

# **Jihadist Radicalisation: Threat Perception & Policy Actions within the European Union**

**Soumya Chaturvedi**





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*By*

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## **About the Author**

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## **List of Abbreviations**

DIK	-	Deutsch Islamischer Kulturverein
EU	-	European Union
Europol	-	European Union Agency for Law Enforcement Cooperation
IS	-	Islamic State
PART	-	Plan d'Action contre la Radicalisation et le Terrorisme
PET	-	Danish Security and Intelligence Service
Plan R	-	Radicalism Action Plan
PLAT	-	Plan de Lutte Anti-Terroriste
SAVE	-	Society Against Violent Extremism
TE-SAT	-	European Union Terrorism Situation and Trend Report





# Jihadist Radicalisation: Threat Perception & Policy Actions within the European Union

## Introduction

Terrorism continues to be a major non-traditional security challenge across the world. Over the decades, terrorism has acquired different forms – ethno-nationalist, separatist, left-wing, right-wing, and others. More recently, '*jihadist*' or 'Islamic' terrorism has dominated the national security discourse across most of the global state actors and is often regarded as part of the fourth wave of modern terrorism.<sup>1</sup> While the absence of a global consensus on its definition and root causes prevails, 'radicalisation' as the basis of terrorism has become an accepted phenomenon. Consequently, the need to address the growing '*jihadist*' or 'Islamic' radicalisation has taken centre stage in countries most affected by the associated form of terrorism.

Although the European Union (EU) has suffered from several terrorist attacks, the threat of *jihadist* terrorism has been on the rise since the 2000s. According to the European Union Agency for Law Enforcement Cooperation (Europol), as recently as 2023, the overall terrorist threat to EU security remains acute and *jihadist* terrorism is the primary concern of the EU member states.<sup>2</sup> Several factors have influenced *Jihadist* terrorism in the EU. The emergence of the Islamic State (IS), foreign fighter mobilisation and the subsequent declaration of IS Caliphate in 2014 played a key role in destabilising EU security. The possible role of immigration in influencing the security instability and adding to the *jihadist* radicalisation issue has also been at the centre of polarising debates with the EU. More recently, the revival of the Israel-Hamas war in the last quarter of 2023 was also attributed to adversely impacting EU security.

While countering *jihadist* radicalisation has been a priority of the EU member states, quantifying the effectiveness of such measures has always been challenging. The current report aims to study *jihadist* radicalisation as a security threat in the EU and the countermeasures undertaken by the EU member states. After presenting a brief overview of the status of *jihadist* terrorism and *jihadist* radicalisation in the EU, the report deep dives into the experiences of different EU member states and the policy actions they undertook.

To maintain coherency throughout the report, while the terms '*jihadism*,' '*jihadist terrorism*,' and 'Islamic terrorism' may be used interchangeably, they would mean to be the same as defined by the Europol's European Union Terrorism Situation and Trend Report (TE-SAT) 2023, i.e.,

*"...a violent sub-current of Salafism, a revivalist Sunni Muslim movement that rejects democracy and elected parliaments, arguing that human legislation is at variance with God's status as sole lawgiver. Jihadists aim to create an Islamic state governed exclusively by Islamic law (sharia), as interpreted by them.*

*...Contrary to other Salafist currents, jihadists legitimise the use of violence with a reference to the classical Islamic doctrines on jihad, a term which literally means 'striving' or 'exertion', but which jihadists treat as religiously sanctioned warfare.*

*All those opposing jihadist interpretations of Islamic law are perceived as 'enemies of Islam' and therefore considered legitimate targets. Some jihadists include Shia, Sufis, and other Muslims in their spectrum of perceived enemies."*

## **Jihadist Terrorism: Recent Facts and Figures**

In the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks in the USA, 'Islamic terrorism' found a distinct mention as a threat in the Europol Annual Report 2002.<sup>4</sup> In 2004, although made public only in July 2017, Europol published a separate 'Terrorist Activity in the European Union: Situation and Trends Report (TE-SAT)' with a dedicated segment on threat of *jihadist* terrorism in the EU.<sup>5</sup> Since 2007, TE-SAT

has been a publicly-available annual publication of the Europol providing an assessment of *jihadist* terrorism threat along with threats from other forms of terrorism in the EU.<sup>6</sup>

In 2022, there were six *jihadist* terrorist attacks in the EU, of which two were completed and four were foiled. Both the completed attacks were lone-wolf attacks and no terrorist organisation claimed responsibility. Prior to 2022, the last attack in the EU to be claimed by a *jihadist* organisation was in Vienna in November 2020 by IS. In France one attack was completed and three were foiled in 2022 and in Belgium, one attack was completed, and one was foiled.<sup>7</sup>

Although the highest number of terrorist attacks were attributed to left-wing and anarchists with 18, the disproportionately higher number of arrests relating to *jihadist* terrorism highlight the severity of threat emanating from *jihadism*. While 18 ethno-nationalist and separatist-related and 19 left-wing and anarchist-related arrests were undertaken in 2022, 266 *jihadism*-related arrests were made.<sup>8</sup> Consistently since 2013, *jihadist*-related arrests have been the highest in the EU compared to the arrests made with regards to other forms of terrorism. The arrests were mostly made on the grounds of planning or preparing attacks, terror financing, production or dissemination of propaganda material originating from IS and al-Qaeda, and membership of banned organisation.<sup>9</sup>

