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# CONGRESSIONAL TESTIMONY

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## **Allies Under Attack: The Terrorist Threat to Europe** **Testimony Before the Joint Subcommittee on** **Terrorism, Nonproliferation, and Trade** **Subcommittee on Europe, Eurasia, and Emerging Threats** **Committee on Foreign Affairs**

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Robin Simcox  
Margaret Thatcher Fellow  
Margaret Thatcher Center for Freedom,  
The Heritage Foundation

Chairman Poe and distinguished Members of the subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify here today.

My name is Robin Simcox and I am the Margaret Thatcher Fellow at The Heritage Foundation. My responsibilities consist of research on terrorist groups, particularly those targeting Europe, as well as research on intelligence and security policy. These are issues I have helped governments across Europe shape their response to for almost 10 years. I also regularly speak to relevant US government agencies on such matters.

The views I express in this testimony are my own and do not represent any official position of The Heritage Foundation.

My goal this afternoon is to highlight the severe threat that Islamist terrorism poses to Europe. There are several aspects to the threat which I will discuss today.

### **The Scale**

There has been much discussion by governments across the Continent of the threat posed by foreign terrorist fighters. This refers to the minimum 5,000 to 6,000 Europeans who have fought alongside ISIS and other Islamist groups in Syria and Iraq since 2011 and are now returning to their home countries.<sup>1</sup> Clearly, this is a major problem: There are approximately 1,000 returnees alone just from the U.K., France, and Germany.

Past attacks in Europe have demonstrated that there is good reason to be wary of the dangers posed by these returning fighters. Members of the cell that committed ISIS's attacks in Paris in November 2015—killing 130 and wounding 368—had traveled to Syria from Europe, fought and trained with ISIS, and then returned to Europe to carry out an attack.

This cell also contained ISIS members who had entered Europe from Syria after making false asylum claims. Security agencies are cognizant of ISIS using this avenue to infiltrate Europe. While the majority of Syrian refugees are not tied to terrorism, Germany in particular has seen a sharp uptick in the threat it faces following the recent influx. There was an eightfold increase in plots between 2015 and 2016, largely due to a surge in plots involving refugees. Indeed, Germany faced more plots last year than it did in the entire 2000–2015 period.<sup>2</sup>

As with the attacks the US suffered in San Bernardino and Orlando, European governments also have very significant problems with homegrown radicals—the majority of whom are unlikely to have any formal ties to conflicts taking place in countries such as Iraq, Libya, Syria, or Yemen.

To give an idea of the scale of this threat, the U.K. has approximately 23,000 terror suspects on the radar.<sup>3</sup> Within this are 3,000 suspects assessed to be the most imminent threat. However, such

assessments will never be foolproof and there always lies the possibility that the likes of Westminster Bridge attacker Khalid Masood—who was on the radar but not thought to be an imminent danger—slips through the net.

## **The Breadth of Terrorism Throughout Europe**

Data from my forthcoming research for Heritage demonstrates that the number of plots Europe has faced since 2014 has risen year-on-year. The countries most commonly targeted are Belgium, France, Germany, and the U.K.; yet plots targeting Europe are not consigned to only those countries. In fact, between January 2014 and the end of May 2017, there was eleven additional countries targeted: Albania, Austria, Bosnia, Denmark, Italy, Kosovo, the Netherlands, Norway, Spain, Sweden and Switzerland.

This year, there have been multiple attacks on traditional Islamist targets: the U.K. and France. Yet an ISIS-linked asylum seeker from Uzbekistan also killed five people and injured 15 in a truck attack in Stockholm; and an Italian Tunisian inspired by ISIS stabbed multiple police officers and soldiers at a train station in Milan.

Furthermore, while there are certainly trends, it is impossible to build a catch-all profile. It is not just young men, for example. Khalid Masood, the Westminster Bridge attacker, was 52. My research has even shown an uptick in plotting by teenagers and girls.<sup>4</sup> Converts and those raised as Muslims; those who have a criminal record and those who do not; those who trained with terrorist groups and those who have not; those who are well educated or affluent,

as well as those who are poorly educated or from a lower socioeconomic background. All were drawn into the terrorist orbit and planned attacks in Europe.

## **The Range of Weapons Now Used by Terrorists**

Since November 2015, Belgium, France, Germany, and the U.K. have all seen operatives acquiring the expertise and materials to assemble suicide bombs without having their plans thwarted. There has not been a lack of willing volunteers to carry out these suicide missions, including Salman Abedi, who carried out the attack in Manchester.

There has also been a multitude of plots involving firearms, knives or some other form of edged weapon (such as a machete or an axe) and, of course, the increasing use of vehicles. Unfortunately, there have been no publicly disclosed instances in which these plans for vehicular attacks have been thwarted. This is perhaps unsurprising considering how easy it is to acquire such vehicles. We have seen the consequences of this in Berlin, London, Nice, Stockholm and elsewhere.

Because of such factors, over 1,400 people were injured and over 300 people killed in Islamist attacks in Europe in the past three and a half years. Included in this number are nine Americans.

Chairman Poe, distinguished Members of the subcommittee, the grave danger that terrorism poses to Europe is only likely to increase. The U.S. must work with Europe to defeat this threat.

Thank you for inviting me to discuss this with you and I look forward to any questions.

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## Endnotes

1. "More Than 6,000 European Jihadists in Syria, EU Official Says," *The Telegraph*, April 13, 2015, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/syria/11531884/More-than-6000-European-jihadists-in-Syria-EU-official-says.html> (accessed June 21, 2017).
2. "'11 Terror Plots Foiled in Germany Since 2000'," *The Local*, March 29, 2016, <https://www.thelocal.de/20160329/german-security-service-saves-its-sheep-from-terrorism> (accessed June 6, 2017), and forthcoming Heritage research.
3. Sean O'Neill, Fiona Hamilton, Fariha Karim, Gabriella Swerling, "Huge Scale of Terror Threat Revealed: UK Home to 23,000 Jihadists," *The Times*, May 27, 2017, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/huge-scale-of-terror-threat-revealed-uk-home-to-23-000-jihadists-3zvn58mhq> (accessed June 21, 2017).
4. Robin Simcox, "The Islamic State's Western Teenage Plotters," *CTC Sentinel*, Vol. 10, No. 2 (February 2017), p. 21, <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/the-islamic-states-western-teenage-plotters> (accessed June 21, 2017).