Migration-related Terrorism: Trends, Challenges, and Policy Implications

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International Centre for Counter-Terrorism

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Contents

Acronyms

BAMF	Germany's Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (*Bundesamt für Migration und Flüchtlinge*)
BKA	Germany's Federal Criminal Office (*Bundeskriminalamt*)
CT	Counter-Terrorism
CUTA	Coordination Unit for the Threat Analysis
DGSE	France's Internal Intelligence Agency (*Direction générale de la sécurité extérieure*)
DGSI	France's External Intelligence Agency (*Direction générale de la sécurité extérieure*)
EASO	European Asylum Support Office
ECRIS-TCN	European Criminal Records Information System - Third Country Nationals
ECTC	European Counter Terrorism Centre
EES	Entry-Exit System
ETA	Basque Homeland and Freedom (*Euskadi Ta Askatasuna*)
ETIAS	European Travel Information and Authorisation System
EU	European Union
EUAA	European Union Agency for Asylum
FARC	Colombian Revolutionary Armed Forces
FSPRT	France's National Database for the Prevention of Radicalisation Leading to Terrorism (*Fichier des signalements pour la prévention de la radicalisation à caractère terroriste*)
FTF	Foreign Terrorist Fighter
IDP	Internally Displaced Person
IRA	Irish Republican Army
LKA	Germany's State Criminal Police Office (*Landeskriminalamt*)
LTF	Local Task Force
NCTC	National Counterterrorism Center
NCTV	National Coordinator for Security and Counterterrorism (*Nationaal Coördinator Terrorismebestrijding en Veiligheid*)
OQT	Order to leave the territory (*Ordre de quitter le territoire*)
PLO	Palestinian Liberation Organisation
SIS II	Schengen Information System
VIS	Visa Information System

Abstract

Recent incidents, such as the 2024 Solingen attack and anti-migrant riots in the UK, underscore growing concerns among policymakers, security services, and the public regarding the intersection of migration and terrorism. Yet, evidenced-based research into the scope and nature of the terrorist threat posed by individuals entering Europe via legal or illegal routes remains scarce. With a view to inform the scientific debate and public policies, this report analyses trends in terrorist attacks involving (individuals posing as) migrants in Europe over the past decade, and examines case studies of high-profile attacks in Paris, Berlin, and Brussels. While clearly demonstrating that attacks involving migrants neither represent a primary, nor a growing terrorist threat in Europe, this report provides nuanced insights into the specific challenges faced by counter-terrorism services and offers actionable recommendations for balanced policy responses that strengthen both security and societal resilience.

Introduction

On 23 August 2024, a Syrian national reportedly known for radicalisation and under a deportation order, killed three people and injured eight others in a stabbing attack in Solingen, Germany.[1] The attack was later claimed by the Islamic State. Just a few days after the attack, the German federal government announced a package of security measures restricting criteria to obtain asylum and lowering thresholds for deportation of illegal migrants.[2] Earlier in the summer of 2024, from 30 July to 7 August, a wave of violent anti-migrant protests and riots erupted across the UK, resulting notably in attacks on homes and businesses owned by immigrants, as well as hotels housing asylum seekers.[3] Promoted and attended by known far-right activists, these events led to 1,280 arrests and 796 people charged as of late August.[4] These incidents in Germany and the UK illustrate how terrorism and migration can interact. Research exploring further such interactions appears highly timely and policy-relevant.

Background

Concerns about migrants as potential terrorists are far from new. For instance, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, Italian migrants in Europe and North America were often stereotyped as criminals and anarchist terrorists, even resulting in public lynching in the US.[5] While the vast majority of Italian migrants were not criminals, some anarchists (including violent ones) were hiding in their midst. Indeed, some liberal countries, like Switzerland or the UK, became a refuge for persecuted exiled anarchists at the turn of the twentieth century.[6] The perception of the immigrant as a threat is, in fact, a recurrence throughout history.[7]

Furthermore, there is a long history of terrorist organisations and militants moving across borders to escape detection, mobilise support, organise operations, and launch attacks. There are many examples, including the Irish Republican Army (IRA),[8] the Basque separatist organisation ETA (*Euskadi Ta Askatasuna*),[9] the Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO), or the Colombian Revolutionary Armed Forces (FARC).[10] Similarly, other dynamics of the migration-terrorism nexus, such as the movement of foreign fighters, have long-standing historical precedents. Various conflicts throughout history, ranging from wars in Afghanistan, Bosnia, Chechnya, Iraq, Somalia, or Yemen, have attracted cohorts of foreign (terrorist) fighters, whereas the mobilisation of volunteers for foreign wars is a broader phenomenon that can be traced back to at least the late eighteenth century.[11]

While not new, the migration-terrorism nexus seems to be gaining prominence on the policy agenda and in public perception. Indeed, opinion polls in Europe show that citizens are

1 Deutsche Welle, "Germany: Cross-party Migration Talks After Solingen Attack," *Deutsche Welle*, 4 September, 2024; Elizabeth Schumacher, "Solingen Attack Sparks Debate on Germany's Deportation Laws," *Deutsche Welle*, 28 August, 2024.
2 Riham Alkousaa, "Germany Tightens Security, Asylum Policies After Deadly Festival Stabbing," *Reuters*, 29 August, 2024.
3 William Downs, "Policing Response to the 2024 Summer Riots," *House of Commons Library*, 9 September , 2024.
4 Ibid.
5 Chris Woolf, "A Brief History of America's Hostility to a Previous Generation of Mediterranean Migrants — Italians," *The World*, 25 November, 2015.
6 Richard B. Jensen, "Anarchist Terrorism and Global Diasporas, 1878–1914," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 27, no. 3 (2015): 441-453.
7 Leo Lucassen, *The Immigrant Threat* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2005). See also: Chris Millington, "Immigrants and undesirables: "terrorism" and the "terrorist" in 1930s France," *Critical Studies on Terrorism* 12, no.1 (2018): 40–59; Evan Smith, "Creating the National/Border Security Nexus: Counter-Terrorist Operations and Monitoring Middle Eastern and North African Visitors to the UK in the 1970s–1980s," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 31, no.3 (2017): 595–614.
8 Henry Patterson, "The Provisional IRA, the Irish border, and Anglo-Irish relations during the Troubles," *Small Wars and Insurgencies* 24, no.3 (2013): 493.
9 Marc Sageman, *Leaderless Jihad: Terror Networks in the Twenty-First Century* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), p.66.
10 Luis R. Martínez, "Transnational Insurgents: Evidence From Colombia's FARC at the Border With Chávez's Venezuela," *Journal of Development Economics* 126 (2017):138-153.
11 Nir Arielli. *From Byron to Bin Laden: A History of Foreign War Volunteers* (Harvard University Press, 2018); David Malet, *Foreign Fighters : Transnational Identity in Civil Conflicts* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2017).

increasingly concerned about immigration, which they perceive as a security threat. A recent poll shows that a majority of Europeans are dissatisfied with the European immigration policy, with fifty-nine percent of the respondents considering that the fight against illegal immigration should become a political priority, and seventy-one percent demanding stronger border controls.[12]

Reports and figures from counter-terrorism services in Europe confirm that there is an objective threat related to (illegal) immigration. For instance, in Germany, 138 (28 percent) out of 480 individuals assessed as dangerous Islamist extremists (*Gefährder*) have no German passport,[13] including 129 who are currently assumed to be in Germany.[14] In France, figures communicated by the Ministry of the Interior in 2023 show that of the 20,120 individuals listed in the national database for the prevention of radicalisation leading to terrorism (*fichier des signalements pour la prévention de la radicalisation à caractère terroriste*, FSPRT), 4,263 (21 percent) are of foreign nationality.[15]

Yet, it is important to note that these numbers also underscore that asylum-seekers and illegal immigrants are far from representing the majority of the counter-terrorism workload in Europe. In fact, only 1,411 (7 percent) of the individuals monitored in France in 2023 were in irregular situation, and only 489 of them (2,4 percent) were still in France.[16] Similarly, in Belgium, only 77 individuals (11 percent) among the 700 listed by the Coordination Unit for the Threat Analysis (CUTA) in 2023 were in irregular situation, of which only 40 (5,7 percent) remained on Belgian territory.[17] A year later, that number was halved (*see Belgian case study)*.

Indeed, research suggests that terrorism is primarily a homegrown problem. In France, a country significantly impacted by Islamist terrorism in recent years, Crettiez and Sèze found that 81 percent (285 individuals) of a sample of 353 individuals incarcerated between 2017 and 2021 for jihadist terrorism-related offences are French nationals (and 86 percent are Europeans).[18] Similarly, Hecker's analysis of 137 individuals condemned for jihadi terrorism offences in France between 2004 and 2017 found that the majority (69 percent) were French nationals, confirming that "the terrorism affecting France is essentially domestic (homegrown terrorism)."[19] One study found that 16 percent of Islamist terrorist plots and acts of violence in Europe between early 2014 and late 2017 involved refugees or asylum seekers (meaning in contrast that 84 percent did not).[20]

Furthermore, studies consistently show that the overwhelming majority of migrants are not terrorists. The number of refugees involved in terrorism represents a marginal fraction of the overall refugee population. For instance, in Europe, only seventeen individuals among the 600,000 Iraqi and Syrian asylum seekers who arrived in Germany in 2015 had been investigated a year later for having links to terrorist organisations.[21] Schmid argues that such figures "indicate

12 Jorge Liboreiro and Vincenzo Genovese, "Half of Europeans Disapprove of EU Migration Policy and Demand Stronger Border Controls, Poll Shows," *EuroNews*, 26 March, 2024.
13 Frederik Schindler, "Die meisten islamistischen Gefährder sind deutsche Staatsbürger," *Welt,* 30 April, 2024.
14 Spiegel, "35 ausländische »Gefährder« seit 2021 abgeschoben," 20 June, 2024.
15 Armêl Balogog, "La moitié des personnes suivies pour radicalisation sont-elles étrangères, comme l'affirme Jordan Bardella ?" *France Info*, 26 October, 2023.
16 Romain David, "Fiché « S », FPR, FSPRT… quels sont les différents fichiers de renseignement utilisés pour la lutte antiterroriste ?" *Public Senat*, 16 October, 2023; Le Figaro, "Près de 500 «personnes étrangères dangereuses irrégulières sur le territoire», selon Darmanin," 16 October 2023.
17 Ugo Santkin and Véronique Lamquin, "Attentat à Bruxelles : combien de personnes en séjour irrégulier sont sur la liste de l'Ocam ?" *Le Soir*, 19 October, 2023.
18 Xavier Crettiez and Romain Sèze, "Sociologie du djihadisme français : Analyse prosopographique de plus de 350 terroristes jihadistes incarcérés," *Rapport de recherche pour la Mission de recherche Droit et Justice*, CESDIP, (2022): 38.
19 Marc Hecker, "137 nuances de terrorisme. Les djihadistes de France face à la justice." *Focus stratégique*, Ifri, no. 79 (2018): 23.
20 Robin Simcox, The Asylum-Terror Nexus: How Europe Should Respond, *Heritage Foundation, Backgrounder*, no. 3314 (2018): 2.
21 Peter R. Neumann, "The refugees are not the problem," *The Security Times*, February 2016, 34.

that fears about refugee terrorists are largely unfounded."[22] According to one European expert, "the number of terrorists compared to the total number of immigrants is so marginal that it makes such correlation insignificant: the order of measurement is one unit per million immigrants."[23]

If anything, research shows that migrants are much more likely to be victims of terrorism than perpetrators. Data spanning from 1970 to 2020 reveal hundreds of attacks against refugees, refugee camps, internally displaced persons (IDPs), and asylum seekers globally, including in Europe, with particularly high incidences in Germany and Sweden.[24] Some of these incidents, frequently involving far-right groups, escalate to acts of terrorism, as when a 66-year-old man threw three petrol bombs against a Border Force centre for processing migrants in Dover, UK, on 30 October 2022, injuring two persons.[25] Research moreover suggests that the contribution of migrant flows to the spread of terrorism more often takes the form of attacks against migrants than attacks committed by migrants themselves, thereby challenging prevailing perceptions of migrants as a primary source of insecurity.[26]

Research Aims

Although not a new phenomenon, as mentioned above, research into the nexus between migration and terrorism is relatively recent, with the large majority having been carried out over the past two decades.[27] Some numbers help illustrate this. A search in the archives of the academic publisher *Taylor and Francis*, using various combinations of key words related to migration and terrorism,[28] returned only sixteen articles published between 1945 and 2000, whereas the same search returned 377 articles for the period 2001-2024, although the migration-terrorism nexus is only peripheral, if addressed at all, in the majority of these articles.