While the TE-SAT 2024 was not published at the time of preparing this report, the numbers are expected to further increase for the year 2023. In the aftermath of developments in Gaza in late 2023, there was an increase in demonstrations that turned violent, stabbing of people and other serious law and order concerns. EU member states including France, Germany, Sweden, Belgium increased their alert levels citing risk of *jihadism* and the far-right.<sup>10</sup>

### **Jihadist Radicalisation: Deciphering the Root-Cause Arguments**

Within the EU, the 2004 Madrid attack and the 2005 London attack brought to notice the concept of homegrown *jihadist* terrorism. The 9/11 attacks had given the perception that the *jihadi* terrorists come from abroad. However, with the attacks of 2004 and 2005, the EU member states realised that individuals raised

within the territory of the EU could also be attracted by extremist ideologies, turn against their fellow European citizens and resort to *jihadist* terrorism. This observation led European scholars and practitioners to research the drivers and processes of radicalisation. Two decades later, while several scholars have suggested several factors, the quest for an effective consensus on their sequencing or relative importance in answering the question - how individuals turn into terrorists - is still ongoing. However, there is a broad consensus on the lack of a one-size-fits-all explanation. Nonetheless, the ongoing research on radicalisation is essential as it highlights the factors that need to be considered for developing effective policies by states to deal with the menace of radicalisation.

Broadly, the identified drivers of radicalisation have been – socio-economic deprivation, personal and cultural characteristics, and ideology and religion. One of the pioneer works on root causes of terrorism suggests the need to investigate societal context, psychological considerations, and group dynamics to understand terrorism.<sup>11</sup> This framework has been further developed to view terrorism and pre-terrorism radicalisation as an interplay between a conducive environment (push factor), opportunities (pull factor), kinship and friendship networks or bonds, and ideology.<sup>12</sup> This nuanced framework also feeds into the argument of understanding radicalisation as a “kaleidoscope of factors which creates unlimited unique combinations”.<sup>13</sup>

Conducive environment or push factors can be broadly simplified to include two scenarios. Firstly, individuals with criminal backgrounds who belong to smaller criminal gangs and the possibility of joining terrorist organisations like IS and al-Qaeda are seen as an opportunity to become part of a 'super-gang.' This was often referred to be the case with the perpetrators of the November 2015 Paris attack.<sup>14</sup> Secondly, individuals who feel a sense of inequity are stifled and discontented with their status quo. To become 'someone,' believe in 'something', be part of a bigger cause, be 'useful', or gain acceptance within a community, they are attracted to the cry of *jihad*. The feeling of being abandoned by the state authorities was one of the drivers for nearly 50 young inhabitants of Molenbeek in Brussels to leave and join *jihad* in Syria.<sup>15</sup>

An opportunity or a pull factor, along with a conducive environment, make radicalisation an attractive proposition. This 'opportunity' was seen when IS offered a more lucrative proposition than the al-Qaeda. As opposed to al-Qaeda, IS had gained control over a large territory, almost like a proto-state where it could practically execute its promises. It would also imply that joining IS could provide an alternate life. Apart from offering a new future, acceptance, adventure, and belongingness, IS was also offering material wealth, as some foreign fighters from the UK described their time in Syria as a "five-star jihad".<sup>16</sup>

Kinship and friendship networks function as links between the conducive environment and the opportunity. These networks or bonds play a key role in the socialisation process<sup>17</sup> as they can assist in introducing the *jihadi* scene to eager individuals. Once they are placed deep in the system, these networks also help create a snowball effect by inspiring them to join *jihad*. Sometimes also referred to as 'radicalisation hubs',<sup>18</sup> the group dynamics within these hubs play the most crucial role in pushing a vulnerable individual to become a terrorist.

In an extensive study undertaken in the Hildenheim town of Germany, it was found that despite no abnormally low socio-economic conditions, a significant number of young individuals travelled to Syria or Iraq to join *jihad* including, the Anis Amri, a terrorist of Tunisian origin who was responsible for the 2016 Berlin Christmas market attack. It was later found that *Deutsch Islamischer Kulturverein* (DIK), or the German Islamic Cultural Association, comprising of Salafist leaning Muslims, had acquired a mosque in the Hildenheim town's vicinity. The central location of the mosque in Germany became one of the more prominent European hubs for radicalisation in the country and neighbouring regions. DIK was responsible for mobilising a substantial number of foreign fighters to join *jihad* in Syria and Iraq.<sup>19</sup>

A similar formation of *jihadist* radicalisation hubs was also seen under the Sharia4 network. Describing themselves as activists, some individuals got together and used 'Islam4UK' as an identity for their propaganda activities involving publicity-seeking stunts and highly provocative and polarised rhetoric. While they did undertake activities such as declaring "sharia-

controlled zones” and denouncing democracy in the UK, arguably due to high tolerance of freedom of speech and expression, they were careful about ensuring that the activities were not illegal. Described as 'plebian *jihadism*,<sup>20</sup> it was an anti-elitist and anti-intellectual, providing second or third-generation European Muslims a feeling of higher purpose and being as authoritative as a scholar or an expert. Eventually, in the 2010s, its franchise propped up in different European countries and has been discussed separately in the case studies below. Although European security authorities considered them a nuisance, they did not consider them a national security threat. However, with the outbreak of the Syrian civil war, their assessment proved wrong as these networks became responsible for mobilising support for the terrorist organisations in Syria and were declared terrorist organisations across Europe around 2015.

