European Security and Islamist Terrorism

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Related Authors

- [Kristin Archick](#)

- [Paul Belkin](#)

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Kristin Archick, Specialist in European Affairs (karchick@crs.loc.gov, 7-2668)
Paul Belkin, Analyst in European Affairs (pbelkin@crs.loc.gov, 7-0220)

Terrorist Attacks in Europe and Mounting Security Concerns

On March 22, 2016, [coordinated bombings in Brussels, Belgium](#), left at least 35 people dead and more than 300 injured at the city's international airport and a downtown metro station near the headquarters of the European Union (EU). [Four Americans were killed](#) and a dozen injured. Belgian officials declared the bombings acts of terrorism, and the Islamic State organization claimed responsibility. The bombings follow the [March 18 capture in Brussels of Salah Abdeslam](#), who is believed to have been directly involved in the November 13, 2015, terrorist attacks in Paris that killed 130 people. Authorities have linked Abdeslam to the [three identified Brussels suicide bombers](#), including Najim Laachraoui, who may have constructed the explosive devices used in both the Brussels and Paris attacks.

These incidents are the [latest in a number of Islamist terrorist attacks in Europe](#). Over the past two years, many attacks and thwarted plots appear connected to the Islamic State and were perpetrated by European citizens of Muslim background who have trained or fought in Syria and Iraq. European officials estimate that [up to 5,000 European citizens](#) have traveled to fight in Syria, Iraq, and other conflicts abroad. The suspect in the [May 2014 killing](#) of four people at the Jewish Museum in Brussels is a French citizen who reportedly spent a year with Islamist fighters in Syria. The perpetrators of [three related attacks in Paris in January 2015](#) in which 17 people were murdered (including at satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo*) were French-born Muslims, with possible ties to the Islamic State or Al Qaeda in Yemen. All of [the identified perpetrators of the November 2015 Paris attacks](#) were French or Belgian citizens, and at least six appear to have fought with the Islamic State. Laachraoui, the [suspected Belgian bomb expert](#), may have trained in Syria, and [Turkey deported one of the Brussels suicide bombers to the Netherlands](#) last summer after arresting him near its border with Syria. (Also see CRS Report R44003, *[European Fighters in Syria and Iraq: Assessments, Responses, and Issues for the United States](#)*.)

[French](#) and [EU](#) authorities warn that the Islamic State's ability to direct and/or carry out operations in Europe [appears to be increasing](#). Reports suggest that the individuals involved in the Paris and Brussels attacks may have relied on larger networks of accomplices and supporters to carry out the attacks and evade security services. Following the Brussels attacks, [French police foiled another terrorist plot](#) and several suspects were arrested on terrorism charges in [Belgium,](#)

Germany, Italy, and the Netherlands. The uptick in terrorist activity has reinforced long-standing concerns about the integration of Muslims in Europe and the potential for radicalization among some segments of Europe's Muslim populations. Worries also persist about attacks by self-radicalized individuals who may not have traveled abroad but have been inspired by Islamist extremist propaganda, such as the Danish gunman who killed two individuals in Copenhagen in February 2015.

Many of the recent attacks have exposed weaknesses in European domestic security, intelligence-sharing, and border controls. Some officials and analysts are concerned that terrorists could slip into Europe as part of the ongoing migrant and refugee flows. At least two of the November 2015 Paris assailants may have entered Europe through Greece in early October by posing as refugees with fake Syrian passports. At the same time, EU officials caution against linking refugees with terrorism.

European Responses and Challenges

European governments have employed a range of measures to combat Islamist terrorism and the so-called foreign fighter phenomenon, including increasing surveillance, prohibiting travel, and arresting returning fighters and terrorism recruiters. Some countries have bolstered existing counterterrorism laws, especially to ensure that individuals who travel abroad for terrorist purposes may be prosecuted (as required by U.N. Security Council Resolution 2178 of September 2014). European officials are also working 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), has been at the forefront of European efforts to counter the threat posed by Islamist militants. Recent estimates indicate that up to 1,600 French nationals have traveled to fight in Syria and Iraq and roughly 2,000 people are involved in Muslim extremist cells in France. French counterterrorism policies are considered to be among the most stringent in Europe. In the past year, the government has imposed travel bans on individuals suspected of seeking terrorist training abroad, prohibited speech that encourages terrorism, and significantly enhanced the state's surveillance authorities. (For more information, see CRS Insight IN10301, *France: Efforts to Counter Islamist Terrorism and the Islamic State*.)

Belgium has also come under scrutiny. Belgium has the highest number of foreign fighters per capita of any European country (possibly as many as 550 out of a total population of roughly 11 million) and what some describe as a "well-developed underground jihadist pipeline." Over the past year, authorities have disrupted several terrorist plots, including a planned attack in January 2015 in Verviers (in eastern Belgium). In late 2015, the government proposed new measures to strengthen law enforcement capabilities against terrorism and better tackle extremism, including shutting down hate-preaching websites and monitoring radicalized youth (potentially through the use of electronic tags). Additionally, Belgian officials pledged to "clean up Molenbeek," the Brussels district that is home to dozens of suspected Islamist militants.

Despite some progress, European authorities have encountered difficulties stemming the flow of fighters to Syria and Iraq and monitoring a growing number of potential assailants amid budgetary and personnel constraints. At least some of the suspects in a number of attacks were previously known to European security services. Law enforcement and intelligence capacities also vary across Europe. Many observers view the fact that it took Belgian services four months to find Abdeslam as indicative of serious shortcomings in Belgian counterterrorism policies. On the other hand, even France's widely praised counterterrorism apparatus has struggled to prevent attacks, and some experts suggest that increasingly tough policies targeting Muslims could further alienate them, exacerbating the potential for radicalization. Critics argue that efforts to integrate Muslims in Belgium and France have been largely unsuccessful.

Analysts assert that more must be done at the EU level given the Schengen system, which largely permits individuals to travel without passport checks among most European countries. The EU has sought to enhance information-sharing among national and EU authorities, strengthen external border controls, and improve counter-radicalization efforts, particularly online and in prisons. However, implementation of some initiatives has been slowed by national sovereignty concerns, law enforcement barriers to sharing sensitive information, and civil liberty protections. In December 2015, the EU reached provisional agreement on a controversial proposal for the EU-wide collection of

airline Passenger Name Record (PNR) data. Critics have long contended that the envisioned system infringes too much on privacy rights and does not go far enough in ensuring that PNR data is meaningfully shared. Data protection concerns have reportedly continued to delay final approval of the EU PNR system.

Issues for the United States

President Obama strongly condemned the terrorist attacks in Brussels and asserted U.S. support for Belgium, the EU, and NATO (which is also headquartered in Brussels). The attacks may raise additional questions in Congress about U.S.-led military efforts to counter the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq, and they may prompt further scrutiny of airport security. Some Members of Congress remain concerned that Europeans fighting with Islamist extremist groups abroad could enter the United States under the U.S. Visa Waiver Program, which allows short-term, visa-free travel for citizens of most European countries (see CRS Report RL32221, *Visa Waiver Program*). U.S. policymakers underscore the importance of maintaining close U.S.-EU counterterrorism cooperation in light of the Islamist terrorist threat and the foreign fighter phenomenon (see CRS Report RS22030, *U.S.-EU Cooperation Against Terrorism*).