

European Security, Islamist Terrorism, and Returning Fighters

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Terrorist Attacks in Europe and Mounting Security Concerns

European concerns about Islamist terrorism have been heightened considerably by several attacks over the last year and the growing number of European citizens training and fighting with extremist groups in foreign conflicts (especially in Syria and Iraq). Most recently, on August 21, a [Moroccan man—who may have traveled to Syria](#)—was arrested in France after attempting an alleged terrorist attack on a train traveling from Amsterdam to Paris (six passengers, including [three Americans](#), stopped the attack). In late June, a man was beheaded during an attempt to blow up a U.S.-owned chemical factory [near Lyon, France](#); the suspect is a French citizen of Muslim background. Other incidents include the following:

- The [May 2014 killing](#) of four people at the Jewish Museum in Brussels, Belgium; a French Muslim who reportedly spent a year with Islamist fighters in Syria has been charged.
- The January 2015 attacks in Paris in which gunmen killed 17 people in three related incidents that targeted the satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo*, police officers, and a kosher supermarket. The perpetrators of the attacks were [French-born Muslims](#), with [possible ties to Al Qaeda in Yemen or the Islamic State terrorist organization](#).
- The February 2015 shootings in Copenhagen, Denmark, in which a [Danish-born citizen of Palestinian descent](#) murdered two individuals—one at a cafe that had been hosting a free speech debate, another at a synagogue—and wounded five police officers.

Security services warn not only about the potential dangers posed by those who may have trained and fought abroad, but also about individuals like the Danish gunman or the Lyon suspect who appear to have been inspired by Islamist extremist propaganda to commit "lone wolf" attacks at home without ever traveling abroad.

Although it is difficult to assess the precise number of Muslims from Europe who have joined extremist groups in Syria and Iraq, European officials believe that their ranks have increased significantly over the past two years. [Estimates from Europol](#), the European Union's (EU's) joint criminal intelligence body, suggest that at least 3,000 and upward of 5,000 EU citizens have left to fight in Syria, Iraq, or other conflict zones. A [January 2015 study](#) indicates that up to 4,000 individuals from Western Europe have become foreign fighters. Key [countries of origin](#) reportedly include Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Spain, Sweden, and the United Kingdom. The conflict in Syria and Iraq has also attracted fighters from the Western Balkans (especially Bosnia, Kosovo, and Albania) and Russia. (For more information, see CRS Report R44003, [European Fighters in Syria and Iraq: Assessments, Responses, and Issues for the United States](#)).

European Policy Responses

[European governments](#) have employed a range of measures to combat the foreign fighter threat, including increasing

surveillance, prohibiting travel, detaining returning fighters, and bolstering counterterrorism laws. Individuals suspected of having traveled to fight in Syria or Iraq, planning such travel, or recruiting others have been arrested in Belgium, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Spain, and the United Kingdom (among other countries). Several European governments have enacted or are considering new legislation to ensure that their laws permit prosecuting those who travel or attempt to travel abroad for terrorist purposes, as required by [U.N. Security Council Resolution 2178](#) of September 2014. European officials are also seeking to more aggressively counter radicalization and extremist propaganda, especially via the Internet and social media. Some have [called on U.S. technology companies](#) to assist these efforts by preemptively removing terrorist content from their sites.

France, which is home to Europe's largest Muslim population (about 5-6 million) and the source of the largest number of European fighters in Syria and Iraq (about 1,400), has been at the forefront of European efforts to counter the threat posed by Islamist militants. Over the past year, the government has taken steps to strengthen counterterrorism policies already considered some of the most stringent in Europe. These have included imposing travel bans on individuals suspected of seeking terrorist training abroad, blocking websites and prohibiting speech that encourage terrorism, and [significantly enhancing the state's surveillance authorities](#).

Nevertheless, stemming the flow of European fighters to Syria and Iraq and keeping track of those who go and return remains challenging. Prosecuting individuals preemptively is difficult in because most existing laws require a high level of proof that a suspect has actually engaged in terrorism abroad or has returned to commit a terrorist act. Furthermore, even governments with far-reaching legal authorities have been challenged to monitor a growing number of potential assailants amid budgetary and personnel resource constraints. The suspects in the Brussels, Paris, and Lyon attacks had all been previously questioned by French authorities, but surveillance was lifted in each case.

Analysts assert that more must be done at the EU level to better combat the foreign fighter threat given the [Schengen](#) system of largely open internal borders (which permit individuals to travel without passport checks among most European countries). The thwarted train attacker and the alleged Brussels gunman had each reportedly traveled between several European countries prior to the attacks. The [EU has been seeking to](#) enhance information-sharing among national and EU authorities, strengthen external border controls, and improve existing counter-radicalization efforts, particularly [online](#). However, implementation of some of these initiatives and other possible measures—such as harmonizing criminal laws against "jihadi travel" among the EU's 28 member states—has been slowed by national sovereignty concerns, law enforcement barriers to sharing sensitive information, and civil liberty protections.

Pressure has also increased to approve an [EU-wide system for the collection of airline Passenger Name Record \(PNR\) data](#), which stalled in the European Parliament—a key EU institution—in 2013 because of data privacy and protection concerns. In July 2015, [the Parliament's civil liberties committee endorsed](#) a revised PNR proposal, but it must still be approved by the full Parliament and the EU member states. [Critics contend](#) that the envisioned EU PNR system infringes too much on data privacy rights and does not go far enough in ensuring that PNR data is meaningfully shared among member states. In the wake of the aborted train attack, the EU is also expected to consider ways to [strengthen rail security](#).

U.S. Interests

[U.S. officials](#), including some [Members of Congress](#), worry that Europeans fighting with Islamist extremist groups abroad could enter the United States under the U.S. Visa Waiver Program (VWP), which allows short-term, visa-free travel for citizens of most European countries (see CRS Report RL32221, [Visa Waiver Program](#)). In the 114th Congress, [H.R. 158](#) and [S. 542](#) largely aim to strengthen the VWP's security components to better guard against terrorist threats. U.S. policymakers assert that the foreign fighter phenomenon underscores the importance of maintaining close U.S.-EU counterterrorism cooperation (see CRS Report RS22030, [U.S.-EU Cooperation Against Terrorism](#)); they have also encouraged the EU to establish its own PNR system and to make greater use of existing EU-wide information-sharing tools.