The last yet crucial factor in understanding radicalisation is ideology. *Jihadist* terrorist outfits have deployed theological explanations as the most important tool of their communication. For a deeply religious community, terrorist organisations such as IS and al-Qaeda have used theology to state their end goal, to justify their means, motivate, inspire, bring cohesion, and create euphoria while also providing a higher purpose to vulnerable individuals. Whether it is a key driver or a mere justification, is it necessary for a terrorist to undergo a lengthy process of indoctrination, or can it be instant – these questions have left scholars and practitioners divided. However, lack of consensus does not discount the role of *jihadist* ideology and the act of weaponising mosques in radicalising individuals.

### Case Studies

While the threat of *jihadi* radicalisation is prevalent across the EU with varied historical experiences and contemporary threat assessments, the current report focuses on five countries – France, Germany, Belgium, Sweden, and Denmark. These five countries have a combination of factors making them interesting case studies. These factors include nature of terrorist incidents, radicalisation processes and unique policy developments.

## France

France hosts the largest Muslim population within the EU. While only a minority of its Muslim population subscribes to *jihadism*, they still form one of the largest *jihadi* extremist groups in the EU. Arguably, it could contribute to the reasons behind France witnessing one of the most significant numbers of *jihadist* terrorist attacks within the EU, almost consistently for several years. It also consistently reports the highest number of arrests, often double the number reported by the EU member state holding the second position.<sup>21</sup>

Factors responsible for radicalisation in France include the influence of the French secular system, the impact of Salafi preachers, socio-economic marginalisation, the role of prisons, and traditional antagonism against France, its colonial history, and its domestic and foreign policy.<sup>22</sup> The French involvement in the Algerian civil war had resulted in the 1995 France bombings, arguably the first *jihadi*-inspired attack in the EU. While this phase of jihadi terrorism in France was a result of its colonial history and foreign policy, the second phase was characterised by ideological reasons. More recently, when the prominence of al-Qaeda and IS was growing, the French town of Lunel, also referred to as the 'capital of *jihad*'<sup>23</sup>, presented an interesting case of becoming a radicalisation hub. A small town of 30,000 population with one-third Muslim population, it suffered from socio-economic deprivation and drug trafficking. Not being particularly religious, with the developments in Syria, places like a local mosque run by Tablighi Jamaat got the youth of Lunel to discuss issues such as "ills of French society, the injustices suffered by Muslims worldwide and, as their process of radicalisation progressed, the endeavours of jihadist groups in Syria." This was accompanied by Lunel youths becoming foreign fighters in Syria and joining Jabhat al Nusra and the IS. One of them even climbed up the ranks to lead a 300-man strong battalion and become an American designated wanted terrorist.<sup>24</sup>

In 2014, France introduced - *Plan de Lutte Anti-Terroriste* (PLAT), which consisted of 24 measures aimed at preventing the French youth from departing to Syria. In the aftermath of the January 2015 Charlie Hebdo attacks, the French government launched "*Stop-Djihadisme*" online campaign, which included tools

for practitioners and resources to educate citizens to understand the issues, and spot and prevent *jihadism*. Following the December 2015 Bataclan attacks, French authorities updated the 2014 PLAT. They introduced - '*Plan d'Action contre la Radicalisation et le Terrorisme*' (PART), a €40 million plan consisting of 80 measures, of which 15 were dedicated to prevention.<sup>25</sup>

Owing to the changing nature of the threat and inefficiency of PART, in 2018, France adopted its first strategy exclusively dedicated to the prevention of radicalisation - 'Prevet to Protect'. By mobilising 20 government departments, the strategy was focused on 5 main axes and identified 60 measures to be undertaken. The 5 main axes included protecting minds against radicalisation, completing the detection/prevention network, understanding and anticipating the evolution of radicalisation, professionalising local actors, evaluating practices and adapting disengagement.<sup>26</sup>

More recently, in 2021, the French Parliament overwhelmingly approved a bill intended to strengthen oversight of mosques, schools and sports clubs against *jihadism* and promote French values. Titled "*confortant les principes de la République*" or "Law reinforcing the principles of the Republic", some of the important features of the bill included stricter action against hate speech following the beheading of a teacher in 2020 for showing Charlie Hebdo's 2012 cartoon in a class; making it compulsory for 3-16 years aged children to attend only state registered schools and allowing home-schooling on limited grounds; imprisonment of 5 years and fine of €75,000 on any person threatening an elected representative or public officials; publicly funded associations to sign a memorandum committing to "principles of liberty, equality, fraternity, and respect of human dignity" and strict accounting for religious associations receiving foreign funds; prohibiting health professionals from issuing virginity certificates, often requested by Muslim families; reinforcing the strict French stance on prohibition of polygamy.<sup>27</sup>