22 Alex P. Schmid, "Links between Terrorism and Migration: An Exploration," *ICCT Research Paper* (2016): 44.
23 Claudio Bertolotti, "Terrorism and immigration: links and challenges," *REACT, Report on Terrorism and Radicalization in Europe* 2, no. 2 (2021): 43.
24 Ryan Hata, Alexander Hart, and Derrick Tin, "Terrorist Attacks on Refugees, Internally Displaced Peoples, and Asylum Seekers," *Prehospital and Disaster Medicine* 38, no. 1 (2023).
25 "Dover attack on migrant centre driven by hate, say terror police," *BBC*, 1 November, 2022.
26 For instance, Gineste and Savun found that globally, between 1996 and 2015, "a larger number of host states experienced terrorist attacks against refugees than terrorist attacks by refugees" adding that "this overall pattern seems to have picked up in recent years." Similarly, research by Polo and Wucherpfennig, covering 161 countries from 1970 to 2016, finds no significant effect of hosting sizable refugee stocks from countries hosting transnational terrorist organisations on the probability of terrorist attacks against domestic targets in OECD countries. By contrast, this research shows that "refugees and refugees' conationals from terror exporting countries are disproportionately likely to become the targets of (right-wing) terrorism in host states," especially in the developed world. Supporting this view, Klein's research further shows that "when refugee flows into a host-country increase, the larger the host-country's population with negative social perceptions of foreigners is, the greater the likelihood of domestic terrorism," suggesting that host-country populations' attitudes towards foreigners influence the likelihood of domestic terrorism in the presence of refugee inflows. Christian Gineste and Burcu Savun, "Introducing POSVAR: A Dataset on Refugee-Related Violence," *Journal of Peace Research* 56, no. 1 (2019): 140-141; Sara MT Polo and Julian Wucherpfennig, "Trojan horse, copycat, or scapegoat? Unpacking the refugees-terrorism nexus," *The Journal of Politics* 84.1 (2022): 43; Graig R. Klein, "Reframing Threats from Migrants in Europe," Perspective, The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT), 13 December, 2021; Klein, Graig R. "Refugees, perceived threat & domestic terrorism," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 47, no. 6 (2024): 668-699; See also: Richard J. McAlexander, "How Are Immigration and Terrorism Related? An Analysis of Right-and Left-Wing Terrorism in Western Europe, 1980–2004," *Journal of Global Security Studies* 5, no. 1 (2020): 183.
27 Marc Helbling and Daniel Meierrieks, "Terrorism and migration: An overview," *British Journal of Political Science* 52, no. 2 (2022): 978. See for instance: Vincenzo Bove and Tobias Böhmelt, "Does Immigration Induce Terrorism?" *The Journal of Politics* 78, no. 2 (2016): 102047; Tobias Böhmelt, Vincenzo Bove and Kristian Skrede Gleditsch, "Blame the victims? Refugees, state capacity, and non-state actor violence," *Journal of Peace Research* 56, no. 1 (2019): 73-87; Erik Cruz, Stewart J. D'Alessio and Lisa Stolzenberg, "Decisions Made in Terror: Testing the Relationship Between Terrorism and Immigration," *Migration Studies* 8, no. 4 (2020): 573–588; Axel Dreher, Martin Gassebner and Paul Schaudt, "The effect of migration on terror: Made at home or imported from abroad?" *Canadian Journal of Economics/Revue canadienne d'économique* 53, no. 4 (2020): 1703-1744; Michael T. Light and Julia T. Thomas, "Undocumented immigration and terrorism: Is there a connection?" *Social science research* 94 (2021): 102512; Daniel Milton, Megan Spencer and Michael Findley, "Radicalism of the hopeless: Refugee flows and transnational terrorism," *International Interactions* 39, no. 5 (2013): 621-645; Alex Nowrasteh, "Terrorists by Immigration Status and Nationality: A Risk Analysis, 1975-2017," *Cato Institute Policy Analysis*, no. 866, 2019; Andrew C. Forrester, Benjamin Powell, Alex Nowrasteh and Michelangelo Landgrave, "Do immigrants import terrorism?" *Journal of Economic Behavior & Organization* 166 (2019): 529-543; Mary De Ming Fan, "The immigration-terrorism illusory correlation and heuristic mistake," *Harv. Latino L. Rev.* 10 (2007).
28 The search used different combinations of the terms: terrorism, terrorist, migrants, immigrants, migration, immigration, refugees, asylum-seekers, asylum seekers, diaspora.

Academic and policy interest in the topic surged in the early 2000s, following the 9/11 attacks in the US. It was further reinvigorated in the context of the combined crises of terrorism and immigration in Europe, in 2014-2016,[29] when a large number of individuals sought to escape war-torn Syria and Iraq to find refuge in Europe, while thousands of European foreign fighters, and their families, travelled in the other direction, to join the Islamic State and other terrorist organisations. Concurrently, high-profile attacks in Paris and Brussels involved terrorist operatives who had infiltrated migrant routes to enter Europe undetected.[30] These phenomena combined raised serious concerns among policy-makers, security services, and citizens.

Nevertheless, the topic remains largely peripherical within terrorism studies,[31] whereas migration studies have only superficially studied the topic. To illustrate this, a manual search in the archives of the four main academic journals in terrorism studies (*Terrorism and Political Violence, Studies in Conflict and Terrorism, Critical Studies in Terrorism, and Perspectives on Terrorism*), identified only thirty-five relevant articles published after 2001, almost all of which were published after 2015. Furthermore, these articles cover very different aspects of the migration-terrorism nexus (such as the radicalisation of migrants, foreign terrorist fighters, the role of diaspora communities, etc.), and almost none of these articles discuss the specific challenges posed by individuals who exploit legal and illegal migration flows to carry out terrorist attacks in Europe. Research on this aspect primarily consists of studies examining it as one dimension within a broader exploration of the migration-terrorism nexus,[32] with very few studies engaging with the topic as a main subject of analysis.

Among the few studies that directly address the terrorist exploitation of migration flows, Sam Mullins' research stands out for its comprehensive analysis of the profiles, travel routes, and operational activities of jihadist terrorists having entered Europe under the guise of refugees – including both EU and non-EU nationals – between 2011 and 2018. The author identified 144 individuals, referred to as "terrorist asylum-seekers."[33] Their travel patterns have largely "mirrored the broader flow of migrants," since their intention was precisely to enter Europe clandestinely. Half of them arrived in Europe at the peak of the migrant crisis in 2015,[34] and their journey typically started in Syria or Iraq, passing through Turkey, entering Europe via Greek islands, and continuing along the so-called "Balkan route".[35] The same applies to their methods of travel. As for genuine refugees, their travel was facilitated by smugglers, often involving the use of false documents and facing substantial hardships, although a few managed to travel by plane directly from places like Damascus to Rome, or from Morocco to Portugal.[36]

Existing research on the radicalisation of legal and illegal migrants in Europe similarly remains scarce. Existing research suggests that migrants', asylum seekers', and refugees' radicalisation towards violent extremism can be influenced by a complex set of personal grievances, socio-

29 Jean-Baptiste Meyer, "Le lien entre migration et terrorisme. Un tabou à déconstruire," *Hommes & migrations*, no. 1315 (2016): 50.
30 Ibid.
31 Sajjan M. Gohel, "Prevention of Cross-Border Movements of Terrorists: Operational, Political, Institutional and Strategic Challenges for National and Regional Border Controls," in *Handbook of Terrorism Prevention and Preparedness*, (ed.) A. P. Schmid, (The Hague: ICCT Press, 2021), 475.
32 See for instance: Alex P. Schmid, "Links between Terrorism and Migration: An Exploration," ICCT Research Paper (2016); Helbling, Marc, and Daniel Meierrieks. "Terrorism and Migration: An Overview," *British Journal of Political Science* 52, no. 2 (2022): 977–996; Khalid Koser and Amy Cunningham. "Migration, violent extremism and terrorism: Myths and realities," *Institute for Economics & Peace. Global Terrorism Index* (2015): 83-85; Khalid Koser and Amy Cunningham, "Chapter 9–Migration, violent extremism and social exclusion," *World Migration Report* (2018); Claudio Bertolotti, "Terrorism and immigration: links and challenges," *REACT, Report on Terrorism and Radicalization in Europe* 2, no. 2 (2021).
33 Among the 144 jihadist terrorists analysed, 38 percent were members of foreign terrorist organisations prior to entering Europe but without committing further offenses after arrival, while 35 percent (re-)entered Europe with the specific intent of carrying out terrorist activities, including support roles. About 13 percent conducted attacks in Europe, with a total of 12 completed attacks, and another 28 percent were involved in planning 23 thwarted and aborted plots. Sam Mullins, Jihadist infiltration of migrant flows, pp. 67-68.
34 Ibid., p. 46.
35 Ibid., pp. 43-45.
36 Ibid., p. 43.

economic conditions, identity factors, settlement patterns, local policies,[37] and eventually the presence of local radical networks seeking to recruit.[38] Even "after being granted official refugee status, there are still needs and conditions – like social marginalisation and discrimination, perceived grievances and injustice, the sense of not belonging and identity issues, alienation, disappointment and hopelessness – that can feed the breeding ground for radicalisation and increase vulnerability to recruitment."[39] Additionally, some studies underline the need to consider "those excluded from the procedures by being denied asylum."[40] Asylum-denial and the resulting risk of deportation have severe consequences for individuals, which could trigger radicalisation or violent action, particularly if combined with "other risk indicators are present (most notably, engagement with extremist individuals or propaganda and a history of violence)."[41] In the longer run, those denied asylum who decide to stay in the host country are condemned to clandestine life, at the margins of society. Such situations make these individuals more vulnerable to radicalisation, recruitment or exploitation by terrorist groups, although virtually no research has focussed on this particular group, at least in Europe.

Against this backdrop, this report aims to critically analyse the scope and nature of the terrorist threat posed by individuals entering Europe via legal or illegal routes, whether they had radicalised prior or after entering Europe, with a view to inform the scientific debate and public policies with clear evidence, particularly in the field of counter-terrorism.

Methodology

This project started with a preliminary review of the literature, in order to get a broad overview of the different dimensions and challenges at the intersection of migration and counter-terrorism, specifically in a European context. We combined research of key terms through online academic databases as well as a snowball approach (i.e. reviewing bibliographies of key articles to identify more articles). Furthermore, systematic searches were conducted in the four main journal in terrorism studies between 2001-2024 (*Terrorism and Political Violence, Studies in Conflict and Terrorism, Critical Studies in Terrorism, and Perspective on Terrorism*), in order to identify unmistakenly all relevant literature to the field of (counter-)terrorism. One challenge identified as part of this literature review was the lack of good and updated data. In order to be able to assess the relevance of the migration-terrorism nexus in Europe, we collected data on jihadist attacks in the EU between 2014 and 2024 involving non-EU nationals – including irregular migrants, regular migrants with a resident permit, asylum seekers, and refugees – as well as EU nationals who returned to Europe using migration routes and/or posing as asylum seekers. To do so, the project team combined data available from several databases (such as the Global Terrorism

37 Radicalisation Awareness Network, *Preventing Radicalisation of Asylum Seekers and Refugees*, 26 December, 2019;
Barbara H. Sude, "Prevention of Radicalization to Terrorism in Refugee Camps and Asylum Centres," in Alex. P. Schmid (ed.), *Handbook of terrorism prevention and preparedness*, International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT), 2021;
Marina Eleftheriadou, "Refugee Radicalization/Militarization in the Age of the European Refugee Crisis: A Composite Model," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 32, no. 8 (2020).
38 For example, see: Sude, "Prevention of Radicalization in Refugee Camps," pp.247-249; Nuno Tiago Pinto, "The Portugal Connection in the Strasbourg-Marseille Islamic State Terrorist Network," *CTC Sentinel* 11, no. 10 (2018): 17-24; Crispian Balmer, "Italy arrests Somali cleric over alleged plans for Rome attack," *Reuters*, 9 March, 2016; Europol, "Changes in Modus Operandi of Islamic State Revisited," (November 2016): 9; Koser and Cunningham, "Migration, violent extremism and social exclusion," p.7; United Nations Security Council, Thirty-fourth report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team submitted pursuant to resolution 2734 (2024) concerning ISIL (Da'esh), Al-Qaida and associated individuals and entities, July 2024, p.15.
39 Radicalisation Awareness Network, *Preventing Radicalisation of Asylum Seekers*, p. 1.
40 Radicalisation Awareness Network, *Preventing Radicalisation of Asylum Seekers*, p.2.
41 There have indeed been examples of individuals committing terrorist attacks after being denied asylum in Europe, as illustrated by the attack in Solingen, Germany, on 23 August 2024. The attacker Issa Al H, a 26 years-old Syrian had his asylum claim denied in Germany in 2023, and was facing deportation to Bulgaria, but escaped authorities' surveillance. In the UK, the Iraqi-born failed asylum seeker Emad al-Swealmeen, who died after detonating a bomb outside of a hospital in Liverpool in November 2021, reportedly "bore a grudge against the state because his asylum claim was rejected." See: Mullins, *Jihadist infiltration of migrant flows,* p.74; Paul Kirby, "Germany Resumes Afghan Deportations After Mass Stabbing in Solingen," *BBC*, 29 August, 2024. Jamie Grierson, "Liverpool Hospital Bomber Had Asylum Claim Grievance, Policy Inquiry Finds," *The Guardian*, 8 November, 2024.

Database) as well as from key resources (such as Europol's annual TE-SAT reports), in addition to open-source information. The resulting dataset offers some insights that complement findings from the existing literature.

In order to go beyond quantifying the phenomenon and get a more granular understanding of how it unfolds in specific contexts, the authors conducted post-mortem analyses of three terrorist attacks carried out in Europe by migrants or asylum seekers, or terrorists posing as asylum seekers. The objective was to identify specific challenges from a counter-terrorism point of view, in order to inform recommendations. The case studies were selected on the basis of the following criteria: location of attack (one per country maximum); specifics of the attack (preference for attacks that raise different challenges in relation to the migration-terrorism nexus), and availability of information (to make the analysis possible). Eventually the three cases selected were: the Paris attacks, in November 2015; the Berlin Christmas market attack, in December 2016; and the Brussels shooting attack, in October 2023. For each case study, the project team compiled and reviewed a list of open-source information, including media reports, books or articles, as well as official reports (such as parliamentary hearings or investigations, or reports from oversight committees). Furthermore, a limited number of semi-structured interviews were conducted in September 2024, with representatives from counter-terrorism and immigration services, as well as meetings with representatives from Europol and the Dutch National Coordinator for Security and Counterterrorism (NCTV). These meetings helped refine the case studies and more broadly the key findings from this report.

Some limitations in our methodology should be highlighted. There is a clear European bias in our dataset and in our selection of case studies. We acknowledge this bias, as an assumed choice to narrow down our research focus and to best inform our recommendations, although recognising that it limits the generalisation of our conclusions and applicability to other contexts. Moreover, the study of the migration-terrorism nexus is complicated by the perennial difficulties in researching both topics separately, particularly with regard to data. Indeed, open-access data on terrorist incidents or radicalised individuals is limited and not always accurate, whereas data on migration is equally incomplete, as it generally does not include illegal migration.

Structure of this Report

The report explores the threat and challenges posed by terrorists using legal and illegal migration routes into Europe. Building upon the analysis of an original dataset, it first discusses key trends observed in Europe over the past decade. Specifically, it assesses the magnitude of the threat (i.e. number of attacks, individuals involved, casualties), its nature (i.e. legal status of the perpetrators, targets of attacks, timeframe between the perpetrator's arrival in the EU and the attack, etc.), as well as key trends (i.e. evolution of the threat over the past decade, countries most impacted, etc.). It then presents three case studies, which offer more insights into the materialisation of the phenomenon in the context of specific terrorist attacks, highlighting concrete challenges and identifying some lessons learned. Each investigates the individual trajectories of the perpetrators, clarifies their radicalisation process, and examines how they successfully escaped the attention of counter-terrorism services. Specifically, each case study aims to (1) explore the migration-terrorism as it manifested in each instance, (2) highlight the key challenges faced by counter-terrorism services in detecting and preventing such attacks, and (3) extract actionable lessons learned. Finally, the report concludes with the identification of a number of recommendations.

Analysis of Attacks Perpetrated by (Individuals Posing as) Migrants in Europe

A dataset was developed in the context of this project, to document jihadist attacks conducted in the EU between 2014 and 2024, involving directly non-EU nationals – including irregular migrants, regular migrants with a resident permit, asylum seekers, and refugees – as well as EU nationals who returned from conflict zones using migration routes and/or posing as asylum seekers – but excluding those who returned by legal routes.[42] We only considered completed attacks, as information on foiled and failed terrorist plots is often very fragmentary, if available at all. Furthermore, we only included attacks that had been clearly investigated or prosecuted as terrorist, hence excluding some cases where the terrorist motive had been rejected by prosecution.[43] Finally, we limited ourselves to jihadi terrorist attacks, for consistency in the dataset. This dataset is based on Europol's *European Union Terrorism Situation & Trend Report (TE-SAT)* and supplemented with open-source information.

