicals worldwide. Islamic terrorists see the United States leaving Afghanistan as the capitulation of a major power and a victory for jihadism. Afghanistan has the potential to become a global hub for radicals to conduct their training, propaganda, equipment and development activities.

Afghanistan has the potential to become a global hub for radicals.

The Islamic State (IS) has been weakened following the loss of the territory of the caliphate. However, the organisation has succeeded in developing a network of branches around the world, through which it continues its ideological and physical expansion, seeking to divert attention from its defeats, motivate fighters and recruit new members. IS highlights the activities of its branches via its propaganda channels, thus demonstrating its broad reach and inciting fighters to attacks that threaten European countries and interests. Islamic radicals' extensive and effective agitation to organize attacks against the West will continue to pose a serious threat to European security.

IS's Khorasan Province (IS-K) in Afghanistan uses radicals in Europe to incite violence, and plan and carry out attacks. In recent years, IS-K has successfully incited radicals from Central Asia and North Caucasus to attacks, but these have, fortunately, been



Fighters of the so-called Islamic State Khorasan (IS-K) Province in Afghanistan.

Source: social media

thwarted in preparatory stages. In April and May 2020, a group of Tajik nationals who had arrived in Europe as refugees were arrested in Germany, Poland and Albania for planning attacks under the guidance of IS members in Syria and Afghanistan. As IS-K continues to call for attacks against the West, Islamic radicals from Central Asia, inspired by these calls, may continue to target the Western citizens and interests in the region and also carry out attacks in Europe. The threat lies primarily in individuals incited by IS propaganda, who, like the Uzbek radical who carried out an attack in Stockholm in April 2017, are supported and guided by members of the terrorist organisation.

Al-Qaeda has weakened significantly since its heyday, lacking a convincing leader and having lost influence competing with IS in recent years. Since the 2005 London attack, it has not managed to carry out any large-scale attacks in Europe. Al-Qaeda sees the Taliban's victory as an opportunity to gain an advantage over IS, win back members who have sworn allegiance to IS, and carry out terrorist attacks on American and European targets outside Afghanistan.

TERRORIST BREEDING GROUNDS IN AFRICA

The spread of religious extremism in Europe is fostered not only by the continuing armed conflicts in the Middle East and Africa but also by the fact that there are still countries where the government lacks control of part or most of its territory, such as Somalia. What makes such countries a source of danger is the combination of religious extremism, international crime and terrorism. In such countries, terrorists skilfully exploit the region's endemic problems and ethnic conflicts by recruiting members from within vulnerable communities.

Following the departure of international security forces, radicals operating in the Sahel may start planning attacks in Europe.

The Sahel continues to be a significant breeding ground for terrorism. The crisis in Mali has escalated into a regional conflict, extending to neighbouring Burkina Faso and Niger. Under French leadership and with the support of international security forces, including the Estonian Defence Forces, there has been a successful effort to curtail the general capabilities of regional terrorist groups with ties to Al-Qaeda and IS, prevent a significant expansion of the Islamic radicals' operating area, and limit the increase of the migration flow stemming from the deteriorating security conditions and the movement of radicals to Europe. With the departure of the international security forces, which will provide terrorists with increased freedom of action, radicals operating in the Sahel may start planning attacks outside the region, including in Europe.

The IS branch in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), active in Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso, has already shown the potential to incite radicals to carry out attacks in Europe. The branch's activities have been presented as a success story in IS propaganda, with ISGS offensive operations praised and fighters encouraged to carry out attacks on France and its allies, who they claim are leading a "Christian operation" in the Sahel. The radical who attacked police officers in Colombes near Paris on 27 April 2020 under IS's instructions had sworn allegiance to the head of ISGS, Abu Walid al-Sahrawi, and sought to use his terrorist attack to draw attention to the need to establish Sharia law around the world.

In the province of Cabo Delgado, Mozambique, at least 3,000 people have been killed in attacks, and some 800,000 people have been forced to flee since 2017 due to intensified activities by extremist groups with links to IS. Although Mozambique has recently made progress in counter-terrorism thanks to the contributions of other countries, Islamic extremists are still able to recruit fighters from outside Mozambique – from other countries and refugee camps in the region – thus threatening the territory of neighbouring Tanzania.

ISLAMIC STATE TERRORIST THREAT IN EUROPE

The coronavirus pandemic has been both a hindrance and a boon for IS in Europe.

IS has been weakened by the loss of caliphate territory but its desire to carry out attacks in the West remains. The terrorist organisation continues to exploit radicals in Europe to incite violence, plan attacks and carry them out.

Security agencies in many parts of Europe have been able to prevent attacks planned by IS fighters, and many radicals have been arrested at the time of planning their attack. The ability of Islamic radicals to carry out attacks in Europe has also been hampered by the coronavirus pandemic and the resulting travel restrictions. At the same time, the economic and social consequences of the pandemic (isolation, rising unemployment, distance learning, increased computer use, etc.) have created a fertile ground for recruiters to promote radical Islam, particularly among minors and those in difficult social and economic circumstances or suffering from mental health problems. IS continues to call for attacks to be carried out in every possible way with readily available means, targeting security forces, churches, hospitals, pharmacies, malls, shops, parks and other places where people gather.

The overall level of terrorist threat remains high in Europe, and the likelihood of an attack by militants encouraged by IS is particularly high in countries with large Muslim communities.

In the coming years, in addition to Islamic terrorism – and often in response to the fear created by Islamic terrorism – European security will also be affected by the increasingly global and coordinated recruitment efforts of right-wing extremists. Far-right radicals incite violence through social media, online platforms and social networks by exploiting emotive topics such as Islamic terrorism and illegal migration, which will remain relevant for years to come. Individuals who are inspired by far-right attacks and violent propaganda and see themselves as part of a global movement are particularly dangerous.

Despite the persistent terrorist threat in Europe, it is our assessment the risk of terrorism is currently low in Estonia. International terrorism poses a high potential risk primarily for Estonian citizens abroad.



On 27 April 2020, an attack on police officers was carried out in the Paris suburb of Colombes by a radical guided by IS. The act of terrorism was meant to draw attention to the need to impose Sharia law worldwide.

Source: Florian Loisy and Olivier Bureau / Le Parisien