Following the Israel-Hamas developments, France faced a series of security and political challenges, including a *jihadist* attack on a schoolteacher, pro-Palestine protests turning violent, the subsequent banning of such protests, and the killing of French citizens in Israel due to the Hamas attack. France is also due to host the Paris Summer Olympics in 2024. In the past, international sporting



events have not been immune from terrorist agenda, including the 2015 Paris suicide bombing outside a Football stadium followed by the Bataclan attack. It is for such reasons that France continues to be on high alert since October 2023.

## Germany

Amongst the EU member states, Germany also faces a severe security challenge from *jihadi* radicalisation and terrorism. Except for in 2022, when no *jihadist* attack was reported from Germany, it has generally ranked second after France on matrices such as number of *jihadist* terrorist attacks (completed, failed, or foiled), arrests for *jihadist* terrorist offences<sup>28</sup> and foreign fighters.<sup>29</sup>

The early years of *jihadism* in Germany were primarily characterised by the willingness to fight for the cause of the Chechens. While 3 German *jihadists* did travel to Afghanistan in 1999 and became part of the group that executed the 9/11 terror attacks, it was an isolated case. In 2005-06, a Muslim covert German – Fritz Gelowicz, passionate about the Chechen struggle, went to Pakistan and became a pioneer of German *jihadism*. They recruited fighters for *jihad* in Afghanistan from Pakistan.<sup>30</sup> Millatu Ibrahim, a group founded by Austrian-Egyptian Mohamed Mahmoud in 2011, was considered the pioneer of *jihadist* radicalisation in Germany. After taking over a mosque in Solingen, they primarily focused on disseminating propaganda via the internet. They would also provoke the German authorities, and after incidents of attacking the police during protests, the German authorities banned them in 2012. Fearing arrest, they left Germany and subsequently joined the IS. In the absence of Millatu Ibrahim from German soil, “The True Religion” became the hub for young *jihadists*. While they were *jihadist* sympathisers, they were always cautious about remaining within the bounds of law. In 2011, they launched the “Read!” campaign, which distributed 25 million free copies of translations of the Quran. Subsequently, by 2012 they were seen with the supporters of Millatu Ibrahim, and the expansion of the *jihadi* network also contributed to the growing number of youths departing for Syria from Germany.<sup>31</sup>

The Fussilet-33 mosque in Berlin-Moabit also played an essential role in the *jihadist* radicalisation scene of Germany. Initially, it became the recruitment

centre for the Chechen. Subsequently, in 2013-14, the preachers at the mosque called for joining the IS. As the hub of *jihadist* radicalisation, it was also known as “IS mosque” within the Berlin-based Muslim community.<sup>32</sup> Similarly, the radicalisation hub developed in the German town of Hildesheim, discussed in the previous segment of the report, also played a significant role. It was complemented by the social media campaign of IS focusing on three premises: (a) the West hates Islam, (b) the West is at war with Islam, and (c) it is every Muslim's obligation to kill the unbelievers wherever they are.<sup>33</sup>

The German attempt to deal with *jihadist* radicalisation was first seen in 2010 when the German Domestic Intelligence Services initiated a nationwide exit hotline service called “HATIF”, although it was discontinued in 2014. In 2012, the German authorities initiated an additional hotline service – BAMF hotline – for the counselling of relatives of *jihadists*. It was based on a public-private partnership model and had private counsellors. Between January 2012 and September 2020, the BAMF hotline received 4544 calls, which resulted in 3061 counselling cases. The success led to creating “prevention networks” throughout the German states. The uniqueness of these prevention networks lies in Germany's multistakeholder approach to countering *jihadist* radicalisation by sharing responsibilities between state actors and civil society organisations.<sup>34</sup>

In 2016, Germany adopted its first National Strategy for Fighting Extremism and Supporting Democracy, under which it has a dedicated National Prevention Programme against Islamist Extremism. The strategy identified 6 operational fields and 18 strategic partners, including religious and local communities, police, military, intelligence, counselling services, prisons, universities, schools, media and internet actors, job environment, etc. The identified operational fields are (a) political education, intercultural learning and building democracy; (b) civil society engagement; (c) counselling, intervention, and monitoring; (d) the press and internet; (e) research; (f) international cooperation.<sup>35</sup>

The security threats emanating from the 2023 Israel-Hamas war have led to tighten the implementation of laws further. Arguably, the reason for Germany to go above and beyond the measures implemented by other European states

could be rooted in its special relationship with Israel owing to the Nazi past. German authorities took several steps, including limiting the pro-Palestine marches, granting schools the power to ban Palestinian flags and keffiyeh scarves, and criminalising the use of the pro-Palestine slogan “From the river to the sea”.<sup>36</sup> Given the escalation of the Israel-Hamas war, the largest Palestinian diaspora in Germany, and Germany's existing radicalisation network, the *jihadism* threat would continue to challenge the German security architecture.