In total, **55 individuals** were identified as participants in **43 completed attacks** across the EU,[44] between 2014 and 2024. The majority of the perpetrators (29 individuals, 53 percent) were either born in Europe (eight individuals, 15 percent) or had resided in Europe for over five years (21 individuals, 38 percent) prior to committing an attack. In contrast, only five individuals committed an attack one year after arriving in Europe or less, including the two Iraqi ISIS members who attacked the Stade de France in November 2015. A quarter of our dataset (fourteen individuals, 25 percent) were EU citizens, sometimes holding dual nationalities.

Regarding their legal status, less than a quarter of our dataset (thirteen individuals, 24 percent) were irregular migrants. The remaining perpetrators included individuals with a permanent residence permit (35 percent), EU nationals having infiltrated migrant routes to return from conflict zones (16 percent), refugees (9 percent), individuals with tolerated stay permits (7 percent) and asylum seekers (4 percent), as well as three individuals (5 percent) for which the legal status could not be determined. Additionally, eleven individuals were under expulsion orders at the time of the attack. Interestingly, figure 1 shows that the number of attacks committed by the combined group of irregular migrants, asylum-seekers, and individuals with a tolerated stay permit is relatively stable over the past decade, whereas the spike of attacks in 2015-2017 is more clearly attributable to EU nationals or individuals that had been residing legally in Europe (a number of which for more than ten years).

42 For instance, the case of Mehdi Nemmouche, perpetrator of the attack against the Brussels Jewish Museum on 24 May 2014, was excluded. Nemmouche, a French citizen, travelled to Syria in the winter of 2013-2014 and joined IS. He tried to conceal his return to Europe and flew to Frankfurt via Turkey, Malaysia, Singapore, and Thailand. However, he neither posed as a refugee nor travelled via migration routes. He also did not use a false passport, but travelled under his real identity. As he did not meet our inclusion criteria, he was excluded from our dataset.
43 For example, a vehicle ramming attack on a Berlin highway, by an Iraqi irregular migrant, seriously injured three people on 18 August 2020. Although this incident was classified as a jihadist attack in Europol's TE-SAT report, it was excluded from our dataset as a court later ruled out a terrorist motive. Associated Press, "Berlin highway attack suspect kept at psychiatric clinic," 1 January, 2022.
44 For the sake of consistency of our data, the UK was excluded from our dataset as a result of Brexit.

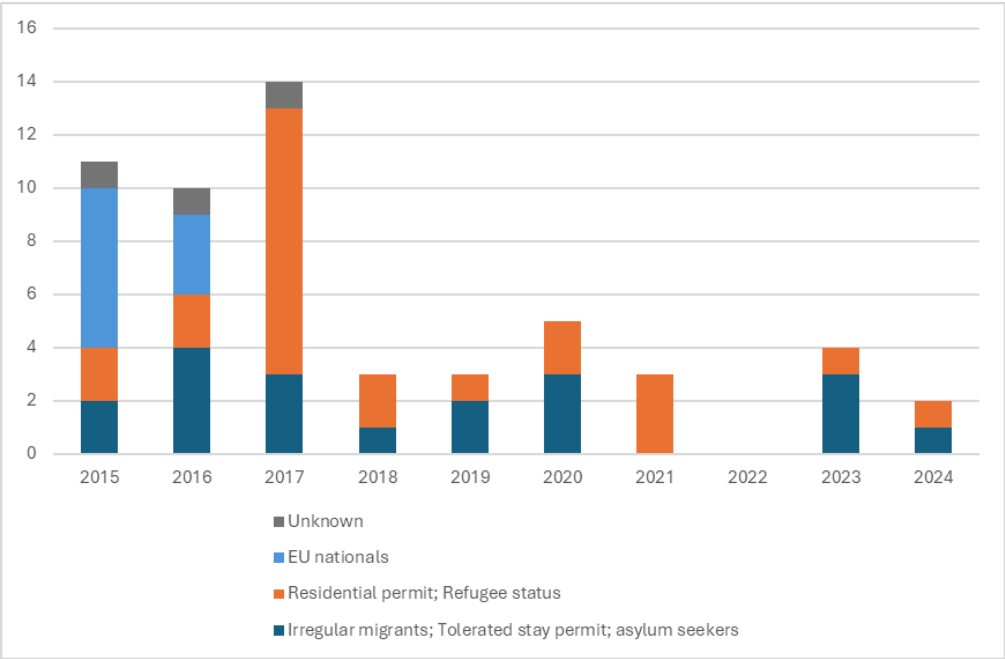

Figure 1. Perpetrators per legal status

These attacks spanned across eight European countries, with France (nineteen attacks, 44 percent) and Germany (ten attacks, 23 percent) being the most affected, followed by Belgium, Spain, the Netherlands, Finland, Italy, and Sweden. Most of these attacks targeted civilians (34 attacks, 79 percent), and overall resulted in 316 deaths and 1,547 injuries.

Attacks in our dataset include notably the three attacks that are discussed in further details in this report, but also several other prominent attacks. This includes the truck attack conducted by Mohamed Lahouaiej-Bouhlel in Nice on 14 July 2016 which resulted in 86 deaths and over 400 injuries, the coordinated attacks of 22 March 2016, in Brussels, which killed 32 people and wounded 340, as well as the two vehicle attacks in Cambrils and Barcelona on 17 and 18 August 2017, together resulting in 16 deaths and 152 injuries. These incidents combined account for the vast majority of deaths (89 percent) and casualties (90 percent) recorded in the database.

Following a peak in 2015-2016, the data shows a gradual decline in the frequency of attacks, the number of individuals involved, and associated casualties (*see Figure 2 below*), suggesting that the link between migration and terrorism has not grown as a threat over time.

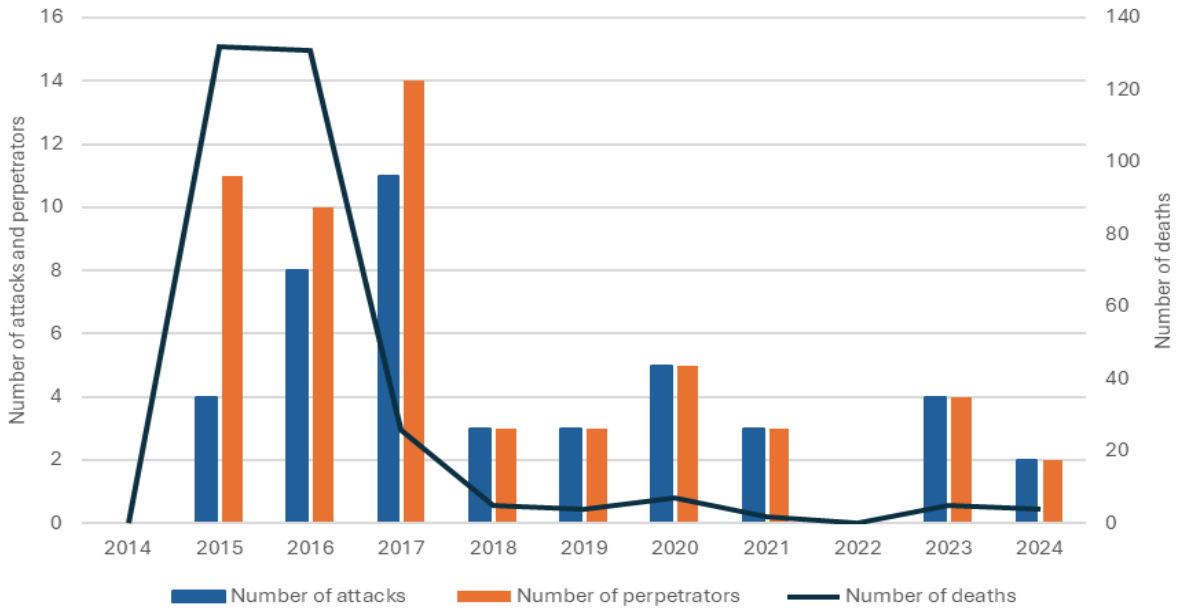

Figure 2. Number of attacks, perpetrators, and deaths

Post-Mortem Analysis 1: The November 2015 Paris Attacks

On 13 November 2015, a series of coordinated terrorist attacks in Paris and Saint-Denis targeted the Stade de France, the Bataclan concert hall, and several café and restaurant terraces. The operation included a mix of shootings, hostage-taking, and suicide bombings, by a commando team of ten members. It resulted in the death of 130 civilians, and hundreds of injuries, the deadliest terrorist attack in French history. These assaults dramatically shifted public perception of the threat associated with refugee flows.

The Migration-Terrorism Nexus

The Stade de France attackers included two Iraqi nationals who had entered Europe posing as refugees and using fake Syrian passports, one of which was found near their bodies after the attacks. The remaining assailants were European citizens – French and Belgian nationals – most of whom had travelled to Syria to join ISIS before returning to carry out organised attacks against their home countries. Amid the hundreds of Europeans who had joined the terrorist organisation in Syria, this French-Belgian network is notable for being "the only one to have developed a plan for large-scale reprisals against its countries of origin."[45]

These attacks, as well as the subsequent Brussels bombings in March 2016, were the results of ISIS's strategy to leverage the ongoing refugee crisis as a cover to discreetly dispatch operatives into Western Europe.[46] The operations were indeed planned and coordinated from abroad – initially from Syria, where the team was formed, "sometimes building on kinship that pre-dated the Syrian jihad,"[47] and from Belgium, where the operatives later regrouped. Most operatives were trained and provided with "false passports, communication devices, contacts with facilitators and smugglers, and money"[48] by services in charge of ISIS's external operations in Raqqa prior to leaving for Europe. Once in Europe, they maintained contact with their handlers in Syria, including with Belgian national Oussama Atar, alias Abou Ahmad, who is believed to have coordinated operations remotely.[49]

Nearly all Paris attackers "came back to Europe using forged Syrian passports and infiltrated the refugee flow."[50] They arrived in small groups between August and October 2015.[51] Crucial to their ability to exploit migration routes was the logistical support received from various facilitators, including "smugglers, counterfeiters established particularly in Turkey and Greece."[52] A key enabler of their infiltration was Bilal Chatra, an Algerian smuggler commissioned by the operation's ringleader, Abdelhamid Abaaoud.[53] Chatra had met Abaaoud in a Turkish refugee camp in late 2014,[54] and was tasked with scouting the 'Balkan route.' He travelled for a month across Turkey, Greece, Macedonia, Serbia, and Hungary, providing constant updates to Abaaoud about "any open border crossings, waiting times, and arrival and departure routes."[55] Using

45 Assemblée Nationale, *Rapport N° 3922 fait au nom de la commission d'enquête relative aux moyens mis en oeuvre par l'État pour lutter contre le terrorisme depuis le 7 janvier 2015*, 5 July 2016, p.139.
46 Jean-Charles Brisard and Kevin Jackson, "The Islamic State's External Operations and the French-Belgian Nexus," *CTC Sentinel* 9, no. 11 (2016): 8-15.
47 Brisard and Jackson, "The Islamic State's External Operations," p.8.
48 Ibid.
49 Soren Seelow, "Comment les terroristes des attentats de Paris et de Bruxelles se sont infiltrés en Europe," *Le Monde*, 12 November, 2016.
50 Brisard and Jackson, "The Islamic State's External Operations," p.12.
51 Ibid.
52 Assemblée Nationale, *Rapport N° 3922*, p.150.
53 Matthieu Suc, *Les espions de la terreur* (HarperCollins, 2018) p.249; Mullins, *Jihadist infiltration of migrant flows,* p.50.
54 Suc, *Les espions de la terreur,* p.249; Mullins, Jihadist infiltration of migrant flows, p.50.
55 Suc, *Les espions de la terreur,* p.249; Brisard and Jackson, "The Islamic State's External Operations," p.12.

the same route, Abaaoud himself managed to re-enter Europe in the summer of 2015.[56] While European intelligence services believed he was still in Syria, Abaaoud crossed the Serbian border at Röszke to reach Budapest on 1 August 2015.[57] He later drove through Austria towards Brussels neighbourhoods, from where he coordinated the arrival of other operatives.[58]

Fellow members of the Paris-Brussels network closely followed.[59] Bilal Hadfi and Chakib Akrouh both arrived in Kirkorös, Southern Hungary, on 25 August 2015.[60] The Bataclan attackers, Ismaël Omar Mostefaï, Samy Amimour, and Foued Mohamed-Aggad, followed a similar path, entering Budapest on 9 September 2015.[61] Finally, the two Iraqi attackers of the Stade de France arrived by boat on the Greek island of Leros, along with "198 people claiming to be Syrian refugees" on 3 October 2015.[62] While a report suggests that the two individuals "were not seriously questioned" by Frontex and Greek authorities,[63] both men were reportedly photographed and had their fingerprints taken.[64] Despite travelling with fake Syrian passports under the names of Ahmad Al Mohammad[65] and Mohammad Al Mahmod, they were able to continue their journey to Western Europe. Following the flow of migrants, the two operatives reportedly travelled to Serbia by land, registering at a refugee camp in Presevo on 7 October,[66] before crossing Austria and Germany, to finally reach their hideout in the suburbs of Brussels.[67]

Only the two Abdeslam brothers did not infiltrate migration flows.[68] While Salah Abdeslam never went to Syria, his brother Brahim is believed to have pretended a tourist trip to Turkey to briefly travel to Syria between late January and early February 2015. As part of this short stay in ISIS-held territories, he reportedly underwent military training and met with his childhood friend Abaaoud.[69]

Once inside Europe, the operatives' movements were facilitated by Salah Abdeslam, who acted "as a key logistical conduit for the Syrian veterans in Europe."[70] Between August and October 2015, the latter made four roundtrips from Belgium – three to Hungary and one to Germany – to pick up ISIS operatives and assemble the Paris attack team.[71] Attackers moreover benefitted from the support provided by "a Belgium-based jihadist network deeply tied to the mother organisation in Syria [which] dealt with facilitation and material support for the terrorist