## Belgium

The *jihadist* threat to security is substantially high in Belgium. While the number of *jihadist* terrorist attacks remains one or two in the past 5 years, the number of arrests for *jihadist* terrorist offences remains in the top 5 amongst the EU member states.<sup>37</sup> One of the critical reasons for considering the *jihadist* threat high is also the experience of Belgium during the years of the rise and fall of the IS in Syria. Belgium recorded the highest number of *jihadist* foreign fighters leaving for Syria in terms of citizens per capita. It was also the first country to experience an attack from a Syria returnee.<sup>38</sup>

The *jihadist* radicalisation scene of Belgium was primarily dominated by three groups - Sharia4Belgium, Resto du Tawheed, and the Zerkani network. Sharia4Belgium was the European version of the Islam4UK campaign of Anjem Choudary and others. It was one of the first Sharia4 franchises and became the largest in the EU. They adopted tactics such as media attention-seeking publicity stunts, confrontational protests, and aggressive online campaigns preaching *jihad*. The main message was condemning democracy as un-Islamic, and the goal was to introduce sharia law in the country. After the group disbanded in October 2012 with the arrest of the founder, several members left to join the *jihad* in Syria. Social Media platforms were used to motivate others from Belgium to join the group in Syria. Subsequently, Sharia4Belgium became the first group to actively recruit Belgians. Resto du Tawheed was a sister network of Sharia4Belgium. While they presented themselves as a charity organisation for destitute Muslims, in 2013, the founder of the group was arrested for actively recruiting for the Syrian *jihad*.<sup>39</sup> The activities of the Zerkani

network, active in the Molenbeek area of Brussels, made the area infamously known as the hotspot for *jihadist* radicalisation. *Jihadists* from the region were found to have links with the 2015 Paris and 2016 Brussels terrorists.<sup>40</sup>

Belgium has been a victim of diverse kinds of terrorism for more than two decades. Hence, it had drawn its “Radicalism Action Plan (Plan R)” in 2006. The plan was updated several times due to the changing nature of the threat. In 2017, 28 new measures were introduced to strengthen the counterterrorism mechanism, apart from the 30 measures introduced in 2015. First-line prevention units were established in the most affected municipalities to monitor and respond to cases of radicalisation. To combat radicalisation in prison, Belgian authorities adopted a separate plan focused on preventing radicalisation of detainees. Belgium also introduced a program by which Muslim imams were trained to work with prisoners and identify possible recruiters and signs of radicalisation within the prisons.<sup>41</sup> In 2021, Plan R was succeeded by the National Strategy Against Terrorism and Extremism, which combines social-preventive, social integration, administrative, police and judicial approaches.<sup>42</sup>

Of the several governmental and non-governmental efforts undertaken to prevent *jihadist* radicalisation in Belgium, three efforts are worth appreciating. First, Theological Pilot Project – a project developed by imams and experts on Islam to draw on religious knowledge and prevent radicalisation. Second, KLASSE Initiative – imparting Islamic knowledge by recognised religious authorities to target radicalisation and Islamophobia in Belgium schools. Third, Society Against Violent Extremism (SAVE) – an initiative by parents of former radical Islamists to impart awareness about radicalisation from the perspective of affected families.<sup>43</sup>

Since the commencement of the 2023 Israel-Hamas war, there have been several pro-Palestine rallies in Belgium, just like the other European states. However, they have not been as violent. Nonetheless, it is important to note that, although not linked to the Israel-Hamas war, the October 2023 *jihadi* attack on two Swedish nationals in Brussels had raised the terror alert to the highest level – level 4 or “very serious”. Inspired by the IS, a shooter of Tunisian origin shot dead

two Swedes and injured another outside the stadium where the Belgium-Sweden football match was taking place. Arguably, the motivation behind the killings was the multiple burning of the Quran in Sweden and the reaction of terrorist outfits to the same.<sup>44</sup>

## Sweden

Sweden has witnessed a comparatively lower number of *jihadist* terrorist attacks on its soil as compared to other EU member states. However, it presents an interesting case study for understanding *jihadist* radicalisation in the EU. Primarily motivated by insults to Islam or the Swedish foreign policy, *jihadists* in Sweden were found more likely to support terrorism abroad than plan an attack on Swedish soil.<sup>45</sup> In the early 2000s, the Swedish threat from *jihadist* terrorism largely came from caricatures of Prophet Mohammad. Although Osama bin Laden explicitly spoke about not targeting Sweden in his infamous 2004 speech,<sup>46</sup> his successor – Abu Omar al-Baghdadi, changed the stance and called for the killing of the cartoonist Lars Vilks.<sup>47</sup> Subsequently, many foreign fighters departed to Syria from Sweden. Their existing networks and the eventual returnees continue to contribute to the threat of *jihadist* radicalisation and attack. As recently as March 2024, two suspected IS supporters were arrested in Germany for planning an attack on the Swedish parliament.<sup>48</sup> In another incident around the same time, two Swedish nationals were arrested in Tyresö Sweden for allegedly preparing an attack.<sup>49</sup>