56 As explained further below, Abdelhamid Abaaoud was located in Athens in January 2015, from where he managed to escape and is believed to have left for Syria again.
57 Seelow, "Comment les terroristes".
58 Seelow, "Comment les terroristes"; Suc, *Les espions de la terreur*, p.252.
59 Ismaël Omar Mostefaï, Samy Amimour, and Foued Mohamed-Aggad respectively travelled under the names of Salah Jamal, Husein Alkhlf, and Fooad Moosa. Similarly, Mohamed Belkaïd, and Najim Laachraoui respectively travelled under the false identities, respectively calling themselves Soufiane Kayal and Samir Bouzid; Seelow, "Comment les terroristes".
60 Seelow, "Comment les terroristes".
61 Ibid.
62 Ibid.
63 Anthony Faiola and Souad Mekhennet, "Tracing the path of four terrorists sent to Europe by the Islamic State," *The Washington Post*, 22 April, 2016.
64 Mullins, Jihadist infiltration of migrant flows, p.3.
65 He was later identified as Ammar Ramadan Mansour Mohamad al-Sabaawi born in 1993 in Iraq. "Attentats du 13 novembre : un kamikaze du Stade de France identifié," *France 24*, 18 January, 2017.
66 Faiola and Mekhennet, "Tracing the path of four terrorists sent to Europe by the Islamic State".
67 Suc, *Les espions de la terreur*, p.256.
68 Soren Seelow, "'Pourrais-tu me rassurer que ces dossiers sont traités ?': le récit des ratés de la police belge avant les attentats du 13-Novembre," *Le Monde*, 28 August, 2021.
69 Ibid.
70 Brisard and Jackson, "The Islamic State's External Operations," p.13.
71 Salah Abdeslam first travelled to Kiskorös, in Southern Hungary, to pick up Bilal Hadfi and Chakib Akrouh on 30 August. He then made two roundtrips to Budapest – the first one to get Najim Laachraoui and Mohamed Belkaid on 9 September, and the second to bring the three Bataclan attackers – Sami Amimour, Ismaël Omar Mostefaï, and Foued Mohamed-Aggad – on 17 September. He finally travelled to Ulm Germany to pick up Osama Krayem, Sofiane Ayari, and Ahmed Alkhald in the night of 2 and 3 October. Brisard and Jackson, "The Islamic State's External Operations," p.13; Seelow, "Comment les terroristes".

campaign to come."[72] Individuals such as Najim Laachraoui, Mohamed Abrini, Ibrahim and Khalid el-Bakraoui, Ahmed Dahmani, and others played key roles in procuring weapons, explosives, vehicles, and safe houses.[73]

Only the day before the attacks would the members of the commandos finally enter France, staying overnight in a rented apartment in Bobigny, in the suburbs of Paris, before launching their operations the next day.[74] Nearly all the attackers died on 13 November. Abaaoud and Akrouh were killed in a police raid on their hideout in Saint-Denis, on 18 November 2015.[75] After a four-month-long manhunt, Salah Abdeslam was arrested in Molenbeek, Belgium, on 18 March 2016.[76] He was sentenced in 2023 to life imprisonment for his participation in the Paris attacks.[77]

The Challenges of the Nexus for the Authorities

The 2015 Paris attacks tragically demonstrated ISIS's ability to exploit the refugee crisis as a cover to infiltrate operatives in Europe. These events, and the parliamentary investigation that followed, exposed significant gaps in national and European capacities to detect and counter such threats.

French intelligence officials admitted to widespread failures. The head of the French internal intelligence agency (DGSI) referred to the attacks as "a global failure of intelligence"[78] – a sentiment echoed by the head of the French external intelligence agency (DGSE), who also admitted to "a failure of external intelligence" in preventing attacks that had been orchestrated from abroad.[79] Many of the perpetrators were indeed known to authorities and had been under various types of surveillance prior to the attacks, being "registered, monitored, listened to or imprisoned at some stage in their journey from delinquency to violent radicalisation."[80] They still managed to travel to and back from Syria to conduct "the deadliest attack in modern French history."[81]

A notable example was Samy Amimour, one of the Bataclan attackers, who managed to go to Syria in 2013 albeit being under judicial supervision and banned from leaving France.[82] Similarly, his travel companion and fellow Bataclan attacker Ismaël Omar Mostefaï was monitored by the intelligence services for his radicalisation ("fiché S") when he joined ISIS in Syria.[83] The third Bataclan attacker Foued Mohamed-Aggad, was, according to French journalist Matthieu Suc, already mentioned in a DGSE note from mid-2014, listing French nationals susceptible to conduct, or coordinate from abroad, an attack in the country.[84]

Perhaps more strikingly, Abdelhamid Abaaoud, described in the parliamentary inquiry as "the blind spot of European counter-terrorism,"[85] managed to travel back and forth to Syria on multiple occasions prior to the Paris attacks.[86] After initially travelling to Syria in February 2013, he first

72 Brisard and Jackson, "The Islamic State's External Operations," p.13.
73 Ibid.
74 Assemblée Nationale, *Rapport N° 3922*, p.150; Suc, *Les espions de la terreur*, p.269.
75 Suc, *Les espions de la terreur*, p.282.
76 Ibid., p.304.
77 Le Monde/AFP, "Attentats du 13-Novembre : Salah Abdeslam a été transféré de la Belgique vers la France pour y purger sa peine," 7 February, 2024.
78 Assemblée Nationale, *Rapport N° 3922,* p.137.
79 Ibid., p.137.
80 Ibid., p.145.
81 Brisard and Jackson, "The Islamic State's External Operations".
82 Despite being stripped of his identity papers, he successfully had them replaced, claiming that they had been lost. The parliamentary enquiry notes that, while any request for new identity papers normally triggers consultation of the national wanted persons file (FPR) in which exit bans are recorded, it would appear that this consultation is not systematic. Assemblée Nationale, *Rapport N° 3922*, p.148.
83 Assemblée Nationale, *Rapport N° 3922*, p.13.
84 Suc, *Les espions de la terreur*, p.187.
85 Assemblée Nationale, *Rapport N° 3922*, p.151.
86 Ibid; Mullins, *Jihadist infiltration of migrant flows*, p.34.

returned to Belgium in September that year, only to depart once more in January 2014, this time with his 13-year-old brother. Soon after, he began appearing in brutal propaganda videos and became the subject of an international arrest warrant issued by Belgium in August 2014.[87] Yet, he successfully re-entered Europe later in 2014, transiting through Edirne in Turkey, and was located in Athens in early 2015, from where he was believed to be coordinating a terrorist cell hiding in Verviers, Belgium.[88] When intelligence services intercepted conversations indicating the "Verviers cell" was planning an imminent attack, it was dismantled in a police operation on 15 January 2015. However, in the rush of the operation, Greek authorities were not informed in time to prevent Abaaoud from escaping.[89] Convicted in absentia by a Belgian court in July 2015, he managed to re-enter Europe, blending in with refugees fleeing Syria in the second half of 2015, eventually making his way to Belgium undetected. The parliamentary inquiry concluded that "evidently, the European Union's external borders are no longer an obstacle to terrorists coming from Iraq and Syria, who can then, like Abdelhamid Abaaoud, move around Europe with disconcerting ease."[90]

The Paris attacks indeed demonstrated how terrorist networks could exploit vulnerabilities in Europe's border management. The parliamentary inquiry pointed to "weaknesses in the control systems within the Schengen area"[91] and noted that "the terrorists who struck in 2015 demonstrated their ability to take advantage of the laxity of the European area."[92] Although returnees from conflict zones were already at the time "at the top of Europe's threat list,"[93] attackers faced little trouble entering and travelling across Europe, benefitting from weak controls at EU external borders amid the unprecedented refugee flows of 2015.[94] For example, security experts estimate that, in Greece, "border guards were only able to conduct thorough screening — meaningful questioning, running fingerprint and database checks — on a third of the arrivals at most."[95] Although no open-source evidence confirms that any of the Paris attackers directly benefitted from it, Macedonia's decision in June 2015 to grant migrants 72-hour transit permits facilitated entry to Europe via the "Balkan route."[96]

Particularly, the attacks exposed the limits of European information-sharing systems. For example, an Austrian police stop of a car carrying Salah Abdeslam, Mohamed Belkaïd, and Najim Laachraoui, on 9 September 2015 failed to trigger any investigation, although all three individuals were known to authorities. Laachraoui was the subject of an international arrest warrant, Belkaïd was known to Swedish intelligence for his ties to extremism, and Abdeslam was the subject of an alert in the Schengen Information System (SIS II). It remains unclear whether the Austrian officers failed to search or find Abdeslam's name in the SIS database or did not adequately respond to the alert, but "Belgian authorities [who had issued the SIS II alert] only learned about the stop months later while investigating the Paris attacks."[97]

Again, on 14 November 2015, the morning after the attacks, French gendarmes stopped Salah Abdeslam – whose name was not yet associated with the dramatic events – while he was on his way to Belgium with two accomplices. Following the course of action indicated in the SIS II alert, they discreetly gathered information on the vehicle and its occupants, and shared it through

87 Sarah Leduc, "Abdelhamid Abaaoud, un terroriste trop médiatique," *France 24*, 20 November, 2015.
88 Suc, *Les espions de la terreur,* p.163.
89 Ibid., p.165.
90 Assemblée Nationale, *Rapport N° 3922*, p.24.
91 Ibid., pp.294.
92 Ibid., pp.149-150.
93 Griff Witte and Loveday Morris, "Failure to stop Paris attacks reveals fatal flaws at heart of European security," *The Washington Post*, 28 November 2015.
94 Assemblée Nationale, *Rapport N° 3922*, p.149.
95 Sebastian Rotella, "How Europe Left Itself Open to Terrorism," *ProPublica and Frontline*, 18 October, 2016.
96 Suc, *Les espions de la terreur,* p.250; Brisard and Jackson, "The Islamic State's External Operations," p.12.
97 Rotella, "How Europe Left Itself Open to Terrorism".

the dedicated EU-wide information exchange system "SIRENE".[98] By the time French authorities were informed by their Belgian counterparts that Abdeslam was a radicalised individual and "a candidate for jihad in Syria,"[99] the gendarmes had let Abdeslam go, allowing him to evade capture for another four months. The parliamentary inquiry ultimately concluded that "SIS II, in the aftermath of the worst terrorist attack in France's history and despite presidential orders, was powerless to provide the French gendarmerie with the information it needed, forcing it to let the jihadist go free."[100]

This specific event has been a matter of significant debates between French and Belgian authorities, with three main points of argument. The first challenge highlighted in the French parliamentary inquiry stemmed from the procedures for the processing of alerts, which relies on bilateral communication between national SIRENE offices, with a positive hit prompting the exchange of inter-state information 'forms'. This procedure can create important delays in the exchange of critical information. In this case, however, the exchange proceeded relatively quickly, despite brief delays on both sides, allegedly primarily on the French side.[101]

The second relates to the conditions for the entry of alerts for discreet checks in SIS II, which can be issued either "for the purposes of prosecuting criminal offences and for the prevention of threats to public security"(Article 36-2 of Council Decision 2007/533/JHA) – which was the case for Abdeslam – or to prevent "serious threats to internal or external national security" (Article 36-3).[102] Belgium was criticised for not having given Abdeslam higher priority on the watchlist despite knowing about his radicalisation and ties to violent extremist networks.[103] In response, the Belgian parliamentary inquiry specified that "although France issued all alerts relating to foreign terrorist fighters under Article 36(3) of the SIS II Decision, [...] this was a departure from the policy followed until recently in other EU Member States," revealing contrasting practices between EU Member States.[104]

Thirdly, the French parliamentary report regretted that Abdeslam's SIS II file "had not been fed by the Belgian intelligence services with information relating to his radicalisation."[105] In that regard, the Belgian inquiry underlined that "it was not yet technically possible" to add information about an individual's terrorism-related activities in the SIS II when the initial alert was issued on 9 February 2015.[106] Yet, recognising that this became possible just later that month, it appears it did not lead to an updating of the initial alert.[107] Moreover, the Belgian parliament inquiry highlighted that Salah Abdeslam had not only been registered in SIS II, but had simultaneously been registered in Interpol's database in early 2015.[108]

Beyond challenges related to EU databases, the failure to utilise other international law enforcement databases to their full extent further hindered the early identification of key Paris attackers. Reports indicate that the Syrian passport found outside the Stade de France after the attack had been recorded in Interpol's database in April 2014 "as part of a batch of 1,450 stolen

98 According to the parliamentary inquiry, Abdeslam was controlled at 9:10 and information about his profile was received by France at 10:45. Assemblée Nationale, *Rapport N° 3922*, pp.300-301.
99 Assemblée Nationale, *Rapport N° 3922,* pp.300-301.
100 Ibid., p.301.
101 Nicolas G. Verheyde, "Abdeslam's failed arrest in 2015. Belgians dispute any mistake," *Bruxelles 2*, 14 November, 2017; See also Assemblée Nationale, *Rapport N° 3922*, pp.300-301; Laurette Onkelinx et al., "Derde Tussentijds Verslag Over Het Onderdeel 'Veiligheidsarchitectuur'", 15 Juni, 2017, pp. 479-481.
102 Council of the European Union, "Council Decision 2007/533/JHA of 12 June 2007 on the establishment, operation and use of the second generation Schengen Information System (SIS II)", 12 June, 2007.
103 Rotella, "How Europe Left Itself Open to Terrorism".
104 Onkelinx et al., "Derde Tussentijds Verslag," p.481.
105 Assemblée Nationale*, Rapport N° 3922*, p.16.
106 Onkelinx et al., "Derde Tussentijds Verslag," p. 479.
107 Ibid., p.479.
108 Onkelinx et al., "Derde Tussentijds Verslag," p.481.

blank Syrian passports."[109] According to Interpol officials, "it was well-known that ISIS had stolen or acquired such passports *en masse*" upon conquering new territories.[110] Although consulting this database might have allowed the detection of the Iraqi operatives' fraudulent documents, "Greek authorities were not regularly using it."[111]

Compounding these issues was poor intelligence-sharing with third countries. Following the attacks, Greek authorities ran additional checks and identified two individuals who had registered in Leros on 3 October 2015 – the same day as the Stade de France kamikazes. All four individuals travelled with falsified passports. While the two Stade de France Iraqi attackers' fake documents went undetected, allowing them to join the rest of the commando, the ones carried by these two additional individuals were detected. The first, Adel Haddadi, an Algerian national, was unable to answer basic questions about his alleged birthplace, Aleppo.[112] The second, Mohamed Usman Ghani, a Pakistani national, could not speak fluent Arabic.[113] Likely assumed to be economic migrants, they were briefly detained until 28 October, then resuming their journey through Macedonia, Serbia, Croatia, Slovenia, and Austria, where they claimed asylum on 4 December 2015.[114] They were later arrested in a refugee centre in Austria on 10 December 2015. Investigations revealed that they were also meant to take part in the attacks, but were too late to join the commando.[115] The French parliamentary inquiry reported that it was only after their arrest that Greek authorities received critical intelligence from an unnamed third country, including a photograph showing all four foreign ISIS operatives together.[116] Had it been shared earlier, this might have helped Greek authorities identify all four individuals attempting to enter under false asylum claims.

A final challenge that emerged from the November 2015 Paris attacks was the conflation of terrorism and immigration in the public and political debates.[117] The European Commission quickly moved to address this misconception, emphasising the importance of distinguishing terrorism from migration and reminding member states of their responsibilities toward refugees. European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker, speaking at the G20 on 15 November 2015, stressed the need to avoid conflating terrorists with those seeking international protection, affirming that "those who perpetrated the attacks are precisely those whom the refugees are trying to flee."[118] Despite these clarifications, EU policymakers soon faced the challenge of addressing security gaps that enabled the attackers to operate within Europe, all while balancing security imperatives with the safeguarding of core EU principles on the free movement of persons, and the legal standards surrounding privacy and civil liberties.[119]

Lessons Learned

The November 2015 Paris attacks exposed several vulnerabilities in Europe's capacity to prevent terrorist networks from exploiting migration flows to conduct large-scale attacks on its soil. The ease with which the Paris attackers were able to (re-)enter Europe despite most of them being known to intelligence services underscored the need for more robust, coordinated border management and information-sharing systems that prevent the infiltration of terrorist operatives,

109 Rotella, "How Europe Left Itself Open to Terrorism".
110 Ibid.
111 Ibid.
112 Faiola and Mekhennet, "Tracing the Path".
113 Ibid.
114 Ibid.
115 Seelow, "Comment les terroristes".
116 Assemblée Nationale, *Rapport N° 3922*, pp. 286-287.
117 Didier Bigo et al., "The EU and its counter-terrorism policies after the Paris attacks," *CEPS Paper in Liberty and Security in Europe* no. 84 (2015).
118 Ibid.
119 Didier Bigo et al., "The EU and its counter-terrorism policies after the Paris attacks," 2015.

while safeguarding fundamental rights, democratic rule of law, principles of free movements within the EU, and the rights of genuine asylum seekers in need of protection. Some key lessons were drawn as a result of the attacks.

- **Improve monitoring of radicalised individuals:** The parliamentary inquiry identified intelligence gaps that allowed individuals under surveillance or judicial supervision to travel to Syria and return to launch attacks. The report highlighted an overly complex, fragmented intelligence network with insufficient information-sharing, each service relying on its own databases.[120] It notably underlined that the only common database – the FSPRT (*fichier des signalés pour la prévention et la radicalisation à caractère terroriste*) put in place earlier in 2015 – includes radicalised individuals present on the national territory – i.e. not individuals having travelled to join terrorist organisations abroad.[121] While the departure of individuals already registered in the FSPRT is flagged to relevant services, particularly the DGSE, the database is not aimed at registering individuals located abroad.[122] It thus recommended expanding FSPRT to include overseas threats, creating a centralised counter-terrorism agency modelled after the US National Counterterrorism Centre (NCTC), involving academics and think tanks for broader threat analysis, and strengthening the enforcement of administrative measures, such as exit bans and judicial oversight.

- **Address resource gaps for more effective controls at EU external borders:** Besides the two Iraqi attackers having reportedly been controlled and registered in the Eurodac database, there is no open-source evidence that other members of the commando were checked upon entry. While initial responses to the attacks emphasised the need for collecting more data on incoming individuals, the incident primarily underscored a significant resource gap in processing a high volume of new arrivals effectively. Observers note that "more data without the necessary human resources and better cross-border operational cooperation among the law enforcement authorities of EU member states is not an efficient policy response."[123] Notably, the parliamentary inquiry recommended increasing Europol's presence in hotspot areas like Greece to support Frontex in processing arrivals and alleviate pressure on national border authorities.[124]

- **Ensure more consistent use of existing EU databases, including SIS II:** The effectiveness of EU information-sharing systems depends heavily on a more consistent usage across member states. Following the Paris attacks, reports indicated significant discrepancies in both how frequently EU member states input data into SIS II and how often they consult it.[125] Without consistent input, systematic checks may yield incomplete results, potentially requiring individuals to undergo redundant checks against an incomplete database.[126] Beyond the *quantity* of data input by member states, arguments between French and Belgian authorities on the specific ground on which Salah Abdeslam's SIS II alert should have been issued also revealed national differences in *how* they input data, particularly with regards to (suspected/aspiring) FTFs. This has changed as a result of the Paris attacks, with member states being required to systematically enter data on all suspected FTFs based on Article 36-3 (threats to national security).[127] Moreover, it underscored issues related to the insertion of certain details and adequate updating of alerts.

120 Assemblée Nationale, *Rapport N° 3922*, pp.12-13.
121 Ibid, p.183.
122 Ibid, p.183.
123 Didier Bigo et al., "The EU and its counter-terrorism policies after the Paris attacks," 2015.
124 Assemblée Nationale, *Rapport N° 3922*, p.296.
125 Niovi Vavoula, "Detecting foreign fighters: the reinvigoration of the Schengen Information System in the wake of terrorist attacks", *Eu Migration Blog*, n.d.
126 Ibid.
127 Onkelinx et al., "Derde Tussentijds Verslag," p.481; General Secretariat of the Council, "Conclusions of the Council of the EU and of the Member States meeting within the Council on Counter-Terrorism," 20 November, 2015.

Even if adequately populated with information, failures to consistently *consult* a database or *act* upon alerts also weaken the system's effectiveness – as illustrated in Salah Abdeslam's check on 9 September 2015. This episode showed that, rather than systematic procedures, the operationalisation of EU information systems often depends on the vigilance of individual end-users.[128] Furthermore, more consistent use of the Interpol database could have made it more difficult for the attackers to enter Europe – as shown by the missed opportunity to detect Stade de France attackers' fake Syrian passports registered in the Interpol database since 2014. The attacks highlighted the need for a unified approach to data entry and consultation, along with enhanced awareness raising and training for end-users on databases functionalities, querying, and information-sharing procedures.[129]

- **Enhance the interoperability among relevant EU databases:** Even if the Paris attackers had been registered in Eurodac, this would unlikely have triggered any immediate results due to their use of false alias-identities, and the absence of connections between Eurodac and other EU databases, such as SIS II. According to Rob Wainright, former Europol Executive Director, the greatest lesson from the Paris attacks was the need for "a much more systematic, better hooked-up, centralized system."[130] The Paris attacks were indeed a major trigger point for new regulations at the European level, and notably inspired efforts to enhance the interoperability of EU databases.[131] Once completed, these reforms might help close some critical gaps, for instance, allowing border agents registering an asylum seeker in Eurodac to be alerted of any positive hits in connected databases.

- **Allow for timely operationalisation of SIS II alerts and exchange of information:** The exchange of additional information following the 'positive hit' in SIS II for Salah Abdeslam on 14 November 2015 was relatively quick, despite later critics. However, this episode drew considerable attention to the SIS II system and its operational challenges, revealing broader issues with the general speed of alert processing. As one Belgian counter-terrorism official pointed out in reference to Abdeslam's first control by Austrian police officers in September 2015, "even if they got a hit, it only gets communicated to us by fax after a while. […] And it may take weeks for such information to reach the appropriate unit of the Belgian counterterrorism police, if it reaches them at all."[132] Since then, new EU regulations were introduced, requiring all member states to establish a Single Point of Contact, responsible for coordinating and facilitating the exchange of information, that "carries out its tasks 24 hours a day, 7 days a week."[133] Time limits under which information requested should be provided have also been specified, depending on the urgency of the request and accessibility of the information.[134]

- **Increased access to SIS II for Europol:** One key weakness of SIS II noted in the parliamentary inquiry into the Paris attacks was related to "the administration of the alert by the issuing State alone."[135] The report regretted "the absence of a supranational body with access to all the information and threats"[136] able to have a comprehensive overview of and capacity to flag potential needs to update the database. It thus recommended "to provide Europol with full

128 Rotella, "How Europe Left Itself Open to Terrorism".
129 Rocco Bellanova and Georgios Glouftsios, Controlling the Schengen Information System (SIS II): The Infrastructural Politics of Fragility and Maintenance, 2022.
130 Rotella, "How Europe Left Itself Open to Terrorism".
131 European Commission, "Interoperability," Migration and Home Affairs European Commission, https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/policies/schengen-borders-and-visa/interoperability_en
132 Rotella, "How Europe Left Itself Open to Terrorism".
133 European Parliament and the Council of the EU, "Directive (EU) 2023/977 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 10 May 2023 on the exchange of information between the law enforcement authorities of Member States and repealing Council Framework Decision 2006/960/JHA," 10 May 2023.
134 Ibid.
135 Assemblée Nationale, *Rapport N° 3922*, p. 302
136 Ibid., p. 302

access to the Schengen Information System (SIS II) for consultations, searches, and alerts."[137] The ongoing reform of the EU information-sharing architecture provides Europol with full access to SIS II and stipulates that member states should send a copy of any requests for information or information provided pursuant to such requests to Europol for any bilateral exchange involving serious crimes or terrorism.[138] Moreover, Europol will now be able to suggest (not to issue) an alert for further information to a member state.

- **Enhanced Europol's role in supporting operational cooperation:** In the aftermaths of the Paris attacks, France decided to hand over to Europol the analysis of a large amount of data collected as part of the investigation.[139] The parliamentary inquiry noted that "beyond its usefulness to the investigation, Europol's strong mobilisation has real symbolic significance,"[140] translating a greater willingness to overcome deeply rooted resistance among national services to disclose information and collaborate in the investigation of serious crimes and terrorism. Steps have been taken in that direction, with, for instance, the creation of a European Counter Terrorism Centre (ECTC) at Europol in January 2016, in charge of providing tailor-made operational support to EU Member States' counter-terrorism authorities.[141]

137 Ibid., p.294.
138 Interview at Europol, 21 October 2024.
139 Assemblée Nationale, *Rapport N° 3922*, p.135.
140 Ibid., p.136.
141 Europol, European Counter Terrorism Centre, n.d.

Post-Mortem Analysis 2: The December 2016 Berlin Attack

On 19 December 2016, Tunisian national Anis Amri rammed a truck into a crowded Christmas market at Breitscheidplatz, Berlin, killing twelve people and injuring dozens more. The attack sparked a national debate over Germany's refugee policy when it became clear that the attacker had entered Europe as an illegal migrant, sought asylum under multiple false identities, and evaded deportation despite being denied asylum and known for violent radicalisation.

The Migration-Terrorism Nexus

Born in Tunisia in 1992, where he had a record of petty crimes, Amri entered the EU via the Italian island of Lampedusa on 4 April 2011.[142] Having reportedly discarded his personal documents along the way and falsely claiming to be sixteen years old, he was registered as an unaccompanied minor and placed in a refugee shelter in Belpasso, Sicily.[143] Arrested for assault and arson on 23 November 2011, after starting a fire in the shelter and assaulting a member of the staff, Amri was sentenced to four years in prison.[144] His radicalisation most likely started during his detention in various Italian jails, where he exhibited aggressive behaviour towards prison guards and other (particularly Christian) inmates.[145] According to the German Bundestag committee of enquiry into the attack, Italy had "indications that Amri had already tried to travel from Italy to the so-called Islamic State."[146] Despite signs of his radicalisation, there is no clear evidence that Italian authorities took any specific action based on this information.[147]

Upon his release from jail on 18 May 2015, Amri was placed in a detention centre in Caltanissetta pending deportation.[148] In the absence of valid identity papers, Italy made a request for Tunisia to recognise him as a citizen and issue him travel documents. As this request stayed unanswered, Italian authorities were forced to release him on 17 June 2015, with the requirement to leave Italy and the Schengen area.[149] Instead, he travelled illegally to Switzerland before crossing into Germany on 6 July 2015, where he first registered as an asylum seeker at a police station in Freiburg under the alias "Anis Amir."[150] Despite being subjected to fingerprinting and identification checks, Amri went undetected due to his combined false identity and Italy's failure to register him (and his fingerprints) in Eurodac.[151] He was thus assigned to an asylum centre in Karlsruhe.[152]

Over the following months, Amri registered under no less than fourteen different alias-identities across various German cities, amongst others in Dortmund, Münster, and Berlin. These cities, along with Freiburg, fall under different federal states (*Länder*)[153] – namely Baden-Württemberg, North Rhine-Westphalia, and Berlin – a factor that likely contributed to information not being readily shared, ultimately allowing Amri to obtain several certificates of registration (called *Büma*). These registrations, which used to be issued to asylum seekers as a temporary substitute identification

142 Georg Heil, "The Berlin Attack and the "Abu Walaa" Islamic State Recruitment Network," *CTC Sentinel* 10, no. 2, February 2017, p.1.
143 Georg Heil, "The Berlin Attack," p.1; Volker Ullrich et al., Beschlussempfehlung Und Bericht 1. Untersuchungsausschuss [Recommended Resolution and Report 1st Committee of Inquiry], Berlin, Germany: Bundestag, 15 June, 2021, pp.276-278; Kate Connolly, "Anis Amri: from young drifter to Europe's most wanted man," *The Guardian*, 23 December, 2016.
144 Ullrich et al., "Recommended Resolution"; Connolly, "Anis Amri".
145 Ullrich et al., "Recommended Resolution"; pp.277, 331, 1110; Georg Heil (2017), p.2; Alison Smale, Gaia Pianigiani, and Carlotta Gall, "Anis Amri, Suspect in the Berlin Truck Attack: What We Know," *The New York Times,* 22 December, 2016.
146 Ullrich et al., "Recommended Resolution," p.508.
147 Connolly, "Anis Amri".
148 Ullrich et al., "Recommended Resolution," pp.276-278.
149 Ibid., pp.276-278.
150 Ibid., pp.281-283.
151 According to the German Bundestag inquiry report, Amri's data were not registered in Eurodac by Italian authorities. Yet, according to one witness cited in this report, Italian authorities had registered Amri in Eurodac, but the period for the retention of his data has expired.
152 Ibid., pp. 281-283.
153 Baden-Württemberg (Freiburg), North Rhine-Westphalia (Dortmund and Münster), and Berlin.

for accessing social services,[154] did not equate to an official asylum application through Germany's Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (BAMF), which ultimately determines whether an individual will be granted a refugee status. Amri only formally applied for asylum on 28 April 2016 – almost a full year after his entry into German territory – at the Dortmund branch of the BAMF under the alias 'Ahmed Almasri.'[155]

By this time, at least since February 2016, Amri had become known for his Islamist activities and was classified as a *Gefährder*—a person regarded as posing a potential terrorist or violent extremist threat— by the state criminal police (LKA) of North Rhine-Westphalia and subsequently by LKA Berlin after his move to the capital in March 2016, and several of his alias identities had been identified.[156] With both information flagged in his asylum file, combined with his inability to answer basic questions about his alleged country of origin, Egypt, and his accent being identified as Tunisian, the BAMF quickly rejected his application on 30 May 2016.[157] Yet, his deportation could not be carried out because he lacked valid documents and Tunisian authorities did not recognise him as one of their citizens.[158]