One of the first prominent *jihadists* from Sweden was Mohamed Moumou. Apart from being suspected of leading a *jihadi* group at Brandbergen Mosque in Stockholm and a having a wide Sweden-based terrorist network responsible for several terrorist attacks, he went on to become the second-in-command of al-Qaeda in Iraq.<sup>50</sup> Moumou's involvement with al-Qaeda in Iraq played a significant role in radicalising, recruiting, and financing *jihadi* activities, including sending several Swedish citizens to join terrorist outfits in Syria and Iraq.<sup>51</sup>

Another important location that became a strong radicalisation hub for *jihadism* in Sweden was the Gothenburg area, which is often referred to as the Wahabi epicentre in Sweden.<sup>52</sup> The Bellevue Mosque in Gothenburg is the largest

mosque in Sweden and one of the largest in Europe. Since 2007, the mosque and preachers have been connected with the call for joining *jihadi* terrorist organisations, acting as a recruitment centre and promoting anti-democratic views along with violence-promoting interpretations of Salafism. Other cities include Orebro and Malmo.<sup>53</sup> In a nutshell, Salafi preachers have been found to be related to Salafi-*Jihadists*, making it extremely difficult for the Swedish authorities to treat social Salafists, political Salafists, and militant Salafists as separate categories.

In 2023, Sweden was embroiled in a diplomatic row after the 'Quran crisis'. In June, an Iraqi refugee in Sweden desecrated the Quran publicly in front of the Stockholm Central Mosque by repeatedly tearing and burning the pages. It led to violent protests, including the burning of vehicles, and created a massive diplomatic row between Muslim countries and Sweden.<sup>54</sup> This was followed by threats from *jihadists*, including calls to execute the perpetrators and carry out attacks like the 2015 Charlie Hebdo shooting<sup>55</sup> and even the 2023 Belgium shooting, as discussed above. The burning or desecrating of a holy book is not illegal in Sweden as it falls within the ambit of freedom of expression. However, the Swedish courts subsequently upheld the order of deportation of the Iraqi refugee on the grounds of providing 'false information' in the asylum application.<sup>56</sup>

Swedish authorities adopted 'Responsibility and Commitment – A National Counter-Terrorism Strategy' in 2011. In 2014, the Swedish government adopted a new strategy – 'Prevent Pre-empt Protect', which was aimed at creating a long-term framework for Sweden's counterterrorism efforts. The 'Prevent' part of the strategy was given utmost importance, and it was focused on identifying and developing knowledge-based methods capable of preventing radicalisation and taking holistic approach in doing so.<sup>57</sup> Given the threat becoming increasingly complex and challenging to combat, the Swedish Government adopted a new strategy in 2024 - Prevent, Avert, Protect and Manage. The new strategy is aimed at “preventing violent extremism and terrorism, averting terrorist attacks and other ideologically motivated crimes, protecting people and functions, and managing the situation during and after an attack.”<sup>58</sup>

## Denmark

The 2015 Copenhagen shootings were the last big *jihadi* terrorist attack in Denmark. In the subsequent years, there were attempted bombings, assassinations, and shooting plots orchestrated by *jihadi* radicals but were foiled due to timely intervention by the Danish authorities. In the previous years, there have been sporadic arrests. As recently as December 2023, Danish authorities arrested three individuals on suspicion of planning attacks in the aftermath of the Israel-Hamas war.<sup>59</sup> Despite the apparent low figures, the Danish experience with *jihadi* radicalisation, terrorism and subsequent policy interventions present an interesting case study.

The *jihadi* scenes of Denmark date back to the 1990s when individuals affiliated with the Egyptian al-Gamaa al-Islamiyya resided or visited Denmark. The most prominent names included Omar Abdel Rahman, infamously known as the Blind Sheikh, and Talat Faud Qaaim, who was given political asylum in Denmark after being convicted for participating in the assassination of Egyptian President Anwar al-Sadat. Participants of the same network also found the Al Nur Islamic Information publishing house in Copenhagen, the material from which was subsequently found to be connected with the 9/11 attacks and the 2004 Madrid bombings.<sup>60</sup> Members of such networks were found to have travelled to London to participate in conferences organised by the UK-based *jihadi* networks and later got involved with terrorist activities in Denmark and abroad.