While in Germany, Amri's radicalisation deepened as he progressively integrated into the country's Islamist milieu, in particular with a group led by the Dortmund-based preacher, Ahmad Abdulaziz Abdullah Abdullah, known as Abu Walaa, considered the central figure of ISIS recruiting network in the country,[159] and later frequently visited the *Fussilet*-mosque in Berlin, known as an Islamist hotspot. According to the findings of the investigation committee, Amri started thinking about conducting an attack in November 2015, in the aftermath of the Paris attacks, and started searching for bomb manufacturing manuals online a month later.[160] From December 2015, he had also been in contact, through social media platforms, with Tunisian acquaintances who had joined the so-called Islamic State in Libya.[161] In July 2016, Amri reportedly attempted to leave Germany to join ISIS, but German authorities prevented his departure.[162] This failed attempt reportedly marked a turning point, after which he decided to carry out a terrorist attack within Germany.[163] Inspired by the 2016 Nice attack in France, Amri began with concrete planning in October 2016, maintaining regular contact with ISIS operatives, including the German-Serbian national and prominent member of the Abu Walaa network, Boban Simeonovic.[164]

On 19 December 2016, Amri hijacked a truck and drove it into a busy Berlin Christmas market, before managing to escape.[165] Despite the European arrest warrant issued by Germany on 21 December, he was able to travel through the Netherlands, Belgium, France, and Italy, where he was eventually killed in an exchange of fire with Italian police after a routine identity check in Sesto San Giovanni, near Milan, on 23 December.[166] On the same day, a video in which Amri pledged allegiance to the Islamic State was released on the group-affiliated website *Amaq*.[167]

154 Among the various alias identities used by Amri were reportedly: Anis Amir, Mohamed Hassa, Ahmed Almasri, Ahmad Zaghoul, Mohammad Hassan, and Ahmad Zarzour. Georg Heil (2017), p.2; Ullrich et al., "Recommended Resolution," pp. 850-861; Matthias Bartsch, et al. "Why Did Germany Fail to Stop Terrorist?" *Spiegel International,* 5 January 2017.
155 Ullrich et al., "Recommended Resolution," pp. 850-861.
156 Ullrich et al., "Recommended Resolution," pp. 850-861.
157 Ibid, pp. 850-861.
158 Connolly, "Anis Amri".
159 Connolly, "Anis Amri"; Paul Cruickshank, "A look inside the Abu Walaa ISIS recruiting network," *CNN*, 29 December, 2016.
160 Ullrich et al., "Recommended Resolution," pp.153-154.
161 Ibid., pp.154-155.
162 Ibid., pp.154-155.
163 Ibid., pp. 154-155; 331-332.
164 Heil, "The Berlin Attack," p.2.
165 BBC, "Berlin market attack: How did Anis Amri escape?" 28 December, 2016; Alison Smale, Gaia Pianigiani, and Carlotta Gall, "Anis Amri, Suspect in the Berlin Truck Attack: What We Know," *The New York Times*, 22 December, 2016.
166 Elisabetta Povoledo, Gaia Pianigiani, and Rukmini Callimachi, "Hunt for Berlin Suspect Ends in Gunfire on an Italian Plaza," *The New York Times*, 23 December, 2016.
167 Laura Smith-Spark, "Berlin attack: Amri's ISIS allegiance video called 'authentic'," *CNN*, 29 December, 2016.

The Challenges of the Nexus for the Authorities

The Berlin attack, and the investigation committee established by the German Bundestag in 2017 to investigate the circumstances and failures related to the incident, exposed significant challenges related to the intersection of migration and terrorism.[168]

Amri's case first exposed significant gaps and operational challenges within the Schengen area's asylum and information-sharing systems. Upon his first entry into the EU, via Lampedusa, Italian authorities failed to record him in Eurodac.[169] When he registered in Freiburg, Germany, on 6 July 2015, his personal information, including finger- and palmprints, were entered into the German databases INPOL and POLIS, and cross-checked with the Federal Criminal Office (BKA) and Eurodac.[170] However, due to Amri's use of the alias 'Anis Amir' and the absence of prior records in Eurodac, the search yielded no results and he was issued a *Büma* certificate.[171]

Additionally, Italy had issued an alert within the Schengen Information System (SIS II) on 23 June 2015, flagging that he was refused entry into the Schengen area.[172] This alert was therefore remarkably issued only six days after releasing Amri from pre-deportation detention, allowing Amri to move across Europe undetected, had he been controlled. Furthermore, it appears that German authorities did not search or notice the SIS II alert during his asylum registration. Since SIS II could not be queried using biometric data like fingerprints – only accessible for identity confirmation – Amri's aliases would likely have hampered his identification within the database. Further inconsistencies in the registration and processing of asylum claims in Germany during 2015 – when "the arrival of tens of thousands of people daily stretched the capacities of the authorities"[173] – further hindered Amri's later identification. For example, when he registered in Berlin under the name 'Mohammed Hassan' on 28 July 2015, his fingerprints were only taken on paper and the copy reportedly never reached the Dortmund authorities to whom he was referred.[174] In some cases, as during his registration in Dortmund on 30 July 2015, the process of registration appeared to primarily rely on self-reported information.[175] In other instances, as during his second registration in Berlin on 11 September 2015 under the alias 'Ahamad Zaghloul', no identification procedure was conducted because the responsibility had been assigned to another authority.[176] These procedural shortcomings allowed for Amri's previous registrations to remain unnoticed.[177] Even after he registered again in Berlin on 11 December 2015 as 'Ahamad Zarzour' and the cross-checking of his fingerprints pointed to his prior registration in Freiburg under a different alias, investigations did not yield any immediate consequences and were closed on 25 February 2016.[178]

Amri's use of false identities was "only gradually exposed as he came increasingly under the scrutiny of security authorities."[179] By the time he formally applied for asylum under the alias 'Ahmed Almasri' at the BAMF office in Dortmund on 28 April 2016, some of his aliases and extremist affiliations were known.[180] In fact, his asylum procedure was purposefully prioritised as a result of these security concerns, in order to obtain the rejection of the application required

168 Ullrich et al., "Recommended Resolution".
169 Ibid., pp.276-278.
170 Ibid., pp. 278-285; 1061.
171 Ibid., p.1061.
172 Ibid., pp.276-278.
173 Anne Koch et al., "Integrating refugees: Lessons from Germany since 2015–16," *Background paper*, World Development Report 2023: Migrants, Refugees, and Societies, April 2023.
174 Ullrich et al., "Recommended Resolution", pp.288-290; pp.312-314.
175 Ibid., pp.288-290.
176 Ullrich et al., "Recommended Resolution," pp.312-314.
177 Ibid., pp.288-290.
178 Ibid., p.314.
179 Ibid., pp.1061-1064.
180 Ibid., pp.850-861.

for deportation as quickly as possible. After this idea of an accelerated asylum procedure was first discussed in February 2016, a note compiling some of Amri's aliases and information about his radicalisation was shared, in early March 2016, by the state's criminal police (LKA) to the BAMF.[181] Both pieces of information were added to his asylum file. A request to prioritise his case was eventually sent from the Ministry of the Interior of North Rhine-Westphalia to the BAMF headquarters on 7 April, and forwarded to the BAMF Dortmund branch on 13 April. From that point, the BAMF Dortmund office swiftly proceeded with Amri's case, the latter being "summoned comparatively quickly" to file an application on 28 April, and attend a hearing on 17 May 2016.[182] During the hearing, Amri's responses raised inconsistencies, particularly regarding his supposed Egyptian origin, leading the BAMF to reject his application on 30 May 2016, issuing the rejection for all eight known alias identities.[183] Amri was requested to leave Germany within a week after the decision became legally binding on 11 June 2016.[184]

However, Amri's case "illustrates the challenges faced in the return procedure of an asylum seeker whose request for asylum has been rejected."[185] Without official identification confirming his citizenship, Amri's deportation depended largely on Tunisian authorities to confirm his nationality and issue new identification documents. However, Tunisian authorities were notably unresponsive to both Italian and German requests, impeding his deportation even after his asylum claims were rejected. Italian authorities were compelled to release Amri after 30 days of detention, as they had not received the necessary identification documents from Tunisia within that timeframe. In Germany, where his asylum application was denied in June 2016, several months passed before Tunis finally confirmed in October 2016 that Amri was a Tunisian national.[186] The necessary documents were eventually issued by Tunisia but only arrived in Germany two days after the attacks.[187] Furthermore, the report lamented that Germany remained unaware that Tunisia had sent Amri's identity documents to the Italian authorities after the 30-day detention limit. If German authorities had become aware of the existence of these documents, it could have sped up the deportation process.

The 2016 Berlin attack, moreover, exposed critical flaws in the monitoring of radicalised individuals. For months, Amri had been on German intelligence's radar over suspicions that he was planning an attack. Classified as a *Gefährder* by the police in February 2016, Amri was placed under surveillance.[188] Phone records from monitored Salafist preachers indicated that Amri had volunteered himself as a suicide bomber, but the intercepted conversations were so coded that authorities deemed the evidence insufficient for an arrest.[189] Additionally, Amri was suspected to have attempted to organise a break-in to fund the purchase of automatic weapons, and there was evidence that he had researched bomb-making techniques online.[190] The Bundestag investigation committee, moreover, indicates that his attempt to leave Germany in July 2016 was part of a plan to join ISIS in Libya or Syria.[191] Despite these red flags, Amri's surveillance was reportedly "dropped in September 2016 after it was determined he did not pose a security threat."[192] This decision, later heavily criticised, reportedly stemmed from a lack of evidence.[193]

181 At a meeting on 24 February 2016, North Rhine-Westphalian authorities urged for Amri's asylum procedure to be prioritise to obtain the rejection of the application required for deportation.
182 Ibid., pp.288-290.
183 Ibid., pp.288-290.
184 Ibid., pp.288-290.
185 Willemijn Tiekstra, "Free movement threatened by terrorism: an analysis of measures proposed to improve EU border management," *International Centre for Counter-Terrorism*, Policy Brief, October 2019, p.4.
186 Ullrich et al., "Recommended Resolution," pp.1061-1064.
187 Connolly, "Anis Amri".
188 Ibid., p.39.
189 Connolly, "Anis Amri".
190 Ibid.
191 Ullrich et al., "Recommended Resolution," pp.154-155.
192 Chase Winter, "A well-trodden trail of jihad," *Deutsche Welle*, 23 December, 2016.
193 Connolly, "Anis Amri".

Furthermore, investigations revealed failures to act on warnings from Amri's co-asylum seekers, several of whom noticed signs of his radicalisation and reported their concerns to various authorities. In many instances – especially when they informed their caregivers or local social welfare offices – their hints were not taken seriously and were not forwarded to security authorities.[194] In one notable case, it was only through the persistence of an asylum-seeker who ultimately reached out to the local immigration office, that his tip-off was finally shared with the police, bringing Amri's radicalisation to the attention of the security authorities for the first time in October 2015.[195] However, the report noted that, even when reports were properly forwarded, no thorough interviews were conducted with the reporting asylum seekers, which might have uncovered further information.[196]

Finally, the committee of inquiry report further highlighted some deficiencies in inter-agency cooperation across the vast number of security and migration authorities involved at the local, regional, state, and federal level.[197] According to the report, this fragmentation resulted in substantial information on Amri's radicalisation and dangerousness that had been available early on not being appropriately utilised.[198] The report also identified collaboration gaps between German migration and security authorities. Although some information was exchanged, security agencies often withheld key intelligence from immigration authorities. For instance, a staff member at one of Amri's accommodations was instructed to "pay special attention" to him, but was not given specific reasons, leading the staff to assume it related to general criminal activity.[199] In another instance, the caseworker managing Amri's file at a local immigration office was informed that Amri was of interest to the intelligence services but not that he was classified as a *Gefährder*.[200] The caseworker indicated that this knowledge would have likely led to Amri's case being prioritised.[201]

A critical shortfall in cooperation related to Amri's palmprints. Although the BKA had them filed in the police information systems INPOL and the special database for fingerprint files AFIS since his first registration in July 2015, these records were not available to the Kleve immigration office (NRW) in charge of Amri's deportation.[202] This information gap complicated efforts to meet Tunisian authorities' requirement for palmprints to issue replacement documents required for deportation. The immigration office indeed had to retrieve a second set of palmprints collected as part of Amri's arrest on 31 July 2016, when he attempted to flee Germany.[203] The report further noted that security and immigration authorities' reliance on different databases and systems for storing fingerprints and identity data complicated efforts to track Amri's aliases and monitor his activities.[204]

194 Ullrich et al., "Recommended Resolution," pp.296-298.
195 Ibid., pp.296-298.
196 Ullrich et al., "Recommended Resolution," p.1069.
197 Ibid., pp. 1014-1015; 1132.
198 Ibid.
199 Ullrich et al., "Recommended Resolution," 291-293.
200 Ibid., p.304.
201 Ibid., p.825.
202 Ibid., pp.278-285.
203 Ibid., p.1064.
204 Ibid., pp.1013-1014.

Lessons Learned

The 2016 Berlin attack offers several lessons to address the challenges posed by the terrorism-migration nexus:

- **Streamline border management and identity verification:** This situation underscored how individuals could exploit gaps and inconsistent usage of EU border management systems by using different aliases and inconsistent personal information. One of the primary gaps that benefitted Amri was the inconsistent and delayed entry of data in EU databases. For instance, Italy did not register Amri in Eurodac, and only registered him into the SIS II database six days after his release from the deportation centre, a timeframe leaving plenty of time for an individual to move across borders. Furthermore, if as indicated in the committee of inquiry report, Italian authorities had suspicions about Amri's radicalisation and potential travel to Syria, an indication of this in the SIS II entry could have prompted German authorities to reach out for further information. Yet, a major issue in detecting individuals using multiple identities, as pointed out by BKA President Münch, was the lack of a link between alphanumeric and biometric data, with fingerprints being stored as images attached to the SIS file, but not searchable, only consultable once a person was found using personal details.[205] Ensuring that countries upload relevant information in a timely manner, and can search biometric data such as fingerprints into these databases, while respecting fundamental rights and data privacy, is essential for preventing individuals from evading detection by using false identities and putting pressure on the immigration system by unlawfully applying several times in different countries, in breach of Dublin regulations.