In 2005, a Danish newspaper – Jyllands-Posten, published a cartoon mocking the Prophet Mohammad. It was immediately followed by riots, attacks on Danish embassies in Muslim countries, hundreds of deaths, trade boycotts for a few years, and death threats on the life of the cartoonist.<sup>61</sup> While this was one of the first incidents involving a cartoon mocking the Prophet, even before the Lars Vilken incident in the neighbouring country of Sweden, it is considered to have played a vital role in the radicalisation scene of Denmark.<sup>62</sup>

In 2009, *Kadet til Islam* (The Calling to Islam) was established, which called for the implementation of Sharia and the establishment of a caliphate in Denmark. Communicating via online mediums, group members were also found to appear in television debates with Danish politicians. While these individuals continued to openly enjoy their freedom of speech and movement, like in the rest of Europe

in those days, it was considered a tolerable nuisance and not a security threat. In 2011, the group even called for boycotting the Danish general elections and declared “Sharia zones” in the Tingbjerg region of Copenhagen, where they would patrol and maintain order. Leaders of *Kadet til Islam* later went on to join the *jihad* in Syria and used multimedia to inspire others to join the fight.<sup>63</sup>

The Danish response to the growing threat of *jihadi* radicalisation, particularly in light of the rise and fall of the IS, has been studied, adapted, and replicated by several state actors across the world. Popularly known as the Aarhus model, Danish authorities launched a rehabilitation program in 2014, which took a more lenient approach to deradicalisation than its contemporaries. The Aarhus model had a three-pronged approach – outreach, capacity building, and exit. First step, outreach – The Danish Ministry of Social Affairs collaborates closely with community leaders such as teachers, parents, and religious figures, along with national and local NGOs, to eliminate the conditions that promote radicalisation and ensure continuous dialogues between these stakeholders and Danish authorities. Second step, capacity building – Danish Security and Intelligence Service (PET) identifies influential members of the community, develops strong relationships with them, and trains them to become assets who can identify signs of radicalisation and counsel the vulnerable or potential individuals into adopting a different path. Third step, exit – PET directly contacts family, friends, and acquaintances of the foreign fighter returnees to ensure that the radicalisation abroad does not manifest into domestic attacks.<sup>64</sup> More recently, the Danish authorities have also formed a network of “Info Houses”. Comprising of representatives of municipalities, police, and other relevant stakeholders, the purpose of Info House is to share knowledge and discuss any trends that need closer observation.<sup>65</sup>

In the days following the Quran burning in Sweden, almost 170 similar incidents were also reported in Denmark.<sup>66</sup> With several protests and pressure from other countries, in December 2023, Denmark passed a law banning the 'inappropriate treatment' of religious texts. Several experts suggest that the radicalising effect of the Quran burnings is high and could severely impact security considerations. Hence, the law is important from a Danish security point of view. However, others argue that such a law would affect the free-thinking spirit of the country.



## Analysis

- When deciphering the concept of *jihadi* radicalisation, the factors responsible for it and the processes involved are varied in the context of the EU. Neither can they be generalised, nor can the proportion of the contributing factors can be fixed. However, the presence of some common factors and their role cannot be negated. These factors include criminal background, sense of marginalisation, kinship networks, and ideological motivators. Thus, a multipronged approach is necessary to understand the root causes and motivations and make informed and effective policy decisions.
- Marginalisation as a motivator for *jihadi* radicalisation in the European context includes a sense of alienation or lack of integration with the local Westerners or members of other communities; socio-economic deprivation or lack of governmental oversight in the development of the communities; and perceived attack on the Islamic religious values and disregarding the possibility of coexistence.
- While the above factors can also influence an individual to become a criminal and cause law and order issues, *jihadi* radicalisation hubs, along with family and kinship networks, influence an individual to become a *jihadi* terrorist and lead to threatening national security.
- One of the prominent reasons for the existence of a robust *jihadi* network with the EU has been the late response of the state authorities. Despite jihadi groups advocating for the implementation of Sharia, demanding the establishment of a Caliphate within the EU, declaring “Sharia-zones,” and running aggressive online campaigns preaching *jihad*, European state authorities tolerated such activities and continued granting such groups and individuals the freedom of speech and movement. It was around the Syrian civil war that the authorities began thoroughly investigating such activities and taking actions. However, by then, the *jihadi* networks had already strengthened.
- The difference in experience of North and South Europe can only be understood from the viewpoint of tolerance. Countries such as Italy and Spain have seen limited *jihadi* terrorism-related incidents, such as foreign

fighters, incidents, and arrests, as compared to France, Belgium, Germany, and Sweden. One of the important reasons could have been the zero-tolerance policy of Italian and Spanish authorities towards extreme forms of Islam, even if they were non-violent.<sup>67</sup> It is not to argue that the national security of Italy and Spain is not threatened by *jihadi* radicalisation or terrorism. However, the intensities of *jihadi*-related incidents are much higher in the Northern European countries.

- The country of origin of the pioneers of *jihadi* radicalisation played a significant role in determining the nature and goal of radicalisation in the respective countries of residence. For example, in France, the initial years of *jihadi* radicalisation were focused on the cause of the Algerian Muslims; in Denmark, the nature of radicalisation was dictated by the issues relevant in Egypt of the 1990s. In some cases, the *jihadi* experiences of the pioneers determined the cause of discussions in the country of residence. For example, in Sweden, since the *jihadi* leaders had been to Iraq and Syria, they mobilised supporters under the pretext of developments in Iraq.
- The initial agenda of the *jihadi* groups was varied depending on the affiliations of the *jihadi* leaders in the respective country. Although some commonality was found for the conflict in Afghanistan, the call for *jihad* in Syria by the IS was a turning point for most *jihadi* networks in the EU. Almost every *jihadi* group, leader, or campaign resonated with the IS's call for *jihad*. While some initially joined the Jabhat al Nusra, most subsequently joined the IS. Thus, given the fluidity of their cause, these networks can be mobilised to converge with any cause of *jihadi* nature. With the escalation of the 2023 Israel-Hamas war, the risk from collective action of these networks persists. It can even be exploited for future causes. Therefore, dismantling of the *jihadi* networks and systematic deradicalisation efforts should be a priority for the European states.
- The biggest achievement of the IS was having a territory under their control. Even though it only lasted for a brief period, it gave hope to those who desired to live in such a society. The takeover of Afghanistan by the Taliban presented a comparable situation and had the potential to create euphoria in the minds of the *jihadis*. However, the intensity of mobilisation seen for Syria was not