- **Enhance information-sharing among immigration authorities, and interagency cooperation with other relevant services:** Amri's case revealed inefficiencies in information sharing between immigration authorities – notably due to the multitude of such authorities in Germany's federal system[206] and "the complete overload of all agencies dealing with refugees in the summer and autumn of 2015" which lacked resources to properly process the high number of new arrivals,[207] leading to aforementioned inconsistencies in the registration and processing of asylum claims. Important steps have been taken to improve the process, including by replacing the informal system of the *Büma* which differed from one Länder to another by the issuance of a proof of arrival (*Ankunftsnachweis,* AKN) following a more comprehensive early registration process, including the registration of asylum-seekers in a Central Register of Foreigners, to which all immigration authorities are now connected.[208] Additionally, effective coordination between immigration, law enforcement, and intelligence agencies was lacking. Addressing this requires better communication channels and integrated systems that allow for the seamless exchange of information. Although intelligence information is sensitive and cannot be shared broadly, it is essential to ensure that criminal police and intelligence agencies are aware of monitored individuals' status, and that immigration authorities receive relevant intelligence—under defined conditions—on individuals who pose potential national security threats.

- **Improve deportation procedures:** Amri's ability to remain in the Schengen zone after being denied asylum, and despite being possibly plotting to join a jihadi group, and then planning an attack, sparked debates for more efficient deportation processes for high-risk individuals. This involves working closely with the countries of origin to ensure that rejected asylum seekers

205 Ibid., pp. 1013-1014
206 One witness heard by the committee of inquiry stated that "at least there were 650 back then. Ullrich et al., "Recommended Resolution," pp. 1014-1015.
207 Ullrich et al., "Recommended Resolution," p.1132.
208 BAMF, "Digitalising the asylum procedure," accessed 9 December, 2024, https://www.bamf.de/EN/Themen/Digitalisierung/DigitalesAsylverfahren/digitalesasylverfahren-node.html

can be identified. The committee of inquiry moreover recommended the establishment of a European information exchange on the availability of identification documents issued by third countries – to avoid a similar scenario where Tunisia had provided necessary documents to Italy without Germany ever being aware.[209] The attacks also raised sensitive questions about preventive detention periods for those awaiting deportation, a measure that should be placed under very strict conditions. Germany has since extended this pre-deportation detention period, a measure heavily criticised by civil society organisations.[210] Considering the human rights implications of such reforms, it is important to note that what Amri's case rather underscored was a failure to enforce already existing laws due to a lack of information-sharing and cooperation.

- **Improve utilisation of tip-offs from co-asylum seekers:** This case underscored the role that can be played by asylum seekers in the early detection of high-risk individuals and the need for authorities to take such warnings seriously. However, research has highlighted the risk of "deliberate misinformation to settle personal disputes," a challenge that has surfaced in Germany, where authorities are often overwhelmed with tips—many of which are unhelpful and, at times, can be intentionally misleading.[211] Some safeguards are thus needed to help authorities focus on credible intelligence and manage the flow of information effectively.[212]

209 Ullrich et al., "Recommended Resolution," p.1061.
210 Through the Act on Better Enforcement of the Obligation to Leave the Country (2017) and the Second Act on Better Enforcement of the Obligation to Leave the Country (2019), Germany extended to the period to a maximum 18 months in cases where individuals pose a specific security risk and when the deportation cannot be executed due to delays, for example, in receiving appropriate documents from third countries. See: Bundesministerium der Justiz, "Gesetz zur besseren Durchsetzung der Ausreisepflicht" [Act to improve the enforcement of the obligation to leave the country], Bundesgesetzblatt 2017, No. 52, 28 July, 2017; Bundesministerium der Justiz, "Gesetz zur besseren Durchsetzung der Ausreisepflicht" [Act to improve the enforcement of the obligation to leave the country], Bundesgesetzblatt 2019, No. 31, 20.08.2019; Anne Koch et al., "Integrating refugees: Lessons from Germany since 2015-16," *Background paper*, World Development Report 2023: Migrants, Refugees, and Societies, April 2023.
211 Mullins, *Jihadist infiltration*, p.143.
212 Mullins, *Jihadist infiltration,* p.143.

Post-Mortem Analysis 3: The October 2023 Brussels Attack

On 16 October 2023, in the city centre of Brussels, Abdessalem Lassoued, armed with a semi-automatic rifle, gunned down Swedish football fans. Two individuals were killed, and two injured. Lassoued targeted specifically Swedish supporters, on the occasion of a football game between Belgium and Sweden that evening. Although his motivations were not entirely clear, they likely included a combination of personal grievances (he had been denied asylum and was convicted of crime in Sweden), ideological grievances (the burning of Qurans in Sweden earlier that year triggered a lot of reactions worldwide), and geopolitics (the attack occurred a couple of weeks after the Hamas terror attack on 7 October).

In a video posted on Facebook after the attack, Lassoued claimed to have acted on behalf of the Islamic State to "avenge Muslims". The Islamic State took credit for the attack the next day, via a message from its news agency *Amaq*. Lassoued was quickly identified and located by the police. On 17 October, in the early morning, he was shot down by the police during the attempted arrest.

The Migration-Terrorism Nexus

Lassoued was born in Sfax, Tunisia, in 1978. He was sentenced to 26 years of imprisonment in Tunisia, in 2005, for attempted murder and drunkenness in public space. He escaped prison in 2011, during the Arab Spring, and fled to Europe. In June 2011, he filed for asylum in Norway, and his personal data, including fingerprints, were entered into Eurodac. After being denied asylum in Norway, he travelled to Sweden, where he applied for asylum again in September 2012, but was also rejected. He was furthermore sentenced to prison by the Swedish authorities, in 2012, for crimes related to drugs and weapons. As a result, Swedish authorities entered his name in the SIS II database as "refused entry or stay in the Schengen area". In April 2014, Lassoued was expelled by the Swedish authorities to Italy, the country through which he allegedly entered Europe, in line with the "Dublin rules".[213] The same year, Lassoued filed an asylum request in Italy, which was once more denied, followed by an order to leave the country.[214]

In the following years, Lassoued seems to have moved across Europe, certainly between Italy and Belgium. According to his own statements, he was present in Belgium in 2015 and was certainly in Italy in 2016 when he came under the attention of the Italian police. The Italian services suspected Lassoued to have radicalised and to be a potential candidate to join the Islamic State in Syria.[215] In July 2016, the Italian police made an official request to the Belgian authorities with regard to three Belgian phone numbers that had been in contact with Lassoued. However, none of these numbers were known to the Belgian authorities at the time. Living a clandestine life in Europe, his whereabouts between 2014 and 2019 are unknown.

In October 2019, Lassoued introduced an asylum request in Belgium. His request was denied in October 2020, and he received an order to leave the Belgian territory ("ordre de quitter le territoire", or OQT) in March 2021. The 18-month-long procedure is somewhat surprising, given Lassoued's

213 Comité P, "Position d'information de la Police fédérale et locale concernant l'attentat terroriste survenu le 16 Octobre 2023," Comité permanent de contrôle des services de police, 2024, p. 10. It is interesting to note that there is no clear mention in available reports of any registration of Lassoued in Italy, in 2011, which would suggest that he managed to cross the entire European continent illegally, before reaching Norway.
214 Comité P, "Position d'information de la Police," p. 9.
215 Comité R, "Enquête de contrôle relative à la Position d'information de l'Organe de Coordination pour l'Analyse de la Menace (OCAM) concernant l'attentat Terroriste survenu le 16 octobre 2023 à Bruxelles,"
Comité permanent de contrôle des services de renseignement et de sécurité, 12 March 2024, p. 7.

previous failed attempts and SIS II alert. In spite of the OQT, Lassoued did not leave the territory voluntarily, nor was expelled by force. In Belgium, in 2021, only 15 percent of the administrative OQT were followed by an effective return.[216]

In June 2022, Belgian and Tunisian authorities exchanged information on Lassoued, as a result of suspicions by Belgian authorities that Lassoued had escaped a Tunisian prison in 2011, which was confirmed by the Tunisian authorities. Subsequently, a "red notice" was circulated by Tunisia and Interpol against Lassoued. In August 2022, the Tunisian authorities requested the extradition of Lassoued to the Belgian authorities, but that request remained inexplicably unanswered. On 20 October 2023, four days after the terrorist attack, the Belgian Minister of Justice resigned because of this, considering that it was an "unacceptable mistake".[217]

While in Belgium, Lassoued came under the attention of counter-terrorism services on a few occasions. In May 2022, he drew the attention of the Brussels local police, under suspicion of holding radical views and engaging in religious proselytism near mosques.[218] His case was discussed among specialised counter-terrorism services, but did not meet the threshold of evidence for further investigation, notably as the content of the preachings was not known. In July 2023, Lassoued appeared on the radars of another local police (near Antwerp), after an asylum seeker reported having been threatened online (via Facebook) by Lassoued, leading once more to his case being discussed among relevant counter-terrorism services.[219] These discussions were still ongoing when the attack occurred.

The Challenges of the Nexus for the Authorities

From a counter-terrorism point of view, the case of Lassoued raised a number of very concrete challenges for the Belgian authorities, including: the issue of the spelling of foreign names (at least five different spellings have been used in Belgian databases: Abdessalam Lassoued, Abdessalem Lassoued, Abdesalem Lassoued, Abdeslam Laswad, Abdesslem Laswad), the connection between various Belgian and European databases, and the exchange of information between services. Overall, these issues resulted in a fragmented information position that weakened the counter-terrorism response.

In 2016, following the request for information by the Italian services, an entity was created in an internal database of the Belgian federal police under the name "Abdesslem Laswad" (as spelt by the Italians).[220] No entity was created in the internal database of the national counter-terrorism fusion centre (CUTA), because no clear connection was established between Lassoued and Belgium at that time.[221] No additional follow-up was given to the Italian request, although it appears with hindsight that Lassoued might have been present in Belgium during that period, clandestinely, based on his own declarations.

In late 2019, when Lassoued applied for asylum in Belgium, the immigration services ran the usual screenings within their databases, as well as with police and intelligence services. The immigration services found a match for his fingerprints in Eurodac and could then see his previous failed requests in Norway, Sweden, and Italy. A few months later, in April 2020, the Italian immigration authorities confirmed to their Belgian counterparts that Lassoued had indeed been declined

216 Eurostat, "Third-country nationals returned following an order to leave, by type of return, citizenship, country of destination, age and sex – quarterly data," 13 November, 2024.
217 "Attentat à Bruxelles: le ministre de la Justice Vincent Van Quickenborne démissionne," *L'Echo*, 20 October, 2023.
218 Comité P, "Position d'information de la Police," p. 22.
219 Comité P, "Position d'information de la Police,".
220 Comité P, "Position d'information de la Police," p.5
221 Comité R, "Position d'information de l'Organe," p. 8

asylum in Italy under the name "Abdesslem Laswad".[222] Meanwhile, as is standard procedure, the Belgian police had checked its main databases on the basis of the name provided by the Belgian immigration services ("Adbdesalem Lassoued"), which yielded no result at that time.[223] If the Belgian immigration services had shared the name provided by the Italians ("Laswad"), the Belgian police could have found a match in the database of the federal police, as well as in the SIS II database.

In May 2022, when Lassoued became suspected of radicalisation by the Brussels local police, they ran several checks in various police databases but yielded no results. The only existing entity was "Abdesslem Laswad", but it appears that the phonetic search function was not activated by the local police officer leading the investigation.[224] To conduct further checks, the local police officer also contacted the immigration services to verify Lassoued's immigration status, and found that he was under an OQT. A new entity was then created for "Abdesalem Lassoued" in the main database of the police.

Several emails and requests for information were exchanged in May 2022 between the Brussels local police, the federal police, immigration services, intelligence services, and CUTA. As a result of these exchanges, all partners became aware that Lassoued and Laswad were one and the same person. However, the entities continued to co-exist under different spellings in different police databases and would only be merged after the 2023 attack.[225]

Furthermore, during these exchanges, the federal police did not share its available knowledge of a previous suspicion of radicalisation (from 2016), based on the assumption that the information could not be shared – although that argumentation could be contested.[226] The federal police also inexplicably failed to report the SIS II notice, although logins indicate they searched and found that information in May 2022.[227]

On 14 June 2022, as a result of the suspicions of radicalisation from the Brussels local police, the case of Lassoued was discussed during a meeting of the Local Task Force (LTF), a counter-terrorism multi-agency platform gathering representatives from the local/federal police, intelligence services, CUTA, immigration services, and prosecutor's office. From the report of the LTF meeting, it appears that the information regarding a previous radicalisation or SIS II alert was not mentioned, either for a lack of willingness to share the information or due to a lack of proper preparation for the meeting (as during these discussions priority is given to existing entities in the common database on extremists and terrorists, rather than to "new" entities).[228] Lassoued was not discussed in any ulterior LTF meetings.

Lassoued appeared one last time on police radars in July 2023, after an asylum seeker filed a complaint against "Abdeslam Laswad" (yet another spelling) for online threats. The local police officer in charge of the case (in the northern part of Belgium) found "Lassoued" in the police database through a creative searching method (using date of birth and first two letters of last name), to circumvent spelling issues.[229] The Flemish local police officer could see in the main police database that there had been previous suspicions of radicalisation. But his request to receive more information from the various local Brussels police services resulted in no relevant

222 Comité P, "Position d'information de la Police," p.9
223 Comité P, "Position d'information de la Police," pp. 9-10
224 Comité P, "Position d'information de la Police," pp. 17-19
225 Comité P, "Position d'information de la Police," p.5
226 Comité P, "Position d'information de la Police," pp. 24-26
227 Ibid. However, it appears that the local Brussels police were aware of the SIS II alert, as of 18 May 2022 (Comité P, "Position d'information de la Police," p. 23)
228 Comité R, "Position d'information de l'Organe," pp. 10-14.
229 Comité P, "Position d'information de la Police," p. 39

update.[230] A few weeks later, Antwerp's judiciary police formulated a similar request to the federal police, but obtained a "no-match" answer[231] as the entity "Lassoued" was not connected to "Laswad" in the internal federal police database. The information regarding the threats against an asylum seeker was also shared with CUTA, but led to no immediate action, as the complaint was still under investigation and was not considered a "threat against Belgian interests or residents".[232]

During an "intel concertation" (an informal multi-agency mechanism on radicalism for the Antwerp area) on 21 September 2023, between Antwerp's judiciary police, Antwerp's local police, Antwerp's prosecutor's office, and intelligence services, the case of Lassoued was discussed one last time before the attack. From these discussions, it appears that participants were not aware of the details of Lassoued's previous conviction in Tunisia, the red notice issued, or the Tunisian request for extradition,[233] all of which dated back to the summer of 2022. Indeed, the extradition request had been filed by the Brussels prosecutor's office in an internal database (not visible to other partners), and the paper file was inexplicably "stored in a cupboard" and not given priority anymore.[234]

Lessons Learned

Quite a few lessons have been or should be taken away from this case.[235] It is interesting to note that, while some of the Belgian services have conducted their own post-mortem analysis, to reflect on what went wrong and could be improved, in addition to the investigations led by the three oversight committees cited in this case study (police oversight committee, Comité P; intelligence services oversight committee, Comité R; and oversight committee of the judiciary, CSJ), there does not seem to have been an overarching, collective post-mortem reflection gathering all counter-terrorism services. It is equally unclear what measures, if any, have been or will be taken to address problems and challenges encountered in this particular case.

- **Improve databases functioning, to allow for flexible search options:** A first clear lesson is that databases must allow to include various aliases under a single entity. Furthermore, these databases should be searchable phonetically, to identify different possible spellings of a same person. At least five different spellings were used in this case. It is also important that databases users understand whether their searches include phonetic approximations or not. According to the Comité P, there might be some confusion among police officers in this regard, as some databases require to activate this field specifically; and a platform that allows to search multiple police databases at once does not include phonetic search.[236]

- **Sharing known aliases to connect the dots:** When different spellings or aliases for the same person are identified, such information should be shared with partners on relevant opportunities. For instance, if the immigration services had shared the alias "Laswad" with the police for a second screening based on that new identity after receiving the information from their Italian counterparts, they would have known about the SIS II signalling. Furthermore, a more proactive sharing of aliases could allow certain services to connect entities or pieces of information that were previously held separately. This was notably the case of the entities "Laswad" and "Lassoued" in the internal database of the federal police.

230 Comité P, "Position d'information de la Police," pp. 42-43
231 Comité P, "Position d'information de la Police," p. 46.
232 Comité R, "Position d'information de l'Organe," p. 13.
233 Comité P, "Position d'information de la Police," pp. 46-49
234 CSJ, "Enquete Particulière, Affaire Abdesalem Lassoued," Conseil supérieur de la justice, 19 June 2024.
235 Some of the observations below are drawn from post-mortem investigations conducted by the oversight committees of the police (Comité P), of the intelligence services (Comité R), and of the justice (Conseil Supérieur de la Justice). Some observations are also drawn from discussions with representatives from CUTA, VSSE, and immigration services (interviews conducted in person, in Brussels, in September 2024).
236 Comité P, "Position d'information de la Police," pp.58-59

- **Increase databases' interoperability:** The interoperability between certain databases could still be improved, in order to allow services to know that certain information is available, even though subject to access authorisation. For instance, the fact that the SIS II alert remained unknown to most services is highly problematic. Likewise, the fact that the extradition request of the Tunisian authorities was not visible to the relevant services is equally problematic.[237]

- **Review criteria to create a new entity in counter-terrorism databases:** The threshold for creating a new entity in certain databases could be revised. For instance, CUTA claims that while their criteria did not justify creating a new entry in their internal database for Lassoued in 2016, this would be different in 2025. This broadening of criteria allegedly results from a reflection that had started prior to the 2023 attack, but was clearly "accelerated" after the attack.[238] With hindsight it is always easier to say, of course, but the 2016 lead from Italian services could have been further investigated. The Belgian phone numbers mentioned by the Italian police were unknown to the Belgian services, but they suggested that Lassoued had links with Belgium and, indeed, Lassoued claims he had been present in Belgium in that period. This could have justified further investigation into his case.

- **Review information-sharing protocols between services:** A more positive lesson shared by Comité R and Comité P, as well as interviewees for this case study, is that the existing mechanisms to share information between relevant Belgian services, including between immigration and counter-terrorism services, are functioning relatively well. Furthermore, there is a general agreement that all relevant actors are willing to cooperate. When information was not shared, it seems to have resulted mainly from individual mistakes and errors of judgement, rather than from a culture of information retention.[239] Nevertheless, it appears from the case of Lassoued that the discussion of new entities in LTFs could be better prepared by all partners, while they are not always considered the highest priority. Furthermore, as noted by one interviewee, the information available to Belgian services also depends partly on the information shared by external partners. In this regard, it is far from clear for interviewees whether the level of cooperation between immigration and counter-terrorism services is similarly advanced in other European countries, which could then impact negatively the Belgian information position and, more broadly, national security.

- **Do not overlook, nor exaggerate, the threat from illegal migrants:** Concerns about illegal immigrants are not new to counter-terrorism services, but the attack by Lassoued triggered new reflections among security services about specific risks and challenges related to this particular group, given Lassoued's continuous clandestine life in Europe over twelve full years. Indeed, it is acknowledged by interviewees that the monitoring of illegal migrants is overall complicated. It also creates administrative complexities, such as, for instance, deciding which LTF is competent for the management of a particular individual, when they do not have an official address.[240] However, a check of the common database on terrorists and (potentially) violent extremists reveals that there are only 31 illegals under an OQT listed in Belgium as of late 2024, which is less than five percent of the total database, that the majority of them are actually in prison, and that almost all of them have a relatively low to moderate individual threat assessment.[241] Furthermore, all of these individuals lost their official status (and thus became "illegal") after being listed in the common database. The listing of individuals that are already considered "illegal" in the common database is possible, but exceptionally rare.[242] According to a CUTA interviewee, all these figures are "reassuring" in the sense that they

237 CSJ, p. 41
238 Comité R, "Position d'information de l'Organe," p.10
239 Comité P, "Position d'information de la Police," p. 61
240 Interview VSSE, 27 September 2024.
241 Interview CUTA, 5 September 2024.
242 Interview CUTA, 5 September 2024.

put this particular threat in perspective.[243] All this said, a particular decision that was made after the attack is to keep track more systematically and regularly of these "illegals" in the common database, and to have a specific briefing about them in LTFs every three months.[244] For instance, the granting of an OQT could be discussed in LTF, if it would be assessed that it could act as a trigger element for violence and/or to discuss what measures could be taken to mitigate the risk.[245] One specific challenge recognised by all interviewees is that illegal migrants, due to their status, are not eligible for most socio-preventive measures (such as, psychiatric treatment or psycho-social support, etc), which limits possible measures to surveillance and security approaches.

- **More efficient deportation of radicalised illegals, when possible:** Given that Lassoued was under an OQT since 2021, having been signalled SIS II, being under a red notice and extradition request, it is hard to conclude differently from the Comité P in that his expulsion from the Belgian territory would have been "the most effective obstacle to the commission of his attack".[246] It is widely known that the implementation of OQT is complicated (*see above for numbers in Belgium*). However, given Lassoued's previous conviction in Tunisia, his conviction in Sweden, and the recurring albeit unsubstantiated suspicions of radicalisation in 2016 and 2022, maybe there was enough information available to the authorities to prioritise his expulsion. Indeed, "dangerousness" (i.e. threats against public order or national security) is considered a key criteria in prioritising expulsions.[247]

243 Interview CUTA, 5 September 2024.
244 Interview CUTA, 5 September 2024.
245 Interview VSSE, 27 September 2024.
246 Comité P, "Position d'information de la Police," p. 63
247 Interview CUTA, 5 September 2024.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Based on the analysis of an original dataset of attacks conducted by immigrants or by terrorists infiltrated within migration flows in Europe over the past decade, and an in-depth examination of three case studies, this report contributed to a better understanding of various facets of the migration-terrorism nexus, and henceforth provided evidence to support more effective counter-terrorism policies. Here is a brief summary of our findings.

Terrorist organisations have exploited migration flows for operational purposes. Some terrorists have infiltrated refugee flows to *(re-)migrate* to Europe undetected. This tactic, notably observed during the 2015-2016 refugee crisis, involving posing as asylum seekers to conduct attacks in third states led to some of the most devastating attacks in Europe's recent history. While recent migration patterns, such as those from Ukraine, might warrant scrutiny for potential misuse,[248] such occurrences are statistically rare. Terrorists can also migrate for other purposes, including to hide from counter-terrorism authorities. Furthermore, terrorists can infiltrate equally legal as illegal flows.

Terrorist organisations have capitalised on migrants' vulnerabilities. Various elements in migrants, asylum seekers, and refugees' trajectories may influence their susceptibility to radicalisation, ranging from traumatic experiences in their countries of origin or during their journey, uncertainties about their future, prolonged stays in poorly equipped camps or reception centres, restricted access to education and employment, weak social support networks, or experiences of discrimination in host countries. As a result, some migrants have radicalised into violent extremism, although in very small numbers.

Not all migrants are terrorists, nor are all terrorists migrants. Data shows that some migrants can constitute a security risk, with a number of asylum-seekers and illegal aliens being monitored by counter-terrorism services or having been involved in terrorist plots. However, these cases should not obscure the fact that terrorism remains predominantly a homegrown problem. In other words, most terrorists are not (first-generation) migrants. Furthermore, when compared with the overall number of asylum requests in Europe, the number of individuals that are suspected of radicalisation or indeed involved in terrorist attacks is infinitesimally small.

The migration-terrorism nexus raises some challenges for counter-terrorism services. Our case studies have highlighted a number of specific challenges faced by counter-terrorism and immigration services in Europe. These include notably issues related to the timely exchange of information between immigration and counter-terrorism services, at the national and international levels. There are also issues related to the feeding of relevant information in existing databases (including all aliases e.g.), the lack of interconnections between various databases, or the difficulty of deporting individuals that are clearly identified as a threat to national security.

To conclude this report, building on our findings, we formulate the following recommendations to better assess, prevent, and address challenges raised by the migration-terrorism nexus:

248 The Islamic State in the Khorasan Province (ISKP) has reportedly taken advantage of the Russian invasion of Ukraine to infiltrate the massive flow of Ukrainian refugees to Europe. In July 2023, the German authorities arrested seven individuals and the Netherlands two persons, who were suspected of preparing a "high profile attack" in Germany. It is possible to assume that these individuals were already members of ISKP before infiltrating Europe, shortly after the Russian invasion in 2022, since they almost immediately started to collect money for the terrorist group in April 2022. Indeed, the head of the German intelligence services claimed that ISIS had infiltrated Europe via the flow of refugees from Ukraine. See: Deutsche Welle, "Germany Arrests 7 Suspected Members of Islamist Terror Group," 6 July, 2023; Kyiv Post, "Germany Fears Moscow-Style Attack Against EURO 2024," 19 June, 2024.

1. More evidence-based research is crucial to improve our understanding of the migration-terrorism nexus, and get our counter-terrorism priorities right. A biased or incomplete view could result in a waste of resources, in underestimating a possible threat, or in designing inadequate responses with potential adverse effects.

2. A full-fledged audit of policy responses to the migration-terrorism nexus is needed, to identify the key operational challenges faced by the various relevant services (such as counter-terrorism services, immigration services, border guards, etc.), to identify challenges related to the cooperation between services or to the use of certain tools (e.g. databases), as well as to identify some good practices. Specifically, attention should be paid to the ethical, human rights, and rule of law considerations related to the policy responses to the migration-terrorism nexus.

3. It is important to consider seriously the potential threat emanating from illegal immigrants, which constitutes a challenging target population given its clandestine life. Meanwhile, it is important to not underestimate the threat from legal immigrants, as a number of terrorist acts in Europe and elsewhere have been committed by individuals using legal migration routes (tourists, workers or students e.g.).

4. It is important to highlight that only a tiny minority of immigrants, legal or illegal, become involved in terrorist activities. Hence, it is crucial to avoid the criminalisation of an entire population or the excessive securitisation of immigration policies, at the risk of wasting resources and leading to counter-productive results.

5. In Europe, it is important to ensure the most efficient process for asylum-seekers, in order to reduce as much as possible the time and uncertainty of the process, which puts individuals in a situation of vulnerability to radicalisation or recruitment.

6. In order to prevent the radicalisation of asylum-seekers, more prevention work could be done. This could include for instance:

    - Training of staff working in reception centres, in order to improve their capacity to detect and report cases of radicalisation or recruitment;

    - Developing trusted channels for asylum-seekers to report cases of radicalisation or recruitment that they witness, with necessary safeguards to adequately process such information;

    - Working with asylum-seekers to reinforce their resilience and reduce their vulnerability to radicalisation (e.g. by circulating leaflets in their own language highlighting the risks of radicalisation and the consequences);

    - Ensuring the security of asylum-seekers in reception centres, protecting them from undesirable influence, such as radical preachers, for instance by better controlling people that come in and out of such centres;

    - Offering mental health and socio-preventive support to asylum-seekers, including those rejected, in order to reduce their vulnerability to radicalisation;

    - Ensuring some degree of continuity by offering follow-up support even after refugee status is granted to reduce vulnerability during the critical moment of transition from services received in reception centres to the integration in host communities.

7. A large part of the migrant population in Europe (including diasporas) is socio-economically marginalised and discriminated. Policies that seek to address these underlying conditions to radicalisation would strengthen Europe's security and economy.

8. A stronger cooperation between counter-terrorism and immigration services, in every European country, is needed. At the national level, this would improve the security screening of immigrants, while collectively improving the information collection since these services have different sources, tools, and mandates. A better cooperation at the national level would also strengthen the information position at the European level on possible threats linked to asylum seekers and irregular migrants.

9. Efforts to ensure the interoperability of EU databases is underway, but has already taken some delays. Ensuring the completion of these efforts as quickly and smoothly as possible should become a priority, while ensuring that all fundamental rights and freedoms are respected.

10. Meanwhile, more attention should be paid to improving the interoperability of relevant databases at the national level. Indeed, our case studies suggest that the lack of connection between certain national databases hindered the information position of the services.

11. However, all these databases – national and European – are only as good as the information they are fed with. It is therefore crucial to train people using these databases, so they understand the importance of properly feeding these databases, properly checking them in the right circumstances, and adequately and timely act upon the information. There might also be a need to define minimum standards about the quality of the information entered by different parties. Lastly, efforts should also be targeted at increasing trust, as the effectiveness of the information-sharing instruments ultimately depends on participating parties' willingness to share information and to trust the information shared by counterparts.

12. Given that some individuals might use different aliases, or provide different spellings for their names, as observed in our case studies, it is crucial to ensure that relevant databases to immigration and counter-terrorism allow to enter and search for multiple aliases and spellings. Moreover, databases should be upgraded to allow for phonetic searches, when possible. Finally, given that new aliases or spellings for a particular individual might appear over time, and recognising that knowledge of this new information can allow to make significant connections with other profiles or cases, a "push alert" could be envisaged when new aliases or spellings are added in certain databases, to warn other services.

13. The enforcement of orders to leave the EU territory is a complex and delicate matter. However, when there is strong evidence that an individual under such order is involved in activities endangering public order or national security, such as terrorism, arrest and deportation should be prioritised. Enhanced information-sharing on documents required for deportation made available by third countries would also be beneficial.

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