seen in the case of Afghanistan. One of the possible reasons for this could have been the element of surprise in the fall of Kabul. Unlike the campaign for joining *jihad* in Syria as an obligation of every Muslim, there were no such campaigns undertaken by the Taliban. Furthermore, the pandemic lockdowns and stricter border controls and terrorism laws could have also played a key role in restricting the number of people crossing the border to live in Afghanistan.

- Increasing immigration rates have been a crucial point of discussion in European politics. It is argued that increasing immigration from the Muslim countries to Europe also has an impact on the levels of threat for *jihadi* radicalisation and terrorism. A study of successful *jihadi* attacks in Europe and North America between 2014 and 2017 found that 73% of the perpetrators were citizens of the country in which the attack was committed. About 14% were legal residents or visitors, 5% were refugees or asylum seekers, and around 6% were residing illegally.<sup>68</sup> This highlights the strength and effectiveness of the existing *jihadi* networks, presumably much before the first *jihadi* attack took place on European soil.
- Despite the abovementioned study, the polarised nature of the European debate on the increasing immigration of non-westerners stems from the possibility of the creation or strengthening of 'parallel religious societies' that refuse to co-exist within European values. Such societies can fuel the fire created and maintained by the radicalisation hubs and networks. Denmark has taken several legislative actions against the creation of such parallel societies that have stirred debates worldwide. Since 2010, Denmark has compiled a "ghetto list" of neighbourhoods with high crime and unemployment rates, lower educational attainments, and 50%+ second-generation non-western immigrants. Apart from differential and stricter regulations for such areas, in 2020, the law stipulated public housing stocks to be no more than 40% by 2030.<sup>69</sup> In 2021, Denmark legislated on allowing refugees arriving in Denmark to be moved to asylum in partner countries such as Rwanda. More recently, in 2023, Denmark revoked the residency permits of some Syrian refugees, citing the reason that parts of Syria are safe for return.<sup>70</sup>

- The continued active presence of anti-democratic and anti-European values Salafist groups also presents a major security challenge to the EU. Most European states distinguish between the social, political, and militant Salafism. While they allow social and political Salafism, they have criminalised militant Salafism in varied measures. One such organisation is the Muslim Brotherhood. While it has not been banned within the EU, several questions have been raised if the values they propagate challenge European values, and thus, contribute to radicalisation. Muslim Brotherhood does not explicitly support al-Qaeda or the IS, but their support for Hamas and *jihad* in Syria raises serious concerns.<sup>71</sup> In 2021, Austria became the first country within the EU to blacklist Muslim Brotherhood under the new anti-terrorism laws linking it to 'religiously motivated crime'. It is yet to be seen whether the other European countries will take the same path.
- Over the years, the EU member states have undertaken several innovative steps to counter and prevent radicalisation. Most states have adopted a 'whole-of-society' approach by bringing together multiple stakeholders to fight the menace of *jihadi* radicalisation at various levels. Given the fluidity of movement within the Schengen area, it is important that the states cooperate and collaborate in their deradicalisation efforts.

## Conclusion

The *jihadi* radicalisation scene within the EU is complex, and developing preventive measures is a challenging task. The EU has traditionally taken pride in its tolerance levels and standards for freedom of speech and expression. The *jihadi* threat presents a paradox – while allowing advocacy of extremist Islamic views aligns with the freedom of speech standards, their sustenance fuels the radicalisation network. Similarly, while the burning of holy religious books has been an acceptable form of expressing dissent within the European values, it is increasingly threatening the national security of the states. The theologians could suggest better, but it is evident that demanding a puritanical form of Islamic society could be the antithesis of the European way of life. It is important for the EU member states to take cognisance of any form of advocacy that questions or degrades the idea of coexistence and act much before the advocates opt for extremist violent options. The European authorities must also ensure a well-balanced approach in their actions and avoid unintentional polarisation, which only contributes to the agenda of the *jihadists*.

Among others, one of the most crucial factors differentiating a criminal from a *jihadi* is weaponising of religious interpretations and places of worship by *jihadi* leaders. Given the alarming trends, the need for theology-based counter-radicalisation and deradicalisation efforts is more necessary than ever. While some EU member states have already involved Islamic religious leaders as crucial stakeholders in their endeavours, it is important that such efforts are scaled up and made mainstream. Organising regular global inter-faith dialogues can have a significant impact in countering the misdeeds of *jihadi* preachers.

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